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What You May Not Know About History

Deuteronomy 8:13-14

Perhaps you haven't heard of this, but in England many parents and educators are upset with the London school system. There has been a concern that students don't appreciate the writings of William Shakespeare because the language is too flowery and in some cases too difficult to understand. It's scaring them off. So in an attempt to hold their interest, new curriculum has been developed modifying the original words of the bard. Here is an example from a familiar passage in Macbeth:

"Is this a dagger I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee. I have thee not and yet see thee still." The new textbook revision has Macbeth upon seeing the dagger say simply, *"Woooooh!"* Sometimes changing the language is what constitutes a revisionism that denies people from knowing an author's original intent or from knowing what actually happened.

After reading the book Mayflower describing the Pilgrim's journey and struggle to establish a permanent settlement in America, I was interested to see what one of our school textbooks said about the event. The quote from one of our nation's landmark documents called the Mayflower Compact which most of the passengers on the ship signed in 1620 as a pact to cooperate in the endeavor was "We have undertaken a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia." But the textbook leaves out something that for the sake of the history of our nation is important to remember and teach. The Mayflower Compact begins with the words, *"In the name of God, Amen. Having undertaken, for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian faith...a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia."* The faith factor, the religious motivation, is conveniently omitted. Some might call this revisionism.

This morning on the Sunday before we celebrate our nation's independence I want to key off ideas from a sermon presented by D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale. His point was to suggest that we have lost much of the spiritual history of our country and after looking at some of the textbooks used in our public schools I'm inclined to agree. These days we're so afraid to offend people of other faiths or those with no faith at all we shy away from saying that this nation was and in most cases still is an overwhelmingly Christian nation. And the bits and pieces of that part of our history that we are allowing to fall through the cracks is making it increasingly difficult to articulate the truth of our origins.

For instance, if you ask people why Christopher Columbus came to the new world the two most likely answers will be that he came for gold, or just accidentally ran into a few tropical islands by mistake. It was all about the greed and conquest factor, but could it be that it had anything to do with faith? Here's what Columbus writes in his own journal.

It was the Lord who put into my mind the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies. All who heard of my project rejected it with laughter, ridiculing me. There is no question that the inspiration was from the Holy Spirit, because He comforted me with rays of marvelous inspiration from the Holy Scriptures...I am a most unworthy sinner, But I have cried out to the Lord for grace and mercy, and they have covered me completely. I have found the sweetest consolation since I made it my whole purpose to enjoy His marvelous presence...It is simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah prophesied...No one should fear to undertake any task in the name of the Saviour, if it is just and if the intention is purely for His holy service.

"This is what Christopher Columbus said. He knew the meaning of his name, though many today don't. Christopher means 'Christ bearer.' And he believed that God had raised him up and called him by name, and that he was to bear Christ to the new world, to the Indies and the farthest shores. That is why he came, though there are those who see no spiritual meaning at all in this, and simply say that he was looking for gold.

Columbus finally sighted land just at the point when the crew was about to mutiny. In fact, they had said that if they didn't see land in three days, they were going to turn around and go back. In the middle of the night of the third day there was some inkling, and when the sun rose, it rose over the most beautiful island he had ever seen He named it 'Gold Unlimited.' Well, not really, he named it San Salvador which means 'Holy Savior.'

"Then, of course, he saw an island with three mountains, and he named it Trinidad, which many probably don't know means 'the Trinity.' And so it was with virtually all the islands he named. They all have biblical and spiritual meanings such as that. That is how it started. Columbus came that he might carry the Word of God to the farthest coasts of the world."

For instance, many people seem to have lost or never learned the full story behind the Pilgrims who came 128 years after Columbus. Kennedy points out that "The voyage of the Pilgrims was very simply this: It was a church relocation project." And it was, "they represented the church in Scrooby in Southeastern England. As a church they had become so concerned with the corruption in the Anglican Church at the time that they decided to separate themselves from it. They were known in England as Separatists. And being persecuted by the government, they fled to Holland where there was more liberty." From there they came to America hoping to build a community that would be built upon their interpretation of the bible and the Christian faith.

The governor of their settlement called the Plymouth Colony was William Bradford. "He wrote the first history ever written in America, the history of the Plymouth Plantation, and he said that the Pilgrims came here and founded this colony with" *...a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancing of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea, yea, though they should be but even as stepping-stones unto others for the performing of so great a work."*

And what was the religious demographic of America 150 years later? "As late as 1776, ninety-eight percent of the population professed themselves to be Protestants; 1.8 percent professed themselves to be Roman Catholics; 2/10 of 1 percent professed themselves to be Jewish. This means that in 1776, 99.8 percent of the people in America professed themselves to be Christians. Is this a Christian nation? Was it founded by Christians? Absolutely!"

Daniel Webster, one of our country's greatest senators and orators emphasized this delivering a speech in 1820 commemorating the bicentennial of the founding of Plymouth: *"Let us not forget the religious character of our nation..."*

Our fathers were brought hither by their veneration for the Christian religion. They journeyed in its light, and labored in its hope. They sought to incorporate its principles with the elements of their society and to diffuse its influence through all their institutions – civil, political, or literary. Let us cherish these sentiments and extend their influence still more widely in the full conviction that it is the happiest society which partakes in the highest degree of the mild and peaceful spirit of Christianity."

There are many more examples that could be held up, but what happened? Why are so many of these details forgotten or buried in the annals of history? Well, our focus this morning has not been on the why but on highlighting some of the lost details, but perhaps we could say that part of the cause has been a fixation with the phrase, *"a wall of separation between church and state."*

The phrase comes "from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson in 1802 to the Danbury Baptists. They were concerned that the new Constitution might allow the government to come in and foul up their worship, so Jefferson wrote them a letter that the Congress had erected this wall of separation between church and state so the government could never come in and do anything. "

What isn't told is what Jefferson did the following Sunday after he wrote that letter, which if read in its entirety can be seen as a letter taken out of complete context today. "Jefferson went to church. In fact, he went to the same church virtually every Sunday for the next seven-plus years of his tenure as President of the United States.

Where did he go to church? He was part of the largest congregation and went to the biggest church in America. Where was that? They held worship services every Sunday in the chambers of the House of Representatives in the Capital Building in Washington, D.C.! A whole worship service!

After a while Jefferson wasn't satisfied with the worship service. He thought it needed some better music. So he got the Marine band stationed in Washington to come over every Sunday for the worship service held in the Capital building of the United States. Were any of us taught that in school? Is that something we find in our textbooks or stories about the life of Thomas Jefferson? No.

Jefferson also had another job while President of the United States. "He was chairman of the committee on education for the public schools in Washington, D.C. And he demanded that two books must...be taught in the public schools...the Bible and the Watts Hymnal. He mandated that whatever else they might want to teach or not teach, these two books must be taught in our public schools." -- another one of those details that has fallen through the cracks.

Our immediate past Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William Rehnquist, once said, *"There is simply no historical foundation for the proposition that the framers intended to build a wall of separation [between church and State]...the "wall of separation between church and State" is a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned."*

The opinion of Justice Rehnquist aside, our national heritage must include our spiritual heritage for like the biblical history of Israel they were unavoidably intertwined. Any spiritual journey that hopes to be cradled with integrity and honesty must include the dimensions of both.

Notes:

- Quotation Marks represent direct quotes from D. James Kennedy, author of Remember Our Foundations. His information was checked for authenticity.
- Quotation Marks in italic come from sources cited in the text of this sermon.

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