

July 1, 2007
The Making of Christian Statesmen
Matthew 5:13-16
(Lincoln's Gettysburg Address)

If you have ever spent much time outside the United States, I'm quite sure you have come to appreciate how magnificent this country truly is. It is not a perfect land by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a country that has been a beacon of hope for the world for over two hundred years. A government of the people, by the people and for the people is an experiment that is still unfolding. Yes, we are still a work in progress but no government on the face of the earth has given more hope to mankind. Mark Twain once said that the American form of government is the worse form of government except for all the other forms of government.

On this Sunday before Independence Day we come to express our gratitude to God for allowing this country to come into being and for sustaining us through the years. When one studies the history of America, it is beyond doubt that God has had his hand on this great nation. From that cold winter at Valley Forge when Washington's ragtop troops were outnumbered to the dark days of the Civil War when our nation was torn apart as brother fought against brother, to the uncertain days of World War II, this nation's existence has been dependent on the Almighty.

God has brought forth leaders, statesmen to guide our land during times of national emergency, men like Washington, Jefferson and Adams. I believe the challenges of today are not unlike the challenges that we have faced during other perilous times. We need statesmen, Christian statesmen, to help chart our course through the difficult waters that lie ahead. But first what is a statesman? I believe there are four clearly defined characteristics that mark a statesman.

First, a statesman has bedrock principles. Bedrock principles constitute what a person stands for. Our bedrock principle is a democratic form of government--a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Second, a statesman has a moral compass. A statesman knows the difference between right and wrong. A statesman stands for truth, even at the expense of political gain.

Third, a statesman has a vision. Our Founding Fathers had a grand vision for America. America is a model for the world. America is the world's best hope for humankind.

Fourth, a statesman is a consensus building. A statesman works to unite the country and not divide it.

Perhaps the greatest example of a statesman is Abraham Lincoln. He was president during the turbulent years of Civil War when the country was divided as never before in our history. Over 623,000 soldiers were killed during this war, more than almost all the wars that America has fought.

His abilities as a statesman were never more evident than on a cold, rainy November day in 1863. A few months earlier the armies of the north and south had battled for three days at a place called Gettysburg. Several months after the battle, corpses were still lying in the grassy fields around Gettysburg. In those days undertakers were paid a dollar and a quarter by the soldiers to bury them in case they were killed. These soldiers who paid the undertakers had little numbers pinned all over their uniforms and after battle the undertakers would go from body to body in an attempt to identify the men who had paid the money. If you were killed in battle and hadn't paid the undertaker, then there was no one to care for your remains and you might just rot out in the sun. It was clear that something had to be done to correct this injustice.

Edward Everett was the featured speaker on that November day to dedicate a National Cemetery. Few people wanted to invite Lincoln. He wasn't a gifted speaker and he looked rather odd, with his tall and slender build. But finally the president was invited.

Stepping off the train from Washington, he rode to the cemetery on a horse that was too small for him. His legs dangled loosely below the stirrups. His wife, Mrs. Lincoln was ill at home. Three of her brothers had been killed during the course of the war, all having fought for the Confederate cause. Added to her pain she had lost a son just ten months earlier and her other son was now ill as well.

Lincoln wrote his own speech on the train to Gettysburg; a far cry from modern day politicians who have a stable of professional writers. It lasted barely two minutes. [Read Gettysburg Address]

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they

gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. "

When one reflects on the speech one is struck by the biblical allusions. Throughout Lincoln's address, his words reflect scriptural phrases. Lines from the Bible surface in almost every sentence. "Four score and seven years ago..." is most assuredly derived from the Bible. Only King James authors spoke of years in these terms. "Conceived in Liberty" is another term that harkens back to scripture. It is a reference to the biblical births of great people in the Bible, men like Moses and Samuel and Jesus. "All men are created equal" was a novel concept that helps us to understand how immersed Lincoln was in scripture. Even the great Constitution of the United States did not condemn slavery. But Lincoln knew that because all men had been created by God and in his image, then it stood to reason that all men are created equal.

Look at the phrase "gave their lives that that nation might live." Is this not a reference to the Christ who gave his life that a world of sinners might also live? Words like consecrate, hallow and dedicate are all expressions of biblical faith. "One nation under God" underscores Lincoln's dependence on his Creator. This was unusual phraseology for the 19th century. In the Constitution there is not one reference to God.

"A new birth of freedom" points to the new birth that occurs when one commits his life to Christ. Lincoln finishes his address with these words, "and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Remember the passage "that all who believe in him shall not perish?" Lincoln's address from beginning to end is an address saturated in scripture.

Lincoln was not just a statesman, he was a Christian statesman. When Jesus calls us to be salt of the earth and light of the world, I think Lincoln serves as a good model of what that means. Lincoln was not thought of as an overly religious man. He certainly didn't wear his religion on his sleeve. Lincoln just lived in such a way that he was salt and light to the world. He was so saturated with the Bible that he probably was not even aware that the Gettysburg Address was so filled with biblical references. Scripture was just part of who he was. It flowed naturally from his life. It spilled over unto all that Lincoln said and did.

Our nation needs men and women who are shaped by scripture. We need Christian statesmen who are so immersed in the ways of God that salt and light pour out of them naturally. Our great land needs men and women who have been so formed by the Word of God that in every day language and every day actions, God's presence can be clearly seen and experienced. Christian statesmen are not made by media campaigns or an abundance of financial contributions; they are formed by scripture. As we celebrate this national holiday, may we all pray that God will raise up among us leaders who will be Christian statesmen, at the local level, state level and national level so that this "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."