

On the Christian Commonwealth

Rodney J. Marshall
Coram Deo Academy
Headmaster's Lecture Series
Grade 12 September 2006

The colonial Americans sought to establish their **plantations** as Christian **commonwealths** wherein all lived in **covenant** with each other and God and wherein church and state **coincided** under the government of God. In doing so, they inaugurated a society that provided exceptional liberty for families to live and prosper free from the despotism of either church or state.

Plantation: An original settlement in a new country; a town or village planted. A colony. A first planting; introduction; establishment; as the plantation of Christianity in New England

Commonwealth: The word signifies strictly, the common good or happiness; and hence, the form of civil government supposed best to secure the public good. Commonwealth does not necessitate a democratic form. The Christian commonwealth also involves Christians in covenant relationship with one another and God and then governing themselves in that form best suited to secure their public good.

1. The colonial Americans sought to establish their plantations as Christian commonwealths wherein all lived in covenant with each other and God.

Covenant, n. [L, to come; a coming together; a meeting or agreement of minds.] A mutual consent or agreement of two or more persons, to do or to forbear some act or thing; a contract; stipulation. A covenant is created by deed in writing, sealed and executed; or it may be implied in the contract. (Webster's 1828 Dictionary of the American English Language)

For the early Americans this covenant was between the parties and God not just between the parties as proposed by Rousseau. The order of civil society therefore maintained itself in covenant with and under the Lordship of the sovereign God who revealed Himself in His Word providing moral laws as a basis for order. Therefore, it is the duty of humankind to order itself in civil society under the government of God as revealed in His Holy Word. This ordering will also provide the most wholesome of societies. Many early American charters reveal this understanding.

Our pilgrim forbears had planned to plant a colony in northern Virginia, but in the providence of God, they were blown off course and landed as we know

near what is now Cape Cod, Massachusetts. They occupied land vacated by the Native Americans because of a recent plague. They did not take the land from anyone, nor was it in northern Virginia. No form of civil government was in place at that location which condition required the colonists to form their own means for civil society. The Mayflower Compact documented that form of civil government they voluntarily provided for themselves.

The Mayflower Compact 1620 – William Bradford (See Of Plymouth Plantation)

"In the name of God, Amen. [This language invoked in the opening means that the parties to the compact or covenant entered into the compact in the presence of God and in His name. The breaking of the covenant would then entail breaking the commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord they God in vain." This in stark contrast to the passé observance of contracts in the modern world] We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord, King James, by the Grace of God, of England, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, e&

Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid; And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the General good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

In Witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord, King James of England, France and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini, 1620."

These colonists did not view their civil covenant as a secular covenant. Rather that took their oath in the presence of the Holy God the same God in whose name they baptized their children and observed Holy Communion in their Churches. To the colonists, their solemn civil covenant carried the same weight as an act of Christian faithfulness as the observance of church sacraments.

Enlightenment thinkers reduced the richness of Christian Commonwealth to the secularized concept of social contract resulting in disorder. J. J. Rousseau stated, *"If then we discard from the social compact what is not of its essence, we shall find that it reduces itself to the following terms: Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member*

as an indivisible part of the whole." However, what is the general will? When does the general will trample on the liberties of its subjects? Since Rousseau forsook the biblical assumption of the fall of man's nature into sin, he assumed the general will would produce something good. Absent the sovereign God, and His Holy Word the general will of the people in revolutionary France became sovereign and eventually devolved into cruel despotism as found in the Reign of Terror.

Over the centuries American society and government has devolved from its original ideal of Christian commonwealth to a secularized social contract and eventually to the current form of a centralized nation state. Whereas second President John Adams said, *"We have no government armed in power capable of contending in human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."* (1798 address to the militia of Massachusetts) To the constitutional framers a religious people meant a Christian people. The pluralism of today was foreign to the colonists. Morality meant adherence to the moral Law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments. Modern moral relativism leaves civil society to search its own general will, which leads to cruelty. Again as stated by Alexander Hamilton, *"In my opinion, the present constitution is the standard to which we are to cling.... Let an association be formed to be denominated 'The Christian Constitutional Society,' its object to be first: The support of the Christian religion. Second: The support of the United States."* (April 16-21, 1802 letter to James Bayard)

However, much has changed in the hearts of the people and those that hold public office. In the mid 20th Century President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, *"Now to bring about government by oligarchy masquerading as democracy, it is fundamentally essential that practically all authority and control be centralized in our National Government."* Roosevelt's concept of civil government made the full shift from constitutionally federated power to the centralized power of a super-state that began in earnest with the war between the states. This is that form of government now prominent in the United States of America on the national scale.

Wise citizens will labor over time to restore a godly order decentralized and under the government of God. Christians cannot romanticize the early American period, but rather seek to apply biblical principles in all of life today. Most of this work must take place at the local level where influence is possible. In doing so, and with the blessing of Almighty God, and much time society will once again covenant in the presence of God, to the glory of God restoring genuine liberty to families.

2. The colonial Americans sought to establish their plantations as Christian commonwealths wherein the church and the state coincided under the sovereign government of God.

Coincidence *noun*: the temporal property of two things happening at the same time

During the middle ages, the church and the state often vied for power over each other rather than peacefully coinciding. From time to time, the Holy Roman Emperor sought authority over the Pope and therefore the western Church. Again, when the Pope excommunicated the Holy Roman Emperor for defying the order of the Pope the Emperor, understanding excommunication to damn him, came truckling before the Pope in submission. When King Henry threw off the authority of the Pope, he did not release a free church under God, but rather declared himself the head thereof collapsing the authority of church and state into one absolute monarch. In each example over time, the concentration of civil and church power into one head tended toward corruption and corrupt powers toward despotism.

The early Americans understood the struggle for power between church and state having departed a Europe perpetually at war over this and other issues most in the name of God. They sought to establish commonwealths wherein church and state coincided under God separating their legitimate powers for good not despotic government. Church and state were separate and equal parts of the Christian commonwealth. The church was not to assume authority over the state or the state over the church. Each was to govern its separate sphere under God coincidentally. The sphere of the state was (and is) justice while the sphere of the church was (and is) the Gospel. Only those professing belief in the orthodox Christian faith could participate fully as members of the commonwealth either as church members or as voting citizens. The consensus of society was Christian and therefore church membership was required as a prerequisite to voting in a Christian commonwealth. Therefore, to participate as a member of the commonwealth one must share the religion held in common by those in covenant relationship. The commonwealth did not force anyone to convert. One could travel down the road to found one's own commonwealth differently as did Roger Williams. To enjoy membership in the commonwealth both in church and in state required a credible profession of the Christian faith. In this way the colonists provided healthy civil and ecclesiastical government for themselves under God and maximum liberty for their families.

Application

The idea of Christian commonwealth in broad application across society is not currently a realistic possibility but it can operate in mini-commonwealths through the initiative of covenant keeping Christians. Today pluralistic America conducts

itself with various religious perspectives in conflict with each other. The church or churches and the state exist separately under God but not self-consciously. Although the state thinks itself sovereign in reality there is none sovereign but God Himself, and He will countenance no competitor. Modern pluralism has sought to drive the Christian religion from the public arena while the church has largely isolated itself to the realm of Gnostic spirituality without application to practical life and the broader society. The church and state both operate apostate (unfaithful to the godly state of being) but will one day find restoration because of the power of God operating through faithful Christians.

Christians should establish mini-commonwealths within society that will eventually leaven the lump of culture to the glory of God. Independent and church schools can carry their mission to train the next generation to think God's thoughts in a covenant community under God free from the constraints of the state. Small businesses operated in obedience to God and his Holy Word form a small covenanted community leavening communities with selfless services. For example, the clinic that will not perform abortions but will provide extraordinary care to unwed mothers of preborn children form a sort of mini-commonwealth within the broader society. Instead of waiting for the state to change its laws from above faithful Christians should step up with godly service in every sphere of endeavor. Any association of Christians in covenant with God and one another can quietly leaven the lump of culture for good.

The colonial Americans sought to establish their plantations as Christian commonwealths wherein all lived in covenant with each other and God and wherein church and state coincided under the government of God. In doing so, they inaugurated a society that provided exceptional liberty for families to live and prosper free from the despotism of either church or state. Today Christians can and must do the same in family, church, school and the broader society. Over time and given the mercy of God the Christian commonwealth will reemerge restoring godly order to the world in which we live and move and have our beings until He comes again to consummate the Kingdom.

Resources

Of Plymouth Plantation, Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, Vision Forum

This Independent Republic, Studies in the Nature and Meaning of American History, Rushdoony, Rousas John, Ross House Books, 1964



Rodney Marshall is President and Headmaster of Coram Deo Academy, a classical and Christian school located in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. Additional articles located at <http://coramdeoacademy.org/content/headmaster/articles.php>.