

March 2012

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First They Came For...

Cursed is the sneaking coward who neglects the sinking state, when called to its defense—O then flee this dire curse—let America's valorous sons put on the harness..." --Rev. William Stearns (1775)

Washington's new same-sex "marriage" law takes effect on June 7. But Richard Hammar, legal counsel for the Assemblies of God, is cautioning clergy not to "overreact to unfounded or exaggerated fears."¹ He is responding to suggestions that churches amend their bylaws to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

"The exemption language is remarkably broad," says Hammar, "and provides adequate assurances to clergy and churches that they can follow their precepts and conscience when it comes to marriages without fear of legal reprisals." In other words, no immediate need for churches to sound the alarm.

But across the continent, on April 19, bells will sound in Lexington, Massachusetts, as townsfolk gather on the "Green" before sun-up to experience the annual re-enactment of "The shot heard round the world." It commemorates a time when church leaders were not at all reluctant to lead.

Some seventy Minutemen responded to the peeling of the church bell on that mid-Spring morning in 1775. Reverend Jonas Parker took his place in line alongside others who were hurriedly wadding the powder charges in their long-barreled muskets. Almost before he could fill his hat with musket balls and flint, someone cried, "Here they come!"

Rounding the bend in the road near the east end of the green was a long column of British regulars—perhaps numbering several hundred. What happened next is unclear. First, some yelling, the sound of a pistol, and then scattered rifle fire. It was over in 15 minutes, leaving some of Lexington's leading citizens dead or mortally wounded, including Rev. Parker. Seriously wounded, he was on the ground, struggling to reload his musket. A young Redcoat finished him off with a bayonet.

Whatever compelled Pastor Parker to place his ministry, his church, and his life in harm's way also compelled other ministers throughout the colonies. "In fact," says historian David Barton, "so prominent were the clergy in the struggle that the [Tories] called them the 'Black Regiment' due to the black clerical robes they wore."

Many were the exploits of ministers such as Rev. William Graham, who rallied his own neighbors to dispute the passage of Rockfish Gap with Tarleton and his Britain dragoons, or Chelsea's Rev Philips Payson who single-handedly captured two British supply wagons during the battles of Lexington and Concord. Rev. John Craighead was noted for fighting and preaching alternately. He raised a company of militia from his parish and led them off to join General Washington in New Jersey.

Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green served as an orderly sergeant and Rev. James Hall commanded a company that armed against Cornwallis. Rev. John Blair Smith, president of Hampden-Sidney College and Rev. Dr. Cooper were also captains of military companies. John Adams later wrote that Rev. Cooper and Rev. Dr. Mayhew were two of the "characters... most conspicuous, the most ardent, and influential" in "an awakening and a revival of American principles and feelings...in 1775."²

Perhaps best known among the soldier-clergy was Rev. (John) Peter Muhlenberg of Virginia. At the conclusion of a sermon from Ecclesiastes 3, he declared, "...There is a time to preach and a time to fight." He paused, and then threw off his pulpit robe to reveal the uniform of a colonel in the Continental Army. Muhlenberg marched that afternoon at the head of a column of three hundred men and was to distinguish himself in a number of battles, rising to the rank of brigadier general.³

The Rev. Frederick Muhlenberg of New York, Peter's brother, was deeply troubled by Peter's involvement in the war. He told him: You would have acted for the best if you had kept out of this business from the beginning...I think you are wrong in trying to be both soldier and preacher together." Peter responded:

"I am a clergyman it is true, but I am a member of society as well as the poorest layman, and my liberty is as dear to me as to any man, shall I then sit still...? Heaven forbid it...I am called by my country in its defense—the cause is just and noble...and so far I am from thinking that I act wrong, I am convinced it is my duty so to do and duty I owe to God and my Country."⁴

Some historians say that Peter's arguments had an effect upon Frederick; others say that Frederick became involved after the British ransacked and burned his church to the ground. Whatever the motivation, Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg—an ordained minister and pastor—became the original Speaker of the House of Representatives. His is one of only two signatures at the bottom of the *Bill of Rights*.

Pastoral involvement in the public sphere is much more controversial today. Joe Wright, Senior Pastor at the 2,500 member Central Christian Church in Wichita knows this well. He ignited a firestorm of controversy in 1996 with his politically-incorrect prayer before the Kansas State House, later aired by commentator Paul Harvey. Wright returned to the public fore in 2004 when state lawmakers denied Kansas residents an opportunity to consider a ban on same-sex marriage.

Enlisting the support of fellow preacher Terry Fox, senior pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church, the pair took a two-hour trip to Topeka to meet with legislators. Many legislators refused to meet with them. Others ridiculed them from the Senate floor calling them "the two ayatollahs of Wichita" as they sat in the gallery above. One member told them, "You need to shut up and go back and take care of your churches and let us take care of the state."⁵

To make a fascinating story much shorter, the two did return home—long enough to round up 400 more pastors who concurred that marriage is honorable and worthy a vigorous defense. The following year, a ban on same-sex marriage won a stunning 70 percent voter approval.

While we appreciate Richard Hammar's technically correct explanation, it is clear that it could be misinterpreted by some to mean that pastors can take a pass because the new law is really intended for others. It brings to mind, of course, Pastor Martin Niemöller's famous quip, *First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew*. He was speaking about the inactivity of German intellectuals and the Church following the Nazi rise to power and the purging of certain groups, one after another.

That said, we address not the hundreds of pastors around the state who are already providing leadership in the current marriage ballot campaign. Rather, we hope to head off the one or two bullies in most congregations that try to intimidate and silence church leadership when homosexuality is at the fore. So, may we ask, if the Church should not speak to the moral issues of our times, who should? The Seattle School Board? The Independent Order of Foresters?

For the record, signature gathering efforts for R-74 (to overturn same-sex "marriage") and I-1192 (to limit marriage to one-man-one-woman) are progressing very well. Why don't we make the efforts "phenomenal?"

Rick Forcier

¹ Northwest Ministry Network of the Assemblies of God, [Response to SB6239, Same-Sex Marriage](#), 2/27/2012

² Barton, David, [Original Intent](#), 1996, WallBuilder Press, Aledo, TX, pg. 104

³ Marshall, Peter, [The Light and the Glory](#), 1977, Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, New Jersey, pg. 291

⁴ Barton, David, [Keys to Good Government](#), 2000, WallBuilder Press, Aledo, TX, pgs. 27, 28

⁵ Cushman, Candi, [Fearless faith](#), Citizen [Magazine], April 2006, pg. 16