

4-1-2013

The politicization of biblical analysis by Protestant army chaplains during the American Revolution

Andrea Stevens

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses>

Recommended Citation

Stevens, Andrea, "The politicization of biblical analysis by Protestant army chaplains during the American Revolution" (2013). *Honors Theses*. Paper 8.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the presence of political ideology within sermons delivered by chaplains in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. In particular, this thesis studies sixteen sermons delivered by Episcopal, Anglican, Congregationalist and Presbyterian chaplains between the years 1776 and 1802. The analysis of these sermons reveals an influence of the political climate during the Revolution on the ways in which the chaplains taught from the Bible. This essay begins with the formation of the chaplaincy as a response to four main needs of the soldiers: the need for a justifier, encourager, disciplinarian and religious teacher. The chaplains referenced the Bible as a higher authority and sought to reconcile the war with a loving God. A pressing need that existed amongst the soldiers was the assurance that God's hand was upon their fighting and that God would lead them to victory. By referencing the Bible, chaplains related the soldiers' condition to Biblical stories of exploits and hardships in order to maintain that God would be faithful to the colonial soldiers in the same way he was faithful to his people in the Bible. Yet, the chaplains expressed political interpretations of these verses within their sermons. Because sermons served as key channels for communicating directly to the soldiers, the presence of political references within these sermons reveals potential political motivations and urgings behind the chaplains' teachings. Specifically, this thesis examines the different interpretations of Psalm 144:1, the association between the American colonists and the Israelites of the Bible, and the concepts of sin and liberty. From this thesis, one can see the infiltration of political thought within sermon literature during the American Revolution, leading to varied interpretations of the Bible.

THIS THESIS SATISFIES THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT'S REQUIREMENTS FOR
HONORS IN HISTORY

April 29, 2013

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sydney Watts", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Sydney Watts
Honors Thesis Coordinator

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Woody Holton", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Woody Holton
Honors Content Advisor

THE POLITICIZATION OF BIBLICAL ANALYSIS BY PROTESTANT ARMY
CHAPLAINS DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

by

ANDREA STEVENS

An Honors Thesis Submitted to the History Faculty at the University of Richmond

May 2013

Richmond, VA

Copyright © 2013 by Andrea Stevens.

All rights reserved.

DEDICATION PAGE

To my mother and father – Thank you for pushing me to do better in everything I do. I hope this makes you proud. I love you both.

To Peter – Thanks for simply being the best brother in the world. It's rare that a younger brother acts so much like an older brother and I am so thankful for this, even when you challenge me. I love you so much, brother.

To Dr. Sydney Watts and Dr. Woody Holton – Thank you for all of your help throughout this entire process. You have made me a better writer, historian and thinker. I appreciate the suggestions and guidance from selecting a topic, the final edits, and every draft in between.

To Bethany – Thank you for knowing me better than I know myself. You are truly my sister in the Lord and I am eternally grateful for the ways you show Him to me constantly. Thanks for calming me down when I got into panic mode about this thesis and for your constant encouragement in everything. I wish I could have just one more night with you... and Abbie, of course. I love you both so much it's not even real life.

To David – Thank you for sacrificing your time for this thesis and for me in so many ways. Thank you for never letting me get away with anything and for continually teaching me. Thank you for your constant support in this entire process, especially when I wanted to quit. Thank you for showing me what it really means to be blessed to be a blessing. I couldn't ask for a better brother or friend. I can't wait to see where the Lord will take you in the future. I know you will always be going hard, and I will be in constant prayer for you. I love you, bro.

To Kate – I can't begin to thank you for putting up with me for these past four years, and especially these past two thesis-filled semesters. I'm sorry for how un-fun I've been, but thank you for your constant support even when I couldn't play with you. You have been the best roommate, friend, confidant, playmate, and person I have known for the past four years. I'm going to miss you so much next year. Thank you for all of the times we've had together. Love you!

Most importantly, to God – Thank You, Lord, for everything. Thank You for transferring me from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light though I was still Your enemy, for paying the ransom required when my sins had condemned me through the life, death, and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus. May my whole life be reflective of the One who deserves all praise, honor, glory and power. Thank You especially for your help with this thesis. Thank You that Your Word does not return to You void. May this thesis be honoring to You and serve Your purpose in this world. “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Amen.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: Political Men of the Church	7
CHAPTER 2: Evidence of Political Thought in the Chaplains’ Analysis of the Bible.....	24
CHAPTER 3: Conclusion	47
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	50

INTRODUCTION

Yes to tell you the truth, if I thought you could possibly be innocent and stand unconvicted in the eye of Heaven, if you dropped your weapons and submitted to the late Bill for the alteration of the Constitution, I would immediately change my voice and preach to you the long-exploded doctrine of Non-resistance. But as an honest man and as a minister of Jesus Christ, as a servant of Heaven, I dare not do it. As a friend to righteousness, as a priest of the Lord who is under the Gospel Dispensation, I must say – The Priests blow the trumpets in Zion – stand fast – take the Helmet, Shield and Buckler and put on the Brigandine!

Arise! my injured countrymen! and plead even with the sword, the firelock and the bayonet, plead with your arms the birthrights of Englishmen, the dearly purchased legacy left you by your never-to-be-forgotten Ancestors. And, if God does not help, it will be because your Sins testify against you: otherwise you may be assured. But. . . let every single step taken in this most intricate affair be upon the defensive. God forbid that we should give our enemies the opportunity of saying justly that we have brought a civil war upon ourselves by the smallest offensive action.¹

This excerpt from a sermon given by William Emerson, recognized as the first chaplain of the Continental Army, appears, at first glance, to be a religious appeal to soldiers to fight for God. Biblical references abound in these two paragraphs and Christian terminology is present, including “Heaven,” “Jesus Christ,” “Gospel Dispensation,” “Priests,” “God,” and “Sins.” But a closer look at the subject of these two paragraphs shows that this excerpt contains more than just spiritual urgings. In the first paragraph, Biblical images surround, and almost hide, the main subject: the importance of not submitting to “the late Bill for the alteration of the Constitution.” Emerson feels forced to tell the “Priests [to] blow the trumpets in Zion – stand fast – take the Helmet, Shield and Buckler and put on the Brigandine!” Why? Because colonists were meekly submitting to the proposed changes to the Constitution. If he thought God would approve the

¹ Edward Waldo Emerson, *A Chaplain of The Revolution* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1922), 12-13, in Parker C. Thompson, *From Its European Antecedents to 1791: The United States Army Chaplaincy* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Dept. of the Army, 1978), 91.

recent change, Emerson says, then he would “preach to you the long-exploded doctrine of Non-resistance”, but because He did not, he cannot encourage this action and must tell the soldiers to fight. And for what reason does Emerson persuade them to fight? In the second paragraph, he emphatically urges the soldiers to “plead even with the sword, the firelock and the bayonet, plead with your arms” – his way of saying to use all means available – to fight for “the birthrights of Englishmen, the dearly purchased legacy left you by your never-to-be-forgotten Ancestors.” According to Emerson, the goal of the war was to fight for political rights of English citizens. Only after stating this does Emerson add religious support, saying that a military defeat would be a punishment by God for the soldiers’ sins. Emerson is not encouraging that the war be fought for God, but for a political purpose. Seeing past the blatant religious language in order to see the political point Emerson makes reveals that his sermon seems to be a tool to express more than just Biblical thought. Instead of being in the foreground, the Biblical references seem to take an auxiliary role in supporting the political statement Emerson urges. This realization transforms the way we must interpret ostensibly religious texts like Emerson’s sermon.

This essay will examine how the insemination of political ideology into sermon literature was not limited to Emerson but had become commonplace by the time of the American Revolution from 1775-1783. Much scholarship focuses on the role of Christianity as a cause of the American Revolution. One leading historian, Patricia Bonomi, argues that religious factors had the biggest impact on leading to the Revolution than all other political, social or economic factors.² I extend this argument to claim that politics had infiltrated the expression of religious thought to the extent to which political ideas being communicated through religious channels were more prominent. Political agendas were no longer conveyed in strictly political modes of

² Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

communication, but had spread into the religious sphere of influence. Bonomi describes the spread of Christian religious ideas and practices amongst colonists of varying economic, geographic and social lines. I argue that the influence of religion on many aspects of the colonists' daily lives opened doors for political messages to be spread to the masses in the name of religion: through religious education, sermons, church meetings, etc. I will assert that religion was not an independent factor that caused the Revolution, but rather that it had deep political influences in a way that makes it almost impossible to find strictly religious thought. In addition, I maintain that this politicization of Christian worldview occurred across the four major Christian Protestant denominations at the time: Anglicanism, Congregationalism, Episcopalianism, and Presbyterianism. In sermons given by chaplains of these denominations, interpretations and applications of Biblical verses are uniquely political in their presentation, suggesting that perhaps theological convictions were not the only motivation of the chaplains.

In his *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, Thomas Kidd traces the influence of a shared desire for religious liberty across the different Christian denominations. He credits religious cooperation, despite differing theologies, as the key to the success of the colonies during the American Revolution and in the early formative years of the new country.³ Despite undeniable points of contention between the denominations, the extension of political aspirations for liberty showed itself in each denomination. Political hopes became intertwined with theological convictions. Across sects, ministers referenced Biblical tales of hardships and war as the Revolutionary War began, though in different ways. This essay will analyze interpretations of the Old Testament given by chaplains of Anglicanism,

³ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

Episcopalianism, Presbyterianism and Congregationalism to display the effect of the political climate on Scriptural analysis.

Most scholars do not doubt the connection between the colonists' faiths and the independence of the American colonies. Matthew Harris is one of the many historians who have evaluated the possibility that America was founded as a Christian nation. In his book, *The Founding Fathers and the Debate over Religion in Revolutionary America: A History in Documents*, he compiles documents from the Founding Fathers in order to prove that their beliefs about God had saturated their political beliefs.⁴ However, an inverse relationship can also be seen; ideas on politics influenced the way the Founding Fathers viewed conceptions of a deity.

I am choosing to examine the full infusion of politics into Christian sermon literature through a look at an organization that, according to our conceptions today, we would assume to be wholly religious in nature: the United States Army chaplaincy. I have chosen to concentrate my research on the sermons of the chaplains in order to gauge the politicization of Protestant Christianity through what the chaplains expressed to their soldiers. The best representation of what chaplains wanted soldiers to hear can be found through these sermons, the most available recordings of the chaplains' actual words to the soldiers. Whereas political figures made public speeches or wrote treatises, chaplains in the colonial militia conveyed their thoughts through sermons. As we examine the sermons, I will argue that chaplains used sermons as persuasive texts to encourage the fighting of the war by incorporating Biblical language and references, but that they did so ultimately for political aims. As Chaplain Robert Smith explained in a sermon in 1802, "You have long been addressed by politicians of the day, as citizens; I now address you

⁴ Matthew Harris, *The Founding Fathers and the Debate over Religion in Revolutionary America: A History in Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

upon the same topics, as Christians and protectors of the religion of Jesus Christ. The cause of America is the cause of Christ [emphasis mine].”⁵

For the soldiers, their belief that their actions aligned with the will of God was irrevocably linked to morale. If soldiers believed God disapproved of the war and that fighting the war would be an act of disobedience towards Him, they would not be inclined to fight and all morale would dissipate. On the other hand, if the soldiers believed they were fighting a war that was just in the eyes of God and in which God would extend providential protection, the soldiers were more likely to abandon all for the sake of the war and to persevere in the face of opposition. Sermons, therefore, became key methods of communicating whether or not soldiers’ actions fulfilled the will of God. Chaplains held the responsibility of justifying the soldiers’ actions and assuring them that they remained in God’s will. Interestingly enough, only one chaplain that I will look at in this paper refers to what may be the closest to a sanctioned role of a soldier in the Bible, 2 Timothy 2:4.⁶ This verse reads, “No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him [Jesus Christ] who hath chosen him to be a soldier.”⁷ Rather, chaplains often incorporated secular sentiment into the context of their sermon.

In order to show the ways in which politics influenced the ways in which chaplains analyzed the Bible within sermons during the Revolutionary War, I gathered sixteen sermons given by chaplains during, or soon after, the war. Of the sixteen sermons that I analyze in this paper, six come from Northern colonies, seven from Southern colonies, and three from the middle colony of Pennsylvania. My collection includes one Anglican, two Congregationalist, two Presbyterian, and three Episcopal chaplains, as well as one chaplain whose religious

⁵ Robert Smith, *The Obligations of the Confederate States* (Philadelphia: Bailey, 1782). Sermon 2, 33.

⁶ Joseph Willard, *The Duty of the Good and Faithful Soldier* (Boston: Fleets, 1781).

⁷ 2 Timothy 2:4 (ESV).

denomination is unknown. I have included multiple sermons from four chaplains. The earliest sermon was published in 1776 and the latest was published in 1802.⁸

This paper will first present a history of the political men of the church. The first chapter offers insight into the role education played in the intermingling of the sphere of politics and the sphere of the church. It also presents the reasons behind the formation of the chaplaincy, the roles of the chaplains, and a brief introduction into the Protestant Christian climate at the time of the Revolution. The next major section of the paper will deal closely with the sermons themselves. Common themes and repeated verses will be analyzed in order to gauge the way in which chaplains interpreted Biblical passages with a political slant. Sermons from chaplains of different denominations and different colonies provide insight into the motives behind the misapplication of Scripture evident in some sermons. This paper ends with an assessment of the appearance of politics within the chaplains' sermons and the implications of the politicization of these sermons. In order to reach this conclusion, however, we must first understand the relationship between politics and the institutions of the church at the time.

⁸ Some sermons have two dates listed: a date that the sermon was preached and the date it was published. Sometimes these dates spanned multiple years. Except when explicitly mentioned that I am referring to the publication date, the dates used in this paper will refer to the date the sermon was delivered, if known.

CHAPTER 1: POLITICAL MEN OF THE CHURCH

Radically different from today's secular age, a connection between clergymen and politicians was not unheard of or condemned in any way in pre-Revolutionary colonial America. In fact, this relationship had always been the accepted manner of things because of the traditional bond between religion and education, specifically Christianity and education. The common link between the great politicians and the great clergymen at the time lay in their education. In order to be in either societal position, one needed an education. The universal sign of a well-to-do person rested in their ability to read, write and interpret not just generic texts, but Scriptural texts. Of course, this dates back to before the American Revolution, as the most educated members of European societies, even in the Middle Ages, tended to be the literate monks, priests, or scribes. When looking at the Revolutionary period, it is thus not shocking to learn that the most educated men in society also had a vast Biblical knowledge. Colonial American children learned with primers that taught the alphabet by using Biblical references. At the collegiate level, Harvard University (founded in 1636), Yale University (founded in 1701), and the College of New Jersey (founded in 1746 and later named Princeton University) became pillars of higher education and were established by religious denominations to be institutions of higher religious learning. Not only were religious schools like these the best schools at the time, they were the only option for an education until Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia in 1819 which existed without a religious affiliation. Even if a man had no interest in becoming a clergyman, an education that prepared him for politics included religious education.

John Witherspoon is a prime example that the relationship between clergymen and politicians extended beyond similar educational backgrounds but actually included frequent

overlap of the two positions. Witherspoon was a member of the Presbyterian clergy who is most famous for being a signer of the Declaration of Independence for the state of New Jersey. In 1768, Witherspoon moved to New Jersey in order to begin his position of the president of the College of New Jersey, a school devoted to training ministers. A respected Presbyterian minister in his own right in Scotland, Witherspoon resented British measures to create an Episcopal system in the American colonies. Even though he was the president of a university, he responded in a minister-like manner to what he felt was impending British tyranny through new implementations in the religious system; he wrote a sermon entitled “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” in 1776.⁹

Universities that were created to educate and train clergymen also educated a number of gentlemen who chose other professions. Clergymen who attended prestigious schools received the same education as men who went on to become the great political thinkers and actors of the Revolutionary period. James Madison and Aaron Burr, for instance, attended the College of New Jersey while John Witherspoon was the president of the college. According to one source, Witherspoon had a vital position as a teacher of Presbyterian ministers by educating 57 of the 177 ministers in the colonies in 1777.¹⁰

Clergymen were respected men in town, partly because of their higher level of education and also due to the public nature of their office. Their societal position gave them authority and power that stretched outside of the church walls. The formation of the chaplaincy saw clergymen leaving their churches to become chaplains. One striking example is found in the story of Reverend Nathaniel Eells of Connecticut. After making a plea for men in his

⁹ Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

¹⁰ “John Witherspoon,” Bill of Rights Institute, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://billofrightsinstitute.org/resources/educator-resources/founders/john-witherspoon/>

congregation to respond to “The Great General Washington, and the sons and daughters of civil and religious liberty [who] were in great peril and calling for help”, the men who volunteered on the spot “informed [Eells] that they wanted his consent for them to elect him as their captain; that he had long been their spiritual leader and that they would be pleased to have him lead them in this trying hour.”¹¹ The American colonists had looked to their pastors as spiritual leaders in peacetime and wanted to be able to do the same during wartime. Thus, church leaders abandoned their pulpits and joined their congregants on the battlefields.

The prominent style of thinking in the modern era involves compartmentalizing things into secular and religious categories. Seen through this lens, the idea of a religious institution that influenced and was influenced by politics seems radical. Yet understanding the relationship between the religious environment and politics in the eighteenth century casts new light on the formation of the chaplaincy during the American Revolution. As we will see when examining certain sermons, the chaplaincy became a channel through which chaplains conveyed political and theological messages to soldiers.

Formation and history of the chaplaincy

Through examining conversations between Washington and Continental Congress as recorded in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*, it becomes evident that the intentions of the colonial leadership for the formation of the chaplaincy were not simply based on purely religious reasons. The pervasiveness of disobedience in the troops led Washington to appeal to the Continental Congress in 1776 to lessen the amount of troops for which each chaplain was responsible so that there could be less disorder and more “religious coverage.”¹² In this context,

¹¹ Thompson, 103-104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 109.

it seems that “religious coverage” referred more to oversight by the chaplains that was discipline-based rather than faith-based. The fact that General Washington requested the formation of a chaplaincy shows that the chaplaincy was not simply a brainchild of men of the church. Though Chaplain Israel Evans encouraged his soldiers to, “Like [Washington,] love virtue, and like him, reverence the name of the great Jehovah,” Washington was no clergyman, and he never intended the chaplaincy to become an off-shoot of traditional ministry positions.¹³ As we will see, a spiritual need among the soldiers necessitated the creation of a position within the military of one who would meet this need of a religious leader, as well as fulfill other needs of the soldiers while in the midst of battle. Chaplains became regarded as such valuable members of the military that their salary was even greater than that of certain military commanders.¹⁴ Recalling his experiences as a chaplain, William Emerson,

also speaks of General Gates, who invited him to sup on venison at Head Quarters, gave him a frank and friendly reception, and though not professing himself to have such Religion, said he looked upon a Chaplain as a very much necessary officer in the Army.¹⁵

The first official statement of the “Rules and Regulations” of the Continental Army highlighted the value placed on the faith-based aspects of the war. Published on June 30, 1775, the document declared, “It is earnestly recommended to all officers and soldiers, diligently to attend Divine Services; and all officers and soldiers who shall behave indecently or irreverently at any place of Divine Worship, shall, if commissioned officers, be brought before a court martial.”¹⁶ Though a requirement for all troops to

¹³ Evans 1777, 17.

¹⁴ Thompson 91.

¹⁵ Thompson 95.

¹⁶ Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1779. Vol. II Pages 111-123. Edited from the original records in the Library of Congress by Worthington Chauncey Ford; Chief, Division of Manuscripts. Washington, DC : Government Printing Office, 1905.

attend church services may appear striking at first, the fact that this article was the second out of fifty-nine total declarations makes it obvious that the government officials placed a high value on religious discipline. Making church mandatory does not appear to be controversial or questionable in any way; rather, it was expected.¹⁷

Despite potential secular reasons for its establishment, the chaplaincy did serve to meet religious needs for the colonial forces. The war required Biblical justification, moral explanation and divine guidance on military restrictions. Chaplains during the American Revolution had the responsibility of not only reconciling the Revolution and the Bible to the soldiers, but also maintaining this belief throughout the victories and defeats in war in order to keep the soldiers fighting.

There existed in the American Revolution a dilemma not unfamiliar to Christians in warring lands throughout history: how can a war be justified with the Christian faith? Thompson presents the background to this problem in this way: “Throughout the long history of Christianity, three major stances on this dreadful subject have prevailed: the crusader, the pacifist, and the combatant who participates in war as a grim reality and sad necessity of life while wishing wholeheartedly” for a peaceful resolution.¹⁸ A pressing need for assurance that their actions were in obedience to the will of God plagued both soldiers and chaplains alike. The justification of the war took precedence in establishing that the combatants were pleasing God.

St. Augustine recognized the importance of determining whether a war was just. In the fourth and fifth centuries, St. Augustine argued through his “just war” theory that only wars that fit his definition of just wars should be fought. Just wars were the only wars that would not be condemned by God. Any war outside of the definition of a just war would be against God’s will

¹⁷ Thompson 106.

¹⁸ Thompson 95.

and thus would be condemned. According to Augustine, a just war had to be a defensive last resort that protected innocent lives that were at stake.¹⁹ This theory served as the main measuring device of just or unjust wars for many centuries. Chaplain William Emerson, in the excerpt of the sermon quoted at the beginning of this paper, discusses the justice of the Revolutionary War. Emerson insists that he would promote non-resistance against the British if he “thought [the soldiers] could possibly be innocent and stand unconvicted in the eye of Heaven. . . . But as an honest man and as a minister of Jesus Christ, as a servant of Heaven, [he] dare not do it.”²⁰ To Emerson, the war met all of the requirements of a just war and needed to be fought, with potential divine punishment waiting if it was not. Similarly, in a sermon delivered in 1777, Chaplain Israel Evans tells his soldiers, “Be assured my friends, that under God, the only means to procure you good treatment, are the sharpness of your swords, and your skill in war, and your invincible courage in battle.”²¹ Non-resistance was no longer a viable option. Because of this, “America betook herself to arms in opposition to the most unlawful exercise of power” but “this she did not, till she had tried every other means in vain.”²²

Most attempts at justification of the war during the American Revolution did not draw upon St. Augustine’s just war theory but instead drew from the popular Deist worldview. Deist philosophy based itself on the tenets of logic and reason. In the secular sphere, these were the same foundational markers of classical republicanism, the political philosophy that emerged during the Renaissance and from which Thomas Hobbes created his famous “social contract theory”. Hobbes’s theory held that government had an unwritten contract to do good to its people. If the government did not hold its end of this contract, the people had a right to rebel

¹⁹ For more detailed information on the components of Plato’s just war theory, see “War,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed July 14, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/#2>

²⁰ Emerson, 12-13.

²¹ Evans 1777, 21.

²² Smith 1802. *The Obligations of the Confederate States*, First Sermon, 4.

against it. John Locke carried Hobbes' ideology into the Enlightenment. Locke, of course, is frequently cited as a major influence of the Enlightenment on the Founding Fathers and the one to which the idea behind "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is credited.²³ With the blurring of concepts of Deism and classical republicanism's "social contract theory", it can be said that Deism became the religious face for the political idea of classical republicanism. Though considered a form of religion, Deism, founded not on faith but on logic, seemed to be a secular and political justification of life events.

In social contract theory, a war would only be deemed just if it showed that the government broke its end of the social contract. Reaction from the people needed to be defensive and never offensive. Chaplain Emerson relays this important aspect of a just war, saying, "God forbid that we should give our enemies the opportunity of saying justly that we have brought a civil war upon ourselves by the smallest offensive action."²⁴ Similar to St. Augustine's just war theory as well, Emerson implies that the American colonists would be condemned by God if their actions were offensive, but would be free from condemnation if they acted out of self-defense. In the history of the wars that plagued the American colonies before their independence, one can see constant defenses and justification of actions, claiming self-defense as the cause for war. In 1748, in the middle of the French and Indian War, minister Gilbert Tennent delivered a sermon entitled, "Of The Late Association for Defence Farther Encouraged: Or, Defensive War Defended; and Its Consistency with True Christianity." As the rest of the lengthy title explains, this sermon was written as a response to accusations by the

²³ Thad W. Tate, "The Social Contract in America, 1774-1787: Revolutionary Theory as a Conservative Instrument," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 22, no. 3 (July 1965): 375-91. While this paper will not focus on the social contract theory, Tate's work is helpful in understanding the implications of the premises set forward in the social contract and the ways in which the new American government was formed around these premises.

²⁴ Emerson in Thompson, *From Its European Antecedents to 1791: The United States Army Chaplaincy*, 91.

Quakers that the war was not just.²⁵ Minister William Currie, in the same year, published “A Treatise on the Lawfulness of Defensive War. In Two Parts.”²⁶ In it, he draws from both Scripture and philosophy in order to explain his assertion that defensive wars are lawful. Religious justification, therefore, did not come as a novel task for the colonial chaplains during the American Revolution, but rather it came as an expectation of their role.

Because of its implication that war was the necessary response to certain political and social actions by the government, Deism fulfilled certain people’s need for a justification of the war. However, Deism tended to be popular only in the upper classes who had access to philosophical works that valued reason and logic. The lower classes, from which the majority of the Continental soldiers came, did not feel the effect of Deism as much as the more affluent classes. Therefore, Deism could not be the only means of justification of the war. General Washington understood that soldiers needed more than a secular, political means of reconciling the war with their faith. As Chaplain Robert Smith, an Episcopalian from South Carolina, commented in a sermon he gave in 1802, “The rankest deist can scarcely deny the hand o’ Providence in our successes, and the wide door of hope they open to America.”²⁷ By instituting the chaplaincy, Washington hoped that chaplains could provide soldiers with more than just rational explanations that the war was justified in the eyes of God, as well as be encouragers, disciplinarians, and religious leaders for the men at war. For the truth remained that a “man may be a good soldier in his country’s cause, do his tour of duty and fight valiantly, when called to it, and yet not be a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”²⁸ The purpose of the chaplaincy, therefore, was to create these “good soldiers of Jesus Christ” instead of men fighting simply for political reasons.

²⁵ Gilbert Tennet, *The Late Association for Defence Farther Encouraged* (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall, 1748).

²⁶ William Currie, *A Treatise on the Lawfulness of Defensive War* (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall, 1748).

²⁷ Smith 1802, *The Obligations of the Confederate States*, Second Sermon, 28.

²⁸ Willard 1781, 8.

Yet, we will see that sermons did not always present the mission of the chaplaincy in this way. In the sermons, chaplains included secular reasons for fighting over theological purposes.

Roles of Chaplains

Justifying the war, though of high importance, was only one of the several duties chaplains assume. In fact, the sermons that I have selected for this project seem to suggest that chaplains had four main roles to play: justifier, encourager, disciplinarian, and religious leader. From a religious perspective, the requirements of the chaplain to justify the war for the soldiers held the most spiritual weight among their roles. In William Emerson's sermon, quoted at length in the beginning of this paper, the first chaplain of the Continental Army focuses on God's approval, or disapproval, of the actions of the soldiers: "[I]f I thought you could possibly be innocent and stand unconvicted in the eye of Heaven, . . . I would immediately change my voice and preach to you the long-exploded doctrine of Non-resistance."²⁹ If God condemned the war, the souls of the soldiers would be condemned. Emerson also predicts the flip side of this relationship: "And if God does not help, it will be because your Sins testify against you: otherwise you may be assured."³⁰ The sense of assurance, or security, for the soldiers, rested in God's provision. Issues of spiritual security, or confidence that God would protect them, rose to utmost importance for soldiers. It also became a weighty issue for generals, because when spiritual security increased, so did morale of the individual and of the brigade as a whole. It would seem that chaplains instilled the belief that good fighters were those who believed in a good war of which God approved.

²⁹ Emerson in Thompson, *From Its European Antecedents to 1791: The United States Army Chaplaincy*, 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

The chaplains' task extended further than a one-time justification of the war. A chaplain also needed to take on the identity of an encourager, who would constantly motivate his soldiers to press on, even in the worst of times. Thompson references this example from William Emerson's life:

For years after the war, one old veteran was not ashamed to relate how terrifying those moments of waiting were, and his own gnawing anxieties; fears known to every combat soldier. Neither was he ashamed to recall that Chaplain Emerson – his chaplain – put his hand on his shoulder, saying, “Don't be afraid, Harry; God is on our side.” And with that gesture and word, he tells, he felt calm.³¹

The key way in which chaplains encouraged their soldiers was through referring the higher power that would take care of the soldiers. In his sermon in 1776, Anglican chaplain David Griffith implied that just as the Lord said to Moses in Exodus 3:7-8, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; . . . And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians,”³² the same Lord would surely free the American colonies from the slavery of British tyranny.³³ The comfort of knowing the Lord was on their side instilled a new sense of motivation and energy in the soldiers and, as the old veteran remembered, brought about calmness foreign to them on the battlefields.

Similarly to the way the chaplains referenced the Bible to provide encouragement, they also cited the Bible in necessary moments of rebuke and discipline. In the same way encouragement seemed enhanced when it was related back to the Bible, so too did discipline and correction seem much more serious when the Bible was used to rebuke. Official discipline rested on the military commanders, but discipline that stemmed from the Bible was a task held

³¹ Thompson 91.

³² Exodus 3:7-8 (KJV), quoted in Griffith 1776.

³³ Griffith 1776.

by the chaplains and one that was required often. The majority of the Continental Army never had formal military training and was not accustomed to obey military commanders. Rebellion and disobedience broke out among the troops to the extent that it was one of General Washington's main gripes to the Continental Congress regarding his men. Military commanders may not have had additional military training then those soldiers under their command. Thus, disobedience to commanding officers plagued the Continental Army. Chaplains served to point to obedience to a higher authority, since the soldiers refused to acknowledge their earthly authorities. In their sermons, chaplains addressed the growing issue of disobedience by referencing models of Biblical behavior, specifically Romans 13:13: "Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying."³⁴ Especially poignant to the disorderly men, rules and regulations like those in this verse carried additional weight coming from the Bible and not simply from a military commander.

Chaplains frequently referenced scriptural verses in their sermons. By incorporating direct Bible references, sermons acted as channels of communication unique in their ability to communicate highly-valued, Biblical ideals to a collection of rag-tag men assembled in the colonial militias in a way that was plain and straight-forward. The chaplain's other three roles – justifier, disciplinarian, and encourager - rested on his position as a religious teacher. Serving as the spiritual leaders of the brigade, chaplains had to constantly direct the soldiers to the higher authority in God. One way this was done was through the incorporation of separate sections within their sermons that included direct prayers to God instead of traditional sermon text. Chaplain Abiel Leonard of Connecticut highlighted the importance of prayer within the position of chaplain. In his "Prayer Composed For the Benefit of the Soldiery in the American Army",

³⁴ Hurt 1777 and Leonard 1776.

Leonard dedicates five pages to appealing to God on behalf of the soldiers.³⁵ Two of the verses Leonard references are also seen at the end of a sermon given by chaplain John Hurt of Virginia one year later and at the beginning of a sermon given by chaplain Fitzhugh McKay of Virginia two years later.³⁶ Hurt's prayer, in particular, inserts six distinct Bible verses, and four of these are also seen in Leonard's prayer. The similarities within the prayers suggest that there may have been a common soldier's prayer circulating throughout the colonies.

In Chaplain Abiel Leonard's "A Prayer Composed for the Benefit of the Soldiery," The subtitle of this prayer explains that it was "to assist them in their private Devotions; and recommended to their particular Use."³⁷ Though this document is not a sermon, I have included it in my collection because I believe that it had the same purpose as a sermon. Both sermons and printed prayers like this one were published for widespread distribution in order to spread the meaning or purpose of the work. As has previously been mentioned, sermons were the ways in which chaplains reached their soldier audience. Considering that chaplains made these public addresses to the soldiers, a certain level of persuasion existed in the content of the sermons. Whether the chaplains used the sermons to persuade the soldiers of the justification of the war in the eyes of God, or of political purposes, either intention could be conveyed through sermons. Chaplain Leonard's prayer is evidence that even prayers became forms of material printed for a specific purpose. Considering that Leonard's prayer looks very similar to "A Soldier's Prayer" included at the end of Chaplain John Hurt's sermon, it adds to the claim that the potential existence of a common prayer across the colonies could be a way in which ulterior purposes infiltrated into the army camps. In particular, though, Leonard's prayer, advertised as a guide for

³⁵ Leonard 1776.

³⁶ McKay 1778.

³⁷ Leonard 1776.

“private devotions,” seeks to influence the attitudes and thoughts of soldiers even in their most personal moments.

Protestant Christian Denominations

This paper specifically focuses on sermons given by chaplains belonging to the four main Christian denominations at the time. All four denominations were Protestant, which is not surprising considering the rocky relationship between American colonists and Catholics. Interestingly, Christian denominations during the American Revolution were mainly geographical in nature. Certain pockets of the colonies held members of specific denominations, and while there were religious minority populations, it became safe to assume that one’s geographic background dictated their religious denomination. It is known that Anglicanism dominated in the Southern colonies of Virginia and Maryland, with more than 450 congregations emerging by the start of the American Revolution in 1775. Congregationalism, on the other hand, quickly emerged as the dominant denomination in Massachusetts. By 1750, ten of the eighteen churches in Boston had Congregationalist ties. Neighboring Connecticut felt the influence of Congregationalism in strong ways as well. By far, the Middle Colonies were the most dense and diverse in terms of congregations per capita.³⁸ No one denomination dominated in the Middle Colonies but Presbyterians lived nearby Quakers who lived near German Reformed and Dutch Reformed congregants. Episcopalians could generally be found in Virginia, amongst the Baptists and Anglicans, and also in the Carolinas. The geographic denominational patterns, and the practice in which chaplains were assigned to brigades in their own colonies, almost guaranteed that chaplains assigned to a brigade would hold similar

³⁸ Bonomi 54.

theological views as their soldiers. Common theological tenets between the chaplains and the soldiers made relations easier and helped them approach the issue of reconciling the war with their faith from the same perspective.

However, across denominations, denominational differences influenced the chaplains' desired outcomes for the war. The core theological beliefs of each denomination dictated the way that it desired the government of the American colonies to look. Chaplains of each denomination wanted the American colonists to be victorious, but the plan for the structure of a future independent government remained in question. Within denominations, church governance became regarded as a model of political and state governance. A brief glance at the beliefs of church structure of each of the four major denominations will help us to understand the corresponding ways in which their theology dictated their political views.

In 1820, Frederick Dalcho of St. Michael's Church in Charleston, South Carolina compiled what he entitled, "An historical account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina". In it, Dalcho describes the statements of beliefs, laws and constitution of the Protestant Episcopal Church.³⁹ Episcopalianism traced its origin back to the Church of England. Because of this, the Episcopalian clergy were mainly Loyalists. By the time of the American Revolution, the Episcopal Church was the established church in six colonies: Virginia, New York, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.⁴⁰ The established church did not necessarily mean that the majority of the colonists adhered to that denomination; rather, it was a financial stipulation that means that the local government paid taxes to support the local parish. The church structure of the Episcopal Church follows episcopal polity, a hierarchal structure in

³⁹ Frederick Dalcho. *An Historical Account Of The Protestant Episcopal Church In South-Carolina: From The First Settlement Of The Province To The War Of The Revolution*, (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2007).

⁴⁰ Bonomi 207.

which separate dioceses are united by the leadership of bishops. Because episcopal polity was replaced in Protestant churches after the Protestant Reformation, this tradition carried a long-standing connection to the Church of England.

Of course, the Episcopalian connection to the Church of England was not as strong as that held by Anglicanism, which was the transplant of the Church of England in the American colonies.⁴¹ According to Anglican beliefs, the King of England was the head of the church, so rebellion against him would be rebellion against God's church and ultimately God himself. However, the examination of Anglican chaplain David Griffith's sermon delivered in 1775 shows that sometimes the supposed connection between Anglicans and the British crown was not as strong as suspected. The Anglican Church structure looked very much like Episcopal Church structure. After the war, the Episcopal Church would officially split from the Anglican Church. Yet, during the war, there was already hints of Episcopalianism as being a "rebels' religion," as the instituted church structures showed a political distrust of the king.

Congregationalist clergymen were perhaps the loudest of all of the denominations in terms of political voice. The name "Congregationalism" referred to belief that each congregation should have its own independent and autonomous leadership. Congregational policy differed from episcopal policy in that there was no oversight of bishops and no hierarchal system; it also differed from presbyter policy in that it did not involve a representative body. Many Congregationalists thought that the future government of the American colonies should also follow this self-sufficient format. In his book, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The*

⁴¹ As such, it has been an interesting case study through the historiography of the relationship between religion and the American Revolution. The attempts at Anglican reconciliation between devotion to king and devotion to the colonies have been discussed in various forms of literature for many years. One of the key sources in this complex discussion is Nancy Rhoden's *Revolutionary Anglicanism: The Colonial Church of England Clergy During the American Revolution*. This book addresses the dilemma that faced Anglican clergymen when war broke out.

Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts, James Cooper argues that the structure of Congregationalist had a unique sense of democracy that made it highly influential to the Revolution. According to Cooper, it is no coincidence that Massachusetts produced some of the most well-known political figures during the Revolutionary period as Massachusetts and Connecticut were the hotbeds of Congregationalist though heavily dictated their political leanings for rebellion against the British throne.⁴²

Presbyterians, on the other hand, were more moderate in terms of the political goals advocated in the theological beliefs on church structure. As has already been mentioned, Presbyterians differed from the Episcopalian practice of a hierarchical system of bishops. Presbyterians also rejected the Congregationalist solution of separate autonomous congregations. Instead, Presbyterians held that church government should be run by a group of church elders, or “presbyters”, hence their name.⁴³ This system mirrored a republican style of government, popular during the time of the Enlightenment.

With the history of the formation of the chaplaincy, the ideologies concerning the justification of war in the eyes of God, and the differences in Protestant Christian denominations at the time now introduced, the evidence of political thought in the sermons of the chaplains during the American Revolution can be discussed. The capacity of sermons for persuasion introduces the potential that both Biblical and political agendas may have been pushed. In order to understand the relationship between politics and Christianity during the time of the Revolution, the messages of these sermons must be compared to the actual Biblical text the sermons referenced. In their sermons, the chaplains made connections between the lives of the

⁴² James F. Cooper. *Tenacious of their Liberties: the Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴³ For more information about the practices of Presbyterianism, see *An Address of the Presbyterian ministers, of the city of Philadelphia, to the ministers and Presbyterian congregations, in the county of [blank] in North-Carolina* (Philadelphia: 1775).

soldiers and stories or characters in the Bible. Upon examination of the Biblical text from which these references derive, it can be seen that some of the associations the chaplains made were not consistent with the original Bible context. Instead, the chaplains' application contained evidence of political leanings. The following chapter provides examples from sermons that reveal that chaplains had varied interpretations of the Biblical text that viewed certain Biblical references from a political lens.

CHAPTER 2: EVIDENCE OF POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE CHAPLAINS' ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLE

Throughout the sermons I have collected, patterns emerge which focus on the same Old Testament figures, themes and verses across the four denominations but with different interpretations. Even chaplains who reference the same verse in separate sermons years apart can be seen to change their interpretation of a specific passage of Scripture.

A prime example of different interpretations of the same verse is Psalm 144:1. This verse reads, "Blessed be the Lord my strength which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight."⁴⁴ Chaplain John Hurt, an Episcopalian, cites this verse, as does Chaplain Israel Evans, a Presbyterian, who referenced it in two separate sermons two years apart, in 1777 and 1779. All three of the Congregationalist chaplains in my collection – Chaplains Dwight, Avery and Leonard - mentioned Psalm 144:1. Chaplain Evans displays an understanding of this verse by communicating the humility it expresses within its Biblical context. However, Chaplain Evans applies this verse to refer to motives for war that the rest of the Psalm itself does not present. Chaplain Avery inserts this verse in a condemnation against the sins of his soldiers, while Chaplain Hurt seeks to assert that the provision of God promised in the Psalm would also be applicable to the soldiers. The different interpretations of the same verse reveal that oftentimes the context of the Biblical verse was regarded as less important than the applications the chaplains asserted.

The Biblical context of Psalm 144 is summed up nicely by Chaplain Evans, who states in his sermon delivered in 1779 that "within the compass of the second book of Samuel, we are

⁴⁴ Psalm 144:1 (KJV).

informed of thirteen bloody and important battles, which were fought by the armies of David, and that success crowned his arms, and victory followed him in all his wars.”⁴⁵ David, the “great warrior of the Jewish nation,” was also their revered king and the psalmist of a large portion of the Book of Psalms.⁴⁶ He begins this Psalm by stating the character of God. Verses one and two describe the characteristics of God as a rock, trainer, steadfast love, fortress, stronghold, deliverer, shield, and refuge.⁴⁷ David’s description of the Lord seems to help him recognize the humility that the vast differences between the goodness of the Lord and the insignificance of man demands: “Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him! or the son of man, that thou makest account of him! Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.”⁴⁸ In response to this realization, David sings in praise that the powerful God who dwells in the heavens, who has to come down to touch the mountains, who has the power to “cast forth lightning”, is the same God that provides material possessions to His people.⁴⁹ According to verses 12-14, these material signs of prosperity include successful children, full granaries, numerous sheep, and strong cattle.⁵⁰ Verse 15 then concludes the psalm by emphatically declaring, “Blessed are the people to whom such blessings fall! Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!” This verse helps answer the question: Who are the people who are blessed? Blessed are the people who receive good gifts from God, because they are the people whose God is the Lord. David does not delight in victory in battle or material possessions, but rather praises God for being his God, who through His goodness provided all other things.

⁴⁵ Israel Evans, *A Discourse, Delivered at Easton* (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1779), 8.

⁴⁶ Evans 1779, 8.

⁴⁷ Ps 144:1-2 (KJV).

⁴⁸ Ps 144:3-4 (KJV).

⁴⁹ Ps 144:5-6, 12-14 (KJV).

⁵⁰ Ps 144:12-14 (KJV).

Yet Chaplain Evans, in a sermon delivered in 1777, cites Psalm 144:1 in the midst of relaying the history of the battle against General Burgoyne, the turning point of the Revolution and the one that secured American victory. In rhetoric reminiscent of epic storytelling, Chaplain Evans describes all components of the battles as ones acted out by the hand of God instead of human effort, asking, “what but the providence of God” could make all events work out the way they did.⁵¹ Evans expresses the provision of God: “And when we had so increased in numbers, as to be able to advance, and meet the enemy in the field of battle, did not the Lord teach our hands to war, and our fingers to fight, so that many of the enemy fell down slain and wounded.”⁵² He also attributes all credit for the victory to the undeniable work of the “hand of God” during the battle. Chaplain Evans’ application of this verse in a sermon delivered in 1779 echoes the same humble spirit David expresses in the Psalm.

In his 1779 sermon, Chaplain Evans further shows that he understands that God is the object of David’s praise in Psalm 144. Evans identifies David’s humble recognition of God’s provision: “Instead of confiding alone in the valour of his troops, and the experience of his generals or his own courage and sagacity in war, [David] ascribes all his happy success to the over-ruling hand of God.”⁵³ Evans presents David as an example for his soldiers of someone who “When he was strong and victorious in battle. . . acknowledges God as the author of his prowess and success.”⁵⁴ Chaplain Timothy Dwight, a Congregationalist from Connecticut, echoes his Presbyterian counterpart. In his sermon delivered in 1777, Dwight asks his soldiers, with a sense of indignant humility, “With what face can we presume to think those great events,

⁵¹ Israel Evans, *A Discourse, Delivered on the 18th day of December, 1777* (Lancaster: Bailey, 1778), 12.

⁵² Evans 1777, 12.

⁵³ Evans 1779, 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

who so evidently display the finger of God, are within the limits of our power?”⁵⁵ In order to “most carefully avoid that arrogance,” Dwight essentially demands his men to give all praise to God.

Even though Evans’ application of this Psalm to the lives of the soldiers coincides with the meaning of the Psalm within the Biblical context, Chaplain Evans reveals an interpretation for David’s motives to fight that is different from what the Psalm presents. In actuality, Psalm 144 does not specifically address David’s motives for war. Yet, Chaplain Evans cites Psalm 144 when he exalts David as a model character. According to Chaplain Evans’ interpretation, David fought battles “in order to preserve the liberties of the people.”⁵⁶ Using the phrase, “liberties of the people,” Chaplain Evans conveys a political or militaristic understanding of the word “liberties,” though neither of these is addressed in the actual Psalm. David is not praising God for political freedoms or militaristic gain that came from a military victory, but because of the goodness of the Lord. Later, we will dig deeper into the meaning of the word “liberty” in the eighteenth century and the effect different applications of this word had on Scriptural interpretations.

Chaplain David Avery, also a Congregationalist, references Psalm 144:1 in the midst of a rant against his soldiers for their lack of repentance for their sin. When Chaplain Avery asks, “why should it be thought beneath a Soldier to reverence the Great and Awful Name, the Lord our God, the God of Armies?” we again see Avery use Psalm 144:1 to describe this God. However, the verses that Avery chooses in order to paint a picture of the God assisting the soldiers have a very militaristic tint. The God of “steadfast love” is not evident in Avery’s description of the Lord as “He who endoweth you with the martial spirit . . . who covereth your

⁵⁵ Dwight 1777, 12.

⁵⁶ Evans 1779, 8.

heads in the day of battle – who crowneth your efforts with victure and honour.”⁵⁷ To Avery, God was a militaristic God, providing victory to His people in pursuits of war. Unlike David, Chaplain Avery’s praise of God seems to be for the blessings of conquests and victories He has bestowed, but not for His character.

Whereas Chaplain John Hurt of Virginia uses Psalm 144:1 as a mark of the identity of God like the other chaplains, Chaplain Hurt interprets this verse in a more political nature. In the section of his sermon entitled “The Soldier’s Prayer”, Hurt calls upon God as “thou that teachest my hands to war and fingers to war.” He is thankful that that is God’s identity because “when any encouragement presents itself for *the public good of my country*” [emphasis added], Hurt maintains confidence that the Lord will provide strength and protection.⁵⁸ The prayer section of his sermon is not a direct message to the soldiers in a formalized sermon, but instead is a directed prayer. We can see that, according to Chaplain Hurt, every soldier should pray for opportunities to serve their country, knowing that God would undoubtedly provide in battle. Hurt takes the description of God’s provision for David and David’s Biblical Israel and concludes that Revolutionary America would receive the same protection. This application, however, is an overgeneralization and unfounded relational assumption between Israel and the American colonies. Though David considers God to be the one that trains him in war, it is not a logical step to then conclude that all people are taught to fight by the Lord. In fact, it is highly doubtful that Chaplain Hurt himself would ascribe God’s provision of military training to the British troops. If Chaplain Hurt would not make this association, his inclusion of Psalm 144:1 as basis for his encouragement to the American soldiers seems to be weakened.

⁵⁷ Avery 1777, 40.

⁵⁸ Hurt 1777.

In “A Prayer Composed for the Benefit of the Soldiery in the American Army,” based upon Psalm 144:1 in the format of a request, Chaplain Abiel Leonard pleads, “Teach, I pray thee, my hands to war, and my fingers to fight in the defence of America, and the rights and liberties of it! [I]mpress upon my mind a true sense of my duty, and the obligation I am under to my country!”⁵⁹ There is absolutely no attempt to mask political agendas in this prayer. The original verse makes no reference to fighting for a specific country or people or fighting out of duty or obligation. When David writes Psalm 144:1, he does so to ascribe praise to God for providing for him during battle. But the humility David exhibits in this psalm expresses that he understands that God does all things for His own will, not the will of man who is “like of vanity.”⁶⁰ However, Chaplain Leonard appeals to the Lord for assistance in the fight for the “defence of America, and the rights and liberties of it.”⁶¹ Patriotic obligation, not necessarily spiritual convictions, fueled Leonard to encourage his soldiers. The public nature of sermons enabled Leonard to articulate these motivations to soldiers through a channel of communication that intended to influence the soldiers’ prayer life.

The Concept of “Liberty”

Like Psalm 144:1, different chaplains that I studied had different interpretations of the concept of “liberty.” The word “liberty” had a wide reputation during the American Revolutionary period. In reaction to oppressive British tax acts, Patrick Henry’s defiant proclamation, “Give me liberty or give me death!” reverberated around the colonies after he included it in a speech given in March 1775. “Liberty” had civic and political connotations when used in sermons and even has the same connotation in today’s modern vocabulary. It takes

⁵⁹ Leonard 1776, 5.

⁶⁰ Psalm 144:4 (KJV).

⁶¹ Leonard 1776, 5.

the definition, “Freedom from arbitrary, despotic, or autocratic control; independence, esp. from a foreign power, monarchy, or dictatorship.”⁶² But the word “liberty” has roots that traced to much earlier in history. According to the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest definition of the word “liberty” was found in the Bible circa 1384 where it referred to “[f]reedom from the bondage or dominating influence of sin, spiritual servitude, worldly ties, etc.”⁶³

Yet, Chaplain Evans provides an example of the way this term was commonly used. In his 1779 sermon, Chaplain Evans laments over the waning patriotic spirit within his soldiers when he asks sorrowfully,

But ah my Sons and Citizens of the United States, whither fled that patriotic zeal which first warmed your disinterested breasts? Whither that public spirit, which made you willing to sacrifice not only your fortunes but also your lives in defence of Liberty? Whither is fled that happy union of sentiment in the great service of your country? And whither is fled that honorable love and practice of virtue, and that divine and generous religious, which cherishes the spirit of Liberty and elevates it to an immortal height?⁶⁴

According to the original definition of “liberty,” it appears that the personified version of liberty in reference to political rights or patriotism is a misapplication of this term as it was used in the fourteenth century. A counterargument to this claim would potentially cite chapter 61 in the Book of Isaiah, which reads, “[the Lord] hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”⁶⁵ Though “liberty”

⁶² “liberty, n.1. c.”. OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107898?rskey=UDJoCe&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 7, 2013).

⁶³ “liberty, n.1. a.”. OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107898?rskey=UDJoCe&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 7, 2013).

⁶⁴ Evans 1779, 28.

⁶⁵ Isaiah 61:1(KJV). This verse is in the King James Version of the Bible in order to avoid translational differences in the word “liberty” in more updated versions.

could mean release from physical bondage in this context, a glance at Romans 8:21 reveals further insight into what “liberty” could mean.

Romans 8:21 is the continuation of a thought by the apostle Paul on the suffering and the future glory for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Romans 8:1-11, Paul sets up the contrast between the person who lives according to the sinful desires of the flesh and cannot please God and the person who has been set free from that life because of their belief that through God’s sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, they have received His Spirit and thus everlasting spiritual life. The word used in the King James Version to describe the work of the law of the Spirit of life is “free,” as in “the Spirit of life in Christ hath made me free from the law of sin and death.”⁶⁶ This word is different than the “liberty” used in verse 21: “Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” So what does “liberty” refer to and how is it different than the use of “free” in verse two? In context, the creature in verse 21 refers to all of creation, which, verse 20 tells us, “was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope.”⁶⁷ The hope is verse 21. “Liberty” is something that those in the “bondage of corruption” do not have but those who are the “children of God” do have. Romans 8:14 and 15 provides the explanation of what it means to be a child of God: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. . . you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons.”⁶⁸ But what are the benefits of being a child of God to which the “glorious liberty” seems to be referring? Verse 17 answers that those who verse 14 said were led by the Spirit of God “are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him,

⁶⁶ Romans 8:2 (KJV).

⁶⁷ Romans 8:20 (KJV).

⁶⁸ Romans 8:14-15 (KJV).

that we may be also glorified together.”⁶⁹ Those who God foreknew, he predestined, called, justified according to verse 30. If it is the case that one is a child of God, then they receive the benefits, or “glorious liberties of the children of God” revealed in verses 31-39. Included in these glorious liberties is the promise that nothing, “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate” God’s children from His love in Christ Jesus.⁷⁰ Liberty as defined by Romans chapter 8 refers to much more than the physical liberation from oppression, but rather encompasses a release from a life in the sinful nature along with a promise for greater spiritual blessings in the Lord.

The evolution of the English language over time has become expected. In fact, the word “liberty” in Romans 8:23 is stated as “freedom” in twentieth century translations of the Bible. Nevertheless, the misapplication of the original meaning of this word bears important implications when considering the context of these sermons. In the midst of battle, soldiers desperately sought spiritual security, the same kind of liberty referred to in Romans 8:23. Yet in his sermon in 1777, Chaplain Evans again uses the secular meaning of the word when he describes the war as one in which “. . . American liberty was the prize contended for!” When the chaplains referred to liberty, they meant it in the secular, patriotic sense. The political motives of supporting the war and opposing the British overtook the chaplains’ faithfulness to the original meaning of this word. The first conclusion from this description is not that the goal of the war was the spiritual freedom of the American people. Rather, the first thought is of the liberty reminiscent of the inalienable right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” that would appear in the United States Constitution ten years later. The application of this term

⁶⁹ Romans 8:7. (KJV).

⁷⁰ Romans 8:38. (KJV).

“liberty” shows that somehow the focus of the chaplains turned from encouraging spiritual security to promoting a political desire.

A Day of Thanksgiving, December 18, 1777

After declaring independence, the Continental Congress reached into the religious sphere by declaring days to be set apart for purposes of spiritual fasting and thanksgiving, thus blurring the line between political and religious actions. It was common for the Continental Congress to appoint specific days to be “Days of Thanksgiving,” especially after major military victories. One of these dates was December 18, 1777. Because days dedicated to prayer and thanksgiving were commonplace in British tradition, Aedanus Burke, a delegate in the House of Representatives for the state of South Carolina in 1789, argued against a proposed day of thanksgiving celebrating the passing of the Constitution of the United States, saying he “did not like this mimicking of European customs, where they made a mere mockery of thanksgivings.”⁷¹

Three sermons I have looked at were given on December 18, 1777, a day set aside for “prayer and thanksgiving”. This Day of Thanksgiving was one of higher importance as it commemorated the victory of the American army over the British at the Battle of Saratoga on October 7, 1777. This battle would be hailed as the decisive battle which led to British General Burgoyne’s surrender only ten days later. Of the three sermons I studied, two were given by Congregationalists from Massachusetts (Avery) and Connecticut (Dwight), but the third was by a Presbyterian from Pennsylvania (Evans), showing that the declaration of the Congress stretched across colonies and denominations. The reactions of the chaplains in both dedicating praise and

⁷¹ Joseph Gales, Sr., compiler, *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States; with an Appendix, Containing Important State Papers and Public Documents, and All the Laws of a Public Nature, (Annals of Congress)*, 42 vols. (Washington, D.C.: 1834-1856),1:949-50. In <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/thanksgiving/intro.html#1>

looking forward to future endeavors of the country reveal the influence of political hopes within the emotions of militaristic victory.

An examination of these Thanksgiving sermons reveals a heavy reliance on the Old Testament as opposed to the New Testament. When looking at the entire collection of sixteen sermons used for this paper, two thirds of the verses present are from the Old Testament, while only one third is from the New Testament. But the December 18, 1777 Thanksgiving sermons depend even more dramatically on the Old Testament. Of the staggering 153 distinct verses that Avery quotes in his sermon, 83.7% of these are drawn from the Old Testament, while 16.3% are from the New Testament. Chaplain Dwight follows a similar pattern as 88.2% of his verses are from the Old Testament and 11.8% come from the New Testament, although he only cites 17 verses in total. Likewise, Chaplain Evans quotes the Old Testament 79.4% of his 34 total verses and only quotes the New Testament 20.6% of the time. The Old Testament, comprising two-thirds of the Bible, is presented in narrative form, as opposed to the epistolical letters of the New Testament. Though the Gospels of the New Testament present the story of the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament serves as the primary source for a narrative form of the history of God's people, Israel. Loaded with battles and wars and kings and nations, the Old Testament was the natural choice of chaplains who wished to justify the state of war in which the American colonists found themselves with the will of the God as displayed during Biblical times. Thus an understanding of the Biblical context of verses in the Old Testament that chaplains include their sermons is critical to having a more complete picture of the way in which chaplains viewed their current situation during the war. This insight also sheds light on the ways in which Biblical interpretation in sermon literature had been affected by the political and militaristic situation occurring around the chaplains.

When looking closely at the December 18, 1777, Thanksgiving sermons, an initial assumption could be that denominational similarities would create patterns. However, looking at the Scriptures cited in these sermons, this does not seem to be the case. Psalm 115:1 is quoted in both Chaplains Dwight's and Evans' December 15, 1777 Thanksgiving sermons and also appears in a sermon by Evans four years later and in a sermon by Presbyterian chaplain Adam Boyd in 1802. Spanning across two denominations and five years, there does not seem to be any pattern of distinction with this repeated verse. Instead of the two Congregationalists having more similarities in verse selection, Chaplain Evans, the Presbyterian, held more similarities with the Congregationalist Chaplain Avery than Avery's Congregationalist counterpart, Chaplain Dwight. By my count, six distinct verses were repeated in both Chaplain Avery's and Chaplain Evans' Thanksgiving sermons. Chaplains Avery and Dwight, the two Congregationalists, may be most interesting to compare, however. Despite their common denomination and it being the same moment in the war, the two chaplains who may have been suspected to be the most similar only referenced two similar places in the Bible. Chaplain Avery only alluded to 2 Kings 18, but did not quote directly from that chapter whereas Chaplain Dwight did.⁷² Both authors called upon the trials and eventual deliverance of Hezekiah, king of the nation of Judah, as he faced his enemy Sennacherib to provide an allusion to the way they believed God would provide for the soldiers in a likewise manner.⁷³ Both Chaplains Dwight and Avery also made a direct reference to Daniel 4:27: "Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a

⁷² Avery 1777, 29 and Dwight 1777, 6.

⁷³ The books of the Bible are generally divided into ten categories: the Books of the Law, History, Poetry/Wisdom, Major Prophets, Minor Prophets, Gospels, Church History, Paul's Letters, General Letters, and Prophecy. The book of 2 Kings belongs to the History category as it traces the succession of kings when the nation of Israel splits into the Northern Kingdom (still called Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (called Judah).

lengthening of thy tranquility.”⁷⁴ At this moment in the book of Daniel, Daniel has just interpreted a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar and verse 27 concludes his interpretation of a dream full of judgment for the king’s sin. The chaplains wished for the same repentance of their soldiers, knowing that only true repentance from their sins would bring a hope “that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity,” and by association, of the prosperity of the new nation of America. Looking at these sermons shows that, at least initially, few if any patterns in which one denomination referenced a verse but another did not existed between these three sermons.

As has already been implied in this essay, chaplains and men of the church did not remain unaffected by the political turmoil surrounding them. In their attempts to apply the Bible to the military context, chaplains heavily drew on connections they could make between Biblical characters and political attitudes. One of the first similarities that stands out is the way in which the chaplains regard the British. Because these sermons were delivered more than two months after the British surrender, there is an obvious bias of perspective from these American chaplains. Not surprisingly, Chaplains Dwight, Evans and Avery regard the British with contempt. All three sermons compare the British to Biblical “enemies.” These comparisons only came because of changes in the political climate due to the Revolution. During the French and Indian War, when Britain and her American colonies were on civil terms, the statement, “the language of Britain corresponded with the language of Pharaoh and his cruel task-masters” would not have been made.⁷⁵ Hostilities between the American colonies and their “mother-country” existed but did not reach a level of division. But by the time of the Revolution, we see both Chaplain Evans, who wrote the previous quotation, and Chaplain Avery represent the

⁷⁴ Daniel 4:27 (KJV).

⁷⁵ Evans 1777, 7.

British through the Biblical Pharaoh of Egypt during the time of Egyptian. Chaplain Dwight similarly compared Britain and its rulers to the ruthless King Sennacherib and his Assyrian forces.

In his sermon, Dwight compares Britain to the oppressive Assyrian army mentioned in 2 Kings 18. Dwight traces the similarities between the American colonists and the victimized nation of Judah to even before the fighting began. Chaplain Dwight explains in his sermon that the political and economic demands on the American colonists by the British were not new occurrences but were similar to oppression that King Hezekiah faced at the hands of Sennacherib. “Hezekiah paid a tribute to Sennacherib, and these States to George the third; but in both instances insatiable tyranny demanded more, than the tributaries were willing or able to pay; this was the cause [of the war.]”⁷⁶ Chaplain Dwight also comments on the feigned religiosity of both of his subjects saying, “Both, with equal truth and piety, pretend to act, under the influence and guidance of Heaven.”⁷⁷ This falsified sense of being in God’s will is presented in direct contrast to the actions of the American Army who, according to Dwight, acted out of obedience to God’s call for a response to the British oppression. As Dwight continues listing similarities between Sennacherib’s Assyrian army and King George III’s British army, he simply states, “the parallel is exact.”⁷⁸

However, apparently Chaplains Evans and Avery believed that the parallel between the British and the Pharaoh who kept the Israelites in slavery in Egypt was even more exact. Evans explained a British retreat in this way: “In vain did the enemy attempt to escape, tho’ they might have said, as the Egyptians did, let us flee from the face of Israel; for the Lord fighteth for them,

⁷⁶ Dwight 1777, 9.

⁷⁷ Dwight 1777, 10.

⁷⁸ Dwight 1777, 10.

against us.”⁷⁹ The last part of that description is a direct reference from the Book of Exodus, chapter 14, verse 25. This verse is also echoed in Chaplain Avery’s version of the British surrender: “Despairing now of advancing, they attempted their salvation, like the Egyptians, by a too late retreat. – Let us flee, cried they, from the face of the Americans, for the Lord fighteth for them against Britons!”⁸⁰ Chaplain Avery also calls on the example of Pharaoh when describing British enactment of anger against the American colonists. He strongly states, “And Pharaoh-like, their madness gave fire to resentment – and kindled their passions into wrath, and rage, and fury – which, like a storm of hail-stones, discharged upon our heads at Lexington!”⁸¹ Though Chaplain Evans used the Egyptian Pharaoh as a comparative figure in his sermon, his true attitude towards the British was that they were “men, who are neither gentlemen, nor honourable soldiers, nor yet men possessed of the common feelings of humanity.”⁸²

Chaplains Dwight and Evans, as well as Chaplain Emerson who was mentioned earlier, also stress in their sermons that the protection of the country depended on the repentance of its people from their sin. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “sin” as a “violation (esp. willful or deliberate) of some religious or moral principle.”⁸³ However, the Biblical definition of sin carries much more weight than this definition expresses. In order to communicate the gravity of disobedience against a holy God, one twenty-first century pastor has called sin “cosmic treason.”⁸⁴ The word “sin” itself technically means to “miss the mark” and refers to a gap between human attempts and godly perfection. Sin can be deliberate or unintentional; either way,

⁷⁹ Evans 1777, 13.

⁸⁰ Avery 1777, 29.

⁸¹ Avery 1777, 13.

⁸² Evans 1777, 20.

⁸³ "sin, n." OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180030?rskey=YBFV4x&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 7, 2013).

⁸⁴ Pastor Robert Greene, Redemption Hill Church, Richmond, VA.

the consequence of sin according to the Bible is death.⁸⁵ Christians believe that God's own son, Jesus Christ, fully divine, entered this world, becoming a man without relinquishing that divinity, and lived without sin and then was crucified on a cross, taking upon himself the fullness of God's wrath towards humanity's sins. Because no human is without sin, God condemned sin by killing his own son in order that the righteousness and sinlessness of Jesus would be transferred to those who believed in Jesus.⁸⁶ God would look upon believers in Jesus as if he were looking at Jesus' spotless record, free of sin, instead of sinful man's own record. In this way, Christians believe that Jesus has reconciled followers of Jesus with God himself, and that Christians now experience the benefit of a relationship with God.⁸⁷ A refusal to repent from sin, however, hastens the ultimate fate of sin, which is death. Chaplain Dwight warns his soldiers of this destructive power of sin. According to Dwight, "Nothing obstructs the deliverance of America, but the crimes of its inhabitants; sin and their authors, are its greatest enemies. If this land be ruined, it will be ruined by its iniquities. Which of you, my countrymen, will say, he is willing to have a hand in this destruction?"⁸⁸ Chaplain William Emerson bluntly lays out the punishment for the soldiers' sins. He chastises, "And, if God does not help, it will be because your Sins testify against you: otherwise you may be assured."⁸⁹ Chaplain Evans offers passionate, yet practical, advice on how to avoid the detriment of sin: "SWEAR NOT AT ALL. Think how horridly ungrateful it is to offend and affront that God, who is continually doing us so much good."⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Romans 6:23 (ESV).

⁸⁶ Romans 8:3-4 (ESV).

⁸⁷ Romans 5:18 (ESV).

⁸⁸ Dwight 1777, 15.

⁸⁹ Emerson in Thompson, 91.

⁹⁰ Evans 1777, 23.

Yet Chaplains Dwight, Evans and Emerson pale in comparison to Chaplain Avery's pressing concern with the issue of his soldiers' sins. Avery might be the perfect case study for the integration of politics and Christian doctrine, as evident in this one sermon. It takes Chaplain Avery multiple pages to express his anger and frustration at "our blind and stupid country."⁹¹ He cries out to the seemingly unrepentant soldiers, "Why, then, do you harden yourselves in your iniquities? Have you obtained a general licence to sin? – Are you not infatuated to act the dreadful part you do? – O my hearers! why should it be thought beneath a Soldier to reverence that Great and Awful Name the Lord our God, the God of Armies?"⁹² He sorrowfully wonders, "How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity, and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?"⁹³ He also specifically echoes Chaplain Evans' appeal to stop cursing. Chaplain Avery lamented over the fact that his soldiers seemed to "learn the infinitely dread Name of Jehovah, only to take it in vain? to profane and pollute it, by your horrid, unhallowed oaths, and curses and execrations, and blasphemies!"⁹⁴ Like Chaplain Emerson, Chaplain Avery recognizes the devastating effects that sin can have, not only on the individual soldiers, but on the country as a whole. "Repent," he begs, "and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin."⁹⁵

But before this chastisement, Avery gives a summarized version of all of the battles of the war. Interestingly, when Avery tells the stories of the battles and campaigns, the amount of Bible verses referenced drops dramatically. In this sermon, Chaplain Avery cites 153 distinct Bible verses, yet only a small portion of these were referenced in the militaristic accounts. At first, the lack of the Bible in Avery's retelling of the military action might seem to suggest that

⁹¹ Avery 1777, 45.

⁹² Avery 1777, 40.

⁹³ Avery 1777, 39.

⁹⁴ Avery 1777, 41.

⁹⁵ Ezekiel 18: 30, quoted in Avery 1777.

his sermon supports the claim that the military sphere remained separate from theological discussions. Yet, if this was the case, why include the summary of the war at all? With a sermon of 47 pages, it is not that Chaplain Avery was in need of more to say. It seems that Avery utilized his sermon to ostensibly communicate religious teaching but actually reviewed the events of the war separately from addressing the theological aspects included in his description of the battles. The inclusion of the account of military victories reveals that Chaplain Avery deemed these victories to be important enough to mention in his theological message. Yet, the lack of Biblical references to God's provision or protection when Chaplain Avery recounts these battles is shocking.

Comparison of General Washington and Moses

The emergence of a political figure, General Washington, in the discussion of the Biblical story of Moses, exposes that Christian thought drew from other spheres besides the Bible, such as politics. The use of analogy was not an unheard of technique by any means, but specific associations like this one reveal beliefs about the relative importance of political figures at the time of the Revolution. It is common knowledge now that General George Washington was a revered figure, even by his contemporaries. The unanimous choice for General of the Continental Army after its creation, the unanimous choice for the first President of the newly formed United States, it is evident that the American colonists wanted him to remain as their leader for as long as he would allow. Moses, himself, was a Biblical leader who like Washington was chosen, not self-promoted.

The Book of Exodus traces Moses' trials as leader of the Israelite people. First, after many attempts and ultimately only because of plagues delivered by God, Moses was able to free his people from the oppression of the Egyptians, who had forced the Israelites into slave labor.

The Israelites were God's chosen people, whom God had spoken of in Genesis 12 when he tells Abram that He "And I will make of you [Abraham] a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."⁹⁶ Later in this same chapter, God promised that he would provide the land of Canaan to Abram's offspring.⁹⁷ God revealed His close relationship with the Israelites when He tells Moses, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."⁹⁸ However, once free from slavery in Egypt, Moses' people rebelled against him and God and were thus forced to wander the Sinai Desert for forty years under the discipline of God. Yet despite the people's rebellion against him, God appeared in this story of hardship bringing provision in the form of manna appearing like dew on the ground every morning for the Israelites.⁹⁹ The association between Moses and Washington is curious. Though Moses freed his people from Egyptian slavery, he was not the one that ultimately brought the Israelites into a new life of freedom in the "promised land" that God had promised to provide for His people. He was not the savior that the Israelites needed. Despite his close relationship to God and the people's reverence, Moses failed to remain sinless and thus could not enter the promised land. He died and it was Joshua, not Moses, who led the people into the land God had given them, despite Joshua's own flaws.

Why would American colonists associate General George Washington with Moses? It appears that the colonists more highly valued the idea of escaping slavery than entering a new land. As the American colonists saw themselves in a state of oppression at the hands of the British, they desperately sought a savior that would free them from their "slavery". Despite Moses' flaws, the colonists felt a need to associate themselves with a Biblical figure whom the

⁹⁶ Genesis 12:2 (ESV).

⁹⁷ Genesis 12:2, 7 (ESV).

⁹⁸ Exodus 3:10 (ESV).

⁹⁹ Numbers 11:9 (ESV).

Lord had blessed by delivering him out of oppression. General George Washington became that Moses-like figure perhaps because of some key similarities in their backgrounds. Washington's humble beginnings as a farmer mirrored the story of Moses' birth by a lowly Israelite woman. Just as Moses was adopted by the daughter of the Pharaoh and received a powerful position within the kingdom, the American colonists hoped that Washington would sit on a throne of power against the British. But Moses ultimately abandoned the pleasures and temptations of a glorious life as the Pharaoh's grandson in order to save his people, the Israelites, from their slavery. The American colonists rebelled against the oppression of the king who reigned over them, King George III, and likewise did not want Washington to become an all-powerful king after the war. Rather, they dreamed that Washington would become a model of sacrificing power for justice for the oppressed like Moses.

But also like Moses, Washington could not be the spiritual savior the American colonists wanted him to be. The praise and adulation of Washington, a political and militaristic figure, within sermon literature expresses a sense that Washington was regarded as a perfect Messiah or Chosen One. Yet, the Bible presents the Messiah as only being Jesus Christ, God's son. During the Old Testament era, Jewish people knew that the Messiah's ultimate purpose for coming to earth was to save the people from their sins, yet they assumed he would come in the form of a powerful and mighty king, full of military prowess. While it does not seem that the chaplains during the American Revolution would support the (mis)conception that Washington had the power to save people from sins, the chaplains seemed to apply the strength of the promised Messiah to Washington. Washington's inclusion within sermon literature and reverent, awe-filled way of which he is spoken reveal the blurriness between political and spiritual ideologies during the years surrounding the Revolution.

Moses and Washington also shared similar personality traits. Both incredibly humble and quiet men, neither would be what one first expects of a leader of a nation of people. Sources show us that neither man necessarily wanted positions of authority, but rather these positions were forced upon them. In Exodus chapter 4, Moses essentially argues with God, giving God many reasons why Moses felt he did not qualify for the leadership position God was assigning him. He asks God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”¹⁰⁰ Moses cites his lack of eloquence and being “slow of speech and of tongue” as reasons why he begs God to “please send someone else.”¹⁰¹ In a letter to his wife Martha, George Washington reveals his own reluctance to accept his recent appointment of General of the Continental Army. In fact, he says, his appointment “fills me with inexpressible concern.”¹⁰² Like Moses, Washington attempted to avoid this position to the best of his ability. He assures Martha, “so far from seeking this appointment I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the Family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too far great for my Capacity.”¹⁰³ Moses realized that he could not go against the sanction of God and Washington admitted, “it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonor upon myself, and given pain to my friends.”¹⁰⁴ Despite their begrudging acceptance of their positions, both men shared the way in which they recognized the need for God’s assistance in their new roles. Washington comforts his wife by telling her, “I shall rely therefore, confidently, on that Providence which has heretofore preservd, & been bountiful to me, not doubting but that

¹⁰⁰ Exodus 3:11 (ESV).

¹⁰¹ Exodus 4:10 (ESV).

¹⁰¹ Exodus 4: 13 (ESV).

¹⁰² “George Washington to Martha Washington: 18 & 23 June 1775,” The Papers of George Washington Documents, accessed September 22, 2012, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/revolution/martha.html>

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

I shall return safe to you in the fall – I shall feel no pain from the Toil, or the danger of the Campaign.”¹⁰⁵ Moses responds in obedience to the Lord, and does what He commands, waiting for the Lord to tell him his next task.

With all of this background in mind, it becomes clearer why chaplains may have included analogies between General Washington and Moses, and the American colonists and the Israelites, in their sermons. Chaplain William Fitzhugh McKay, an Episcopalian chaplain from Virginia, paralleled the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land with the original American settlers to the colonies who,

under the auspices and direction of Heaven, forgetting the place of their nativity, and every other weight, ventured over a widely extended ocean, in quest of territory, and the more noble pursuit of freedom. Oppressed in Britain, ‘till their souls fainted in them, they resolved to explore some unknown country, where unmolested they might breathe the delightful air of liberty. . . they at length arrived in America. Where instead of finding a land flowing with milk and hony [sic], and other comforts, nothing presented itself to their view, but a gloomy and almost unfrequented wood.¹⁰⁶

McKay then directly states the comparison he is trying to draw: “for a Moses [God] sent us a Washington.”¹⁰⁷ In the rest of his sermon, McKay does not hold anything back in his dislike of the British. He describes the colonists as “poor, harmless Americans” who were being persecuted by the “most wanton and unheard of cruelties, thefts &c.”¹⁰⁸ In Chaplain McKay’s eyes, Washington served as the Moses figure, not because of a piety or dedication to the Lord, but for the escape from oppression Moses brought to his people.

As has been previously mentioned, in his Day of Thanksgiving sermon in 1777, Chaplain Evans used the analogy between the American colonists and the Israelites as a

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Fitzhugh McKay, *American Liberty Asserted* (Lancaster, Bailey, 1778), 9.

¹⁰⁷ McKay 1778, 12.

¹⁰⁸ McKay 1778, 11.

way to show the despicable nature of the British. If the colonists were the Israelites, General Washington was Moses. Chaplain Evans writes of General Washington with the highest level of respect. He calls him a “general possessed of such unparalleled fortitude and patience, and not more patient, than meek, virtuous and humane.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, Evans extols his soldiers and all of America to “give glory to God, for such a faithful hero!”¹¹⁰ Apparently, the analogy between Moses and Washington did not include the part of the Biblical story when the people disobeyed Moses’, and the Lord’s, commands. Chaplain Evans appeals, “Oh sons of America, let it not again be said, that you seemed to desert liberty and Washington.”¹¹¹ The call for such a high level of reverence of Washington seems out of place in a theological writing. Indeed, its inclusion shows that political figures during the Revolution were deemed important enough to be included on spiritual levels. There was no separation between the realm of political support and doctrinal literature; the two were one in the same.

¹⁰⁹ Evans 1777, 9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

The infiltration of political influences into the religious sphere during the time of the American Revolution can be clearly seen when examining sermons delivered by the chaplains in the Continental Army. Sermon literature, delivered to and often reprinted for the masses, served as a form of persuasive writing. Chaplains held the responsibility of using the platform of sermons to communicate Biblical teaching. As we have seen from this thesis, chaplains' sermons also contained evidence of encouragement, discipline and justification of the war. I have argued that the different interpretations of the Bible included within these sermons as well have revealed a political factor within the sermons. In comparison to the Bible and to each other, some of the sermons have a distinctly political purpose.

When life and death were on the line, soldiers looked to their chaplains to provide assurance that their actions were in line with the will of the almighty God. Through their delivery and publication of sermons, chaplains adapted Biblical principles, themes, and verses in a way that persuaded the soldiers that the war was justified in the eyes of God. Yet political positions also flooded into the sermons, making texts that were ostensibly religious in fact be overshadowed by political and patriotic references. We see this clearly in the use of the word "liberty," which many chaplains applied to mean secular freedom, not spiritual freedom, as well as in many other examples. The politicization of sermon literature extended across the four major Christian Protestant denominations at the time, suggesting that the influence of politics into the religious sphere was not contained to one denomination only. Instead, it appears that many chaplains included political interpretations of Biblical concepts, regardless of colony, year,

or denomination. Today's conception of "separation of church and state" simply does not appear when analyzing the sermon literature during the Revolution.

There are many questions left unanswered by this thesis. Is there any documentation on the *effect* of the sermons on the soldiers, i.e. how did the soldiers respond? Were there other reasons why the chaplains drew more heavily from the Old Testament than the New Testament, for example the Old Testament's focus on treasuring new land instead of the New Testament's continual longing to be free of this world in hopes of a restored heaven? How did the chaplains reconcile comparing themselves to Biblical slaves seeking oppression, while themselves holding actual slaves on the home front? In what ways were wartime sermons different than sermons delivered during times of peace? How did sermons delivered during the Revolution compare to those from previous wars, either in American colonial history or in the more expansive British history?

In order to understand the influence that Revolutionary politics had on sermons during the same time period, I specifically confined my study to sermons which fell into the general Revolutionary time period. However, the conclusions I have made could be furthered through research tracing sermons from the early beginnings of the chaplaincy until present day. It would be fascinating to notice the changes in political influence on the sermons throughout the nation's history, focusing specifically on the subgenre of sermon literature referred to as "political sermons" and comparing them to each other or sermons that lack this distinction. An analysis of sermons given by chaplains in the United States Army Chaplaincy over a span of hundreds of years could lead to an expansive study on the influence of politics on the chaplaincy as an institution. An alternative study on the development of the separation of the political sphere and the religious sphere in America today would both be interesting and complementary to this

study. The modern chaplaincy of the United States Army has been tremendously shaped by the changes in perception of the relationship between religion and the state (specifically, war). A thorough examination of the changes within the chaplaincy over time could reflect a history of the evolution from a unified concept of religion and state to compartmentalized ideas. The limited availability of sermons constrained my research and will affect future research in this field as well. Nevertheless, the research on chaplains' sermons should not end here.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Ford, Chauncy (ed.), *Journals of the Continental Congress, (1774-1789)*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1905), II.
<http://www.heinonline.org/HOL/Index?index=congreg/jcc&collection=congreg>.
Access date: 27 June 2012.

Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1779. Vol. II Pages 111-123. Edited from the original records in the Library of Congress by Worthington Chauncey Ford; Chief, Division of Manuscripts. Washington, DC : Government Printing Office, 1905.

The Bible. English Standard Version.

The Bible. King James Version.

Sermons:

An Address of the Presbyterian ministers, of the city of Philadelphia, to the ministers and Presbyterian congregations, in the county of [blank] in North-Carolina. Philadelphia: 1775.

Avery, David, "A Narrative of the . . . Difficulties" (Bennington: Haswell & Russell, 1783).

Boyd, Adam, "Sermon in Commemoration of Independence" (Natchez: 1802).

Currie, William, "A Treatise on the Lawfulness of Defensive War" (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall), 1748.

Dwight, Timothy J., "A Sermon Preached at Northampton" (Hartford: Patten, 1781).

Dwight, Timothy, "A Sermon Preached at Stamford. . . December 18, 1777" (Hartford: Watson and Goodwin, 1778).

Dwight, Timothy, "The Duty of Americans" (New Haven: Greens, 1798).

Evans, Israel, "A Discourse, Delivered at Easton" (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1779).

Evans, Israel, "A Discourse, Delivered on the 18th day of December, 1777" (Lancaster: Bailey, 1778).

Evans, Israel, "An Oration, Delivered at Hackinsack" (Newburyport: Mycall, 1781).

“George Washington to Martha Washington: 18 & 23 June 1775,” The Papers of George Washington Documents, accessed September 22, 2012,
<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/revolution/martha.html>

Griffith, David, “Passive Obedience Considered” (Williamsburg: Purdie, 1776).

Hurt, John, “Sermon delivered at Valley Forge on May 6, 1778” (1778).

Hurt, John, “The Love of our Country” (Philadelphia: Styner & Cist, 1777).

Leonard, Abiel, “A Prayer Composed for the Benefit of the Soldiery” (Cambridge: S. &E. Hall, 1776).

McKay, Fitzhugh, “American Liberty Asserted” (Lancaster: Bailey, 1778).

Montgomery, Joseph, “A Sermon, Preached at Christiana Bridge and Newcastle” (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1775).

Rogers, William, “An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1789” (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1789).

Syrett, Harold C. (ed.), *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1961), I, 68-69.

Tennet, Gilbert, “The Late Association for Defence Farther Encouraged” (Philadelphia: Franklin and Hall), 1748.

Willard, Joseph, “The Duty of the Good and Faithful Soldier” (Boston: Fleets, 1781).

Secondary Sources

Bonomi, Patricia U., *Under the Cope of Heaven*. (USA: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Cooper, James F., *Tenacious of their liberties: the Congregationalists in colonial Massachusetts*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Dalcho, Frederick, *An Historical Account Of The Protestant Episcopal Church In South-Carolina: From The First Settlement Of The Province To The War Of The Revolution*. (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2007).

Duncan, Jason K., *Citizens or Papists? : the politics of anti-Catholicism in New York, 1685-1821*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

Emerson, Edward Waldo, *A Chaplain of The Revolution* (Boston: Printed by Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1922).

- Gales, Joseph, Sr., compiler, *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States; with an Appendix, Containing Important State Papers and Public Documents, and All the Laws of a Public Nature (Annals of Congress)*, 42 vols. (Washington, D.C.: 1834-1856), 1:949-50. In <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/thanksgiving/intro.html#1>
- Harris, Matthew, *The Founding Fathers and the Debate over Religion in Revolutionary America: A History in Documents*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- “John Witherspoon,” Bill of Rights Institute, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://billofrightsinstitute.org/resources/educator-resources/founders/john-witherspoon/>
- Kidd, Thomas S, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
- Metzger, Charles Henry, *Catholics and the American Revolution; a study in religious climate*. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1962).
- Morrison, Jeffrey H., *John Witherspoon and the founding of the American republic*. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).
- OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press.
- Rhoden, Nancy L., *Revolutionary Anglicanism: the colonial Church of England clergy during the American Revolution*. (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
- Thompson, Parker C., *From Its European Antecedents to 1791: The United States Army Chaplaincy* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Dept. of the Army, 1978)