

The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents Reveal Their Christian Faith

Compiled by Stephen McDowell

America began as a Christian nation. Christianity has been the predominant faith influencing the nation throughout our entire history. Even in recent years as we have been shifting to a humanistic foundation, Christianity is still the predominant faith. Evidence supporting this is vast and is examined in many of the books published by the Providence Foundation.* One indication of the Christian influence in America can be seen in the leaders we have chosen, in particular our Presidents.

All of America's Presidents have professed Christianity. Many were devout in their religious beliefs, adhering to their faith in word and deed. Others, while saying they were Christians, did not live in accordance with the moral teachings of the Bible. Some may have externally held to the faith (by attending church, professing they were Christians, etc.) while their hearts were far from Him; but nonetheless, they culturally embraced the Christian faith. Every President has at least acknowledged God and sought His aid in some way. This is certainly seen in their inaugural addresses.

The mention of God by the Presidents in their first official speeches has varied in length, from a short mention by some, to about forty percent of George Washington's entire address, and nearly one half of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Many Presidents not only mentioned God in their speeches, but displayed throughout their lives Christian character and a genuine fear of God. Just as importantly, many had a Biblical worldview. Especially important for

fulfilling their position as a civil ruler was their having a Biblical view of government — they saw government as limited, under God, based on self-government, and its purpose was to protect the lawful and serve man; it was not to be our savior. This Biblical view of government is seen in some of the President's inaugural addresses. For example, Herbert Hoover wrote: "Self-government can succeed only through an instructed electorate." Our best leaders have been those who



Calvin Coolidge

feared God, displayed Christian character, and had a Biblical worldview.

The following excerpts show the strong reliance upon God many had, and for those whose faith was more superficial, the words still reveal how central Christianity has been in the history of the life of our nation, including the civil life.

Also notice that many of the Presidents spoke of the providential purpose of America as a nation that

God would use to spread His liberty (personal, religious, civil, economic, political) throughout the world. For example, James Buchanan wrote:

I feel an humble confidence that the kind Providence which inspired our fathers with wisdom to frame the most perfect form of government and union ever devised by man will not suffer it to perish until it shall have been peacefully instrumental by its example in the extension of civil and religious liberty throughout the world.

Calvin Coolidge said in his inaugural address:

America seeks no earthly empire built on blood and force. No ambition, no temptation, lures her to thought of foreign dominions. The legions which she sends forth are armed, not with the sword, but with the cross. The higher state to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human, but of divine origin. She cherishes no purpose save to merit the favor of Almighty God.

A couple of the Presidents offered a prayer in their addresses, including Dwight D. Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush, and a number have quoted Scripture.

* See for example, *America a Christian Nation? Examining the Evidence of the Christian Foundation of America* by Stephen McDowell.

George Washington

(Federalist, 1789-1793)

First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789,
Federal Hall, New York, N.Y.

... [I]t would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes, and may enable every instrument employed in its administration to execute with success the functions allotted to his charge. In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own, nor those of my fellow-citizens at large less than either. No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency; and in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their united government the tranquil deliberations and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities from which the event has resulted can not be compared with the means by which most governments have been established without some return of pious gratitude, along with an humble anticipation of the future blessings which the past seem to presage. These reflections, arising

out of the present crisis, have forced themselves too strongly on my mind to be suppressed. You will join with me, I trust, in thinking that there are none under the influence of which the proceedings of a new and free government can more auspiciously commence.

... I dwell on this prospect with every satisfaction which an ardent love for my country can inspire, since there is no truth more thoroughly

**George Washington**

established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity; since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained;

and since the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people. . . .

Having thus imparted to you my sentiments as they have been awakened by the occasion which brings us together, I shall take my present leave; but not without resorting once more to the benign Parent of the Human Race in humble supplication that, since He has been pleased to favor the American people with opportunities for deliberating in perfect tranquillity, and dispositions for deciding with unparalleled unanimity on a form of government for the security of their union and the advancement of their happiness, so His divine blessing may be equally conspicuous in the enlarged views, the temperate consultations, and the wise measures on which the success of this Government must depend.

John Adams

(Federalist, 1797-1801)

Inaugural Address, Senate Chamber,
Philadelphia, March 4, 1797

... Relying, however, on the purity of their intentions, the justice of their cause, and the integrity and intelligence of the people, under an overruling Providence which had so signally protected this country from the first, the representatives of this nation . . . cut asunder the ties which had bound them, and launched into an ocean of uncertainty.

... with humble reverence, I feel it to be my duty to add, if a veneration for the religion of a people who profess and call themselves Christians, and a fixed resolu-



Prior to serving in civil government, the twentieth president, James Garfield, was a lay minister. He conducted many evangelistic meetings, seeing many people converted to Christ.

tion to consider a decent respect for Christianity among the best recommendations for the public service, can enable me in any degree to comply with your wishes, it shall be my strenuous endeavor that this sagacious injunction of the two Houses shall not be without effect. . . .

And may that Being who is supreme over all, the Patron of Order, the Fountain of Justice, and the Protector in all ages of the world of virtuous liberty, continue His blessing upon this nation and its Government and give it all possible success and duration consistent with the ends of His providence.

Thomas Jefferson

(Democrat-Republican, 1801-1809)
 First Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1801

Relying, then, on the patronage of your good will, I advance with obedience to the work, ready to retire from it whenever you become sensible how much better choice it is in your power to make. And may that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe lead our councils to what is best, and give them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity.

Second Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1805

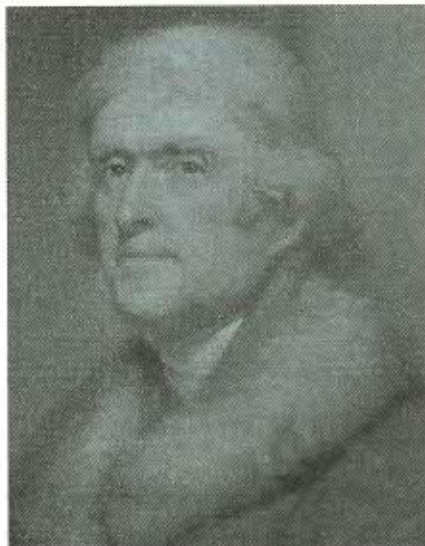
. . . I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with His providence and our riper years with His wisdom and power, and to whose goodness I ask you to join in

supplications with me that He will so enlighten the minds of your servants, guide their councils, and prosper their measures that whatsoever they do shall result in your good, and shall secure to you the peace, friendship, and approbation of all nations.

James Madison

(Democrat-Republican, 1809-1817)
 First Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1809

. . . In these my confidence will under every difficulty be best placed, next to that which we have all been encouraged to feel in the guardian-



Thomas Jefferson

ship and guidance of that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations, whose blessings have been so conspicuously dispensed to this rising Republic, and to whom we are bound to address our devout gratitude for the past, as well as our fervent supplications and best hopes for the future.

James Monroe

(Democrat-Republican, 1817-1825)

First Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1817

. . . If we persevere in the career in which we have advanced so far and in the path already traced, we can not fail, under the favor of a gracious Providence, to attain the high destiny which seems to await us.

. . . Relying on the aid to be derived from the other departments of the Government, I enter on the trust to which I have been called by the suffrages of my fellow-citizens with my fervent prayers to the Almighty that He will be graciously pleased to continue to us that protection which He has already so conspicuously displayed in our favor.

Second Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 5, 1821

. . . that they may produce a like accord in all questions touching, however remotely, the liberty, prosperity, and happiness of our country will always be the object of my most fervent prayers to the Supreme Author of All Good.

. . . With full confidence in the continuance of that candor and generous indulgence from my fellow-citizens at large which I have heretofore experienced, and with a firm reliance on the protection of Almighty God, I shall forthwith commence the duties of the high trust to which you have called me.

John Quincy Adams

(Democrat-Republican, 1825-1829)
 Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1825

. . . I appear, my fellow-citizens, in your presence and in that of Heaven to bind myself by the solemnities of religious obligation to the

faithful performance of the duties allotted to me in the station to which I have been called.

. . . and knowing that "except the Lord keep the city the watchman waketh but in vain," with fervent supplications for His favor, to His overruling providence I commit with humble but fearless confidence my own fate and the future destinies of my country.

Andrew Jackson

(Democrat, 1829-1837)
First Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1829

. . . And a firm reliance on the goodness of that Power whose providence mercifully protected our national infancy, and has since upheld our liberties in various vicissitudes, encourages me to offer up my ardent supplications that He will continue to make our beloved country the object of His divine care and gracious benediction.

Second Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1833

Finally, it is my most fervent prayer to that Almighty Being before whom I now stand, and who has kept us in His hands from the infancy of our Republic to the present day, that He will so overrule all my intentions and actions and inspire the hearts of my fellow-citizens that we may be preserved from dangers of all kinds and continue forever a united and happy people.

Martin Van Buren

(Democrat, 1837-1841)
Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1837

So sensibly, fellow-citizens, do these circumstances press themselves

upon me that I should not dare to enter upon my path of duty . . . did I not permit myself humbly to hope for the sustaining support of an ever-watchful and beneficent Providence.

. . . Beyond that I only look to the gracious protection of the Divine Being whose strengthening support I humbly solicit, and whom I fervently pray to look down upon us all. May it be among the dispensations of His providence to bless our beloved country with honors and with length of



Andrew Jackson

days. May her ways be ways of pleasantness and all her paths be peace!

William Henry Harrison

(Whig, 1841)
Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1841

I deem the present occasion sufficiently important and solemn to justify me in expressing to my fellow-citizens a profound reverence for the Christian religion and a thorough conviction that sound morals, religious liberty, and a just sense of religious responsibility are essen-

tially connected with all true and lasting happiness; and to that good Being who has blessed us by the gifts of civil and religious freedom, who watched over and prospered the labors of our fathers and has hitherto preserved to us institutions far exceeding in excellence those of any other people, let us unite in fervently commending every interest of our beloved country in all future time.

John Tyler

(Whig, 1841-1845)

[Tyler did not give an inaugural address. As vice-president under Harrison, he assumed the Presidency when Harrison died one month after taking office.]

James K. Polk

(Democrat, 1845-1849)
Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1845

In assuming responsibilities so vast I fervently invoke the aid of that Almighty Ruler of the Universe in whose hands are the destinies of nations and of men to guard this Heaven-favored land against the mischiefs which without His guidance might arise from an unwise public policy. With a firm reliance upon the wisdom of Omnipotence to sustain and direct me in the path of duty which I am appointed to pursue, I stand in the presence of this assembled multitude of my countrymen to take upon myself the solemn obligation "to the best of my ability to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

. . . again humbly supplicating that Divine Being who has watched over and protected our beloved country from its infancy to the present hour to continue His gracious bene-



James Buchanan spoke of the providential purposes of this nation in his inaugural address, saying he believed God intended America to be instrumental "in the extension of civil and religious liberty throughout the world."

dictions upon us, that we may continue to be a prosperous and happy people.

Zachary Taylor

(Whig, 1849-1850)

Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 5, 1849

In conclusion I congratulate you, my fellow-citizens, upon the high state of prosperity to which the goodness of Divine Providence has conducted our common country. Let us invoke a continuance of the same protecting care which has led us from small beginnings to the eminence we this day occupy. . .

Millard Fillmore

(Whig, 1850-1853)

[Fillmore became President when Taylor died in office in July 1850. He gave no inaugural address.]

Franklin Pierce

(Democrat, 1853-1857)

Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1853

. . . It is with me an earnest and vital belief that as the Union has been the source, under Providence, of our prosperity to this time, so it is the surest pledge of a continuance of the blessings we have enjoyed, and which we are sacredly bound to transmit undiminished to our children. . . .

But let not the foundation of our hope rest upon man's wisdom. It will not be sufficient that sectional prejudices find no place in the public deliberations. It will not be sufficient that the rash counsels of human passion are rejected. It must be felt that there is no national security but in the nation's humble, acknowledged dependence upon God and His over-

ruling providence.

. . . I can express no better hope for my country than that the kind Providence which smiled upon our fathers may enable their children to preserve the blessings they have inherited.



Abraham Lincoln

James Buchanan

(Democrat, 1857-1861)

Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1857

In entering upon this great office I must humbly invoke the God of our fathers for wisdom and firmness to execute its high and responsible duties in such a manner as to restore harmony and ancient friendship among the people of the several States and to preserve our free institutions throughout many generations. . . .

. . . I feel an humble confidence that the kind Providence which inspired our fathers with wisdom to frame the most perfect form of government and union ever devised

by man will not suffer it to perish until it shall have been peacefully instrumental by its example in the extension of civil and religious liberty throughout the world. . . .

I shall now proceed to take the oath prescribed by the Constitution, whilst humbly invoking the blessing of Divine Providence on this great people.

Abraham Lincoln

(Union Party [Republican], 1861-1865)

First Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1861

Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty.

Second Inaugural Address, Capitol Building, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1865

. . . Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills

to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God—always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Andrew Johnson

(Union Party [Republican], 1865-1869)

[Johnson assumed the presidency on April 15, 1865, after Lincoln was shot and died.]

Ulysses S. Grant

(Republican, 1869-1877)

First Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1869

... Why, it looks as though Providence had bestowed upon us a strong box in the precious metals locked up in the sterile mountains of the far West, and which we are now

forging the key to unlock, to meet the very contingency that is now upon us. . . .

In conclusion I ask patient forbearance one toward another throughout the land, and a determined effort on the part of every citizen to do his share toward cementing a happy union; and I ask the prayers of the nation to Almighty God in behalf of this consummation.



Ulysses S. Grant

Second Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1873

Under Providence I have been called a second time to act as Executive over this great nation. . . .

... I believe that our Great Maker is preparing the world, in His own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will be no longer required.

Rutherford B. Hayes

(Republican, 1877-1881)

Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 5, 1877

Looking for the guidance of that Divine Hand by which the destinies of nations and individuals are shaped, I call upon you, Senators, Representatives, judges, fellow-citizens, here and everywhere, to unite with me in an earnest effort to secure to our country the blessings, not only of material prosperity, but of justice, peace, and union — a union depending not upon the constraint of force, but upon the loving devotion of a free people; "and that all things may be so ordered and settled upon the best and surest foundations that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established among us for all generations."

James Garfield

(Republican, 1881)

Inaugural Address, Capitol Steps, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1881

I shall greatly rely upon the wisdom and patriotism of Congress and of those who may share with me the responsibilities and duties of administration, and, above all, upon our efforts to promote the welfare of this great people and their Government. I reverently invoke the support and blessings of Almighty God.

Chester A. Arthur

(Republican, 1881-1885)

[Arthur became President after Garfield died on September 19, 1881, from a lingering illness from a gunshot wound of an assassin.]

(to be continued in next Perspective)