Our Reformed Heritage

by Edward L. R. Elson

Gilbert K. Chesterton once sent a telegram to his wife saying, "I am in market Harborough, where ought I to be?" "Home!" his wife replied, because she said it was easier to get him home and start him off again on the right track, than to tell him how to get where he ought to be from where he was.

The bicentennial in the United States of America is the occasion by which we go back home – back to the home of the soul of America to get put on the right track that we might find our true American destiny.

The American bicentennial therefore bids us ask, "What is it that makes the United States utterly unique among the nations of mankind? What does the past have to say to the present about the future?" There are two great dangers in our commemoration. The first danger in the bicentennial celebration is that we may simply embalm the events of the past, canonize our patriots and founding fathers, adorn them with synthetic halos and then do inordinate obeisance before their memories. We must avoid simply caressing our forebears or fondling antiquities. To be sure, the historical debunkers have taken care of a good bit of that for us. The second and the greater danger, especially in these post-Watergate, post-Vietnam days, is to dredge up all our sins, our failures, our derelictions, and grovel in guilt and shame over sins long forgiven and mistakes corrected or in the process of correction. Men and nations live by affirmations, not by negations. Men and nations live by faith, and not by doubt. Therefore, both glory and judgment must be kept in perspective; memory and prophecy be co-joined, and it is the role of religion to prevent the debasement of the bicentennial.

We get our clue from the ancient people of the Covenant. David, the magnificent king and musician of Israel, in his prayers remembers the good land of his fathers, the achievement of Saul, and the faith which sustained the ancient people. In a high moment of devotion

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he says, "Thou, O God, hast heard my vows. Thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear Thy name." Like David of old, these are times when we remember our heritage and thank God.

In 1776, Horace Walpole stood up in British Parliament and exclaimed, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson!" He was referring to the Reverend Dr. John Witherspoon, the redoubtable president of the College of New Jersey. John Witherspoon was born in Gifford, Scotland on February 5, 1722, came from a family of ministers, and was a lineal descendant of the great Protestant reformer, John Knox. He studied very hard, and in his twenty-second year was licensed and ordained to preach. It was not long until in his homeland and everywhere he was regarded as an able scholar, a forceful preacher, a man of public affairs as well as a fisherman, golfer and excellent horseman. John Witherspoon was a commanding figure, possessed of a fine sense of humor, and had such an excellent memory that it was said he could reproduce with precision a two-hour sermon, the manuscript of which he had read over only once, or at the most twice. Despite the size of his last church in Paisley, Scotland, he was never a man to be confined to one parish. He was a firebrand in the contentions of his day, and his reputation spread throughout the Scottish church.

This dynamic young minister brought to the ministry in Scotland the same conviction that catapulted him some 30 years later into the forefront of the American Revolution. But before he reached the United States, he was to learn some bitter but useful lessons which in later years would make him the great leader, and one whom history regards as having turned the tide for the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

In Scotland, he used his pulpit to champion the cause of the popular rights – the conservative old-guard point of view – and he did not win. At the beginning of his career, he opposed the clergy having anything to do with politics, and he minced no words about it. Yet in spite of his aversion to politics, he did not hesitate to stand up and be counted on public issues confronting his country.

When Charles Edward Louis Stuart, the young pretender, tried to win back the throne of England, John Witherspoon helped him, though it almost cost the young minister his life. The young pretender was the grandson of James II of England who had been deposed. Bonnie Prince Charlie, as the young pretender was called, was born in exile in Rome. With the help of the Highland clans he determined to re-

turn as king. Witherspoon believed the course was right and determined to help him. When the young prince landed in England with his small army intent upon marching to London, the young Presbyterian minister, Witherspoon, marched at the head of a detachment of militia to join him. Apparently, he had not reckoned with the strength of the opposition, for he and many others were captured at Fall Kirk. Prince Charles' force was defeated at Culloden Moor and the young pretender fled to France, never to return. The battle of Culloden Moor was one of the bloodiest in all of history, and produced many of the American settlers shortly thereafter who came from Scotland. Witherspoon and his compatriots were imprisoned in the highest part of Donne Castle, 70 feet above the rocks below, and there was talk of hanging the rebels.

In their imprisonment, the rebels were not idle. They plotted an escape, and several descended a great distance on a rope made of bedding. One man, however, in an attempt to escape, fell to the rocks and was killed, and the plot to escape was detected by the authorities. Witherspoon and the remaining prisoners had no alternative but to wait. Witherspoon waited with resignation, but without despair. Languishing in the cold, damp castle prison, John Witherspoon's health broke. Eventually, he was brought to trial, but with his broken health, his youth and his calling as a minister, the charges were dismissed and eventually he was released.

In poor health, he returned to the great pulpit which he had occupied. He had had time to think it over. He had dared to rise against the British Crown and had failed. But maybe the next time it would be different. Doubtlessly, this influenced his action and gave motivation to his leadership against the British years later in America. For like the other Colonists who were Scottish, and Scotch-Irish (representing at the beginning of our nation about one-third of all the Colonists) he took up in the New World his opposition to the British Crown where he had left off in the Old World.

He was an avowed Calvinist, and he brought his Calvinistic theology into the church, into education and into politics. When he was 44 years of age, the College of New Jersey at Princeton invited him to be its president. His wife three years his senior, a gracious and able lady, persuaded him to decline. But the regents of the College persisted and a year later he relented. With five children, ranging in age from 8 to 19 years of age, he and his wife made the three-months journey in the cramped ship's quarters to brave the life of the New World

and to share the duties of the struggling infant college. In August, 1768, the Witherspoons landed in Philadelphia. Distinguished citizens vied with each other to welcome and to receive him. Seldom had a man been welcomed with greater hopes, and in the 26 years which remained to Witherspoon, the American people were never disappointed. He exceeded their utmost expectations. Things were never the same wherever John Witherspoon went.

The time in America was ripe for such a leader. In 1776, the population of the Colonies was somewhere between 2.5 and 2.9 million. Of these about 1.5 million were Calvinists and the only inter-colonial church organization among Calvinists was the Presbyterian Church. Indeed, the Church was the first inter-colonial ecclesiastical organization in the New World. Among the Colonists, about one million were Anglicans, who of course were Loyalists, one-half of whom were slaves. (Slaves were listed as having the faith of their owners.) There were then fewer than 23,000 Roman Catholics in the Colonies and less than 2,000 Jews.

Witherspoon was the natural leader and the spokesman of his fellow Calvinists, which was the dominant theology in the colonies at the time. He soon made Princeton the foremost American College. While other colleges were local, Princeton was inter-colonial. Witherspoon strengthened the standards of scholarship, introduced the new lecture method and brought new methods of teaching Hebrew and Greek in which he was highly proficient. He traveled across this country and abroad, raising money for the College, and seeking money from friends abroad.

The college day at Princeton began at 6 a.m. with morning prayers. No cuts were allowed from classes, except with special permission of the President. Sunday was a day of study and special work in theology and Bible. There was no Christmas or Easter recess. But a short recess in the spring and a like period in the fall were provided. Final examinations were given orally by the president and the tutors in the presence of "other gentlemen of education who shall choose to be present."

In our church we still have an oral examination in theology. I had three days of written examinations before I was qualified for ordination and had to do a Greek exegesis, was examined publicly in theology before the whole Presbytery and had to preach a sermon also before the Presbytery. It began early; it has been happening ever since.

In this college, Witherspoon with his love of liberty discussed with his students all kinds of public questions. Students came from all of

the Colonies. His students became the leaders of American life and thought and they were zealous for political freedom. When the war was precipitated, there were more Princeton men who were signers of the Declaration of Independence than Yale and Harvard men combined. Witherspoon acted as Minister of the Princeton town church which met in the college every Sunday. The college achieved an international reputation. Witherspoon undoubtedly was the most scholarly man in the American church of his day, a master of five languages, a writer, a pamphleteer of international influence.

Witherspoon's convictions about ministers in politics slowly changed from an attitude of aloofness and non-involvement to one of active participation and actual leadership.

Witherspoon never ducked an issue or backed away from a challenge. When his proposals were challenged on the ground that he was a minister or a school master, inexperienced in the ways of political bloodletting, he declared, "I am God's minister, both in a sacred and in a civil sense." His work in framing the State Constitution of New Jersey was a rehearsal for the leadership he was to give in the Continental Congress and the government during the days of the Revolution. On June 22, 1776, he was elected as one of the five New Jersey delegates to the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia. Already the delegates of the 12 remaining Colonies had heard of Witherspoon. He lost no time in calling for a Declaration of Independence.

John Adams called him "as high a son of liberty as any man in America." Bancroft, the historian, wrote of him, "The first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve all connection with Great Britain was from the Presbyterians."

During the debate over the signing of the Declaration, John Dickinson of Delaware suggested that the time was not ripe. Witherspoon arose and said, "In my judgment, the country is not only ripe for the measure, but in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it. There is a tide in the affairs of men – a niche of time. We perceive it now before us."

It is said that it was his persistence and his eloquence which prompted the signing of the Declaration then and there. When some men hesitated, he reminded them again and again, "This is the niche of time." He said to the whole Assembly,

> For my own part, of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is at stake, that property is pledged on the issue of this contest, and although these gray hairs

> must soon descend into the sepulcher, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than to desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country.

Fifty-six men stepped forward and signed the Declaration of Independence, six of them former students of Witherspoon, eleven of them Presbyterian.

Witherspoon believed that political emancipation – the right of self-government, the sovereignty of the people over their own destiny – was the logical consummation of spiritual freedom; that freedom of the conscience under God, and the new-found dignity of the individual emanated from the Protestant Reformation which flowered on the European continent and in the little kingdom of Scotland.

When the Declaration was signed, he became a member of the Continental Congress, served on the major committees, and was a close friend and confidant of General George Washington who had very few close friends. Wherever he went in the Colonies, regiments sprang up in defense of freedom. During the six years he was in the Continental Congress, he never attended a meeting of Presbytery or Synod but still had great influence over the Church and was its chief spokesman. He was a Convenor of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church on this soil. Men who were his students joined the cause. So patriotic were the men of Princeton that they would not wear woolens manufactured in England. In October 1777, nearly 15 months after John Witherspoon had crusaded for the signing of the Declaration of Independence, his son, Major John Witherspoon, was killed in the battle of Germantown. The redoubtable minister, educator, and statesman had left an imperishable legacy. He was a child of the Reformed Christian faith, and it was this that motivated his actions. He never ceased to be a minister of the Church. He continued to wear his clerical garb in and out of Congress. In his affable and courteous way, he said, "I am a minister of God. And it is meet that in Congress or out of it, people should know that I am."

If you look at the picture of the signers of the Declaration of Independence as that great painting hangs in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building, you will see Witherspoon sitting across the table dressed in clericals. He wore the gaiters and frock coat which they were accustomed to wear in those days. His national statue in Washington, which has stood for years in front of the National Presbyterian Church, shows the great scholar-leader dropping his church vestments on a

pedestal behind him, and with the Scriptures firmly grasped in one hand, striding out of the church into the great world to take his place.

On May 17, 1776 he preached a terrific sermon in the town church in Princeton which resounded throughout the Colonies and greatly influenced the will of the Congress to seek independence. He brought a massive intelligence to the interpretation of Christian doctrine. When one reads the titles of his sermons, he realizes what a far cry it is from some of the topics announced for churches in America today. Here are just two or three of his: "The Security of Those Who Trust in God," "The Glory of Christ in His Humiliation," "The Believer Going to God as His Exceeding Joy," "A Vision of the Glory of God Humbling the Soul." Enlightening also would be a look at his baccalaureate sermon to the Princeton students.

I want to say just a word of what he said in that great sermon at Princeton that influenced so many other people. It was the first time he had stepped into the public arena. He said on that day,

> If your cause is just, you may look with confidence to the Lord and entreat Him to plead it as His own. You all are my witnesses that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season, however, it is not only lawful, but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without hesitation that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty and of human nature.

Then he went on to say that he was not railing at the King. But he said,

> He is the best friend to American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion and who sees himself with the greatest firmness to bear down profanity and immorality of every kind. Whoever is an avowed enemy of God I scruple not to call him an enemy of this country.

He then concluded by saying,

> I beseech you to make a wise improvement of the present threatening aspects of public affairs and to remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, to yourself is the same, and as peace with God and conformity to Him adds to the sweetness of created comforts while we possess them, so in times of difficulty and trial it is

> the man of piety, an inward principle that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen and the invincible soldier.

That sermon affected all of the Colonies and their leaders. The British and the Tories thought Witherspoon a notable force against them. When the British troops captured the Reverend John Rossborough, they bayoneted him on the spot, under the impression they were disposing of John Witherspoon, the President of Princeton.

The lives of Witherspoon and his family were in jeopardy throughout the war. There was no question where a Calvinist or a Presbyterian would stand in this conflict. Someone defined a Calvinist as a man who bowed one knee before Almighty God and the other knee on the neck of a king. Ranke, the historian said, John Calvin is the virtual founder of the American Republic. Four-fifths of all clergymen, Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists were in some way or other tinctured with the theology of John Calvin. You know it to be a fact that entire congregations who were Loyalist and Tory fled to England and to Canada. The Presbyterian men went into the army, sometimes under the leadership of their pastors.

Some years ago I was a preacher at the biannual commemoration of the Donegal Church in Pennsylvania. This church was a strong center of Calvinistic influence west of the Susquehanna. Once when service was in progress on the Lord's day a courier arrived and announced the fighting in Massachusetts. The benediction was pronounced, and every man in the congregation went out under the tree, signed up for the duration, and fought to the very end. Now, every two years, their descendants return to that church, and gather under the great oak tree (which is now called "the witness tree") to remember their heritage and to make a new dedication.

In the battle of Springfield when the Continental troops were running out of wadding for their rifles, the Reverend James Caldwell, the pastor of the Elizabethtown church and chaplain of the New Jersey Brigade, dashed into the nearby church and gathered up the hymnals which featured the hymns of Sir Isaac Watts. He tore the pages from the books. The infantrymen rammed the paper pages down the barrels of their guns while the chaplain called out, "Give 'em Watts, boys, give 'em Watts!" That afternoon many a red-coated Britisher "high-tailed it" out across the New Jersey plains with the hymns of Isaac Watts deeply imbedded in the upholstered portions of his anatomy.

The son of that chaplain, Elias Caldwell, became an officer of the

Supreme Court. It was he who rescued the records when the British burned the Capitol in 1814. What is even more important is that that man, Elias Caldwell, was also the first Clerk of the Session in what is now the National Presbyterian Church of Washington.

The children of the great, cataclysmic sixteenth century Protestant Reformation were those who shaped our quest for liberty and achieved it for us. The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights embody elements of this heritage: the sovereignty of God, the importance of civil covenants, the limitation of human power-centers because of the perverseness of sin, the supreme value of individual rights and the whole series of appellate courts.

When it was asked in those days, "What is the purpose of life, what is the chief end of man?" out of their heritage, their experience, and their daily living they replied from the words of the Catechism, "The chief end of man is to glorify God. The purpose of life is to serve God, to make known His majesty and His rulership over all of life."

One day a little boy was handed the familiar etching of the Revolutionary soldier and was asked to state what he saw in the picture. He said, "Well first, I see one man with a fife. Secondly, I see another man with a drum. And the third man with a terrible headache." That is America today – always marching but with a headache. We must keep on marching to the fife and drum, praying, working and struggling to complete the American Revolution. We must address ourselves to the remaining problems – the permanently poor, the unemployed who are discouraged, the lonely, the sick, the alienated, the extension of full civil rights and complete justice where it is not a reality. The summons is to live humbly, to avoid chauvinism, and national arrogance or anything which blemishes the character of the soul of "one nation under God." And there are three categories of people in this world: Christians, crusading Communists, and amiable non-entities. You know where we belong. We are bound first of all to Jesus Christ and His rule and to that Kingdom which transcends all earthly kingdoms. The Bible opens with the word, "In the beginning, God . . ." and ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth where He shall reign King of Kings and Lord forever and ever. Alleluia! Amen.