American Heresy or Divine Analogy?

"As Jesus is to the Bible, so is the Declaration to the Constitution." At first, this quote by Theodore Parker, a nineteenth-century American transcendentalist author, gave me pause, especially as a Christian. It sounded like he was deifying a document. Thankfully, I realized that his words were meant only as analogy, not theology, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Heresy averted. But, I still had my doubts regarding its accuracy. Is the Declaration of Independence that important to the Constitution? To find my answer, I looked to the lives of three presidents: Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Calvin Coolidge.

Abraham Lincoln believed in a strong relationship between the Declaration and the Constitution. In a note fragment, he argues that America would not have secured a free government without the Declaration expressing the principle of "liberty to all," thus inspiring the colonists with its "promise of something better than a mere change of masters." To illustrate this, Lincoln alludes to Proverbs 25:11, a verse that describes "a word fitly spoken" as "apples of gold in pictures of silver." He frames the Declaration as the apple and the Constitution as the picture, intended to protect the centerpiece without overshadowing it: "The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture." Ultimately, this view of the documents' connection would motivate him to abolish slavery. Though abolition required winning a war and amending the Constitution, Lincoln saw it as the long-overdue fulfillment of the Declaration's promises of liberty and equality.

In contrast, Woodrow Wilson thought the Declaration-Constitution relationship was all but nonexistent. This is because he dismissed the Declaration's idealistic preamble. In his Fourth of July address in 1914, he argued that the preliminary part was not "the heart of the document."

Years prior, he contended that the Declaration's ideals had no claim on modern people, who should instead "determine afresh" their principles. On another occasion, he summed up his interpretation quite clearly: "If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the preface." His version of the Declaration can have no power over the Constitution for it is only a relic, not a beacon. Wilson used this severed connection to defend his racist and sexist policies; he segregated the federal workforce for the first time since the Reconstruction era, and he opposed women's suffrage for fear of endangering Jim Crow laws. Wilson's view of the two Founding documents as separate ended up undermining both.

Calvin Coolidge, sworn in three years after the Wilson presidency, reaffirmed Lincoln's belief in the Declaration-Constitution connection. In his speech entitled "The Inspiration of the Declaration," he restores the significance of the Declaration's preamble. It is more than rhetoric; it establishes eternal values from which there cannot be progress, only regress. In the most frequently quoted passage of this speech, he proclaims, "If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final." This perspective guided Coolidge's actions as president. He passed anti-lynching laws to quell racial violence, appointed the first woman to the federal judiciary, and granted full citizenship to all Native Americans. In recognizing the import of the Declaration, Coolidge allowed constitutional governance to flourish.

Is the Declaration of Independence as important to the Constitution as Theodore Parker once claimed? After this surveying these three presidents, I say yes. Jesus is the heart of the Bible, and the Declaration is the heart of the Constitution. Both are spiritual cores that animate their practical counterparts, detailing either religious living or democratic governance. These

central organs may appear unnecessary when all is well, but if they are carved out, the bodies cannot function. Christians turn to hypocrites, and patriots turn to bigots. When Christians face decisions where no Bible verse dictates a clear right choice, they need the guiding principle of imitating Christ. When Americans cannot find an explicit provision in the Constitution to settle dispute, they need the immortal values expressed in the Declaration. For all its hyperbole, the analogy is apt.