Relying on the blessing of Almighty God

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Invitation to an event prior to the opening of the Federal Parliament, Melbourne, 1901

... the Commonwealth will be from its first stage a Christian Commonwealth ...
- Sir John Downer, 1898

What makes a nation?

In the mid nineteenth century, as momentum built toward Federation, the Australian people and their leaders reminded themselves of the key truth of nation-building: the formation and sustenance of nations relies entirely on God's blessing. While civic systems prosper by recognising the value of the individual and curbing the potential for human corruption, such systems are useful only when God gives his assent. This was clear to our forebears who understood that *God is the builder of everything* (Hebrews 3:4) and he is sovereign, according to Psalm 127:1:

> *Unless the LORD builds the house, its labourers labour in vain.*

Upholding such truths, Australians at Federation gave their approval to a Constitution with a Preamble containing the following glorious assertion:

> *... the people ... humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth ....*

That declaration has served since 1901 to introduce the Commonwealth Constitution - the "rule book" of Federation. Those words emphasise the distinctively Christian character of the nation, but they are not sufficiently known, read, recited or applied within national life - though there is no hope for our nation if God were to withdraw his blessing. Restoration of a belief in Almighty God, which can be encouraged through study of the Preamble and other founding statements, is vital if our nation is to continue to enjoy peaceful prosperity as *one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth*.

Federation and the recognition of God's sovereignty

As momentum increased toward the unification of the six Australian Provinces as a new nation, God's people shared great wisdom that shaped the principles underlying the emerging Constitution, and they prayed for God's blessing to be upon the movement towards federation. Moreover, many Christians rose up, recognising that God is at work when a nation is being formed, and must be clearly acknowledged. God's people asserted that we may not presume simply to form a new nation. That recognition was part of the wisdom of the era, as shown in these examples from those times:

In **1776** the *Declaration of Independence* was made by Britain's American colonies ... *with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence* ....

In **1836** Governor John Hindmarsh, in his *Proclamation* urged the South Australian colonists to apply ... *a strict observance of the Ordinances of religion* and to evangelise ... *under the blessing of Divine Providence* ....

In **1863** President Abraham Lincoln affirmed the sovereignty of God, in a *Proclamation* appointing a national day of humiliation, fasting and prayer:

> *... it is the duty of nations, as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scripture and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.*

In **1874** the Swiss Constitution was declared *In the name of Almighty God.*

In **1896** the People's Federal Convention held at Bathurst (NSW) stated:

> *... this Convention, acknowledging the government of this world by Divine Providence, commends the cause of Australian Federation ....*

In **1897** the petitions of thousands of people urged the Australasian Federal Convention to acknowledge Almighty God within the Constitution it was drafting. Further, the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 14 April 1897 stated:

> *No Christian could in conscience vote for a Constitution Bill that did not recognise God ....*



National acknowledgement of Almighty God

In Adelaide (at the 1897 Australasian Federal Convention) **Patrick McMahon Glynn** urged that: "... God should be recognised and His blessing invoked, in the opening lines of our Constitution." (*Official Record of the Debates of the Australasian Federal Convention*, III, p.1184). He stated:

Right through the ages we find this universal sense of Divine inspiration - this feeling, that a wisdom beyond that of man shapes the destiny of states; that the institutions of men are but the imperfect instruments of a Divine and beneficent energy, helping their higher aims. Should we not, Sir, grant the prayer of the many petitions that have been presented to us, by recognising at the opening of our great future our dependence upon God - should we not fix in our Constitution the elements of reverence and strength, by expressing our share of the universal sense, that a Divine idea animates all our higher objects, and that the guiding hand of Providence leads our wanderings towards the dawn? (p.1185).

Constitutional recognition of Almighty God was rejected by that meeting, but public concern continued as the upper and lower houses of Parliament in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Western Australia, along with the lower house in Tasmania, urged such recognition. It gained the support of the Convention at its Melbourne session held in 1898, and was approved by the Australian people who voted at a referendum in 1899.

Effective re-ratification of the 100 year old Preamble

Rejecting two referendum proposals in 1999, voters defeated the plan for an Australian republic and they very firmly rejected a proposed new Preamble. Commencing with the phrase: *With hope in God ...* it was very weak in comparison to the existing Preamble, that declares we conduct ourselves:

- **humbly** - rather than exhibiting pride, arrogance, and self-will, but ...
- **relying** - rather than asserting self-capability, but deeply depending ...
- **on the blessing of** him who (at least) can withhold blessing - who is ...
- **Almighty God** - King of kings, Lord of lords, omnipotent, omniscient!

These words in the Preamble approved in 1899 were effectively re-ratified in 1999, as a majority of voters in all states rejected the weaker alternative. Therefore our nation must rise to its stated position before God.

Building on the work of the Founders

Having understood how the Founders applied Christian wisdom to shaping the nation, and asserted dependence on Almighty God, our task is to echo their convictions and build on their efforts. We can ask nothing more of the Founders but we can take up their great cause as we consider their wisdom, encourage knowledge of their vision, and take practical steps to add to the treasure they have given to us. But we will take no action to safeguard it from erosion if we are overcome by reluctance or lethargy, especially (by weakness) if we fail to notice when our national foundations are being undermined.

Instead, Christians can assert wisdom when hosting meetings to dialogue with (and pray for) MPs, councillors, authorities, and candidates for office. The occasion for such breakfasts, dinners or civic functions may include:

- **Australia Day** - 26 January
- **Anzac Day** - 25 April
- **The Queen's Birthday** - the second Monday in June (except in WA)
- **Citizenship Day** - 17 September
- **Labour Day** - the first Monday in October (NSW, SA, ACT)
- **Remembrance Day** - 11 November

Christians can use such opportunities to warn civic authorities and our society that nations are not formed or sustained because we are clever but through God's mercy, and that our nation must turn from self-assertion, arrogance and the defilement of the land. Our task is to reveal the character of the Lord who says: *I am very angry with the nations that feel secure* (Zechariah 1:15), but who *has lifted up the humble* (Luke 1:52).



The Australasian Federal Convention, Adelaide, 1897

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