

On Freedom

By Peter J.B. Carman

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It is with some hesitation, on Fourth of July weekend, I take up a subject that might be seen as preaching politics, or even patriotism, from the pulpit: *Freedom*. A dear friend and family member reminded me just yesterday that separation of church and state is a deeply Baptist principle. So, he suggested I be cautious, for criticism of the state— even when it seems to the preacher the state is getting into the church's business every where— is undertaken at the peril of hypocrisy.

These days I understand too much comment about the government might also lose your church tax-exempt status. Which is one reason I figure it is time to start saying a thing or two! We are experiencing a bit of slippage in the world of freedom.

SO with fear and trembling, I step up to the pulpit today to call one small group of American Christians to be alert! I do so because not only separation of church and state but also freedom— religious freedom and human freedom— are an essential part of our historic Christian witness. Both are elements of the American Agenda that owe much to the efforts of Christian— and Baptist— activists and reformers, over the past four hundred years. Both religious freedom and human liberty are fragile hard-won human rights, never to be taken for granted, and often threatened, either by deliberate actions or unthinking inertia.

Our ancestors in faith were obstreperous people of conviction and courage, people like Anne Hutchinson, who in 1638 was banished from Massachusetts to Rhode Island, along with sixty or so of her followers. Anne Hutchinson believed that God was still speaking to folk, including herself— a belief she had the nerve to share in large bible studies held in her home, gatherings of women and men together ... a radical thing for those days. John Winthrop, then governor of Massachusetts, had this to say in accusation: *[Y]ou have maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex, and notwithstanding that was cried down you have continued the same.*⁺

You probably learned about Anne Hutchinson in junior high school! But how about Isaac Backus, a Baptist preacher from the time of the Revolution? Backus was not part of the official church in Massachusetts. In those times, people in non-established churches had to pay a small religious tax ... to support the established church. Backus refused! Listen to his argument to the General Assembly, an argument he carried on to the Continental Congress!

*We have no desire of representing this government as the worst of any who have imposed religious taxes; we fully believe the contrary. Yet, as we are persuaded that an entire freedom from being taxed by civil rulers to religious worship, is not a mere favor, from any man or men in the world, but a right and property granted us by God, who commands us to stand fast in it, we have not only the same reason to refuse an acknowledgement of such a taxing power here, as America has the above-said power, but also, according to our present light, we should wrong our consciences in allowing that power to men, which we believe belongs only to God.**

We who gather in this place claim for our history those whom others saw as dangerous and undercutting government authority. They were fighting for religious liberty. And they went on to fight for other forms of liberty as well. John Clarke and Roger Williams in the early 1600's founded a colony in Rhode Island where the right of all to worship God as conscience dictated would be honored. Unlike many other colonies, this one actually practiced inclusion! In 1658, a small group of Jews, from Barbados, moved to Newport where they formed the second Jewish community on the continent. The first was the one they had started in New Amsterdam four years earlier!

Today as North Americans many of us take for granted freedom that was, not long ago, assumed by many to be dangerous and unpatriotic. What our ancestors in faith struggled to do—limit the power of government from persecuting, banishing and taxing people simply because of their religious beliefs—may slip away from us simply because of our quiet and complacency.

The crossroads at which this nation stands is hardly new! Many years ago, a few thousand in fact, the prophet-priest Samuel was approached by the elders of Israel, tired of the hard work they had and the corruption they experienced, at the hands of their authorities—Samuel's sons. It was also a minimal government, without much central authority! Except for God. ... So they pleaded for a king instead. "Now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations." Not content with having God for their ruler, the people wanted a human being with more power and authority. God's response to Samuel in a dream might be summed up this simply: *If a king is what they want, then a king they shall have. You asked for it, you go it. But let them know this: Be careful what you ask for. You may get it.*

The heritage of Baptists in our tradition in this country since colonial times has been to stand for the right to have religious life in our communities that is chosen by its adherents—not chosen for us. We have wanted to assure that there is not a single established church—and we have never liked being taxed to support the established church.

In 2006, the (so-called) "Faith-Based" initiatives of the US government take tax dollars drawn from all of the people and award them to "faith-based organizations" that represent some of the people doing work the government sees as worthy of public support. The fact that some of this work is excellent work is irrelevant. The fact that they never seem to have much money for the job is also irrelevant. The government has, for whatever well-

meaning reasons, and on however limited a basis, gotten into deciding who is worthy and who is not worthy to receive federal subsidy, in the world of religion. Where is the line as to whose beliefs on effective social service or issues of justice are in line with the government's agenda and whose are not? Where does doctrine end and politics take up? And who decides? Our ancestors refused to pay taxes to support such an enterprise! And when Isaac Backus was challenged that it was but a few pence from his pocket, he argued that it was not the pence but the POWER he was concerned about.

The heritage of the early religious reformers of this country, in the times of starting a new government, was also to fight for freedom of religious speech and belief! Also the right to assemble in homes or public places freely! Anne Hutchinson was five months pregnant when she made her speech to the men of Massachusetts Bay. She faced exile for her willingness to have home bible studies.

Since those days, our Christian concern has extended from religious rights to the human right to freedom more broadly: Since at least 1786, both Black Baptists and White Baptists in this country started to go on record calling for human emancipation from slavery. Baptists, for reasons of faith, have spoken up and laid their bodies down for the full franchise and equal rights for people of color.

Addressing racism and segregation did not occur in a vacuum! It grew out of faith. And it was part of a broad agenda of freedom. Starting before the civil war and continuously since, religious reformers, many of them Baptists, have looked up from reading in their bibles, looked around, and started to agitate. They have agitated for the rights of women to vote, to own property, to work for equal pay and to vote AND the right of children not to work.

Helen Barrett Montgomery, a member of this church, was a leader in that movement for the rights of women and children! They have fought for the right of conscientious objection to war. During the Second World War and after, Dr. Eugene Bartlett, (later to become a beloved member of this church) was instrumental in that cause.

These are our saints here in one US congregation! Tough and open minded people, real people. This agenda of democratic freedom, while not written out in a single list in the bible, grew out of their biblical faith.

I am concerned that this hard-won family of freedoms will be taken from us! I am not afraid of losing the WORD "freedom", a word that people chant like a hypnotic mantra when they are trying to whip up popular sentiment. I am concerned rather about losing the real freedom that protects unpopular people, obstreperous people, religious minorities, women, and yes, also ethnic and racial groups who have less power! I am concerned about losing the freedom that keeps us from having a single central authority in matters of conscience.

Increasingly in the past decade, our nation has been ruled more and more by the twin spirits of indifference and fear: indifference when the rights and liberties of othersô

including religious liberty are abrogated! And a fear that seems to compel us to do things we would otherwise not think of, when an unknown enemy stands at the door, or slips in and creates terrible havoc ... as happened five years ago this fall.

Some have raised their voices and have in effect said "Give us a king, so that we may have law and order like the rest of the world!" In time of war, the commander in chief must have greater power, they tell us. And some have suggested that in a time of chronic and continuous war, the power must also grow chronically, and be continued indefinitely.

It is a good day to call for the renewal of a pro-democracy movement in America. Not a partisan movement for one political agenda or another, but rather a movement to restore our dedication to basic principles that have underlain the nation's past, and, at least in our better moments, have defined our character as a people. It is a good time to insist that this legacy of freedom is deeply rooted in our faith. And it is a good time to remember that that freedom was not won by decisions from the top but rather by the noise-making of people like thee and me—the Alma Blythes and Michael Warfields, who write letters to the editor; the Michael Roberts types who continue to fight for the rights of working people to decent working conditions; the Lois Davis types, who struggle for judicial reform, even on the local level.

In pulpits across the land at this time of year you may hear patriotism spouted from the pulpit, in the broadest terms. Here let me end, simply by saying to you patriotism when it is unthinking may easily turn toward tyranny. Our legacy in this place is to speak up and act up for the sake of the freedom to which Christ has called us. And we are not prepared to give it up. Not easily.

References and Quotations

⁺ *Mr. [John] Winthrop, Governor: Mrs. Hutchinson, you are called here as one of those that have troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here; you are known to be a woman that hath had a great share in the promoting and divulging of those opinions that are the cause of this trouble, and to be nearly joined not only in affinity and affection with some of those the court had taken notice of and passed censure upon, but you have spoken divers things, as we have been informed, very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers thereof, and you have maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex, and notwithstanding that was cried down you have continued the same.*

From *The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newton*. 1637
(<http://personal.pitnet.net/primarysources/hutchinson.html>).

^{*} *Isaac Backus to the Massachusetts General Assembly 1775*, see 'The Founders' Constitution, Volume 5, Amendment I (Religion), Document 21 <http://press->

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Peter J.B. Carman is pastor of Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester, N.Y. He is a graduate of Yale Divinity School.