

# *A Faith Worth Fighting For*

**A Message offered by  
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor  
Second Presbyterian Church,  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania  
July 4, 2010**

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them--taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*

*Romans 13:1-7 NRSV*

There's a lot of talk about the faith of our country's founders these days. When we study their lives it's clear that most of them--but not all--were believers of some kind. The *heads* of the American Revolution—men like Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Madison--were definitely people of faith, but they weren't what we would call today, *orthodox Christians*. The heart and soul of the Revolution – the middle management, if you will—that's a different story. Many of these patriots weren't just *Christian*, they were Presbyterian. They fought because they believed their faith compelled them to. They did not think for one moment that Jesus' teachings or Paul's letter to the Romans required them to tolerate political authorities who oppressed their own people.

People of deep and passionate Christian faith were on the front lines of both sides of the Revolution, but it was particularly to the American side that Presbyterians felt called. Did you know that twelve signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian? And last year we discussed how so many of our forebears in faith took up arms that some historians call our war for independence, "The Presbyterian Revolt."

Perhaps the most prominent Presbyterian revolutionary was Dr. John Witherspoon, the only pastor to sign the Declaration of Independence.



Rev. John Witherspoon

Witherspoon also served as President of The College of New Jersey (which was later renamed Princeton University). In the English press, Witherspoon was lampooned for his radical preaching as “Dr. Silverspoon, Preacher of Sedition.”

Witherspoon’s national prominence meant that his words as a pastor had special impact. It’s hard for us to appreciate the enormous impact that pastors had in those days. Before universal public education, television news, and local elected governments, pastors were the primary educators, news givers, and civic leaders in their communities. Participating in Sunday worship was the 18<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of praising God, going to school, watching the news, and checking out your Facebook page -- all at once.

One historian estimated that “The average 70 year old colonial churchgoer would have listened to some 7,000 sermons in his her lifetime totaling over 10,000 hours of concentrated listening—and learning. This is the amount of classroom hours it would take to earn ten separate undergraduate college degrees.” Pastors shaped not only souls but minds as well. [Christian History, “The American Revolution, p. 12 ((Issue 50, vol. Xv, No. 2)]

And when the Declaration of Independence was published “it was distributed [first] not to town clerks or newspapers, but to pastors. They were directed to read it to their congregation “on the first Lord’s day after they ha[d] received it.” In fact, Pastors were so important during the war that historians call the ranks of clergy, the “black regiment” in the revolution—so named for the black academic robes that Presbyterian clergy wore while preaching. John Witherspoon was proud to lead the charge. [Christian History, p. 2] He educated people like James Madison and inspired countless clergy across the colonies. He helped people of faith to see the fight in religious terms: as a fight for freedom to worship. A fight that had God’s blessing.

Not all Presbyterian pastors were as widely influential as Witherspoon, but their stories are just as inspirational. James Caldwell was born in 1734 in Virginia to Presbyterian parents.



James Caldwell

The problem was that, in Virginia, the Church of England (also known as the Anglican or Episcopal Church) was the official state religion. Presbyterians had to obtain permits to open new churches or hold worship services; their activities were monitored closely by appointed English authorities; and their people were taxed to support the Church of England. Caldwell was daily reminded of his second class status. Ironically, Caldwell's protestant ancestors had left France, Scotland, and Ireland to avoid persecution by the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. His parents had come to America in search of religious freedom only to find themselves discriminated against by the Anglican Church.

Caldwell never forgot his family's struggle for freedom, not even when he felt called to become a Presbyterian pastor. He attended Princeton University and Princeton Seminary before taking his first call in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When the war broke out he was among the first clergy to volunteer, saying, "There are times when it is righteous to fight as well as to pray."



Revolutionary War Battle Flag

He would have agreed with the slogan on this Revolutionary War battle flag: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." I'm sure that Caldwell made quite an impression on his congregation when—like many other pastors of the day— "he held services with a loaded pistol next to the Bible and sentries in the church bell tower." I doubt many people fell asleep during his sermons.

A trusted advisor and aide to General Washington, Caldwell was beloved by the colonists, and known as "The Fighting Parson" among the congregations of his area. The British despised him and put a price on his head. They ransacked and burned the Elizabeth Presbyterian Church and manse. Later, a sniper shot and killed his wife, Hannah, while she was hiding out in another congregation's church building. Instead of demoralizing him, these tragedies only increased Caldwell's conviction that freedom to worship must be purchased at any price.

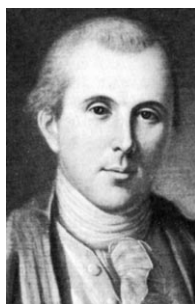


Rev. James Caldwell at the Battle of Springfield

Three weeks after his wife's death, as the British renewed their advance, the Americans fought with everything they had. The Rhode Island regiment began to run out of wadding to pack their muskets. Seeing how desperate they were, Rev. Caldwell rode to the Springfield church, grabbed a stack of hymnals, rode back to the front, passed them out, and encouraged the men to tear out the pages for wadding, saying, If you're out of wadding: "give 'em Watts!" Isaac Watts was the author of many hymns, including two of our favorites "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and, ironically, "Joy to the World." With Caldwell's help the Americans held their ground that day and pushed the British back.

A few years later, however, just as the war was ending, Caldwell was killed in Elizabeth by an American soldier working for the British. Rev. James Caldwell had given his life for his faith.

One more prominent Presbyterian, one with local ties, was Dr. Benjamin Rush, surgeon general during the war and a colleague of General George Washington. Like Witherspoon, Rush was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was also instrumental, of course, in the founding of our own Dickinson College, which began as a Presbyterian related school.

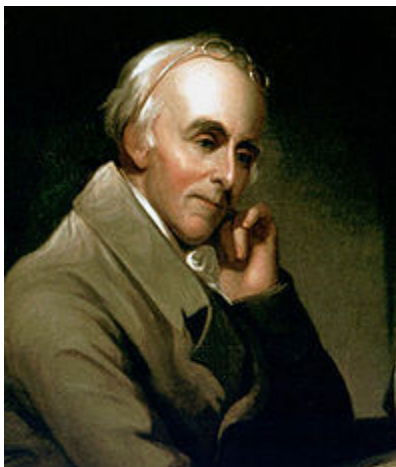


Benjamin Rush as a Young Man

After the war Rush went on to become one of our country's foremost physicians, but it was during the war that he displayed his faith in large and small ways. One of these stories is of particular interest to me.

"As a boy Rush was persuaded by the Presbyterian minister who ran the school he attended to study medicine instead of law." He chose to attend the greatest medical school of

the era, Edinburgh University, in Scotland. While there he became friendly with a prominent Scottish military family, the family of the Earl of Levin, and especially one of his daughters, Jane, whom he dated for a time.



Benjamin Rush in his later years

Years later Rush was on Washington's staff at the Battle of Princeton when word came to Washington from some soldiers that a "Captain Leslie" had been severely wounded. They requested care for this captured enemy prisoner. Rush inquired of them, "A son of the Earl of Levin?" The soldiers indicated yes. Rush asked Washington for permission to treat Captain Leslie. Washington, who was on his way from Princeton to Morristown, New Jersey, for the winter encampment of 1777 agreed, but later that evening, Leslie died while under Rush's care. The next day this British officer was buried with full military honors by Americans in a tiny cemetery on the grounds of a ruined church located in a little town called, Pluckemin. It was an act of quiet decency, loyalty, and mercy.



Colonial era headstone of Capt. William Leslie  
The Old Burial Ground  
Pluckemin Presbyterian Church  
Pluckemin, NJ  
(Jeff Gibelius served as pastor there for seven years)

Leslie's headstone reads, in part:

*In memory of the Hon. Captain William Leslie  
Son of the Earl of Levin  
He fell January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1777,  
Aged 26 years, at the battle of Princeton  
His friend, Benjamin Rush, MD,  
Hath caused this stone to be erected as a mark of his esteem for his worth and of his respect  
for his Noble family.*

Makes you proud to be a Presbyterian from Carlisle, doesn't it?

What was at stake for these Presbyterians? What were they fighting for? In the end it wasn't so much about taxation without representation or economic opportunity. It was all about faith.

They took the words of our scripture lesson seriously and gave great respect to the British authorities. They knew also, however, that with divine authority came divine responsibility. The Presbyterian patriots believed that God would not ordain or support leaders who oppressed their own people. They interpreted Romans 13 to mean that government authorities should be respected only so long as they respected the God-given rights of those whom they governed. This is a reflection of the very Presbyterian notion that with *rights* come *responsibilities*. They saw denial of freedom to worship as a violation of the God-given dignity of every human being.

And Presbyterians have always been concerned about the human tendency toward idolatry, that is, putting other things in God's place. When, in 1766, King George and the British Parliament asserted their right to absolute sovereignty "in all cases whatsoever," our forebears in faith were incensed. That's the kind of proclamation that Hitler made in Nazi Germany. Presbyterians know that God alone is sovereign of all things. We are *citizens* of America, but *subjects* of the Kingdom of God. No human can claim absolute sovereignty over us. Human institutions—such as governments—are always flawed (because of the pervasiveness of sin)—and can never be elevated to a level with God. To obey a king rather than their conscience would have been a complete violation of the unique covenant relationship that Christians have with God. There was no way that Presbyterians could, in good conscience, go along with such an edict.

What was at stake in 1776 for Witherspoon, Caldwell, Rush and so many others? God's sovereignty, human dignity, our covenant with God, and even the kingdom of God itself.

Because of the great sacrifices that people like Witherspoon, Caldwell and Rush, made, we don't have to fight today in America for the right to freely worship as Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, or anything else. But there are places around the world, more now than ever, where Christians are still giving their lives in the battle for religious freedom: places like China, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

This table is about blood shed for the sake of faith and love. When we partake of the bread and cup we are joined with the one who gave His body and His blood for us that we might be truly free. We are joined, too, with all our brothers and sisters in Christ whose spilled blood cries out to God. And we are joined with Christians around the world who today are celebrating this Supper *in hiding* for fear of persecution. We cannot be with them in body, but we can join them in spirit. We need not fight in the same way they do, but we cannot let them fight alone. Until every human being can worship freely the battle is ours too. If this table means anything to us, it must mean that we care for all the people for whom Christ died, especially the people who are dying now for the sake of Christ. Let's remember them in our prayers this week, especially on Independence Day. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

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*Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.*

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