

Chaplain Caldwell of the American Revolution

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“...proclaim liberty throughout all the land
unto all the inhabitants thereof...” -Lev 25:10

True Christians know the meaning of personal sacrifice for “the Word of God and testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:8). When it comes to exemplary American Christian patriots, Chaplain James Caldwell of our Revolutionary era devoted himself entirely to the cause of freedom. He was known for his non-stop labors in the cause of liberty; in terms of sacrifice he would lose his wife, and ultimately, his own life as a Christian patriot.

From his Scots-Irish and Huguenot bloodlines, James Caldwell inherited a natural hardiness and a spiritual zeal rooted in Reformation ideals. Drinking from the fountainhead of thought from men like Jonathan Edwards, he graduated from Princeton College in 1759 before entering the Presbyterian ministry in Elizabethtown, NJ.

At the outbreak of the War for Independence, one of Rev. Caldwell’s church members took command of the New Jersey militia, and Caldwell was the choice to become the state militia’s chaplain. Because of his reputation for integrity and energy, he also was charged with duties as the militia’s Assistant Commissary General, a position that charged him with handling troop payments and feeding the army of New Jersey. He marshaled the resources of his town to ensure that troops on the front line were being provided for.

As a chaplain he ministered to soldiers, especially encouraging the timid and admonishing the mutinous. As a beloved pastor in northern New Jersey, he was welcome in all parts of his parish as he visited his flock and gathered intelligence and promoted the cause of independence.

So effective was Rev. Caldwell in fanning the flames of liberty that resident Tories divulged his name to the invading British just north of Elizabethtown on Staten Island. Caldwell knew he was a marked man, so he began carrying a brace of pistols, except he would lay them aside when he stepped into his pulpit on Sundays.



*Caldwell passing out hymnals
on the battlefield...*

As one historian relates regarding Caldwell’s means of self-protection,

He was engaged in what he firmly believed to be the cause of God, and that cause he did not consider would be advanced by yielding himself unresistingly into the hands of a skulking Tory to be dragged off to the scaffold (cited in Headly’s *Chaplains and Clergy of the Revolution*, p. 220).

Though willing to sacrifice his own life for liberty’s cause, his heart was pierced when his wife was murdered at home by a marauding enemy soldier who had come looking for her patriot husband. The assassin shot her through a window while she sat on a bed with children at her side. Neighbors rescued her body and children after the house was set on fire.

This barbarous murder may have been intended as an act of vengeance in order to terrorize the land into submission. To the contrary this treachery galvanized the citizens in their resistance to tyranny, and it steeled James Caldwell in his leading role for independence.

The militia was fighting the invading Hessian mercenaries at Springfield a while later when Caldwell played a prominent role in saving the day. Because the patriots’ firing was waning for lack of musket wadding, he resorted to the nearby Presbyterian church to scoop up armfuls of Isaac Watts’ Hymnal, and as he raced back to the battlefield to supply the missing musket wads, he shouted amidst his cheering men, “Put Watts into them, boys!”

Firing scraps of Watts’ hymns, indeed, was an ineffectual way of civilizing or proselytizing the invaders, but the loss of the hymnals was just a small and necessary sacrifice in securing liberty at home. James Caldwell lost his house, his church building, his wife, and finally he himself was murdered by a traitor.

Today three towns in upstate New Jersey are named after James and Hannah Caldwell, and the seal of Union County still preserves the image of Hannah being attacked at her home. James and Hannah Caldwell trusted Christ and lived by His Word. They knew that only Christ is worth living for, and as patriots they believed that personal and political liberty is worth dying for.



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