Sunday, September 13, 1987
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION
Micah 6:6-8; I Timothy 2:1-4; Mark 12:13-17

The Bicentennial celebration of the United States Constitution has begun. The Constitution was adopted on September 17, 1787, by the Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia and was declared ratified almost a year later, on July 2, 1788.

It is especially appropriate that churches in this country take note of the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, and one purpose of this sermon is to explore why this is so. But first, here are a few more historical facts about the United States Constitution.

The first ten amendments to the Constitution, better known as the Bill of Rights, were drafted in 1789 and ratified in 1791. The first of these amendments specifically mentions religion: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Since 1787, the Constitution has been amended only 26 times, including the first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights. Historians remind us that the durability of the United States Constitution is remarkable. No other constitution has lasted as long. Indeed, the lifespan of the average constitution can be measured more easily in months than in years. Only 14 of the world's 160 national constitutions currently in existence predate World War II.

Now let's return to our original question — why should Christian churches observe the bicentennial of the Constitution? Or, to put the question another way — what is the relationship between the Christian faith and the United States Constitution?

Dr. Martin Marty, Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and one of the preeminent historians of American Church History, recently pointed out that we "need not treat the Constitution as a sacred document. Nor need we agree with Representative Jack Kemp of New York, who recently declared that 'God is the author of the Constitution.'"

"In fact," says Dr. Marty, "congregational celebration of the event can take the document off the Graven Images shelf, helping people to see its imperfections (slaves, women, and others did not get much out of it at first, though their heirs can now) and to find ways to make it work better."

Let's now look more closely at the connections between our Christian faith and the United States Constitution.

First of all, and at first glance, the Constitution is a disappointing document to commemorate religiously. Were it not for a reference to Sunday, to the Year of our Lord, and to the very important prohibition of religious tests for office, it would be as religionless as it is godless. And then, of course, the First Amendment keeps religion at a distance.

Secondly, however, as Dr. Marty and other historians have pointed out, the people of the 13 colonies-turned-states were morally shaped by the Bible more than by any other book. Its tradition was available for producing the public virtue on which the founders relied. But the

founders themselves did not quote or refer to the Bible and did not use its God-talk for their moral talk, whether at Philadelphia or in most of their personal and public papers.

You may hear about how Benjamin Franklin thought they should pray during a dark day in Philadelphia. But they did not pray at any of the sessions. Some historians have suggested that some members of the Constitutional Convention were afraid of what the public would think if people heard that they were in so much disagreement and trouble that they decided to pray. It is only a legend that has Alexander Hamilton explaining that there was no prayer because they saw no reason, on a domestic issue, to call in foreign aid. Churchly piety was simply not a part of the convention proceedings.

But the Christian faith was influential in the drafting of the Constitution, if not directly, then indirectly. It was present in Philadelphia, in the whole culture and environment, and deeply ingrained in the minds of those who drafted the Constitution, just as it had been present earlier in the Declaration of Independence and in the Revolutionary War.
One example: Dr. Harry Stout, a professor at Yale University, has been doing basic research on the influence of the colonial churches in the early political life of the colonies. He has studied more than 2,000 scattered, unpublished colonial sermons. His research has caused him and others to reject the standard idea that the Revolution was primarily a product of the Enlightenment. Instead, he and others see the colonial revolt as an outflow of fervent religious debate that had been bubbling in the colonial churches for decades.

If the revolution began in the minds of the people, as founder John Adams put it, then those minds were imbued with a complex understanding of Biblical history and metaphor, and of the struggle of oppressed peoples for liberty.

Dr. Stout visited old churches in New England — digging up early sermon notes, ministers' diaries, handwritten manuscripts of church meetings, and other documents never before studied as a group.

He also studied the communication of ideas in the colonies. In the 17th and 18th centuries, America was a wilderness. There were no roads, no national postal system. Most of the population lived in villages untouched by newspapers or print media. The only books most colonists owned were the Bible and a few almanacs, Stout found.

Yet he found these people to be some of the most literate people in the world. Where did they get their ideas of self, of society, of corporate purpose, of what they were placed in the world to do? His answer: the sermon. In colonial America, the sermon was a message of extraordinary power. The average New Englander heard 7,000 sermons in a lifetime, about 15,000 hours of concentrated listening. There were no competing voices. It was a medium more influential than TV is today.

Further, according to Stout, the colonial ministers who were indirectly the grassroots leaders of the Revolution closely identified the events leading to 1776 with the ongoing drama of God's church and the fulfillment of a mission going back to the declaration of Puritan founder William Bradford, "We are the Lord's free people."

Issues of power and authority, of spirit and law, were debated with solemn intensity, especially in churches of the Congregational tradition, which were attended by 70 percent of New Englanders.

The point is, as another historian put it, “The attention to fine matters of theology that most of us would care less about today — the passion, the brilliance — was the same quality of mind that would soon create the new Constitution.”

The new twist was the active role of church members: Congregationalism, by its very nature, grants sovereign power to no one except the people themselves. So we find people in New England in these churches playing democratic politics from the start, without ever calling it that. The churches, and the Congregational churches especially, were schools that were training citizens for a new type of constitutional government.

Thus, it is no surprise that the preamble to the United States Constitution states in the first sentence, “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...” The ultimate power is vested in the people, who then grant power to their elected representatives.

We can also see the influence of the Christian faith at work in the drafting of the new Constitution in the system of checks and balances. This system is set up so that no one branch of the government has more power than another. Rather, power is separated so that one branch is always a check and a balance to the other.
To use theological language, the Constitution takes human sin seriously. Those who wrote the Constitution were aware of the sinfulness of human beings. They knew that institutions are subject to sin. They knew that power corrupts and, therefore, we always need checks on power. Written large over our own State Capitol Building are the words, “The Salvation of the States is the Watchfulness of its Citizens.” Or as Tom Dooley said, “Trust everybody, but cut the cards.”

I have always liked Reinhold Niebuhr’s phrase in this regard—“Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible: Man’s capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.”

There are other moral convictions implicit and explicit in the Constitution that can be traced to the influence of the Christian faith, although they have other roots as well.
There is the conviction, especially in some of the amendments, that there is a real unity in the human race and that all people have a right to equal consideration as human beings before the law, regardless of race, class, or nation. In the history of philosophy, it was one of the significant contributions of Stoicism to bring this insight to the ancient world, and Christianity put it into a context that made it more intelligible and also provided strong religious motivations for its implementation.

Related to this concept of equality before the law is the principle of justice. The Christian faith has had a great deal of influence in transforming the content of what justice means.

The essential formal meaning of justice is that every person should receive his or her due, that there should be no arbitrariness or unfairness in dealing with any human being or any group. But this formal meaning of justice tells us nothing about what any individual’s due is, for that depends upon the moral convictions in the culture.

When slavery was accepted as rational and good, when women were regarded as inferior persons, when the law decreed that petty crimes were punishable by death, when it was assumed that the children of the poor would be excluded from the opportunities for the development of their capacities which were provided for the children of the more privileged classes — justice as applied to slavery, to the rights of women, to punishment, to economic

opportunity was a far cry from what it is today. In fact, some of the amendments to the Constitution were made precisely in order to make justice more equitable.

These are a few examples of the influence of the Christian faith in the drafting of the original Constitution and in the later amendments to it.

There is one other point that needs to be mentioned, and it's one of the most important of all. Beginning way back in the Old Testament is the conviction that some form of government is necessary. Government is needed to create order in society. The New Testament carried on this tradition, stressing that the Christian should take a positive attitude toward the order-creating functions of civil government because in and through them, the providence of God is at work preserving essential conditions for human life, and at the same time, that the state should be kept in bounds and not be allowed to usurp the place of God. That's why Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's."

And for us who are Christian citizens in a representative constitutional government, we have the responsibility to participate since we are, in effect, the government. The government is not the enemy. The "authorities" do not stand over against the citizens.

We are also, as the New Testament points out, to pray for those in authority, that we "May lead a quiet and peaceful life, godly and respectful in every way." Amen.