



**University Christian Church**  
(Disciples of Christ)  
Austin, Texas

University Christian Church - Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

## **The Cost of Freedom**

Pentecost 5, b, July 5, 2009

I Peter 2:13-17

Sometimes one's gut feeling over what needs to be done, can overwhelm what the mind or spirit in calm rationality might dictate. Sometimes frustration and tension build up to the point that there is no balm that will calm the irritation. One incident builds upon another until finally, POW. The explosion!

That well describes what took place here in the year 1776. It wasn't basically a reasoned response, nearly so much as it was a reaction to a long series of irritants that finally caused the colonists to finally and firmly stand up to the British. But there were two serious, theological impediments to Christians in the colonies concerning their participation in this or any other revolution.

The first, although our forbearers in the congregational free churches of New England were chief among those pushing for freedom and few, indeed, in that membership had much sympathy for the Tory cause, they did have a deep respect for the authority of the Bible in making their decisions. So even as church after church made clear she stood for independence, the churches at the same time had to face the fact that scripture gives little support for revolutions such as they pondered. Hear again our reading for this morning in that context:

### **Read I Peter 2:13-17**

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to

*punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

And we could cite others, as well. O yes, the Old Testament has its stories of Israel righteously going off to war with the blessing of the Lord. But in the New Testament, the anchor of the Christian faith, the Biblical writers did not envision much of a wait between their day and the Second Coming of Jesus, so their message was to "wait patiently" in whatever state you presently are.

◇If you're single, don't seek to be married.

◇If your marriage is bad, just hang in there for a while

◇If you are a slave, bear up under it.

◇If you nation's ruler seems unjust, patiently suffer your lot. It will only be for a short time. Don't struggle to be free in any worldly way, for the time is too short to be worried about such trivial things, and your time is too precious to be spent on anything less than the spreading of the gospel. This unmistakable teaching clearly dampened the colonies' church members' revolutionary zeal.

The second Biblical teaching that our colonial forbearers faced was the clear and radical pacifism of Jesus, of the entire New Testament, and of the first 300 yrs. of the Christian church's history. The Bible gave them all sorts of theological support for bearing up under the rule of a repressive mother country. But it gave precious little support to those who dreamed of a violent revolution. Jesus said, **"Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you."**

**"If someone slaps you on the cheek, give them the other to slap as well."**

Time and again the Bible has statements such as, **If a Roman soldier coerces**

**you to carry his military pack one mile, carry it 2 miles.**

And it wasn't that the colonies just before the American Revolution were so awfully different from Palestine in Jesus' day. Remember that in Jesus' own band of disciples there were those who were called Zealots, who if they had been in America would have been called Patriots because their chief aim in life was removing the unwanted overlords. In Palestine it was the mighty colonizing power of Rome. In America it was the mighty colonizing power of Britain. Jesus words' to those chaffing under Roman rule would seem particularly relevant to those chaffing until British rule 1,700 years later. **But what had Jesus said to encourage those who wanted to revolt and throw off Roman rule in Palestine? Can you think of even a single phrase, a single teaching of Jesus that would support such violent resistance?**

**No, I don't believe that there is one.** Jesus' philosophy might be summarized in the phrase, "**do not violently resist evil done to you.**"

So our Christian colonial forbearers were on shaky theological ground when they began encouraging the members of their churches and communities to take up arms to defeat the English in battle. But sometimes theology and simple tenets of faith are overruled by other considerations. That, at least, is the way our forbearers saw it.

They reasoned that they'd fled England 150 yrs. ago in order to have a certain measure of independence: to worship as they pleased, to seek a new and richer life.

- They had done the rough pioneering of the new land.

- They had put up with unbearable winters,

hostile Indians,

diseases;

not those fat cats in London at the House of Lords, who sat in ornate leather upholstered chairs and calmly smoked their Virginian tobacco while making a fortune from the backs of industrious Americans. These colonists had put up with a lot of gaff from the Mother Country. And they had precious little themselves to show for it.

By and large Americans were fed up with British rule. Irritation upon irritation festered... and the wound wouldn't heal. The injustice of the colonial rule was so oppressive upon these colonists, even without scriptural basis for their action, colonial Christians were going to take matters into their own hands. Their human reason told them that it was time to stop waiting for some God-inspired, new Moses to be deliver them! They were going to get up and do something about it themselves!

The First Continental Congress composed of some of the brightest and most vocal leaders of the colonies had in 1774 adopted a policy encouraging civil disobedience to British rule.<sup>i</sup> Now we hear that Congress's rationale for action, as presented by Mr. John Hancock.

**"That the inhabitants of the English colonies in North America, by the immutable laws of nature, the principles of the English Constitution, and the several charters or compacts, have the following Rights:**

**That they are entitled to life, liberty, and property..."** and it concludes with, **"Resolved, That the following acts of parliament are infringements and violations of the rights of the colonists; and that the repeal of them is essentially necessary, in order to restore harmony between Great Britain and the American colonies"**

To such feisty demands, Britain's predictable response was even harsher British rule, which in turn hardened the colonists in their determination to be independent.

But openly hearing fellow Americans say that they intended to be free was a sort of cutting of the apron strings that caused an enthusiastic celebration in the colonies. John Adams, always near the heart of the stirring it seems, wrote to his wife Abigail on July 3, 1776, the day after the Declaration of Independence was readied, and the day before it was approved by the Continental Congress.

**"Yesterday, the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America, and greater, perhaps, never was nor will be decided among men... You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution, and the reasons which will justify it in the sight of God and man."**

Notice the seeking of historical perspective and the seeking of God's blessing. This is so important to remember. This American revolution was as self-conscious as they get. These people knew that they were part of something almost transcendental. It was as if they felt a call from history itself to do this mighty deed and were going to oblige. And though they mention God in almost every letter and every document, it is not God as found in the Bible which is their guiding light, but it is rather, a less intrusive, more Deist God, a god that blesses their embrace of human reason and a sense of fairness - that dominates their thinking.<sup>ii</sup>

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Regardless of how we might judge the Biblical morality of the revolutionary war in retrospect, it is obvious that you and I ARE BENEFICIARIES of the courage

of those men and women. Just as today we cannot look back and justify the long colonial and then national history of slavery here; nor can we look back and justify the taking of the land we now claim as our own from the native Americans who preceded us here; nonetheless you and I are beneficiaries of those policies, those actions. We cannot undo them. We cannot correct them, nor can we justify them. Honesty forbids our even trying to do so.

No, our challenge is to recognize that our present blessing flows to us from a checkered past, from both noble service and also from ignoble rationalizations.

Our challenge is to embrace a patriotism that neither lionizes our predecessors, nor demonizes them, but one that honors them and the tough decisions that they reached and the tough sacrifices that they made.

Our challenge is express a patriotism – to use the phrase of the late William Slone Coffin Jr.- that finds us “in praiseworthy competition with our forbearers,” taking the opportunities of our day to fashion a nation:

more just,

more compassionate,

more uplifting of the human spirit, and

more obedient to the Holy Spirit, than the nation we have inherited from them.

That is our difficult calling. That is our challenging duty, because most certainly following generations will be judging us and our use of our time, talents, and resources.

May the God of Israel and the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, bless us in that endeavor.

Amen.

<sup>i</sup> The test of any commitment is how one responds when resistance is encountered. This is nowhere clearer than in time of war. America had more than her share of committed patriots, and in time of great need she had orators and preachers and politicians and soap box speakers who motivated those who flagged in their zeal with speeches that stirred the spirits back into action. Now hear from one such pamphlet written by the noted Thomas Paine that was distributed by General Washington to the American troops in the field on Christmas 1776.

**"These are the times that try men's souls. the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: 'Tis dearness only that give everything its value. Heaven know how to put a proper price upon its goods: and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated."**

<sup>ii</sup> As long as we are poking into the private mail of the Adames, let us hear Abigail's response to her John's support of this new and challenging form of government that asked a great of its populace:

**"I am more and more convinced that Man is a dangerous creature, and that power, whether vested in many or few, is ever grasping, and like the grave, cries, 'Give, give.'"**

She worried that Americans had grown so comfortable without a government that they wouldn't submit to any new order when it came.