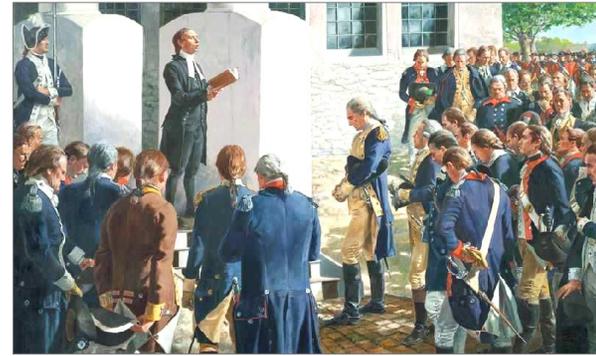


# The Role of Ministers and Chaplains in America's War for Independence

## Introduction

By April 1775 when the battle of Lexington and Concord broke out between American militiamen and British soldiers, the colonies already had a long history of involving chaplains with their militia units. For more than 100 years colonial militias had included a local parson to minister to citizen-soldiers fighting Indian



wars. Had not God's Word set a pattern for seeking His blessing in conflict as well as in times of peace?

"So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people...: 'the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you'" (Deut 20:2-4).

## Christian Concerns in the Troubled Colonies

Americans knew that they would need God to deliver them from Britain's armed forces. Christian patriots, from New England to Georgia, viewed the struggle for independence as a righteous cause. Indeed, the run-up to hostilities in 1775 saw many American preachers in their annual election sermons outlining the God-ordained duties of magistrates (e.g., Deut 17). The declared desire of New England Puritans had been to expand Christ's kingdom in (and from) the New World, but erosions of home rule and the Church of England's threat to impose a bishop directly on American soil meant that the dream of making America a truly Christian lighthouse was in immediate danger.

The Boston Massacre of 1770, and especially the "intolerable" Quartering Act of 1774, led many patriots to conclude that their British masters acted more as overlords than as godly magistrates. At the same time, colonial Christians knew that they were called to spiritual freedom in Christ (Gal 5.1; 1Pet 2.16-17). The Bible taught that only God can bind the conscience (Acts 5.29); believers should be free from superstitions and man-made trappings in religious practice. Should they not also continue as free citizens in resistance against what they viewed as an increasingly oppressive rule that was out of touch with its colonies? The British crown increasingly was denying recognized rights that had been guaranteed to all Englishmen since England's Glorious Revolution of 1688.

## Christian Ministry to the Continental Army

Reformation teachings had brought many Christian dissidents from Europe to America's shores of freedom. Even as biblical teaching had shaped generations of colonists, the Bible also would be the guiding light in America's struggle for independence.

The Continental Congress wanted divine encouragements for its troops. In July 1775 Congress authorized a paid chaplain for each regiment of the Continental Army. This measure is considered the beginning of America's military chaplaincy.

The following July of 1776, General Washington, knowing the crucial role that Christian ministers had had in the colonies and next would have among the troops, issued an order for the recruitment of chaplains:

"The ...commanding officers of each regiment are directed to procure Chaplains accordingly; persons of good Characters and exemplary lives –

"To see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay them a suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious exercises. The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger –

"The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man, will endeavor so to live, and act as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country."



In life and death situations, faithful chaplains minister the word of life, and in the face of prosecuting a war, chaplains would represent the paramount counterbalance of God's mercy and justice in seeking the preservation of life and property.

Chaplain at Breed's Hill

trials of the winter encampment at Valley Forge would test the mettle of every Continental soldier. Just surviving the winter cold and lack of normal food and clothing was a man's first priority. But General Washington reminded his soldiers of something greater at stake in this 1778 order issued at Valley Forge:

"The Commander-in-Chief directs that divine services be performed every Sunday at eleven o'clock in each brigade which has chaplains.... While we are duly performing the duty of good soldiers, we are not to be inattentive to the highest duties of religion."

## Conclusion

When we ourselves get busy in life with lesser things than war, let us take George Washington's admonition to heart. Let's give faithful attendance to Christian worship and give heed to the Word of life. And—let's ask God to use faithful chaplains who minister to our nation's troops.

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