

Lesson Fifteen

The Declaration Of Independence

LESSON IDEA

To show that the Declaration of Independence is based on God-given, not government-given, rights.

PREPARATION

Make copies of the words from the Declaration of Independence that appear on the last page of tonight's lesson, so that each family member can follow along as the excerpts are read during the discussion.

LET'S REVISIT where we left off last week, and learn what happened after England declared war on its American colonies. In 1775 and early 1776, it still amounted to a family fight, with the British soldiers and ships anchored near Boston, and George Washington's volunteer army skirting the west edge of the city. Each waited for the other to back down, but neither did.

As the Second Continental Congress (which was still in session) struggled to find and finance food, uniforms, and ammunition for Washington's troops, talk of cutting all ties with Britain escalated. In January, Massachusetts passed a resolution calling for independence. In April, North Carolina took the bold step, followed by Rhode Island. Virginia declared its own independence from

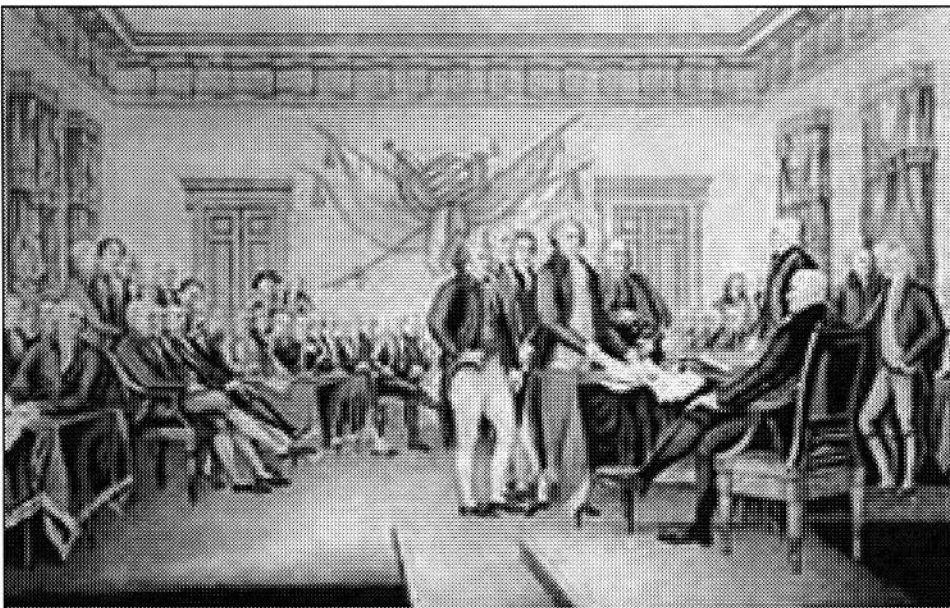
England. New York and Pennsylvania opposed the break, but in other colonies the idea gained steady momentum.

Finally, on June 7th, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia asked the Continental Congress to vote on a resolution stating: "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connections between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

THE LONG-ANTICIPATED moment of decision had arrived. The vote, however, had to be unanimous. If some colonies voted "Yea," while others voted "Nay," England could take advantage of the division and the drive for independence would likely fail. Rather than press for an immediate decision, the vote was postponed until July 2nd.

To save time in the event the resolution passed, the Congress appointed a committee of five (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston) to draft a declaration detailing reasons for the break with

England. Even unanimous support of Lee's resolution would not be quite sufficient. The delegates desired a formal statement that all men and governments could read, making clear that their quarrel with England was more than a tax dispute or a fight over who had what rights. They intended to challenge the very "right" of a king to be a king; the idea that a man could be a government "god" who could give and take liberties at whim. For many thousands of years kings, pharaohs, and emperors had been venerated, even worshiped, as the source of rights. Few of their subjects had dared look such deified beings in the eye and



The signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

say: "Behind your ermine robes, and under your diamond crowns, you are men, no more or less kingly than the rest of us. Any rights you have come from the same source as ours: the Supreme Being who created us all. And because of this, we have rights by birth, not by your decrees."

The idea of God-given, rather than king-given or government-granted, liberties had sparked the American colonists' drive for independence and nationhood. It was the only reason sufficiently important to justify pulling away from the protection of the English empire, and risking defeat and death by challenging British military power.

THE FIVE-MAN COMMITTEE appointed to prepare the Declaration of Independence asked Thomas Jefferson of Virginia to draft it. Tall, freckled, and sandy-haired, Jefferson was known for his mastery of the English language. He was a mediocre speaker, and had not delivered even a single speech during his months in Congress, but with pen and paper he had few equals.

For three weeks Jefferson worked on the Declaration at a portable writing desk he had invented. His lodgings were simple: a second-floor parlor and bedroom in the home of a Philadelphia bricklayer.

While Jefferson searched for precise words that would explain the concept of God-given rights to the world, the speech-makers and debaters (persuasive men such as John Adams and cousin Samuel) hammered home the logic of independence to undecided and reticent delegates, particularly those from Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and New York.

Since each colony had a single vote that was determined by a majority of its delegates, it was not necessary to convince every delegate to support independence. A simple majority of each colonial delegation would be sufficient. By July 1st, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and even New York (where British sentiment was most in evidence) appeared to be moving toward independence. The delegation most in doubt was Delaware, whose three representatives were divided two-to-one: Thomas McKean and Caesar Rodney favored independence, while George Reed believed that such a move was premature. Rodney, however, was not in Philadelphia. He had been called home to squelch a pro-British uprising. Making the 80 mile ride to Pennsylvania in time for the July 2nd vote would have been a great deal to ask of anyone, but espe-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

What were the specific charges levelled by the colonists against the King? How do they compare to abuses by the executive branch of our own central government today? Make a list of the latter, and compare them with the charges specified in the Declaration of Independence. (Check a history or other reference book.) What action did the colonial leaders take to remedy the injustices? What can Americans do to remedy such injustices today?

cially Rodney. The 48-year-old bachelor suffered nearly constant pain from a cancer that had spread over much of his face. Physicians had advised him to seek treatment in Europe, but he had refused to leave the colonies during the crisis with Britain.

On the evening of July 1st, Rodney was riding toward Philadelphia through a blinding thunderstorm, stopping only long enough to change horses at the homes of friends. He arrived on the morning of July 2nd, weary, mud-splattered, and still shod in boots and spurs, only moments before John Hancock (president of the Congress) called the session to order.

THE ROLL CALL began. Two Pennsylvanians who could not bring themselves to vote "Yea" had stayed away, thereby enabling the remaining delegates to vote for independence. New York declined to vote either way. South Carolina backed independence for the sake of unanimity. When the roll call reached Delaware, Caesar Rodney rose to his feet and declared: "As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of Independence, and my judgment concurs, I vote for Independence!"

The issue was decided. Twelve colonies had voted unanimously for nationhood and separation from England. New York, the one colony the British had counted on to vote against independence, had abstained.

Once Lee's resolution was adopted, Congress turned its attention to the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson had drafted and Adams, Franklin, Sherman, and Livingston had approved. The debate focused on the specific words and phrases that Jefferson had penned. The debate continued from July 2nd until the evening of July 4th, when the document was finally approved. Let's take a brief look at the final product, a freedom declaration that generated shouts of

approval and ringing of the Liberty Bell.

There are three main parts: First, the reason for writing the Declaration; second, the heart of the argument, which was the concept of God-given, rather than King-given or government-granted, liberties; and third, a list of specific charges against King George. Here is the opening paragraph. [Distribute copies of the excerpts from the Declaration to each family member. Seeing the words as they are read leaves a more lasting impact than merely hearing them.]

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation.

Can you put those sentiments in your own words? Why was the Declaration written? [The signers believed that it was necessary to explain in writing the reasons for so serious an action as breaking away from an established government.]

The second (and arguably most important) paragraph includes the reasons for independence:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident ...

Meaning that the truths which were to follow should be obvious to everyone.

... that all Men are created equal ...

Pause to think about that for a moment. What is the difference between all men being created equal, and all men being equal? [Encourage discussion of the crucial difference.] If all men are equal, each would have the same talents, tastes, and ambitions. Therefore, each should receive the same amount of money regardless of his occupation. Being created equal is far different. It entails having equal importance in the sight of God (the Creator). The life of one person is as sacred as that of any other. Each has identically the same identical natural, God-given rights.

The next phrase reads:

That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...

This underscores the certainty that rights come from God, not from kings, governments, even presidents of the United States. Rights are permanent and may not be justifiably abridged or abolished. They are, in other words, "unalienable."

But what exactly are these unalienable, God-

given rights? The next phrase of the Declaration tells us that they include:

...Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness...

What are some of the things that people believe are rights, but which are neither mentioned nor implied in the Declaration? [Examples could include the "right: to a \$20,000 income, which we have right earn; the "right" to a job, which we have a right to seek; and the "right" to take something that belongs to someone else (even when government does the taking and calls it "taxes" or "welfare.")]

So we have an inherent right to life, and to have it protected unless and until we deliberately break a legitimate law for which we know the penalty is death (such as a law against murder). No king or president may legitimately order the execution of subjects or citizens simply because they criticize his policies or actions.

We also have a right to liberty; that is, to lead our lives in ways we choose, so long as we do not violate the rights of others.

And finally we have a right to pursue happiness. Note, however, that the Declaration does not promise or guarantee happiness. Our God-given right allows us to seek happiness in ways we see fit (provided, once again, that we respect the rights of others).

The next sentence explains how our rights are to be protected:

...That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed...

The main reason for having a government, then, is to protect--not dispense or change--our God-given rights.

SUPPOSE WE MOVED with a few other families to a newly-discovered island in the mid-Atlantic, then began to have differences of opinion about which family owned what land, or how to file a land claim, or where to build a road, or which side of the road to drive on once it is completed. Obviously, some rules would be needed, and some entity would have to be established to enforce them. There would be a need for rule-makers (legislators), someone to interpret the rules (a judge), and others to enforce the rules once the interpretation was made (a policeman or sheriff). In other words, we would need a government.

Should disputes arise, government would serve as a referee to settle them in a peaceful, just, and

orderly manner. But since all families would contribute to the maintenance of the government and its employees, the families (the people) would remain sovereign, and the government would be a servant. The only power government would have is that which the families agreed to give it.

What would we happen if the servant and referee (government) began to do exceed its legitimate authority by doing things it was not established to do? Suppose, for instance, that it began forbidding the people to drive on roads, or own land, or freely move about the island? And suppose it threatened to take the lives of those who disagreed with its usurpation of power and authority? [Encourage family members to express their views. The simple solution would be to either to compel the existing government get back on the right track, or hire new personnel to run the government in the right way.] This is how the Declaration puts it:

...that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes...

It was because the British government was demolishing the God-given liberties of the colonists (indeed, did not even recognize that there were such rights), and because there was virtually no hope for changing the attitude of the King and Parliament (all attempts over more than a decade had failed), that independence and a new form of government became necessary.

The Declaration continues to list ways in which the King had eroded the liberties of the colonists, concluding with these solemn words:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

Would you be willing to give all that you have, even your life, to support the principles discussed this evening? You might, among other things, lose a great deal of money, as many of those who signed the Declaration did. Next week we'll take a closer look at what else happened to them.

Concluding Thought

The most important point to remember is that the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are God-given, not government-given, and that we should never view government as the source of rights, but rather as an agency hired to protect them.

DURING THE WEEK

For a family project, purchase and frame a copy of the Declaration of independence. Surrounding your family with visual reminders of our American heritage reinforces learning. Inexpensive reproductions of the Declaration are available, or your local library should have a version that can be photocopied. The Declaration may also be downloaded and printed from the Internet.

The book *They Signed For Us* (1957), by Merle Sinclair and Annabel Douglas McArthur, is an Americanist classic that provides further detail about the fate of those who signed the Declaration of Independence. Though long out-of-print, it may be available at a local library or from a used bookstore.

EXCERPTS FROM

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

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We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness--That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes.... And