

Preachers and Pulpits of the American Revolution

by Dr. Catherine Millard

Volumes have been written on the American Revolution. Sadly, however, an important aspect of this heroic epic has been omitted: the Protestant Christian pulpits which constituted the media of the day, from which were preached dynamic Biblical sermons addressing the evil of tyranny and the blessings of God-ordained liberty.

A reason for this omission is due to the fact that it was not an organized force that could be numbered or recruited to achieve visible goals.

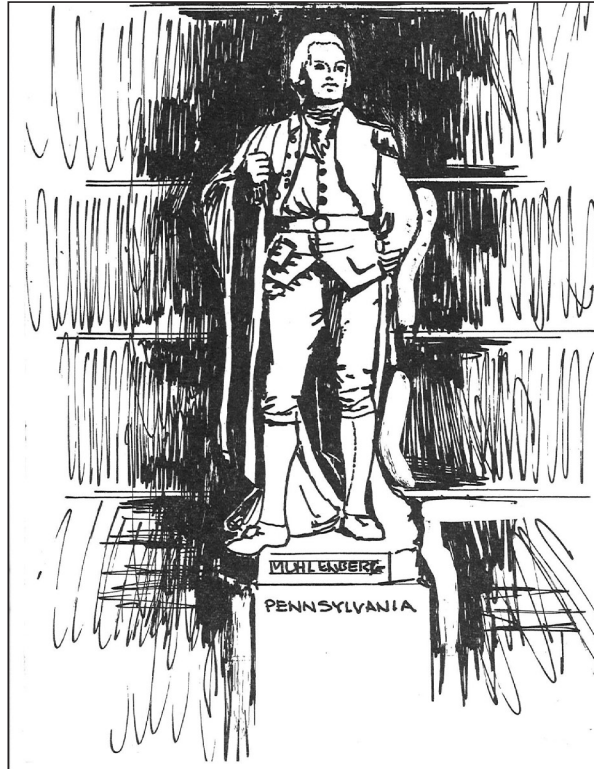
Independence was boldly preached from Scripture throughout the 13 original States during the American Revolution. Why then should not these sermons, addresses, prayers and exhortations have as significant a place in American history as local petitions, resolutions, remonstrances and town committees of safety, which historians deem essential to understanding the Revolution? The pastor's address brought about enthusiasm; his prayers brought about courage, and his parting blessing - encouragement and resolution.

During earlier years, prior to the American Revolution, there were chaplains in the colonial wars, such as the French and Indian War. At the conclusion of the war, these chaplains became pastors of Protestant churches, preaching fervently to their congregations "the divine right of Resistance" as opposed to "the divine right of Kings."

These humble pastors produced the minute-men, who went forth boldly from their congregations armed with exhortation from the Pulpit, as well as muskets and rifles in hand, resisting oppression. This was the first army of the American Revolution, against which the British Empire strived in vain at Bunker Hill. From the man of God's preaching in the villages, towns and valleys, proceeded thousands of minute-men who resisted the British at the Battle of Bunker Hill. When Lexington and Concord sounded the battle-cry, these minute-men took up their arms. The prayers and blessing of their pastor accompanying them, they went forth with patriotism and fervor to defend the lives and freedoms of their fellow citizens.

One such example of Pulpit Preaching is that of **Peter von Muhlenberg**, known as "the fighting parson of the American Revolution." As pastor of a German/English-speaking Episcopal Church in Woodstock, Virginia, he received a circular letter from George Washington to the Protestant Churches, requesting that regiments be raised for the Revolutionary Army. The following Sunday, Muhlenberg's sermon was taken from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8,

ending with an appeal to his congregation: "There is a time for war, and a time for peace; there is a time to pray and a time to fight!" Upon which he dramatically pulled open his clerical robes, revealing the uniform of a colonel in the Continental Army. His parishioners readily enrolled in the army - Muhlenberg's regiment being complete. This great man of God served eight years' military service for the then fledgling country.



Major General Peter von Muhlenberg - "The Fighting Parson."
After the original marble sculpture in the small House Rotunda,
U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C. Illustrator: Maxwell Edgar.
From, *Great American Statesmen and Heroes*,
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In 1774, when the American colonies were in turmoil, the *First Provincial Congress of Massachusetts* asserted with gratitude its debt to the Pulpit ministry as loyal friends of civil and religious freedom, invoking their assistance in an Address, as follows:

"Reverend Sirs: When we contemplate the friendship and assistance our ancestors, the first settlers of this province (while overwhelmed with distress), received from the pious pastors of the churches of Christ, who, to enjoy the rights of conscience, fled with them into this land, then a savage wilderness, we find ourselves filled with the most grateful sensations. And we cannot but acknowledge the goodness of Heaven in constantly supplying us with preachers of the gospel, whose concern has been the temporal and spiritual happiness of this people.

In a day like this, when all the friends of civil and religious liberty are exerting themselves to deliver this country from its present calamities, we cannot but place great hopes in an order of men who have ever distinguished themselves in their country's cause; and do, therefore, recommend to

the ministers of the gospel in the several towns and other places in the colony, that they assist us in avoiding that dreadful slavery with which we are now threatened, by advising the people of their several congregations, as they wish their prosperity, to abide by, and strictly adhere to, the resolutions of the Continental Congress," at Philadelphia, in October, 1774, "as the most peaceable and probable method of preventing confusion and bloodshed, and of restoring that harmony between Great Britain and these colonies, on which we wish might be established not only the rights and liberties of America, but the lasting happiness of the whole British empire.

Resolved, That the foregoing address be presented to all the ministers of the gospel in the province."

From the above, we see that Pulpit preaching in the Protestant churches of America provided the moral force which won her independence. Following are but a few of the numerous *Election*

Sermons which ensued throughout the colonies during the American Revolution:

“Government corrupted by Vice, and recovered by Righteousness.” A Sermon preached by Samuel Langdon, D.D., President of Harvard College in Cambridge, before the Honorable Congress of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay in New England, assembled at Watertown, on Wednesday, the 31st Day of May, 1775. Being the Anniversary fixed by Charter for the Election of Counsellors. (As a roaring Lion and a raging Bear, so is a wicked Ruler over the poor People. Proverbs 28:15.)

“And I will restore they judges as at the first, and thy counselors as at the beginning; afterward thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.” Isaiah 1:26.

Shall we rejoice, my fathers and brethren, or shall we weep together, on the return of this anniversary, which from the first settlement of this colony has been sacred to liberty, to perpetuate that invaluable privilege of choosing from among ourselves wise men, fearing God and hating covetousness, to be honorable counselors, to constitute one essential branch of that happy government which was established on the faith of royal charters?

On this day the people have from year to year assembled, from all our towns, in a vast congregation, with gladness and festivity, with every ensign of joy displayed in our metropolis, which now, alas! Is made a garrison of mercenary troops, the stronghold of despotism...

We have lived to see the time when British liberty is just ready to expire, - when that constitution of government which has so long been the glory and strength of the English nation is deeply undermined and ready to tumble into ruins, - when America is threatened with cruel oppression, and the arm of power is stretched out against New England, and especially against this colony, to compel us to submit to the arbitrary acts of legislators who are not our representatives, and who will not themselves bear the least part of the burdens which, without mercy, they are laying upon us...

That we might not have it in our power to refuse the most absolute submission to their unlimited claims of authority, they have not only endeavored to terrify us with fleets and armies sent to our capital, and distressed and put an end to our trade, - particularly that important branch of it, the fishery, - but at length attempted, by a sudden march of a body of troops in the night, to seize and destroy one of our magazines, formed by the people merely for their security, if, after such formidable military preparations on the other side, matters should be pushed to an extremity...

The Sermon preached before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives, of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, in New England, at Boston, May 27, 1778. Being the Anniversary for the Election of the Honorable Council. (But Jerusalem, which is above, is free, which is the mother of us,

so then, brethren, we are not children of the bond woman, but of the free.” Galatians iv. 26, 31.)

By Phillips Payson, A.M., Pastor of a Church in Chelsea.

“It is common for the inspired writers to speak of the gospel dispensation in terms applicable to the heavenly world, especially when they view it in comparison with the law of Moses. In this light they consider the church of God, and good men upon earth, as members of the church and family of God above, and liken the liberty of Christians to that of the citizens of the heavenly Zion. We doubt not but the Jerusalem above, the heavenly society, possesses the noblest liberty to a degree of perfection of which the human mind can have no adequate conception in the present state. The want of that knowledge and rectitude they are endowed with above, renders liberty and government so imperfect here below...

Recollecting our pious ancestors, the first settlers of the country, - nor shall we look for ancestry beyond that period, - and we may say, in the most literal sense, we are children, not of the bond woman, but of the free. It may hence well be expected that the exertions and effects of American liberty should be more vigorous and complete. It has the most to fear from ignorance and avarice; of their liberty in the eager pursuit of wealth, as the states of Holland have done; and it will always be as easy to rob an ignorant people of their liberty as to pick the pockets of a blind man...

A Sermon preached before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, in New England, May 31, 1780. Being the Anniversary for the Election of the Honorable Council. (Thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers.”- Exodus xviii.21.)

By Simeon Howard, A.M., Pastor of the West Church in Boston.

“Almighty God, who governs the world, generally carries on the designs of his government by the instrumentality of subordinate agents, hereby giving scope and opportunity to his creatures to become the ministers for good to one another, in the exercise of the various powers and capacities with which he had endowed them. Though, for the vindication of his honor, to dispel the darkness and give a check to the idolatry and vice which overspread the world, and in order to prepare mankind for the reception of a Saviour, to be manifested in due time, God was pleased to take the Jewish nation under his particular care and protection, and to become their political law-giver and head; yet He made use of the agency of some of that people in the administration of His government. The legislative power He seems to have reserved wholly to himself, there being no evidence that any of the rulers or assemblies of the people had authority to make laws; but the judicial and executive powers were entrusted with them. At the first institution of the government, Moses seems to have exercised the judicial authority wholly by himself. In this business he was employed from morning till evening, when Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest and prince of Midian, came to visit him. This wise man

A
DISCOURSE
On “the good News from
a far Country.”
Deliver’d July 24th.

A Day of Thanks-giving to Almighty God,
throughout the Province of the *Massachusetts-
Bay* in *New-England*, on Occasion of the
REPEAL of the STAMP-ACT; appointed
by his Excellency, the GOVERNOR of said
Province, at the Desire of it’s Houfe of RE-
PRESENTATIVES, with the Advice of his
MAJESTY’S COUNCIL.

By CHARLES CHAUNCY, D.D.
A Pastor of the first Church in *Boston*.

B O S T O N : N . E .
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– for such he surely was – observed to Moses that this business was too heavy for him, and what he was not able to perform alone; and therefore advised him to appoint proper persons to bear the burden with him, provided it was agreeable to the divine will. Moses, it is said in the context, hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said. There can be no doubt but that God approved this measure...otherwise it would not have been adopted...

Let us now consider, the qualifications pointed out in the text as necessary for rulers:

They must be able men. God has made a great difference in men in respect of their natural powers, both of body and mind; to some he has given more, to others fewer talents. Nor is there perhaps a less difference in this respect arising from education. And though there are none but what may be good members of civil society, as well as faithful servants of God, yet every one has not abilities sufficient to make him a good civil ruler. “Woe unto thee, O land, when thy king is a child,” says Solomon, hereby intimating that the happiness of a people depends greatly upon the character of its rulers, and that if they resemble children in weakness, ignorance, credulity; fickleness, etc., the people will of course be very miserable. By able men may be intended men of good understanding and knowledge, - men of clear heads, who have improved their minds by exercise, acquired a habit of reasoning, and furnished themselves with a good degree of knowledge, - men who have a just conception of the nature and end of government in general, of the natural rights of mankind, of the nature and importance of civil and religious liberty, - a knowledge of human nature, of the springs of action and the readiest way to engage and influence the heart, - an acquaintance with the people to be governed, their genius, their prejudices, their interest with respect to other states, what difficulties they are under, what dangers they are liable to, and what they are able to bear and do...

By ‘able men’ may be further intended men capable of enduring the burden and fatigue of government, - men that have not broken or debilitated their bodies or minds by the effeminate pleasures of luxury, intemperance, or dissipation. The supreme government of a people is always a burden of great weight, though more difficult at some times than others. It cannot be managed well without great diligence and application. Weak and effeminate persons are therefore by no means fit to manager it. But rulers should not only be able men, but, ‘*Such as fear God.*’ The fear of God, in the language of Scripture, does not intend a slavish, superstitious dread, as of an almighty, arbitrary, and cruel Being, but that just reverence and awe of Him which naturally arises from a belief and habitual consideration of His glorious perfections and providence, - of His being the moral governor of the world, a lover of holiness and a hater of vice, who sees every thought and design as well as every action of all his creatures, and will punish the impenitently vicious and reward the virtuous. It is therefore a fear of offending Him productive of obedience to His laws, and ever accompanied with hope in His mercy, and that filial love which is due to so amiable a character. Let me observe, once more, that it is of great importance to their happiness that religion and virtue generally

prevail among a people; and in order to this, government should use its influence to promote them...

For, they must be men of truth. This means men free from deceit and hypocrisy, guile, and falsehood, - men who will not, by flattery and cajoling, by falsehood and slandering a competitor, endeavor to get into authority; and who, when they are in, will conscientiously speak the truth in all their declarations and promises, and punctually fulfill all their engagements...”

The United States elevated to Glory and Honor. A Sermon, preached before His Excellency Jonathan Trumbull, Esq., L.L.D. Governor and Commander in Chief, And the Honorable, The General Assembly of The State of Connecticut, convened at Hartford, at the Anniversary Election, May 8th 1783. By Ezra Stiles, D.D., President of Yale College.

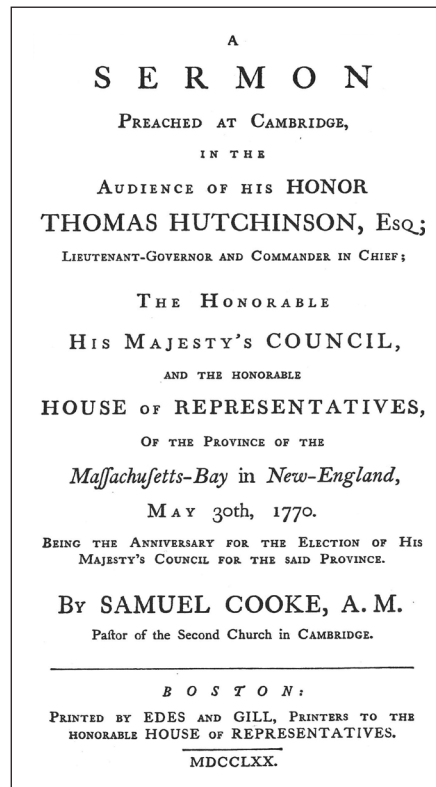
“And to make thee high above all nations which He hath made, in praise, and in name and in honor; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God.” – Deuteronomy xxvi.19

Taught by the omniscient Deity, Moses foresaw and predicted the capital events relative to Israel, through the successive changes of depression and glory, until their final elevation to the first dignity and eminence among the empires of the world. These events have been so ordered as to become a display of retribution and sovereignty; for, while the good and evil hitherto felt by this people have been dispensed in the way of exact national retribution, their ultimate glory and honor will be of the divine sovereignty, with a ‘Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord, be it known unto you, but for mine holy name’s sake.’

However, it may be doubted whether political communities are rewarded and punished in this world only, and whether the prosperity and decline of other empires have corresponded with their moral state as to virtue and vice, yet the **history of the Hebrew theocracy** shows that the secular welfare of God’s ancient people depended upon their virtue, their religion, their observance of that

holy covenant which Israel entered into with God on the plains at the foot of Nebo, on the other side Jordan. Here Moses, the man of God, assembled three million of people, - the number of the United States, - recapitulated and gave them a second publication of the sacred jurial institute, delivered thirty-eight years before, with the most awful solemnity, at Mount Sinai. A law dictated with sovereign authority by the Most High to a people, to a world, a universe, becomes of invincible force and obligation without any reference to the consent of the governed...

Whence Moses and the prophets, by divine direction, interspersed their writings with promises that when the ends of God’s moral government should be answered in a series of national punishments, inflicted for a succession of ages, He would, by his irresistible power and sovereign grace, subdue the hearts of His people to a free, willing, joyful obedience; turn their captivity; recover and gather them “from all the nations whither the Lord had scattered them



in His fierce anger; bring them into the land which their fathers possessed; and multiply them above their fathers, and rejoice over them for good, as He rejoiced over their fathers. (Deuteronomy xx.3) Then the words of Moses, hitherto accomplished but in part, will be literally fulfilled, when this branch of the posterity of Abraham shall be nationally collected, and become a very distinguished and glorious people, under the great Messiah, the Prince of Peace. He will then “make them high above all nations which He hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honor, and they shall become a holy people unto the Lord their God.”

I shall enlarge no further upon the primary sense and literal accomplishment of this in numerous other prophecies respecting both Jews and Gentiles in the latter-day glory of the church; for **I have assumed the text only as introductory to a discourse upon the political welfare of *God’s American Israel*, and as allusively prophetic of the future prosperity and splendor of the United States.**

We may, then, consider –

- I. What reason we have to expect that, by the blessing of God, these States may prosper and flourish into a great American Republic, and ascend into high and distinguished honor among the nations of the earth. “To make thee high above all nations which He hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honor.”
- II. That our system of dominion and civil polity would be imperfect without the true religion; or that from the diffusion of virtue among the people of any community would arise their greatest secular happiness: which will terminate in this conclusion, **that holiness ought to be the end of all civil government. “That thou mayest be a holy people unto the Lord thy God.”**

Dominion is founded in property, and resides where that is, whether in the hands of a few or many. The dominion founded in the feudal tenure of estate is suited to hold a conquered country in subjection, but is not adapted to the circumstances of free citizens. Large territorial property vested in individuals is pernicious to society. Civilians, in contemplating the principles of government, have judged superior and inferior partition of property necessary

in order to preserve the subordination of society and establish a permanent system of dominion. This makes the public defense the interest of a few landholders only.

A free tenure of lands, an equable distribution of property, enters into the foundation of a happy state, - so far, I mean, as that the body of the people may have it in their power, by industry, to become possessed of real freehold, fee-simple estate; for connected with this will be a general spirit and principle of self-defense – defense of our property, liberty, country...”¹

The above-cited Pulpit sermons are but a few of the multitudes preached prior to, and during the American Revolution, proving from Scripture, that tyranny was evil, and self-preservation good in God’s sight; hence arming the American colonists with the blessings of Almighty God in their quest for liberty and independence.

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¹ **President Ezra Stiles** was one of the most learned and erudite men of his time. He was familiar with the lore of the Hebrew and Christian Church. He conversed and corresponded in Hebrew, Latin, and French with facility, and was learned in the Oriental literature and antiquities connected with Biblical history. He taught astronomy, chemistry and philosophy. He and his friend, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, were among the earliest statisticians in America, and his studies in this science exhibit the most comprehensive and advanced views. The Rev. Dr. Channing said of Dr. Stiles: “This country has not perhaps produced a more learned man...His virtues were proportioned to his intellectual acquisition. In my earliest years I regarded no other human being with equal reverence.” Dr. Stiles delivered an oration at New Haven, in February, 1755, in honor of Dr. Franklin, with whom he had a life-long friendship. He was minister at Newport, Rhode Island, from 1755 to the beginning of the war of the Revolution, in 1777; became pastor of the North Church in Portsmouth, but was soon appointed President of Yale College, an office which he adorned; and died May 12th 1795.