

THE BLACK REGIMENT LED THE FIGHT IN OUR WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE

By Reverend Wayne C. Sedlak

During the War of Independence there was a group of heroic men referred to as the "Black Regiment." The very name enraged the British armies. As heroes in the war, their courage and leadership were hailed throughout the colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia. As a "regiment," they never once drilled together, yet the strategic impact of their highly disciplined attacks was overwhelming. As a unit, they never fought together on a particular field of battle, yet without question, their leadership provided the spark which ignited victory after victory.

This "Black Regiment" was responsible for providing the conviction and wisdom necessary for winning a war against the cruelty of an unjust government. What was the "Black Regiment"? Actually, it wasn't a regiment at all. It referred to the American Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist clergy.

British sympathizers (Loyalists), so named them because of the black robes worn by the ministers when they ascended their pulpits each Lord's Day. The name "stuck." Colonial enemies knew that the seeds of what the British called "sedition" or "revolution" were being sown in the pulpits of America. Without the outspoken, tenacious and courageous leadership exhibited by the pastors of the "Black Regiment," it is doubtful whether American independence could ever have been achieved.

Today, while confronting usurped power in the moral swamp of our culture, appeals are made to various authorities such as "morality", "justice", "civil rights", "humanity", our "heritage" and a host of others. Each appeal creates a clientele of its own who appeal to it for ultimacy. The result is confusion. In the face of such confusion, it remains the duty of the clergy to proclaim absolute authority and law. Once that is done and believed, all authoritative pronouncements will take on the status of derived authority, at best.

It was British sympathizer Peter Oliver, who actually first used the name "Black Regiment". He complained that such clergymen were invariably at the heart of the revolutionary disturbances. He tied their influence to such colonial leaders as Samuel Adams, James Otis and others of prominence in the cause. He quotes colonial leadership in its quest to gain the voice of the clergy. In one instance, he disparagingly cites a public plea of James Otis who sought the help of the clergy in a particular matter.

Mr. Otis, understanding the Foibles of human Nature advanced one shrewd position which seldom fails to promote popular Commotions, that "it was necessary to secure the black Regiment". These were his Words and his meaning was to engage ye dissenting Clergy on his Side...Where better could he fly for aid than to the Horns of the Altar?...This Order of Men...like their Predecessors of 1641... have been unceasingly sounding the Yell of Rebellion in the Ears of an ignorant and deluded People. (1) *

The clergy of the "Black Regiment" were believers in that ministerial distinctive described by Saint Paul in the New Testament: How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? (Rom.10:14)

From the Greco Roman world, the Apostle Paul borrowed a term. He used it here as he described the function for a "preacher". That Greek term was "kerux". An imperial kerux was the emperor's herald who was sent to cities and provinces to announce to them the will of the emperor himself. It was the commission of the herald to announce to the people how they must order their affairs ("LAW") as a preparation for the coming of the king. The herald also announced any areas of displeasure which the king had discovered ("SIN"); any remedies he might mandate ("REPENTANCE"); and any sanctions which he would implement if his directives were not obeyed ("JUDGMENT"). The herald had absolute authority to announce such directives, remedies and sanctions. No authority on earth could safely abuse him...nor disregard his commissioned proclamation.

The Rev. Samuel Davies was one such colonial "kerux". He was self consciously an Imperial herald of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, "King Jesus". As such, he believed it to be his duty to expose any evil or corruption which violated God's Righteous Law. His preaching would precede and impress itself upon that of the Black Regiment.

During the French and Indian War, the colonists had been badly defeated on every front and, out of cowardice, many fled from the call of duty. Davies mounted the pulpit, addressed the sin of cowardice in the face of duty and preached one of the most compelling sermons in history...one which was reprinted over and over and, quite literally, helped reverse the tide of that war. Note the conviction of mind which distinguished this Imperial "kerux" of King Jesus:

Such, my brethren, such, alas! is the present state of our country. It bleeds in a thousand veins...And, in such circumstances, is it not our duty, in the sight of God, is it not a work to which the Lord loudly calls us, to take up arms for the defense of our country?

Our countrymen, in general, have acted as if beings of their importance and merit might certainly rest in the quiet, unmolested possessions of their liberty and property without anyone daring to disturb them, and without their doing anything for their own defense; or as if neither God nor man could strip them of their enjoyments. What vain, self confident presumption, what intolerable insolence is this, in a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, who have forfeited every blessing, even the ground they tread upon and the air they breathe in, and who live merely by unmerited grace and bounty of God?

Ye that complain of the burden of our public taxes; ye that love ease and shrink from the dangers of war; ye that wish to see peace restored once more; ye that would be happy beyond the grave and live forever attend to my proposal. It is this: A Thorough National Reformation. (2)

It was this same "kerux" whose preaching, on one singular occasion, stunned the King of England. Davies was preaching with the King in attendance, for the King had heard of his immense reputation as a preacher. During the message, the King and his retinue stood up,

preparing to leave. This caused a small disturbance as all eyes were suddenly fixed upon the King. It was, of course, rude of the King so to disrupt the message. However, kings are accustomed to being rude. In any event, Sam Davies stopped his message and directed his gaze toward the king and spoke to him, saying:

When the lion roars, the beasts of the field tremble. When the Lord speaks, the kings of the earth are silent!

It is no wonder that a young boy of that era would be so struck with the power and authority of that pulpit that the impress would shape the destiny of America's courageous orator and statesman...Patrick Henry.

In 1760, royalist colonial Governor Pownall of Massachusetts warned that once the ministers of the colonies joined in the resistance against the power politics of Great Britain there would be no stopping the colonial movement. "The spirit of their religion...will, like Moses' serpent, devour every other passion and affection," he said.

So influential were the pulpits that it was said by Prime Minister Horace Walpole in Parliament, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson."

The pulpits of that era were anything but neutral. And they certainly did not subscribe to that error of reasoning so dominant in the churches today which says that the only proper subject of concern for the pulpit pertains to individual salvation and one's personal preparation for heaven. That, with a few moral platitudes thrown in for good measure, accounts for most of the "spiritual" concern in the preaching of the church.

Not so with the Black Regiment. Peter Oliver complained that the strength of the colonial boycotts of British goods came from the unction supplied by the pulpits. "...They preached about it and about it; until the Women and Children, both within Doors and without, set their Spinning Wheels a whirling in Defiance of Great Britain." (3) *

Of course, some wonder why colonial pulpits would inveigh against British goods. Properly speaking, those pulpits had reached the point of realization which condemned the socialism (even though they didn't use the term) of British "mercantilism" as an arbitrary, hate mongering system of governance. They had no illusions about a corrupt system such as mercantilism which, through regulation, licensure and taxation, deliberately kept the colonies from developing industrial capacity (a point which escapes the grasp of most historians.) As a result, the colonies were only to produce raw materials for the mother country and remain dependent upon it for finished goods. Dependence, of course, is everything it's cracked up to be...dictated terms through political process. The colonists themselves used the biblical language of the pulpit to decry their servitude when they complained, "...we shall be nothing more than hewers of wood and drawers of water."

Of course, the brutal suppression of colonial economic interests impoverished whole cities, destroyed families and brought near starvation to many. Resistance to such decrees meant severe

reprisals such as the burning of the city of Falmouth, Maine (before the war) and the attempt to starve Boston by closing its port (again, before the war).

Symbolic of this brutality was Captain Codman's Mark in Massachusetts. Captain Codman's Mark was a mummified body of a servant who had risen up against his master. The servant was executed, mummified and hung up publicly, remaining on display by order of the British government for many years prior to the war as an object lesson to the colonists. Put simply, it was meant to teach the colonists what happens to slaves if they dare to rise up against their masters. Need we offer any further examples of the spiritual necessity for sermons which, in a practical manner, addressed such concerns?

It was considered spiritual to comment upon the arbitrary abuse of power by governing authorities. Typical of the pulpitering were positions like that taken by Rev. Samuel West:

Our obligation to promote the public good extends as much to the opposing every exertion of arbitrary power that is injurious to the state as it does to the submitting to good and wholesome laws. No man, therefore, can be a good member of the community that is not as zealous to oppose tyranny as he is ready to obey magistracy..." (4)

However, the reasoning given for such a strong opinion was not grounded upon human rights and liberties, nor economic interests and political favor. The issue was the absolute authority of the Lord as given in His Law:

If magistrates are ministers of God only because the law of God points out the necessity of such an institution for the good of mankind, it follows, that whenever they pursue measures directly destructive of the public good they cease being God's ministers, they forfeit their right to obedience from the subject, they become the pests of society, and the community is under the strongest obligation of duty both to God and to its own members, to resist and oppose them, which will be so far from resisting the ordinance of God that it will be strictly obeying his commands." (5)

So hateful was the presence of such tyranny that the people demonstrated against it publicly. One such demonstration led to a confrontation with British police and the soldiers, responding to taunts, in an unwarranted display of force, fired upon the crowd. This "Boston Massacre" led to the trial of the soldiers involved. When one of the soldiers was asked by the chief justice what objection he had to offer why sentence of death should not be passed upon him, that soldier replied in heated anger, "May it please your Honors! I pray the death of the clergy."

So potent was the preaching which compelled the colonists that, quite often, the War of Independence was referenced in Parliament as "the Presbyterian Revolt". In retaliation, during the war, British troops made Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches military targets. Churches and Christian colleges in British occupied cities were used as barracks and horse stables.

So impressive was the pulpit in providing leadership, that the Sons of Liberty often organized their followers in the church buildings and through the church officers. The Minutemen very

often found their leadership in elders and deacons of the churches. And did you ever wonder why "one if by land and two if by sea" was to be signaled from Old North Church tower?

Of course, when the epic struggle began, church authority was responsible for calling men to action. Pastors often led the colonists in actual battle. The Rev. Jonas Clark was with his flock at Lexington green. In fact, "Old Jonas" had sworn never to run from British guns and proved it when he fell from a musket ball. Trying to fire from the ground, he was "run through" with a British bayonet.

Another "member" of the "Black Regiment", the Rev. James Caldwell became famous when, during battle, he supplied the much needed paper wadding for the muskets from his church hymnals. Returning to the battle front with an armful of Isaac Watts hymnals he exclaimed, "Now boys, give 'em Watts!"

The Rev. Naphtali Daggett, professor of divinity at Yale, dashed off with his fowling piece in hand when the British arrived at New Haven. Others, such as Timothy Dwight were chaplains in the Continental Army. So valuable was such service that Gen. Washington repeatedly pleaded with the Continental Congress to provide him with more chaplains, else, he feared, the Lord would turn His back upon their noble cause.

Actual military leadership was not lacking either. The Rev. General Muhlenberg led his brigade against Cornwallis at the battle of Brandywine. According to historian J. R. Sizzo, at the time of the ultimate surrender of the British at Yorktown, all of the colonels of the Colonial Army but one were Presbyterian elders. In addition, more than half of all the soldiers and officers of the American Army during the war were Presbyterians. (6)

Such were the clergy and the church at large in the formation of this great Republic. But...the question remains. Will such leadership distinguish the clergy of this generation?

Footnotes:

- 1) Peter Oliver's Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion, Stanford Univ. Press, p. 29
- 2.) The Annals of America Volume 1
- 3.) Peter Oliver's Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion, Stanford Univ. Press, p. 63 64
- 4.) Wilkins, Steve, America: The First 350 Years
- 5.) ibid
- 6.) Boettener, Lorraine

*Grammar, usage and capitalization retained as in the original.