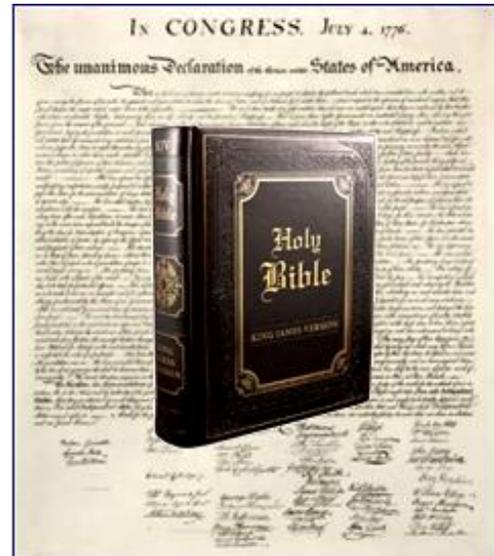


# God in the Declaration of Independence

By Alfred B. Davis  
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Two hundred and forty-eight years ago a revolutionary document was presented to the world by the Continental Congress of Great Britain's American colonies. Fifty-six men, signed their names to that document, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in a bid to alter the course of history and change their lives and the lives of those they loved forever. That document was the Declaration of Independence.



The Declaration had its beginning on June 7, 1776, when Richard Henry Lee of Virginia presented a resolution to the Continental Congress beginning: "Resolved: 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 connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." Although some delegates to the Continental Congress were still desirous of reconciliation with the Crown, a Committee of Five was appointed to draft a statement presenting the American Colonies' case for independence. Appointed to the committee were John Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert R. Livingston of New York, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia.

Jefferson drafted the Declaration, Franklin and Adams made some changes, and the Declaration was voted on by the Continental Congress on July 2. Some further changes were made, and the Declaration of Independence, detailing the grievances of the 13 colonies against King George as their justification for severing ties with Great Britain, was adopted on July 4. It also recognized the magnitude of what they were attempting to do and provided four references as to their reliance upon God.

The first reference occurs in the first paragraph:

*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.*

The phrase, "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," is an implicit acknowledgement that God created the heaven and the earth and that He established basic laws for His creation to operate by. In the physical realm we can see things such as the law of gravity, Newton's laws of motion, and the laws of thermodynamics that govern the interactions of mass and energy. Laws of Nature refers to those laws, but it also refers to moral laws governing the interactions of people; individually,

corporately, and nationally. Consequently, they realized the need to appeal to Nature's God, the Divine Lawgiver, and to follow His laws in their quest to establish a new nation on the earth. As they embarked on the effort to challenge the most powerful nation on Earth, they understood what David meant in Psalm 124:8 when he said, "Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth." Hence the appeal to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" at the very onset of the Declaration of Independence.

The second reference to God comes in the second paragraph of the Declaration:

*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.*

Here we see a clear reference to God as our Creator and a recognition that our Creator has given us "certain unalienable Rights." We can also see what, for 1776, was a very radical statement. The Founding Fathers were stating here that people, under God and by virtue of the rights given to us by God, were entitled to alter, abolish, or institute governments. This was radical because much of the world then was governed by monarchies, by the divine right of kings. Monarchs established, altered, and abolished governments, not the people. Instead, the Continental Congress put King George, and all monarchs, despots, and tyrants, on notice that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" and that "to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." This is also a recognition that neither we, nor monarchs, nor governments are superior to God.

It is also a radical statement to claim we are created by God our Creator and that He has given us the right to establish, alter, or even abolish governments. This was radical in 1776 because monarchs, strong men, and tyrants established, altered, and abolished governments, not the people. To claim, as the Declaration claims, that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" and that "to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed" was to put King George and all monarchs on notice.

Another radical aspect of this statement is that rights come from God, not monarchs or governments. In 1776, the only rights the people in the colonies had were those that King George and the British government allowed or tolerated. To say, as the Declaration did, that it is a self-evident truth that God our Creator has endowed us with certain unalienable rights was to elevate God as both the originator and the giver of those rights. In so doing, it was a reminder that God is superior to human government and human leaders.

I might note that this is still a radical statement to those prone to big government and totalitarianism today. Politico's Heidi Przybyla, for example, recently alerted an MSNBC panel on February 22 of the dangers of Christian nationalists, warning, "they believe that our rights as Americans, as all human

beings, don't come from any earthly authority. They don't come from Congress, they don't come from the Supreme Court, they come from God.” I’m sure King George would have agreed with her.

After establishing that the Continental Congress was acknowledging God and looking to Him for the authority to decide what form of government they should have, they then noted a “long train of abuses and usurpations” as their justification to sever their relationship with the British Crown and to declare their independence. This is followed by the third and fourth references to God in the last paragraph.

The third reference is found near the beginning of the lengthy first sentence:

*We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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 connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.*

Here, the Continental Congress appeals to the “Supreme Judge of the world,” recognizing that God would be both a witness and judge of their actions. This evidences a desire that their actions and motivations would line up with the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”; a desire that what they were doing would be acceptable in the eyes of their Creator.

The fourth and final reference to God comes in the last sentence of the Declaration:

*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.*

Divine Providence is a direct reference to God and an acknowledgment that they needed God’s protection in order to successfully break away from Britain and establish a new, independent United States of America. It also indicates that they were painfully aware of Psalm 127:1, which says:

*Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.*

And so, with God as their witness and a firm reliance on divine protection, they pledged to each to each other their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor as they set course to change history and build a country founded on the “Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.” We would do well to do the same today.

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