

HEARTLAND OF THE WHISKEY REBELLION
July 7, 2013 –Communion—Galatians 5: 1-14
The Church of the Covenant

Did you know the Whiskey Rebellion began here in Western PA? And did you know that the Whiskey Rebellion began in a Presbyterian Church? Presbyterians have been ornery from the very beginning. When I am leading a new member class I often refer to the fact that Presbyterians are supposed to know what they believe and why they believe it and are to speak up when they believe something is wrong. That, I think, is the convergence of our heart-held Presbyterian beliefs and the fact that we come from Scotch-Irish ancestors! When someone stands up in a meeting and disagrees with me I always smile, because I know we are just exercising our “Presbyterian-ness” in that moment. Its not personal; its just who we are. There are reasons why signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterians, such as The Reverend John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister. And there are reasons why King George III, the King of England during the Revolutionary War which we celebrated this past week, declared that the American Revolution was...“that Presbyterian rebellion.”

On July 15, 1794, a notice was served on a Presbyterian farmer, William Miller, an excise tax on domestic products. While it is often referred to as “The Whiskey Rebellion” the tax was assessed on all goods that made their way over the Allegheny Mountains from Western PA to the East. So most properly speaking the rebellion should be referred to as “The Western Insurgency” and the issue was taxes, not whiskey. It was referred to as “The Whiskey Rebellion” by Easterners, Federalists, and supporters of the central government, who were critical of the assertion of rights, and tried to paint Western PA as a bunch of drunken Irishmen. Miller was a member of the Old Mingo Creek Society and met with others at the Old Mingo Meeting House. It was the old log church, which today has become the Mingo Creek Presbyterian Church. (Mingo Creek Presbyterian Church, Bi-centennial Anniversary Celebration 1982). The insurgency began in a prayer meeting that got out of control. Prayer always is dangerous after all; it is spiritual dynamite. An enraged group of about 40 men, led by “Tom the Tinker”, then marched to Woodville Plantation, the home of General John Neville, the regional Government Revenue Inspector. (You can see Woodville Plantation over by Heidelberg, PA today). Shots broke out, Oliver Miller, another Presbyterian, (you can see the Oliver Miller Homestead in South Park) was killed. And then the leader of the rebellion, one Major McFarland, went forward with a white flag in order to enter into discussion, and was shot dead by the troops from Neville’s home. This only further enraged the crowd. The Reverend John Clark, Presbyterian minister from the Bethel Presbyterian Church, “expostulated with them on the impropriety of the enterprise, and used his utmost endeavors to dissuade them from it.” But of course, Presbyterians, then as now, disregarded the advice of their pastor, and rebellion then generally ensued. (Rev. John McMillan, D.D. –Pioneer, Preacher and Educator, Bennett, p. 71) General George Washington marshaled the Federal militia in Carlisle, PA and marched west to put down the rebellion. You can see the flag of the Whiskey Rebellion at the Century Inn in Scenery Hill. Suffice it to say that ingrained in our DNA is an ornery, steadfast and immovable, religious conviction tied to the Presbyterian Church that is suspicious of centralized authority and too much governmental power, particularly where taxation is concerned. Here in the heartland of the Whiskey Rebellion we weren’t happy with taxation *without* representation and we weren’t happy with taxation *WITH* representation either!

There is something inherent in Christianity that plants a vision of human freedom and dignity in the heart of humanity. When we are in Christ we are free; no government and no man controls us; the love of Christ controls us and we only submit to any authority out of respect for Christ. This germ of freedom comes from our faith. It is why despots of all times and places always despise faith. Tyrants loathe and

persecute Christianity because they know their dictatorial ways can never prevail as long as Jesus Christ lives in the human heart. There is a place they cannot ever control in the human heart. Jesus is Lord and no one and no authority is greater than He. When we are free in Christ then we are free indeed. There is a part of the soul that cannot be controlled nor compelled by any law, any government, any of the powers and principalities of this world. We bow our knee to Christ alone and to no earthly king. We submit our lives to Jesus and to no earthly power. Communism tried to eradicate Christianity and it failed. Nazism tried to muzzle the church and it failed. Totalitarianism of every stripe has tried to silence Christ and destroy the church, but the church only gets stronger when it is attacked. The state can never control the human heart; it is the place where Jesus is forever Lord. Our scripture for today is from Galatians and it says: *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5: 1)* Jesus Christ died to set us free from the old law; Christ set us free to liberate the human soul from the confines of outward control; Christ lives within us, through the Holy Spirit, to lead us in paths of freedom and joy and fulfillment. We have been set free in Christ Jesus—first spiritually within our heart and then, politically and in every other aspect in our life. When we have tasted that freedom and joy why would we ever want to go back into bondage? When we have experienced the Promised Land why would we want to go back into slavery in Egypt? Why would we ever give up our spiritual and our political and our legal freedoms? Those people in the Whiskey Rebellion must have asked themselves the question—why did we throw off the yoke of political bondage to England only to receive a new yoke of bondage from a centralized, powerful government? We have been set free—why should we re-submit ourselves to a new yoke of slavery just to a different master? Our master is not governmental; our MASTER is Jesus.

Now I am not a political preacher; never have been and never will be. I preach Christ and Him crucified and I then believe people of good faith can make their own decisions especially where politics is concerned. I see ways in which the church is more and more under attack by its society and its government. There are more and more ways in which an increasingly secular society (in 1990 83% of the nation identified itself as Christian; today 75% do) are directly attacking the church and its independence and its ability to speak the truth as it believes the truth to be. So my one exception to my “no political sermons” rule is when I feel the church itself is coming under attack.

On many college campuses there are speech policies that proscribe saying certain things—I heard a talk by a campus minister saying that at his school he was afraid to share the Bible verse John 14—Jesus saying, *“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”* because asserting an exclusive truth claim might be defined as “hate speech”. Or consider the fact that for the past two years the government has been talking about eliminating the income tax charitable deduction. This is aimed directly at the church, who is still the largest charity in the United States. By the way, the charitable deduction is coming under attack by both Democrats and Republicans—any time you hear the phrase “flat tax” or “fair tax” please understand that what they are really talking about is eliminating the charitable deduction for churches. It is estimated that church revenue, should the charitable deduction be eliminated would reduce church income by upwards of 10-15%. If this happens and income falls would The Church of the Covenant eliminate entirely our mission budget? Would we not call an associate pastor and lay off one or two other staff members? I cannot see this as anything less than an attack on the vitality and independence of the church. Then there has been the targeting of church related entities by the Internal Revenue Service. While most of the news stories have focused on the targeted groups being from the opposition political party, the little realized part of the story is that church-related groups have also been targeted. These include The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan’s Purse. The government has targeted Billy Graham, the last great American Evangelist. Yeah, right, target Billy Graham. How messed up is that? The government has targeted Operation

Christmas Child, you know, all those radical Christmas shoe boxes going to little children in Africa. How messed up is that?

Chief Justice John Marshall, the first chief justice of the Supreme Court, noted that the power to tax is the power to destroy. Governments can use their taxing authority to destroy that with which they disagree. Presbyterians understood that and were part of the American Revolution. Presbyterians understood that and were part of the Whiskey Rebellion.

Government, don't you mess with my church. Government, don't you try to take away my religious freedom. Government, don't you dare impede my God-given right to tell you that only Jesus Christ is LORD!

It is a sermon from the Heartland of the Whiskey Rebellion –*“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore; and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* (Galatians 5: 1) And Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*