

The Consequences of Ideas

Lesson 13: How Christian Was the American Revolution?

If a ruler is unjust; if he is merciless and makes slaves of his subjects; if he imprisons persons without their violating any law; if he is Godless or even thinks of himself as god; if he ignores human rights and dignity and if he confiscates property for his own use; if he is all of these things and more, would a Bible believing Christian be justified in taking up arms to be independent of his reign?

I. God and Earthly Rulers

- a. The starting place for thinking about the question of armed rebellion against a ruler is the issue of the **Sovereignty** of God over the affairs of men. Civil government is a divine institution, and those who rule have their commission from Christ. *Prov 8:15-16 By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me (Wisdom) princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth. KJV*
- b. Scripture is clear that those who reign do so by the Providence of God for His **purposes**. *Dan 5:21 until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes. NIV*
- c. David understood this principle and even after he was anointed king over Israel would not take matters into his **own hands** to depose Saul and elevate himself to the throne; preferring to let God work His purposes in His own time and way. *1 Sam 24:6 And he said unto his men, The LORD forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the LORD's anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD. KJV*
- d. Jesus did not **annul** the principle of subjecting oneself to the power and authority of those who rule on the earth. *Mark 12:17 And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. KJV*
- e. Paul reiterates the principle of **submission**. *Rom 13:1-2 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. KJV*
- f. While this principle may seem categorical in which believers are commanded to obey all rulers in all things at all times, it must be viewed as a limited command because there is a **higher** command that must be obeyed unequivocally. *Acts 5:29 Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. KJV*
- g. Finally, the believer who takes up arms to depose a ruler whom the believer finds odious or with whom he disagrees on other grounds is in serious Biblical jeopardy because he forgets God's Sovereignty over the **lives of men**. *1 Kings 22:34 And a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel (Ahab) between the joints of the harness: KJV*
- h. Repeatedly, Scripture reveals that when God moves sovereignly He is able to accomplish His will without difficulty, often using unbelievers and God haters to work His pleasure on the earth. The Babylonian captivity; **Crucifixion; etc.**

II. The American Revolution

- a. Preceding the American Revolution, many Christian patriots supported the independence movement, but many Christian Tories supported submission to Great Britain and many Christian pacifists thought war under any circumstances was **wrong**.
- b. In other words, Christians disagreed on whether the Revolution was a part of God's will but much of the Revolution's ideological underpinnings were theological arguments advanced by Christians and supported by **Deists** and Rationalists alike.
- c. Therefore, Christianity and Rationalism together embraced the political ideas and rhetoric of **liberty** and became the driving forces behind the Revolution.
- d. Most all American patriots identified with one or the other of these two **worldviews**, and from a practicality standpoint, the Revolution would neither have been commenced nor sustained on the strength of one group alone.

III. Prelude to War

- a. Beginning about **1763**, Americans began to look more at the disadvantages of colonial connections to Britain than the advantages and the public mood began to shift toward seeking independence from Britain.
- b. The **Intolerable Acts**, a series of measures designed to increase British revenues in the colonies, antagonized the colonists who protested the measures as the unlawful taking of property, in short, as "taxation without representation."
- c. This basic response soon expanded to claims that the British acts were threats against the colonists' **natural rights** and fundamental liberties, without which the enjoyment of their very human existence stood in jeopardy.
- d. Increasingly, the colonists appealed to the God of the universe as the witness to these **denied** liberties of which He was the author. Their appeals became more vigorous and vocal and had the effect of whipping up public sentiment.

IV. The Christian Response In 1776

- a. As talk of revolution increased, Christian clergymen across the colonies preached to their congregations the **justness** of the colonists cause.
- b. Samuel Langdon from Massachusetts, for example, preached in 1775: "If God be for us, who can be against us. . . . May we not be confident that the Most High . . . will plead our **righteous cause** . . . ?

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- c. Other patriotic preachers joined in a chorus of dissent against the British attack on American liberties, leading **John Adams** to say, in the months just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, "*they [the clergy] engage with a fervor that will produce wonderful effects. Those . . . of every denomination . . . thunder and lighten every Sabbath.*"
- d. This kind of religious zeal supporting a revolution was perhaps to some extent an outgrowth of the fervency of the **Great Awakening**, the great evangelical revival that spread throughout the colonies from roughly 1735 to 1755.
- e. As a result of the thousands of Christian conversions that took place, many, including the Awakening's greatest preacher, Jonathan Edwards, saw America becoming the center of God's **kingdom on earth**.
- f. The conversions were seen as proof that world history was culminating in a new Age of the Spirit. The creation of new men, converted men, especially political leaders, would make possible the **realization** of the kingdom of God.
- g. This new evangelical emphasis, then, produced by the Awakening, provided one of the most powerful forces that helped to focus American discontent and offered a new "**godly**" vision that allowed for a breaking with the past.
- h. Puritans perceived themselves as God's "**New Israel**." They understood themselves as the "chosen people" of God, just as Old Testament Israel was a "chosen nation."
- i. As God had brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt to Canaan, so He had brought the Puritans out from the bondage of the Old World into a "**new Canaan**."
- j. Moreover, just as God had many times in the Old Testament entered into covenants with Israel, he had covenanted with the New Israel whereby it would be the focus of His plan to usher in a **millennial age** of righteousness on earth.
- k. This postmillennial vision, which emphasized the return of Christ only *after* the **Christianization** of the world, was a widely accepted eschatology during the Revolutionary era.
- l. Puritans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and German and Dutch Reformed became supportive of independence, **believing** that America was the place God had chosen to usher in a reign of righteousness upon the earth.
- m. Christians seeking a scriptural perspective on a possible war with England were especially challenged by **Romans 13:1**: "*Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.*"
- n. This verse raised the question: How could Christians support independence in the face of such a clear statement that God ordains all governmental authority and obedient Christian citizenship requires **submission** to such authority?
- o. **Loyalists** (those who opposed the Revolution) numbered about one-third of the American population and many of them cited Romans 13:1 as the basis of their loyalty to the mother country.
- p. Many patriot preachers taught that the passage did not require **unlimited** passive obedience unto despotic, evil governments; it rather approved of human government in a broad, generic way in which submission would be the *normal* practice.
- q. A prominent Congregational minister held this view, stating that civil magistrates should be obeyed **only** so long as "they do not grossly abuse their power and trust, but exercise it for the good of those that are governed."
- r. This interpretation of Romans 13:1 became **widespread** among other colonial preachers, thus removing the verse as an obstacle to revolution.
- s. Patriot ministers regularly preached on the theme of liberty as well. If God's people had "been called to liberty," as Galatians 5:13 promised, meaning liberty *in* Christ, then it did not seem too much a stretch to believe that this also meant freedom *from* political **tyranny**.
- t. This theme was further supported by the **social contract** and natural right theories of such philosophical divines as John Milton, Algernon Sydney, and especially John Locke.

V. Application

- a. The arguments for the Revolution were stated in a compelling religious framework, assuring devotees of both camps, especially those who would fight and even die for the cause of Independence, that their efforts were looked upon with favor from heaven.
- b. History proves that it was the will of God that the United States of America should emerge as a dominant world power over the last two hundred years, but that evidence leaves the biggest question unanswered.
- c. Was it spiritually right or wrong for Christians to leaven philosophical arguments of the Rationalist worldview with their Biblical theology in order to justify their participation in the rebellion?
- d. Do Christians today accept the leavening of worldly philosophical arguments which do not exactly line up with a Biblical world view in shaping their own cultural attitudes and political actions?
- e. What examples can you come up with that suggest **you** are blending worldly wisdom with your Biblical understanding on issues of our day?
- f. What ought you to do about such blended reasoning?