

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on July 1, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

Independence Sunday

PROVERBS 14:34

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but
sin is a disgrace to any people.”

THE PILGRIM LEGACY

I'm sure that most of you have visited Plymouth, Massachusetts, and have seen the imposing national monument to the Pilgrims, and the replica of the Mayflower, built in England in 1957 and sailed across the Atlantic to find its permanent home at Plymouth.

The predominant statue that rises to the top of that great monument is, of course, the figure of FAITH. It was faith that motivated the Pilgrims. It was their faith in the living God that made them willing to give up their homes in England, leave their kith and kin, to sail to Holland where, for eleven years they lived in the midst of people whose language they could not understand, where they had no skills that enabled them to accept anything but the most menial jobs, in most cases.

It was their faith that gave them courage to set sail in the Mayflower. No doubt many of you have been on it. I was in the ship's hold for about ten minutes and that was quite enough for me, even on a lovely summer after— noon! And yet the Pilgrims were confined in that vessel for fourteen long weeks as she sailed across the turbulent Atlantic, and two people died on board and one baby was born. And even after that three-and-a-half-month journey across the ocean, they lived an additional three months on that ship after arriving in Provincetown in the dead of the winter of 1620.

They, of course, have been called, and rightly so, “The People of the Book” -- the Scriptures. They had discovered the incredible grace of God. They had learned from the Bible of the Savior Who offered them freely the gift of eternal life if they would but trust in Him. And trust they did. Their hearts were lifted upward and they placed their hopes for time and eternity in the One Who loved them and died for them and rose again. And so, the statue at Plymouth has its finger pointed to heaven. Someone has said that faith is simply pointing away from ourselves to the living God -- to Jesus Christ. For a Christian, that is what faith is. And that was their faith.

The Pilgrims had learned not to trust in themselves but in God. But today in our secular society, people are more and more being taught to take that finger and point it to themselves, to place their hope in their own human achievement. And that is why our country is in the moral chaos in which it finds itself.

Unfortunately today, young Americans know less and less about the Pilgrims with each passing year. Dr. Paul C. Vitz, professor of Psychology at New York University, conducted a blue-ribbon panel in which he and others examined the sixty most widely used social study textbooks in American public schools today. They found that there was not one of them that so much as mentioned the spiritual convictions of the Pilgrims!

I heard about one boy who came home from school recently and announced to his parents that he had learned in school what the meaning of Thanksgiving was. It was when the Pilgrims gave thanks to the Indians! There is no doubt that the Pilgrims did give thanks to the Indians for the food, the venison and the turkeys that they brought, but the Thanksgiving ceremony was to give thanks to Almighty God. That is the type of obliteration of the spiritual convictions of the Pilgrims that is happening in our country today.

You remember how in the captain's quarters on the Mayflower, as it rode at anchor off Provincetown Bay, the Pilgrim Fathers signed "The Mayflower Compact" which states that they had undertaken this journey to the northern parts of Virginia "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith." Their great desire was to bring the Gospel of Christ to those who dwelt in darkness here on this continent. That was what animated their hearts and gave purpose to their lives.

Seated around the base of the great statue at Plymouth are four other statues that embody the cardinal virtues which the Pilgrims considered to be most important: Liberty, Morality, Law, and Education.

1. A statue to LIBERTY. There we see a man dressed in Roman armor, in his arms a sword faced backwards so that it does not threaten anyone, with a conquered lion over his back, showing that liberty is a conquest that must be made if it is going to be enjoyed. The Pilgrims left England because they wanted liberty of conscience, religious liberty, and civil liberty as well.

It is very interesting to note the vast difference between the American Revolution and the French Revolution. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French philosopher and writer, when he came to America in 1830 and wrote his famous book, Democracy in America, pointed out that in France, religion and liberty were seen to be irreconcilably opposed to each other, that the only way to gain freedom was to have done with religion.

But de Tocqueville says that everywhere he went in America, freedom and faith were so joined together that no American could ever conceive of the one without the other. I wonder what he would say if he were here today!

It is true that where religion has been banished, tyranny has resulted. The Soviet Union is a grim example of this, where Stalin and his atheistic henchmen did to death over 50 million of their fellow countrymen.

In contrast, ours has been the kind of faith that allows and even encourages any and all to worship as they please because we have had such a solid confidence in what we ourselves believe about God and government that we have not felt threatened by those who express beliefs

that differ from ours. We believe that God's truth will always prevail if we don't break loose from our moral moorings.

When Pope John Paul II visited the United States in September 1987, he took note of the bicentennial of the United States Constitution. In Columbia, South Carolina, the pope warned against the continued breakdown of the family. He blamed the breakdown on "a false notion of individual freedom," and warned us Americans to use our freedom wisely.

"It would be a great tragedy for the entire human family," said the pope, "if the United States, which prides itself on its consecration to freedom, were to lose sight of the true meaning of that noble word. America," he said, "you cannot insist on the right to choose, without also insisting on the right to choose well, the duty to choose the truth."

And that is true, for freedom emptied of its "real content" is nothing else but license and moral anarchy. Freedom that is used with irresponsibility and disregard for the rules of personal conduct is licentiousness. The result is that today, as Cal Thomas has observed, "freedom" seems to mean the right to abort one's child, or to censor certain lofty ideas from the public schools while tolerating the filthiest of pornography as First Amendment—protected speech and press. Conviction in political leaders is seen as 'extremism.' It is thought better to consult the polls to arrive at a bottom-line consensus than to posit firm standards of right and wrong and challenge the nation to follow."

I must add that personally I feel outraged that some of our tax dollars that go to the National Endowment for the Arts are used so that obscene homosexual and child pornographic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, who died recently of AIDS, might be put on public display, along with the blasphemous artwork of Andres Serrano, one of whose photographs is of a crucifix placed in a jar of human urine.

Our beloved country was founded, and our Constitution written on the basis of certain universally accepted moral standards taken from our Judeo-Christian traditions; and because these standards are now under attack, and words like "freedom" have been, in the pope's words, emptied of their real content, our Republic stands today in greater peril than at any time during the past two centuries.

2. The second statue in the memorial at Plymouth is a statue to MORALITY, and "Morality" holds the Ten Commandments in one hand and the scroll of the Book of Revelation in the other. This confirmed that the Pilgrims believed that morality came from obedience to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that ethics is the child of religion. And this is something we must never forget. There has never been an effectual ethical system anywhere in the world that was not rooted in religion. The Pilgrims understood that, and that is why the Commandments and the Book of Revelation are in the hands of "Morality."

It is interesting, I think, to remember that it was because of the first statue, "Liberty," that the Pilgrims left England where they had been denied the freedom to worship God as they desired. And the principal reason why they left Holland was because of the second statue, "Morality." You see, the morality of the people in Holland at the time the Pilgrims lived in their

midst was at such a low ebb that the God-fearing Calvinists from England were distressed by the lasciviousness and immorality of the young people in particular, and they were afraid that their own children were losing their morals and were in danger of losing their souls.

And that is the reason they set sail for the new world. They wanted to be able to worship the Lord freely in a godly society which was based upon the morality exemplified in the Word of God.

3. This brings us to the third statue in the memorial at Plymouth -- the great statue to LAW. The Pilgrims believed that law was based upon morality; and we have seen that morality is based on the Scriptures. So here we have the three-tiered cake of religion, morality and law. One is based upon the other, and it cannot be any other way. The Pilgrims were convinced of this, and so, the laws that they framed were good and wholesome laws simply because they were based upon that great and ancient foundation of God's holy law.

We live in a time when there is a great struggle going on for the soul of America. Our nation was founded upon Christian principles and Christian morality, but today what do we find? - a secular religion, a religion of humanism which believes that man can and must trust in himself. It says that what man thinks is right is right. It is exactly what Protagoras, the pagan philosopher, meant 2,500 years ago when he said, "Man is the measure of all things." This old heresy has given birth to the "new morality," as they call it, which is only another name for the old pagan immorality of 2,000 years ago.

From that "new morality" they have been busily engaged for the last few decades in enacting laws based, not upon the laws of God as contained in the Scripture, but upon the principles of men who want nothing to do with the Bible.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer and Dr. C. Everett Koop, in their book Whatever Happened to the Human Race? explain the meaning of this new interpretation of law: "Law is only what most of the people think at that moment of history, and there is no higher law. It follows, of course, that the law can be changed at any moment to reflect what the majority currently thinks."

What they are saying is that the secular humanists believe that law can be what the majority conceives as law. There is no absolute. In the end, it is always what a court or judge says it is. Indeed, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court sixty years ago, said bluntly, "Truth is the majority vote of that nation that could lick all others." I wonder what he would have said if Hitler had won World War II!

But Holmes continued, "when it comes to a development of a body of law, the ultimate question is -- what do the dominant forces of the community want, and do they want it hard enough to disregard whatever inhibitions may stand in the way." In other words, whatever the dominant forces say is law is law, even if they have to disregard those who "may stand in the way." Wouldn't Holmes and Stalin have been great bed fellows!

With the loss of absolutes, the dignity of man is severely diminished. Concerning the nature of man, Holmes remarked, "I see no reason for attributing to man a significance different

in kind from that which belongs to a baboon or a grain of sand.” The logical conclusion of man’s significance being no greater than that of “a baboon or a grain of sand” found its expression in the Supreme Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade, which upheld the right to abortion on demand. To the Supreme Court, the defenseless unborn child, as a so-called “fetus,” has little significance and is utterly expendable.

Having therefore rejected our Judeo-Christian heritage, the courts have replaced law with politics. It was basically because he believed that that Judge Robert Bork was rejected as a candidate for the Supreme Court. The only absolute that remains is the insistence that there is no absolute. The Christian base has been eliminated because of its insistence that the law of God contained in Scripture is absolute truth and therefore eternally binding upon men and nations. Isn’t that exactly what our United States Constitution means when it asserts that “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” establish the basic principles upon which human beings are to base their life?

If the non-religious element in America wins, then this statue at Plymouth will have to be changed; the eyes of “Faith” must look down to the ground, and the finger must be pointed at self because that will be the object of their life.

4. The last statue at the back of this great Plymouth monument is the statue to EDUCATION. For 210 years, from 1620 to 1830, virtually all of the education in this country was private and religious -- Christian in nature, with very few exceptions. Today that is becoming increasingly rare. As you know, the Supreme Court, in a 1980 decision, has required the removal of the Ten Commandments from the walls of our classrooms.

How well is this increasingly secularized educational system doing today? Well, let me tell you about John Jay, whom President Washington appointed in 1789 as the first Chief Justice of the United States. John was born in 1745, reared in a godly home, went at age 16 to King’s College (now Columbia University) where he graduated at age 19 in 1764. Now what were some of the entrance requirements that this 16-year-old boy had to fulfil in order to be admitted as a freshman to college? One was that he had to be able to read capably, write legibly, converse and debate. How many students today would be able to get into college if they had to do that? I’m afraid many of them would not qualify because many of them are illiterate. Yet John Jay had to do all of that in Greek!

In another of our early colleges one entrance requirement was to translate the first ten chapters of the Gospel of John from Greek into Latin. Today many high school seniors can hardly read the Gospel of John in English!

John Adams, who later became our second president, wrote to Thomas Jefferson when they were wrestling with the kind of government we should have. They had both been studying both ancient and modern forms of government, and in this particular letter Adams said that he had thoroughly studied Plato in two Latin editions, in Greek, in French, and in English.

Thomas Jefferson, in 1800, had. asked Pierre Samuel Du Pont, founder of the famous Du Pont dynasty, to make a study of education in America. Du Pont discovered that 99.994 percent

of the American people could read and write. As Adams said, to find an American who could not read and write was “as rare as a comet”!

We have now spent trillions of dollars on secular education today. And the result? We have 26 million Americans who are completely illiterate, another 30 million who are functionally illiterate and cannot read simple instructions. That is 56 million Americans who cannot do what virtually every American could do in an educational system 200 years ago that cost very little. It makes you wonder, doesn't it? We should thank God for the Christian schools that are springing up across the nation, and for the increasing number of Christian parents who are home-schooling their children in this day and age when secular humanism is the prevailing philosophy of public education.

Let me read you something that Governor William Bradford said about his fellow Pilgrims:

A great hope and inward zeal they have of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancing the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in these remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but even as stepping stones unto others for the performing of so great a work.

They had found a meaning and purpose for their lives in Jesus Christ and FAITH in Him as Savior and Lord, and their emphasis upon FREEDOM, MORALITY, LAW and EDUCATION were the natural concomitants of their Christian convictions.

May we, the inheritors of their great legacy, this day rededicate ourselves to their spiritual and godly ideals, that this country might indeed become and remain a nation set on a hill for all the world to see, to admire, and to emulate.

AMEN.