

Learning to Grow

The official date of signing of the Declaration of Independence is July 4th. However, on June 11th the Second Continental Congress formed a committee to draft a resolution that would separate the colonies from the British crown. The resolution that approved the action took place on July 2nd. The first public reading of it took place in Philadelphia's Independence Square on July 8th, but most of the delegates did not sign it until August 2nd. It has been celebrated on the 4th ever since that first year.

- In 1777 13 gunshots were fired in Philadelphia in the morning and at evening.
- In 1778 George Washington celebrated with a double ration of rum for the troops and an artillery salute.
- In 1779 it fell on a Sunday so it was celebrated on the 5th.
- In 1791 the first recorded use of the word Independence Day occurred.
- Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, founding fathers of the nation and signatories of the Declaration of Independence died on the same day, July 4, 1826, the 50th birthday of our nation.
- And finally in 1941 Congress declared it a legal federal holiday!

Just as learning facts about our history is good for our citizenship, learning about our faith is foundational to spiritual growth as a Christian.

Sometimes, however, learning is easier than others. The primary obstacle ultimately is pride in the Biblical sense of putting yourself in the place of God. Consider what the people of Jesus' home town did in today's Gospel lesson: "Where did this man get all this? We know who He is...he's a home boy who thinks he's made it big." They decide a-priori that He could not possibly have come back with anything of significance, defining truth for themselves and then measuring God against it. This is exactly what the serpent did with Eve. "Did God say?.." says the serpent. "Yes," says Eve. "That's not what He really meant..." says the serpent. A wise man said once that he who rejects the truth commits himself to believe a lie.

But there are more innocuous obstacles that are perhaps more common: We believe in do-it-yourself religion. If you take your car into the shop the mechanic runs some diagnostics and then tells you what is wrong. At that point you probably don't say, "Well, for me it's the carburetor, because when I was a kid it was always the carburetor in my dad's car." We don't go making up truth for ourselves concerning our cars, yet how many times have you heard, "Well, for me it's not about Jesus Christ, it's about doing your best and hoping for the best." "No, well, for me it's about loving your neighbor now. I'm just not sold on this life-after-death thing." "That's good and well for you, but when I read the Bible I think it's talking about how God wants us all to just get along." We wouldn't dare make up immediate truth concerning our car out of thin air, but we are more than willing to do so with ultimate truth. The masters say some very interesting things about this. They tell us that all our cogitations about God are incomplete, for God is mystery, but even though we will never fully understand Him, He has revealed Himself in a way that we can know Him. Each of us knows him partially, so together we get a much better picture of Him. So there is such a thing as being wrong about God. The first such thing is to decide that we know it all already, and the second thing is to decide that we can decide on our own.

We don't trust the messenger. A number of years ago Good Morning America sent one of their people out to ten different garages with a car with a spark plug wire pulled off. In nine out of ten garages the mechanics wanted to fix something else instead, and the biggest repair estimate was over \$500. Only one garage correctly identified the problem and fixed it—at no charge. In the realm of religion there are messengers you should not trust: Some of them are just ignorant of the message and don't realize how they are garbling it. The most damaging ones are those with ulterior motives who are using the Gospel to get something from you. But there are trustworthy messengers, and you can identify them:

They should be humble, grounded in Scripture and tradition (history) of the faith, capable of consistent reason, and should demonstrate a vital faith themselves.

We don't realize how important it is. Our son Leni is a certified car mechanic and a good one, but he has not always been good. Once he just had to find someone who would accept the carcass of his ruined truck. He just hadn't realized how important it was to check the oil. We often don't realize how important it is to study our faith. I Peter 3:15, 16a says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." There will be those who notice something about you, or ask about your church, or your faith, or some manifestation of the hope of Christ within you." Being able to give a cogent answer is important, as well as personally satisfying. Ephesians 4:11-13 says, "It was [Christ] who gave some to be...teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the...knowledge of the Son of God and become mature...." Learning about the faith will transform your life, it will bring to maturity in Christ, and bring you into unity with other Christians.

Finally, we don't know what needs to be known. 30 years ago I could do my own car maintenance. Now I let their experts fiddle with computers and sensors and gages. And it's not so much that I don't know, I have no idea just what I would need to know to fix my truck. The same is true of many Christians today. We have no idea of what we should know about the faith. The foundational concepts of the faith form a framework from which more esoteric ideas are drawn. Not everyone needs to launch into esoteric theological reflections for a living, but every Christian should have that basic framework. Every Christian should know: The basics of the content of the Bible, it's structure, and a little about it's history, and the content of the Catechism, beginning on p. 845 and it helps to have a sketchy knowledge of the first couple of centuries of Church History, and for Episcopalians, the English reformation.

We often quote a partial quote: We say, "Ignorance is bliss." But the whole quote is, "If ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." Proverbs tells us that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, Paul tells us to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. He also tells Timothy in II Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman that does not need to be ashamed, and who correctly handles the Word of truth."