

LIBERTY UNDER GOD

by Lester J. Start

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It was a great celebration in New York this Fourth of July, our nation's 210th birthday, and the 100th birthday of that grand lady, Liberty, who stands holding the torch of freedom over the entrance to New York harbor. Of course, there was too much hype, too much commercial hoopla — one might have wished for a more dignified celebration, to match, perhaps the stately parade of the tall ships — but, then, the hoopla and the hype do reflect America, don't they? America's brash enthusiasm, if not restrained good taste.

And there is much to celebrate. As John Adams said long ago, the Fourth should be the occasion for loud celebration. This nation is a great new advance in human history; as a later great President said, it is "a nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal... a government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

It is good to remember how the spirit of liberty established in our constitution became an inspiration and example to others. The French Revolution which followed ours by some 14 years, echoed the concepts and words of the American scriptures, and Washington and Jefferson were cited as heroes of freedom. Unfortunately, what Hegel would call the excessive love of liberty without the restraint of law, led to a reign of terror and a set-back for liberty. But in our age when the ferment of revolution is associated with leftist, Marxist ideology, we forget how successful America was as an example of the leaders of liberation - in South America, for example, in its struggle from Spanish rule. The Simon Bolivars viewed themselves as successors to the leaders of the American Revolution. There is a legitimate American revolutionary moral leadership — not to be confused with gun boat diplomacy — that it is a pity to relinquish to the leftists or the far right political spectrum today.

And it is good to celebrate our heritage of immigrants, good to anticipate the restoration of Ellis Island as a national monument, fitting, somehow, that the leader behind the Statue of Liberty project is Lee Iacocca, the son of immigrants. America has been a haven of hope for those who dream of a better life in freedom. And it continues to be; the pressures for immigration, both legal and illegal, have never been greater. But now there is a new Ellis Island, the West, with Los Angeles the target for the teeming masses of the Pacific and South America. There is no question that America continues its role symbolized by the Statue of Liberty as a haven for the oppressed, a land of the free.

And we can be grateful for the contributions all these new citizens have made over the years, although we may see that we now serve as a nation not so much as a melting pot, but rather as a tossed salad.

There is much to celebrate, much to be grateful for. But here is where I found a problem. There was too much of a sense of self-congratulation in the celebration; too little, if any, sense of thanksgiving and gratitude for the heritage of our history and the bountiful providence of our land. Celebration need not be simply self-congratulation, an exercise in feeling good about

ourselves, although we must recognize that our President has a genius for doing this — making us feel good about ourselves. I'm not sure it's always a virtue to say, "I feel good about myself". Perhaps there are things in us, here and there, that we shouldn't feel good about, both as individuals and as a nation. I am sure that we shouldn't forget our heritage, nor take credit for what we have been blessed by others — or assume that the fruit of freedom is our right. We should beware that, when we see how fortunate we indeed are, we do not say, as in Deuteronomy, "My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth, but remember the Lord our God". I liked the tall ships — they symbolize our heritage. I was uneasy about the battleships; they symbolize the arrogance of individual power. And nowhere did I find any focus on the God of our fathers. This troubled me.

For, as we have been celebrating our own history and heritage in this church, we have, again and again called attention to the role religion and the Baptists have played in the development of the spirit of liberty in this land. In sermon after sermon, A. E. Lacy has recounted the leading spirits from Roger Williams on down through our history. On the occasion of our anniversary banquet, we remember the eloquent tribute made by Jeff Smith to the individuals named on the new bells in the tower of Stetson Chapel, most of whom were members of this church, people dedicated to education in the spirit of liberty. And the eloquent sermon in the pioneer setting a few weeks ago by Jeremiah Hall (also known as Bob Dewey) indicated the concern those Baptist had for freedom, from abolition of slavery to women's rights. And the Baptist were not alone. Reformed churches, especially, identified political and social and economic liberty with religious liberty, with Christian freedom, with liberty under God.

And this is the lesson we must not forget. Freedom does not stand by itself.

Liberty in excess, undirected, becomes terror, as the French Revolution discovered. As Milton, that great Puritan apologist for liberty wrote: "License they mean when they cry liberty; for who loves that, must first be wise and good." And Burke, that wise political observer, said, "Among a people generally corrupt, liberty cannot long exist".

Too often, and especially today, we think of liberty as a license to do as we please with no strings on us. As James Reston points out in a recent column in the Times, "personal liberty has a lovely sound, but often means license to break the law, traffic in drugs, abandon families, and put personal or special interests ahead of the general good" The word can have many meanings, as he says. Again, I quote, "President Reagan feels at liberty to try to topple the government of Nicaragua", even though we recognize the government and have an ambassador in Managua, and are also in conflict with our commitments to the Organization of American States, the United Nations, and the judgement of the World Court.

Liberty requires some kind of authority, and as our Bible, as well as history tells us, that authority is moral authority, not simply the power to do as we wish.. Even the life of pleasure, doing just what one wants to do, requires some authority, if only the rational judgment to decide what pleasures are worthwhile and which are destructive. The one who simply does as he likes becomes directed purely by his likes, by every passing fancy, until ultimately he becomes

enslaved by some obsessive desire, like the alcoholic. This isn't freedom, as Plato argued long ago.

Political liberty does not mean the power to do as we like, either as individuals or as a nation. Liberty requires not power but authority, moral authority to be valid and valuable. Power can be illegitimate; moral authority never is. Moral authority is embedded in the basic principles of law, that we as well as our forefathers can see as self-evident, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This means that liberty is limited by law, liberty requires justice, liberty is concerned with the common good. Whenever individual liberty conflicts with the law, justice or the common good, it has deserted and lost its moral authority. This is true of nations as well as individuals. But, isn't this the teaching of our Bible? From the very beginning the theme of the scriptures is liberty –liberty through righteousness, liberty under the law of God.

God redeems his people from bondage in Egypt, leads them to the promised land, presents them with His commandments and through them the promise of peace and prosperity. The wilderness experience is a testing and chastening time. There must be training for liberty. And the warning is clear: without obedience to the moral law of righteousness, the people will lose their peace and prosperity. God uses even the enemy to enforce His righteousness.

Again and again in Biblical history the prophets warn about forgetting the commandments, plead the cause of the widow and orphan — teach that justice in the inner self is what God requires – not burnt offerings, not sacrifices –but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Without righteousness the people perish.

God redeems his people, works with them in history to liberate them into a promised land, but always with the clear teachings that liberty and law, freedom and righteousness go together. So Isaiah teaches — in the name of God proclaiming good news, liberty to the captives. And Jesus reading this scripture in the synagogue — "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath appointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" - Jesus reading this said, "This day is this scripture fulfilled".

Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.

What is this truth? God is, indeed, in history, in Christ, redeeming His people. What more powerful symbol of God at hand than the mystery of the incarnation? And again, this redemption, salvation, liberation depends on obedience to the commandments of God. But now the law has been simplified by the teachings of Jesus. We are told to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. God now appears as the God of Love - not as God of Judgment. And by and through this love we attain Christian liberty, liberty under God.

It is as the Apostle Paul said: our moral problem is not that we do not know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil , but that we do not do the good and avoid the evil. "The

good that I would, I do not”, said Paul, “but the evil which I would not, that I do.” Who is to deliver me? And Paul finds liberation in the love of God in Christ.

It is love that provides the dynamic to lift us from our selfish selves, to liberate us for a larger life of service. Liberty under God is liberation from the sins that beset us. And this comes through the love of God in Christ. It is reflected in the spirit of love toward our neighbor who is anyone in need. As Haslett has said, “Love of liberty is love of others, while love of power is love of ourselves.”

Ultimately to be free means to be liberated from the narrow sins that close us in and to be liberated for a larger role in the service of God. Freedom is the ability to develop our God-given potential as children of God. Its opposite is not a causality that determines us; rather it is a sense of alienation, estrangement, that separates us from our possibilities, our better selves and from relationships with others. We are liberated when we feel at home with ourselves, our fellows and our God.

We are, as Paul said, one body. We do not exist as separate atomic particles. Separate rights aren't the real basis of community; it is like the family –children have rights, but that's not why we nurture them. Husbands and wives have rights — but we focus on them when love has gone. We come together as a Christian community to commit ourselves to the love that is our duty and our liberation. And so we come to the Table of the Lord in the spirit of communion, to share in the love that redeems us, and to take upon ourselves the spirit of love that will unite us in liberty under God.

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