

July 3, 2016

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Tryon Presbyterian Church

A Heritage of Faith and Freedom

Zechariah 9:9-10  
Hebrews 11:32-40; 12:1

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

The year was 1776. The place was London, England. Horace Walpole rose from his seat in the British House of Commons to speak concerning the “extraordinary proceedings” that had recently taken place in the American colonies. “There is no good crying about the matter,” said Walpole sadly. “Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson, and that is the end of it.” That Presbyterian parson was the Reverend Dr. John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He was also the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Walpole had good reason to believe Witherspoon was personally involved in this “Presbyterian Rebellion,” as many in England were calling it.

Witherspoon was in favor of independence and had spoken about it many times. Others in the colonies were not so sure. As late as 1775, Thomas Jefferson was reluctant to commit to independence. Even George Washington was not sure when he took command of the Continental Army in 1775. While Jefferson and Washington had changed their minds by July 1776, that was not true for many in the Continental Congress.

It was then that Dr. Witherspoon, a descendant of Scotland's fiery patriot and preacher John Knox, rose to address the Continental Congress. "There is a tide in the affairs of men," said Witherspoon. "We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument," he said, gesturing toward the Declaration of Independence on the table, "should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in this house."

Witherspoon left no doubt that he intended to sign the "noble instrument." "For my own part," he continued, "Of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged on the issue of this contest. And although these gray hairs must soon descend into the grave," he added, "I would infinitely rather that they descend there by the hand of the executioner than desert at this time of crisis the sacred cause of liberty." As history has shown, the Declaration of Independence was signed.

The role of Presbyterians in the revolution was significant. Many pastors preached in favor of the revolution, and many joined the army themselves. At the time of the final battle of Yorktown, all but one of the Colonels in Washington's army were Presbyterian elders. Some historians assert that over half of all the soldiers and officers in the American Army during the Revolution were Presbyterian. No wonder a British lawmaker could assert: "I fix all the blame of these extraordinary proceedings on the Presbyterians."

What was it that caused Presbyterians like John Witherspoon to be so rebellious? Part of the answer was in Witherspoon's life story. Witherspoon was born in Scotland in 1723. He would have been 22 during the great uprising of the Scots against the English in 1745, a bitter defeat, and he witnessed first-hand the brutality of the English conquerors as they lorded it over Scotland. No wonder he and so many other Scottish Presbyterians had so little love for the English.

Trained as a scholar and a pastor in Scotland at the time of the Scottish Enlightenment at a time when Scotland's universities were among the best in Europe, Witherspoon was considered to be a moderate and progressive force for change in the Church of Scotland. He was an evangelical, a scholar, and a passionate preacher. Witherspoon was very popular in Scotland and just beginning a promising career, but felt a call to move to New Jersey to serve as president of the new and struggling colonial College of New Jersey (later Princeton University). The move was difficult especially for his family. New Jersey was primitive by comparison with life in Scotland.

Witherspoon saw education as the key to faith and prosperity in the new land. He devoted himself to the development of the college, which throughout

his life existed at the brink of bankruptcy. He was passionate about the importance of faith and learning. Over the years his students at Princeton included a president and vice-president of the United States, nine cabinet officers, twenty-one senators, thirty-nine congressmen, three justices of the Supreme Court, and twelve state governors. Five of the fifty-five members of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 were students of Witherspoon.

Witherspoon believed along with John Calvin that the Christian life should extend into every corner of society and every moment of every day. The ideals of Jesus Christ should be lived in every family and at every level of government. He had a gift for leadership and organization. He believed that Christians were called to use their gifts, and he worked tirelessly, taking his responsibilities very seriously. Witherspoon served in the Continental Congress for six years. Reportedly he was on over 120 committees. He also served as a legislator in New Jersey, and all this while he was president of Princeton, and pastor of the Presbyterian Church there.

Why did John Witherspoon do these things? What motivated him? At the center of his life he believed in the absolute sovereignty of God. Sovereignty means that God is all-powerful, autonomous, and active in human affairs. As Paul says in Romans: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever" (Romans 11:36). Some in Witherspoon's day, and even today, believe this means that God dictates every little detail of life, but Witherspoon's understanding of sovereignty was much bigger. For Witherspoon the sovereignty of God meant that God is always beyond our full understanding, working in the world and in our lives in ways we can never fully imagine. He believed that we can always be sure that God is present and working, even if we can't fully describe or understand what God is doing at a particular moment in our lives. For Witherspoon God is not limited by our understanding of God's will, or our speculations about the future. As humans we have an important role to play in our world, but that role is always subservient to God. Because of his belief in the sovereignty of God, Witherspoon had a healthy suspicion of human beings who held too high a view of themselves, or their supposed knowledge of God's will, or their sense of the importance of their own endeavors. And King George was first on his list of suspects, closely followed by the Pope, and not a few Lords and Bishops. Lord knows what Witherspoon would think of things today.

Witherspoon's belief in the sovereignty of God led to an incredible trust in God's providence, even and especially when things didn't seem to be going right. It also led to a life of devotion and prayer. And it also led to his gifts as a politician and leader. Most importantly, it led to a powerful sense of courage and humility. He believed that if God is God, and all humans are human, none of us can ever be completely sure we are right, and that we should always humbly acknowledge our own and other's shortcomings. As Paul said in Romans, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Because of his strong belief in God's sovereignty and his own humanity, Witherspoon was known as a man willing to listen to others and entertain opposite viewpoints. He extended courtesy even to his detractors. He believed that both humility and conviction were important. If we are all fallible and God is sovereign, listening even to those whose views differ greatly from ours is important, because one has to hold out the possibility, however remote, that they could be closer to God's truth than I am. If we are all fallible and God is sovereign, Witherspoon believed that we must work together in order to more clearly understand the will of God for our lives today.

For John Witherspoon and people like him, political involvement was not a hobby; it was a sacred calling. And debate and conversation were critically important in better understanding the providence of God. Reading, studying, voting, praying and getting involved all were seen as sacred responsibilities, a part of the process of better discerning God's will. It was John Witherspoon's Calvinist belief in the sovereignty of God and the imperfection of human beings that led to his passion for democracy and his distrust of kings and popes, and why some called the American Revolution the Presbyterian rebellion.

Two hundred and forty years ago fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. Times were anxious and uncertain. People then could write of a "world turned upside down." A lot has changed since that time. Yet we also find ourselves at a time when our country faces incredible challenges. Our challenges are real. And they are complicated. And they are difficult to resolve. But today in 2016, as in that first debate in 1776, ultimately we will be remembered for how we confronted these challenges and lived through them. We are living in the country we live in today because of a heritage of faith and freedom.

We worship as we do because of that heritage of faith and freedom given to us by the men and women whose stories are told in the Bible, as our second lesson from the letter to the Hebrews describes this morning. And the heritage of faith and freedom lived out by others like John Calvin and John Witherspoon. We worship in this sanctuary this morning because of the heritage of faith lived out by the 40 some odd men and women who founded Tryon Presbyterian Church on Freeman Hill in 1926, and those who took the enormous leap of faith to move to Harmon Field Road in 1958.

You and I stand at the tail end of a long line of spiritual foreparents who faithfully and courageously listened to God's call and followed it into the future. It is a great heritage of faith and freedom.

In a few weeks we will be given yet another opportunity to live out our faith as we make pledges to support our church's capital campaign to update our building. To be sure our decisions will not be nearly as far reaching as those our foreparents made on July 4, 1776. But they will be important for the future of this church. And the men and women who sit here twenty years from now will remember what we did and tell our story. Even more important though are the ways you and I choose to live out our faith each day. What we say and what we

do each day of our lives is our statement of faith. We should never forget that. We are a part of a great heritage of faith and freedom.