

The Forefathers Monument: A Matrix of Liberty

By Stephen McDowell

The National Monument to the Forefathers, located in Plymouth, Massachusetts, commemorates the Pilgrims, their planting the colony of Plymouth, and their contribution to the American nation at large. This 81-foot-tall granite structure also provides a matrix for how to build a free society based upon the Biblical ideals and worldview of these early settlers.

From the original concept in 1820 to the laying of the cornerstone in 1859 to its dedication in 1889, it was nearly three-quarters of a century in the making, and contains in simple imagery the great wisdom of the founding era. The components of this significant yet unknown monument teach us how we can preserve America as a shining city upon a hill, an example of liberty to the world.

The monument is composed of numerous statues; the most prominent is *Faith*, standing with one hand pointed to the heavens and the other holding a Bible. At the base of the pedestal where *Faith* stands are four seated statues representing *Morality*, *Law*, *Education*, and *Liberty*. Flanking these allegorical figures are smaller engravings representing more components of the template of liberty.

One of the numerous engravings on the monument contains a quote from Governor William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and depicts well why these people have been called the "parents of our republic."

Thus out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by His hand that made all things of nothing and gives being to all things that are; and as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all praise.

The monument provides us a matrix of liberty based upon the worldview of our forefathers. Their ideas worked, as they gave birth to the most free, prosperous, virtuous, and just nation the world has ever seen. If we apply those same principles today, and build according to the successful pattern, we can expect the same results.

Faith

Just as the statue of *Faith* is the central figure in the Forefathers Monument, the foundational building block of all societies is the faith of the people. All nations are religious; that is, all nations are built upon a set of ideas and principles that are ultimately rooted in the faith of the people. Every nation appeals to some authority to determine what they consider to be correct or lawful behavior. Each nation has some power they look to that they consider to be sovereign, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The founders of America, from the early Pilgrims and Puritans who colonized many of the states through those men who gave us our American Christian Constitutional Republic, understood that the foundation of free nations rests in true religion. True religion is not where man is god, nor is it one of the many man-made religions. The statue of *Faith* points to the heavens, to the Creator of all things, and holds a Bible with the pages peeled open, which indicates that true faith emanates from the living Word of God as revealed in the Bible.

Benjamin Rush, a Signer of the Declaration of Independence and the father of medicine in America, wrote in 1806: “Christianity is the only true and perfect religion, and that in proportion as mankind adopt its principles and obeys its precepts, they will be wise and happy.”¹

Central to the Christian faith is the message that God through Christ redeems man and gives him a living faith through a supernatural internal transformation of the heart. God via His Spirit gives man a new nature and writes His law upon man’s heart. This internal transformation is the beginning of building godly nations. Since only the God of the Bible can bring about this supernatural transformation, only the God of the Bible can change a nation for good.

Biblical transformation is from the internal to the external. Yet, God not only transforms the heart, He also gives principles and precepts in His Word for how we should live and conduct affairs of life. *Faith* has a star upon her head, indicating she receives wisdom from above. The four seated statues below *Faith* represent *Morality*, *Law*, *Education*, and *Liberty*; but more specifically they represent Biblical Morality, Biblical Law, Biblical Education, and Biblical Liberty. The founders understood the necessity of building the nation upon the Christian faith and worldview.

Morality

No nation can long endure without virtue or morality in the people. A loss of principles and manners is the greatest threat to a free people and will cause its downfall more surely than any foreign enemy. Samuel Adams, the father of the American Revolution, said, “While the people are virtuous they cannot be subdued; but when once they lose their virtue they will be ready to surrender their liberties to the first external or internal invader.”² He went on to say that the greatest security from enslavement in a country is morality among the people.

Everyone’s fundamental rights are threatened by a lack of morality in the people. People of character will desire to observe the law and will not willfully take the life, liberty or property of others. Consequently, people will not live in fear of other citizens. In addition, less government will be required in a virtuous nation. Since fewer people will violate the law, a large police force and judicial system will not be needed. Law-making bodies will also have less to do because prohibitive laws will be at a minimum, as citizens will constrain themselves.

In a virtuous nation the rulers will be moral. This produces more freedom because the rulers will not usurp individual rights through bad legislation, and they will not steal from people through fiat money, excessive or graduated taxes, or other means. Consequently, citizens will not live in fear of civil government.

To our forefathers, Christianity was the source of morality. A Christian people are a people with a transformed nature. Those who are redeemed through Christ are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), having a new heart and new desires. Regenerated Christians no longer seek the temporary pleasures of sin, but they seek to please their loving Father and the great Creator. No longer do they desire to live according to their own selfishness, but they seek to obey His commands and live in accordance with His righteous standard.

The nature of redeemed man living under the New Covenant in Christ is reflected in the statue of *Morality* in that she has the Ten Commandments in her left hand and the scroll of revelation in her right, both being necessary to build a free nation. In the New Covenant, God’s word is written upon our hearts (Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33). We are empowered from within to live in accordance with God’s revealed Word as summarized by the Ten Commandments. In the niches in the base of *Morality*’s throne are engravings of the *Evangelist* writing the Gospel

and of *Prophecy*. This Gospel is first written within the heart, which will then flow out and affect all spheres of life.

As we mature as Christians, we become more like Him in character and thought. We gradually display more of His holiness and character, seeking to be honest, loving, kind, pure, self-governed, industrious, and much more. This Christian character or morality is essential for a free nation. A nation of regenerated men is essential for a nation of free men. The statue representing *Morality* has no eyes for she is looking inward, indicating there must first be internal liberty within man before there can be external liberty in society.

Law

All nations have a religious foundation. They are built upon a set of ideas and principles which are ultimately rooted in a people's faith or in who or what they consider to be sovereign. These ideas are reflected in the laws of a nation. Hence, law is the working religion of a people. Law emanates from what a people consider to be right and true. Thus when a society institutes laws, they are encoding what they consider to be truth, which reveals who they consider to be sovereign. From a Biblical perspective, law and truth are related.

The founders of America considered the Bible to be the source of truth, and they sought to not only build their lives upon its precepts, but also their civil laws. The Pilgrims wrote in their *General Laws* that "Laws ... are so far good and wholesome, as by how much they are derived from, and agreeable to the ancient Platform of God's Law."³ In the *Massachusetts Body of Liberties* (which was a precursor to our *Bill of Rights*), written by Rev. Nathaniel Ward in 1641, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) was the basis for its criminal code, and "in case of the defect of a law in any particular case" the standard was "the word of God."⁴

When our Founding Fathers appealed to "the laws of nature and of nature's God" in the Declaration of Independence, they believed this to mean that God reveals His law (His truth) by general revelation in nature and the conscience of man (the laws of nature) and by special revelation in the Bible (the laws of nature's God). Thus they would almost universally agree with these words of Noah Webster, the author of the first exhaustive English dictionary and the most influential educator of the nineteenth century:

The moral principles and precepts contained in the Scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible.⁵

God's law-word will provide justice to all members of society, because all people stand equal before His law. Yet, the Scriptures reveal that God is not only just, but He is also merciful. The two carved reliefs underneath the throne where *Law* is seated reflect this, as one represents *Justice* and the other *Mercy*. Our forefathers sought to administer civil justice while always having God's mercy in view.

Education

A people cannot be ignorant and free. Benjamin Franklin said that ignorance produces bondage: "A nation of well informed men who have been taught to know and prize the rights which God has given them cannot be enslaved. It is in the region of ignorance that tyranny begins."

America's founders believed that all people must be educated in order to know the truth (God) for themselves. Everyone should have access to the Bible, God's source of truth to mankind. This Christian idea motivated the early settlers to start schools and colleges, and to also translate the Bible into the language of the Native Americans.

The Massachusetts school law of 1647, which provided directions for educating youth, begins, "It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures."⁶ One of the original rules of Harvard College, established in 1636, states: "Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the maine end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternall life, (John 17:3), and therefore to lay Christ in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning."⁷ Puritan minister John Eliot worked for decades to give the Algonquin Indians a written language and then to publish the Bible in their language (1661-63). This was the first Bible printed in America.

Education in America for the first few centuries was centered in the home, because everyone believed it was the right and responsibility of parents to govern the education of their children. A statue to the Pilgrim Mother in Plymouth, Massachusetts, bears the inscription: "They brought up their families in sturdy virtue and a living faith in God, without which nations perish." The American home passed on the faith and virtue necessary for liberty. To our founders, the most important aspect of education was to impart Christian character, to shape the inner man. Upon this foundation they taught a worldview deeply rooted in the Bible that provided instruction for all spheres of life. These ideas are reflected in the monument.

The statue of *Education* is holding an open book of knowledge (the Bible) implying its truth must be passed to all. Flanking her throne are two carved reliefs; one is *Youth* (the object of the parents instruction) and the other *Wisdom* (represented by a grandfather) pointing to the commands and an open Bible, with the world at his feet. The family, both parents and grandparents, were to teach the youth how the world works from a Biblical perspective. *Education* is wearing a wreath of victory, which is obtained when children are well-instructed in the Lord.

Liberty

The fruit of a people with Biblical faith, morality, law, and education is liberty. The Forefathers Monument tells us that Christianity produces liberty. After all, Jesus came to liberate man: "It was for freedom that Christ came to set us free."⁸ Jesus came to set us free, both internally and externally. He gave us internal freedom from the bondage of sin as well as external freedom from the fruit of sin in the earth. He came to give us both personal and civil freedom. He came to not only bring internal personal salvation, but also external political freedom. Christ Jesus provided God's pathway to liberty for man, which is from the internal to the external.

God is the author of liberty, all liberty. Engraved on the memorial honoring him are these words of Thomas Jefferson: "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?" Our founders knew, in the words of Jefferson's pastor Rev. Charles Clay, that "the sacred cause of liberty [is] the cause of God."⁹

Historian of the American Revolution, David Ramsay, said: "There can be no political happiness, without liberty; there can be no liberty without morality; and there can be no morality,

without religion.”¹⁰ When our founders spoke of religion, they meant Christianity, for Christianity was true religion to them. Noah Webster wrote in his United States history textbook:

Almost all the civil liberty now enjoyed in the world owes its origin to the principles of the Christian religion. . . The religion which has introduced civil liberty, is the religion of Christ and his apostles, which enjoins humility, piety, and benevolence; which acknowledges in every person a brother, or a sister, and a citizen with equal rights. This is genuine Christianity, and to this we owe our free constitutions of government.¹¹

It is important that we understand the great liberty that God desires us to have. Lack of knowledge of the value and source of our liberty has caused many people today, including many Christians, to give up their liberty for a little security and care. Like Esau, we have traded our birthright for a bowl of pottage. The freedom our forefathers gave us can only be preserved if we are willing to defend it at all costs. The seated statue *Liberty* has a sword in his hand, prepared to protect the family and protect liberty. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty; and it is necessary to overcome *Tyranny* (depicted in one carved relief) and preserve *Peace* (depicted in another).

Most Americans today have forgotten the source of, and price paid for, our liberty. We have abandoned the principles necessary to live free. We have put aside the matrix of liberty presented to us in the Forefathers Monument. We have failed to acknowledge God Almighty as the giver of life and liberty. Consequently, we have begun to lose our liberty, our happiness, and all the fruit that comes from obeying the King of all nations. Let us cry out with our Founders for God to once again deliver us from a house of bondage and use this nation as a “theater of greater events than have yet been known to mankind.”¹²

[This article is a brief overview of one section of an upcoming book to be published as part of a set of resource materials to be used in conjunction with Kirk Cameron’s film *Monumental*. You will be able to order this from our online store as soon as it is available.]

End Notes

¹ Benjamin Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, Philadelphia: printed by Thomas and William Bradford, 1806, p. 93.

² Rosalie J. Slater, *Teaching and Learning America’s Christian History*, San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1980, p. 251.

³ *The Laws of the Pilgrims, A Facsimile Edition of The Book of the General Laws of the Inhabitants of the Jurisdiction of New – Plymouth, 1672 & 1685*, Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1977, p. the Preface.

⁴ *Sources of Our Liberties*, Richard L. Perry, editor, New York: American Bar Foundation, 1952, p. 148.

⁵ Noah Webster, *History of the United States*, New Haven: Durrie & Peck, 1832, p. 309.

⁶ Richard Morris, editor, *Significant Documents in United States History, Vol. 1*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1969, p. 19.

⁷ Mark Beliles and Stephen McDowell, *America’s Providential History*, Charlottesville, Vir.: Providence Foundation, 1989, p. 110.

⁸ Galatians 5:1, NASB.

⁹ Charles Clay, *An Artillery Sermon on The Governor Among the Nations*, c. 1777, contained in the Clay Family Papers (Mss 1c5795a), Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁰ *Maxims of Washington*, compiled by John Frederick Schroeder, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1854, p. 352.

¹¹ Noah Webster, *History of the United States*, New Haven: Durrie & Peck, 1833, pp. 273-274.

¹² From an Address on American Independence by Elias Boudinot, President of the Continental Congress.