

## Freedom!

sermon digest

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James 2:12

Freedom. Once again we come to the time when we Americans celebrate freedom more than at any other time of the year, this 239th birthday of our country. This weekend finds liberals and conservatives, democrats and republicans, rich and poor, young and old, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, and even atheist all celebrating the holiday of July 4, a time that we all remember our freedom, the cost of that freedom and some even remember how we got that freedom.

Back at the time of the American Revolution freedom was a new concept and a new idea, especially when it concerned our freedom to worship, or to NOT worship. We often forget that we had state sponsored churches in many of the colonies both before and after the Revolution. A state sponsored church received money from the state to support its work. Tax payers of all faiths, or of no faith, who lived in a state with a state sponsored church, were forced to contribute to that church. In Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, the Congregational Church was the state church. In Virginia, New York, Maryland and North and South Carolina, it was the Anglican Church that received money from the state.

Back then, churches performed many of the roles that government does today. State churches often operated schools. Even though their taxes were being used to support them not everyone's child could attend because of the attendance fees on top of the tax money the church received. Because of the attendance fees, many parents could not afford to send their children to school. Because churches were doing so much of the education that was being done for children, at least those that could afford to go to school, the Bible was often used as a text and as a reference book. Some schools had Hornbooks that usually included the alphabet, numerals and the Lord's Prayer. The use of religious materials became so established in early American education that when public schools finally became more prevalent, the tradition of using religious materials continued.

The churches also kept the public records for marriage and death in a community. Churches were often used as community centers and places to gather, even on other times than Sunday, as it was often one of the few places that was large enough for the community to gather,

In many of these states, Church laws were imposed on all the people of the state, with the state courts often enforcing these laws. One law sought to ensure that the Sabbath was observed by prohibiting any cooking, shaving, hair cutting, or bed making from Saturday afternoon to sundown on Sunday. *Blue laws* kept stores and businesses from opening on Sunday and still do today in some areas. Some laws even gave slaves free time on the Sabbath while others gave Church officials the power to assign seating in churches according to sex, race, and wealth.

Sadly, governments chose not to accommodate the Jewish Sabbath. Other protections were also routinely denied those who practiced their faith differently from the dominant faith or denomination. In fact, colonial communities were often intolerant of religious minorities and would not allow them the freedom to follow their own beliefs or conduct their own worship services. In most colonies and states, even voting and other political rights were restricted to members of a certain church group. Roman Catholics and Jews were not allowed to vote. Puritans in New England denied citizenship to Quakers and others.

When it began, the Maryland colony was granted to Cecilius Calvert, a Roman Catholic, who had to support the Church of England. Because Calvert believed that religious restrictions would interfere with Maryland's growth and development, he drafted a religious toleration law that the colonial assembly approved in 1649. Called the Maryland Toleration Act of 1649, this was the first law of its type in the British Empire, and it granted religious freedom to all people. Afterward, a group of Puritans fled from Virginia to Maryland, which became famous for its religious freedom.

However, the act was soon repealed, and Protestant settlers overthrew Calvert's government in 1654. Control of Maryland seesawed between Protestant-led and Catholic-led governments into the next century. In 1692, the Anglican Church became the established church of Maryland. In 1718, Roman Catholics in Maryland lost their right to vote, which they did not regain until 1776.

When the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution was adopted in 1791, the First Amendment guaranteed that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This provision ensured that no one religion would be favored over another and protected religious groups from unfair treatment by the federal government. At first, it did not protect against unfair treatment by state governments. Indeed, the amendment was thought by many to protect against congressional interference with state governments' involvement with religion—that is, it was thought to prohibit the U.S. Congress from "disestablishing" churches established by state governments.

I am proud to say that It was a Baptist minister, John Leland who played a key role in the struggle for religious liberty in both Virginia and Connecticut that led to the Bill of Rights.

Raised in New England, Leland traveled to Virginia in 1775 to spread the Baptist message just as tensions between the established Anglican Church and the Baptists were mounting. Leland's experience witnessing the persecution and imprisonment of his fellow Baptist preachers -- in addition to being threatened with a gun himself -- hardened his view that church and state **must** be separate for individuals to be free to follow their conscience in matters of religion. He wrote, "Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise, let men be free."

Demanding freedom of religion, Leland became a key player in the so-called Virginia experience. It was there he found strong allies in James Madison and Thomas Jefferson . It was an unlikely alliance. Jefferson was skeptical of traditional Christianity while Leland was a fervent evangelical intent on spreading the "Good News" of the Gospel. Yet Leland, Madison and Jefferson shared a passionate belief in religious liberty.

They found common ground for different reasons. Like the Puritan dissident Roger Williams, Leland was convinced that the church must be protected from interference and incursions of the state; so he opposed any form of state support of religion. On the other hand, Jefferson believed that it was the state that needed protection from overzealous clergymen and organized religious groups.

Leland became a pivotal supporter of James Madison and helped win Baptist support for Madison's election to the First Congress, where Madison drafted what would become the First Amendment, the Bill of Rights.

Both Madison and Leland were candidates for the Virginia Convention on ratifying the Constitution. It was evident, however, that Leland had more votes than Madison. Though having practically written the Constitution, Madison couldn't get elected from his own state for its adoption. They finally met under a certain oak tree near Orange which has been carefully preserved to this day, and fought it out. It was a battle royal with Leland insisting that there should be an article in the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty. Madison, however, was afraid to put it in on account of the opposition of some of the colonies, Massachusetts in particular. A compromise was agreed upon. Leland would withdraw and advocate the election of Madison. This, they thought, would ensure the adoption of the Constitution by Virginia. It was a tough battle but they won out by a slim margin of 10 votes over Madison's remaining opponents. The agreement between Madison and Leland was

conditioned upon Madison's joining Leland in a crusade for an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty, free speech and a free press."

Baptist preacher John Leland's belief in full separation of church and state would lead him to denounce the notion of the United States as a Christian nation. In *A Chronicle of His Time in Virginia*, Leland wrote: "The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be **exploded** forever. ... Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is **more** than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians."

He said, "Government, has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than it has with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing, i.e., see that he meets with no personal abuse, or loss of property, for his religious opinions.... [I]f his doctrine is false, it will be confuted, and if it is true, (though ever so novel,) let others credit it."

There has been a lot of talk about history and heritage in this past month. This part of our history and the lessons we can, and should learn from, seems to have been forgotten, and even rewritten today by many. We still have blue laws. We even have laws in some parts of our country where a religious belief like creationism, is taught in public schools. Today many strongly proclaim America as a Christian nation, though they seem to be speaking only of their particular brand of Christianity.

It is ironic that many conservative Christian ministers despised the Constitution's lack of Christianity from the time of its ratification. In 1793, just five years after the Constitution was ratified, the Reverend John M. Mason of New York attacked that document in a sermon.

Mason called the lack of references to God and Christianity "an omission which no pretext whatever can palliate." He predicted that an angry God would "overturn from its foundations the fabric we have been rearing and crush us to atoms in the wreck."

As late as 1845, the Reverend D. X. Junkin wrote, "[The Constitution] is negatively atheistical, for no God is appealed to at all. In framing many of our public formularies, greater care seems to have been taken to adapt them to the prejudices of the INFIDEL FEW, than to the consciences of the Christian millions."

These words sound very familiar in tone, style and content, to those of us that have followed the angry preaching of the last weeks as once again, more extremely conservative Christians cry out that their view, their understanding of scripture, should be forced upon all Americans. They appeal to the very founding fathers that strongly opposed a Christian government, rewriting history to make it fit their view while ignoring the very people they quote, and misquote to enforce their view. John Adams was very clear when he said, "The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." I could go on and on and on citing founder after founder, but history is clear. The founders did NOT want this to be a Christian nation, but a free nation for all faiths, or lack thereof.

I am thankful to God for the freedom we have here in America. I am thankful for those that worked so hard to secure it for us, 200+ years ago as well as those still willing to defend that freedom today. Yes, we can truly pray God bless America, but we also must pray, God bless our world, because it is not easy being a citizen of two kingdoms. If the cause is right, I am willing to die for my country, but I have already pledged my life to bringing about another kingdom. I know that Christ's kingdom does not need Uncle Sam's endorsement or support. Frankly, if Christianity can't make it without special privilege and protection, it does not deserve to survive.

In our church covenant we proclaim that:

“We support a free church in a free state, advocating religious liberty through the separation of church and state and meticulously seeking to avoid using or being used by government authorities.”

It is a hard wall; to stay balanced on, this wall of separation. When we as Christians call for justice, or equality, we are fulfilling our calling, not crossing the line, as we act as the nation’s conscience. When we as Christians speak up for the oppressed and those who have no voice or power, we fulfill our calling, not only as Christians, but as good citizens. I hope that we are the type of Christians that the Founding Fathers would be pleased to have as a part of this country. We do not seek to be preeminent in our place in the diverse faiths that are part of America, but we seek common ground with those whose faith differs from ours, working with all people of faith to make and keep liberty and justice for all a reality, even if we are not there just yet. If we err on the side of liberty, I think that God will forgive us our error. But if we err on the side of taking liberty from any we disagree with, we will have to answer to God for that error. **So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty** (James 2:12)

Amen.