

AMERICA 250

“The Black Robe Regiment”

By Robert Dean, Jr., B.A., M.A., Th.M., D.Min., PhD (ABD)

Introduction

Welcome back to our America 250 series. Today is our fifth and final in the series. We’re talking about a group the British feared more than almost any army they faced in the colonies.

The British gave them what they thought was a derogatory nickname — **the Black Robe Regiment**.

This wasn’t an official military unit. There was no roster, no commanding officer, no uniform — except for the black clerical robes these men wore every Sunday in the pulpit.

The “Black Robe Regiment” was the colonial pastors of America. And the British feared them because of what these men knew — and what they were willing to preach: *biblical convictions about the dangers of tyranny* and the dangers of a government that grows so strong it crushes the freedom of its people.

Today, I want to introduce you to a few of these men — pastors who didn’t just preach the Gospel on Sunday, but who helped birth a nation.

THE BIBLICAL WARNING

Where did these pastors get their understanding of tyranny? Scripture. Specifically, 1 Samuel chapter 8.

In this passage, the elders of Israel come to the prophet Samuel and demand a king — they want to be like all the other nations. And God tells Samuel to warn them plainly what a king — what an unchecked, all-powerful government — will actually do to them.

Listen to just a portion of that warning:

“He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen ... He will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain ... and you will be his servants.” — 1 Samuel 8:11–17 (paraphrased)

It goes on to warn about the excessive and burdensome taxation that would come from a monarch.

Samuel’s sobering conclusion packed a punch: “And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day.” — 1 Samuel 8:18.

It was passages like this one — studied, taught, and preached for generations — that gave colonial pastors the theological foundation to warn their congregations about the dangers of government tyranny. They weren’t being political. They were being biblical.

A FATHER'S LEGACY

Let's look at one family that shows just how deep this influence ran: the Muhlenberg family of Lutheran pastors.

The patriarch was Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the founder of the Lutheran church in America. Most people today have never heard his name. But during the Great Awakening, he faithfully preached the Gospel and taught the Bible — and in doing so, he helped lay the spiritual and theological foundation for the colonists' desire for independence. His preaching shaped the worldview of an entire generation, including the generation that would found this nation. The Word of God taught them spiritual courage which became the foundation of the battlefield courage!

Few remember Henry Muhlenberg by name. But we absolutely remember the impact he had — through his two sons.

THE PASTOR WHO BECAME A GENERAL

The first son was John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, who lived from 1746 to 1807. Peter pastored two churches in the small town of Woodstock, Virginia, on the west side of the Blue Ridge Mountains — one English-speaking Episcopal church, and one German-speaking Lutheran church. He also served in the Virginia colonial legislature.

On January 21, 1776, Pastor Muhlenberg stood in his pulpit in Woodstock and preached on the second half of Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verse 8 — “a time for war, and a time for peace.” He concluded that it was a time for war.

And then he did something no one in that congregation would ever forget. Instead of walking back to the vestry room to remove his clerical robe as he always did — he removed it right there, in front of everyone, revealing the uniform of a Colonel in the Continental Army underneath.

He then called for volunteers to follow him outside. That day, 162 men from his own congregation stood up and joined him. The next day, more than 300 men from the surrounding county joined as well. Together they became the 8th Virginia Regiment, and they marched off to war. Hundreds of other pastors throughout the colonies were also raising companies, regiments, and battalions to fight the British.

Peter Muhlenberg went on to survive Valley Forge and fight in the major battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Stony Point, and Yorktown. By war's end, he had risen to the rank of brevet Major General under George Washington himself.

Today, there is a statue of Peter Muhlenberg standing in the hall of statues in the national Capitol building in Washington, D.C. — frozen in the very moment he removed his pastor's robe to reveal the soldier underneath.

THE BROTHER WHO CHANGED HIS MIND

Peter's brother, Frederick Augustus Conrad Muhlenberg, lived from 1750 to 1801. At first, Frederick disagreed with his brother. He didn't believe pastors should involve themselves in the war for independence. He had his own church, in Manhattan.

But in 1777, the British arrived in New York. They drove the pastors out of their own churches — and Frederick's church was burned to the ground.

He changed his mind.

Frederick went on to serve his country at the highest level. Today, a large portrait of him hangs in the United States Capitol alongside the portraits of every other Speaker of the House of Representatives — because Frederick Muhlenberg was the very first Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Two brothers, both Lutheran pastors, raised by a father who preached the Bible during the Great Awakening — one became a general, the other became the first Speaker of the House. That is the legacy of the Black Robe Regiment.

“IN THE NAME OF THE GREAT JEHOVAH”

Let me give you one more story — this one involving Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys.

Allen and his men surrounded the British at Fort Ticonderoga, catching the guards and the sleeping soldiers completely by surprise. When Allen demanded the fort's surrender, the British commander shot back a question: “By whose authority do you order me to hand over this fort?”

Ethan Allen raised his sword into the air and answered:

“In the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress!”

That answer was apparently sufficient — because the commander promptly surrendered the fort. Even on the battlefield, the name of God and the cause of liberty stood side by side in the minds of these men.

Conclusion

Friends, the so-called Black Robe Regiment — these pastors and evangelists — armed the colonists with biblical truth. That truth gave them the spiritual backbone to win the War for Independence and purchase the freedom we still enjoy today.

I hope you have learned a lot about the role of the Bible in the founding of our nation. John Adams said the Constitution was made for a moral people, by that he meant a *biblical* morality. Without that the nation would fail.

Let us pray that God will raise up another army of pastors who arm their congregants with the truth of God's Word. God's Word is more powerful than any human army, leader, or political movement such as socialism, which is an affront to our Constitution. We need to go to churches where the Bible is taught verse by verse and interpreted in a literal, historical, exegetical, and contextual way so that we can learn to think like God thinks. To avoid being pressed into the mold of the world and have our thinking conform to that of Jesus Christ. Only then will we have an understanding of freedom in our own souls.

My prayer for us today is the same prayer I'd ask you to pray with me: that God would raise up another army of pastors — men who will arm their congregations with the truth of God's Word.

Because God's Word is more powerful than any human army, any political leader, or any movement that stands as an affront to the freedoms secured for us in our Constitution.

Let's pray.

Sources

David Barton, *The Spirit of the American Revolution* (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilder Press, 2000), 11–12.

Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (Burlington: H. Johnson and Co., 1838), 17–18.