

**The New Testament Church**  
**Christian Heritage Sunday – June 30, 2024**

**Tyranny: Unfit to be the Ruler of a Free People**  
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*You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. – Mark 10:42-43*

*A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people. – The Declaration of Independence, 1776*

As Jesus began the journey to Jerusalem to lay down His life on the cross in eternal payment for our sin, two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, inspired by their mother Solome, came to Jesus and said, *Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.* Jesus responded, *what do you want Me to do for you?* Their response was, *Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.* Jesus told them that they did not understand what they were asking. Favors of royalty had no place in the Kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus clearly laid down two contrasting philosophies of government. The word Gentile simply meant those desiring wisdom without consulting the revelation of God and the Scriptures laid down for our instruction. History has confirmed that the idea of earthly lordship, top-down elitist rule based on a sense of superiority, privilege and wealth, dominate most governments.<sup>2</sup> The Bible appears to have been consulted more frequently than any other source among those called founders<sup>3</sup>, and thus we have this unique phrase culminating at least 31 charges of tyranny against King George III that comprises over two-thirds of the Declaration. So, we might ask, what does the Bible have to say about tyranny, and how was it defined at the time of our founding?

### **The Biblical Origin and Definition of Tyranny**

Genesis 3:1-5 records the narrative in the garden of Eden between Satan, who is in the form of a serpent, and Eve. The serpent says, *has God indeed said, 'you shall not eat of every tree in the garden'?* Eve responds to this doubt about the standard given by God by saying *we may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, you shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.*

God did not say you couldn't touch it, so she exaggerated it for effect. To which the serpent replied, *you will not surely die, denying the consequences.* Then the serpent concludes his argument by

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 to gain the context of this story.

<sup>2</sup> See *From Change to Chains* by Bill Federer (2011), where he documents that most nations (over 95%) throughout recorded history have been governed by tyrannical monarchies.

<sup>3</sup> Eidsmoe, John, *Christianity and the Constitution*, Baker Academic, 1987, pages 51-53.

saying if she disobeys, *you will be like God, knowing good and evil*. Though enticing, the result of Eve and Adam's disobedience would be determining for themselves what is right and wrong, but the result would be a loss of their liberty under the control of evil. This pattern has been repeated throughout history for every tyrant who has wanted control:

1. Exaggerate the problem beyond its reality
2. Claim the right to disobey what is just and then deny the consequences
3. Determine your own set of rules and lose control of your life to a budding tyrant

The results of this pattern, documented in Genesis 3, once confronted by God, was, *Adam blaming Eve, and Eve blaming the serpent* but with neither taking responsibility for their actions. *Pain and suffering would now accompany daily life*, and doing what is right would often be contested and require sacrifice. Finally, *a desire to control one another* would begin a cycle of tyranny over others. The Hebrew word used for "rule" in Genesis 3:16 gives the meaning of utilizing manipulation and force in order to make the subject like the ruler.<sup>4</sup> That, my friends, is tyranny.

Thus, the Bible defines tyranny as sin arising from the heart to obtain an ***unjust control of another by manipulation or force***. Since tyranny begins within, there must be a change of heart to restrict its spread. Though it must be resisted, it can never be eradicated by external force alone. It has been demonstrated historically that whenever we reject the notion of a Sovereign God and His rules, we accept a replacement, and most often it is civil government that assumes the role of God.

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary is the standard for defining words at the time of our nation's formation. Also, he based his definitions on the meanings of their roots as they are use in Scripture. His definition of tyranny was, *arbitrary or despotic exercise of power; the exercise of power over subjects and others with a rigor not authorized by law or justice, or not requisite for the purposes of government. Hence tyranny is often synonymous with cruelty and oppression.*<sup>5</sup> But before we see how tyranny was addressed in the Declaration, we need to look at an unfamiliar founder, John Hancock.

### **John Hancock and Rev. Samuel Cooper**

John Hancock, born in 1737, was 24 years of age when he witnessed the coronation of King George III (who was 22) on September 22, 1761, in London. Catherine, George's wife, was 17. Hancock had graduated from Harvard in 1754 and was on a business trip for his Uncle Thomas. He was there when George II died in 1760, and he wrote his Uncle he hoped the delay of his return would be such that he could witness the coronation "*as it is the grandest thing I shall ever meet with.*"<sup>6</sup> The six hour coronation ceremony cost more than 6 million dollars in our money today. The crowded

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<sup>4</sup> See *Genesis Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, Baker Book House, 1979, page 517 where word #4910 and #4911 as used in Strong's Concordance are given amplification.

<sup>5</sup> Webster, Noah, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828, republished by the Foundation for American Christian Education, [www.face.net](http://www.face.net), 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Unger, Harlow Giles, *John Hancock: Merchant King and American Patriot*, John Wiley & Sons, 2000, page 58.

streets, crowns, regalia, with 42 singers, 105 musicians, feasts and fireworks, was a true celebration of royalty.<sup>7</sup>

In 1764, at 27 years of age, after the death of his Uncle, Hancock became one of the wealthiest men in America when he inherited the “House of Hancock.” John was born in Braintree, but by the time he was 7 in 1744, he lost his father to an untimely death, the Rev. John Hancock. Though raised in a godly home, his interests were in finances, so his mother sent him to live with his wealthy Uncle in Boston. After his death he moved into the Hancock mansion on top of Beacon Hill. Harlow Unger writes:

*Hancock loved his wealth. He reveled in it. He adored all the foppish trappings it could buy: the fashionable wigs, frilled shirts, silk and velvet jackets and breeches – and the shoes with silver or gold buckles that sparkled as he strode along Boston’s Hancock Wharf... He owned Beacon Hill. His land covered its crest, and his was the only house there.*<sup>8</sup>

Two individuals, separated by an ocean, who both loved wealth and prestige, were destined to be in direct opposition to one another on July 4, 1776. Two-thirds of the Declaration called King George III a tyrant, and the largest signature, three times bigger than any other, was that of John Hancock.<sup>9</sup> John, who loved his wealth and the natural monopoly of trade in Boston, also wanted to avoid politics due to its negative consequences. John had married Dorothy Quincy the year before, so why would he put himself into conflict with the King of England?

What would cause him to be willing to lose two ships, the *Lydia* and *Liberty* to the British who asserted the Writs of Assistance of searching and seizing property without a warrant? What would have caused one who always wanted to avoid politics, to become a Selectman and Legislator in the General Court, standing for liberty at the cost of his wealth? The Sugar Act of 1764 was certainly a catalyst,<sup>10</sup> for this arbitrary tax would cost him dearly. However, I believe the real root for Hancock’s maturing convictions to stand for liberty against tyranny was his faith.

Samuel Cooper of Brattles Church in Boston was John Hancock’s pastor. In his church were also Sam Adams, John Adams, James Bowdoin and Dr. Joseph Warren. Cooper virtually shepherded some of the most influential patriots of his time.<sup>11</sup> He regularly corresponded with Benjamin Franklin on the events taking place in Boston.<sup>12</sup> Phyllis Wheatley, the African-American poet

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<sup>7</sup> See “Coronation of George III and Charlotte”;

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronation\\_of\\_George\\_III\\_and\\_Charlotte#:~:text=The%20coronation%20of%20George%20III,Capel%20Royal%2C%20St%20James's%20Palace.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronation_of_George_III_and_Charlotte#:~:text=The%20coronation%20of%20George%20III,Capel%20Royal%2C%20St%20James's%20Palace.)

<sup>8</sup> Unger, page 1.

<sup>9</sup> See

[https://www.google.com/search?q=the+relative+sizes+of+the+signatures+on+the+declaration&rlz=1C1GCEB\\_enUS908US908&oq=the&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBggAEEUYOzIGCAAQRRg7MgYIARBFgDkyBggCEEUYOzIGCAMQRRg7MgYIBB BFGD0yBggFEEUYPDIGCAYQRRg9MgYIBxBFGDzSAQgxNTI0ajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=the+relative+sizes+of+the+signatures+on+the+declaration&rlz=1C1GCEB_enUS908US908&oq=the&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBggAEEUYOzIGCAAQRRg7MgYIARBFgDkyBggCEEUYOzIGCAMQRRg7MgYIBB BFGD0yBggFEEUYPDIGCAYQRRg9MgYIBxBFGDzSAQgxNTI0ajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>10</sup> Charles River Editors, *American Legends: The Life of John Hancock*, charlesrivereditors.com, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Cooper\\_\(clergyman\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Cooper_(clergyman))

<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.masshist.org/2012/juniper/assets/ed-curricula/blackington\\_samuel\\_cooper\\_documents.pdf](https://www.masshist.org/2012/juniper/assets/ed-curricula/blackington_samuel_cooper_documents.pdf)

whose freedom was purchased by members of the Old South Church in Boston, wrote a poetic eulogy of him upon his death in 1783.<sup>13</sup>

Cooper preached the inaugural sermon at the commencement of the Massachusetts State Constitution on October 25, 1780. Its title began *A Sermon preached before his Excellency John Hancock, Esq; Governour*. The admiration for which John Hancock had toward his Pastor is evident for the choice made on such an occasion. The content of Cooper's sermon on this occasion is also interesting. It was likely a summary of the ideas and ideals Cooper had preached to his parishioners during the tumultuous time of the American Revolution.

- The characteristics of tyranny throughout history and particularly recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible;
- The unique government of Israel before she chose a King – a “republic” where the people are sovereign and function well only to the degree that they are virtuous before God; (please note that we were never considered a democracy – direct rule by the people – but always a representative republic under the rule of law)
- How the Massachusetts Constitution has been established on the independence of America and the nature of ancient Israel – a true republic.<sup>14</sup>

Samuel Cooper corresponded with Thomas Pownall<sup>15</sup>, who was the former governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay from 1757-1760. Pownhall also sat in the House of Commons from 1767 to 1780 in England. He opposed Parliamentary attempts to unjustly tax the colonists. He also supported the Revolutionary War and later advocated for trade barriers to be removed to have the newly established United States operate as an equal among the nations. It was John Adams who wrote that *Pownall was the most constitutional and national Governor, in my opinion, who ever represented the crown in this province.*<sup>16</sup>

Cooper was also able to preach the gospel without the political trappings that would turn the church into a revolutionary machine. He understood that the gospel works from within and tempers the believer in such a way as to be a servant rather than one who constantly attempts to find fault and bring change from without. He had both Loyalists and Patriots sitting in his pews. He worked tirelessly for unity and peace among factions that differed. He worked for harmony by advocating civility of manners in disputes. Of course, as the pressure intensified in the middle 1770's, those who left for England caused the congregation to be a unified target for British vengeance. Hancock, a man desiring to be out of the spotlight, was thrust on the stage at the perfect time with patriotic convictions inspired from his Pastor.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item\\_id=781](https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=781)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.consource.org/document/a-sermon-on-the-day-of-the-commencement-of-the-constitution-by-samuel-cooper-1780-10-25/>

<sup>15</sup> Letters of Samuel Cooper to Thomas Pownell, 1769-1777, *The American Historical Review*, Jan., 1903, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Jan – 1903), pp. 301-330, Oxford University Press.

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Pownall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Pownall)

The convictions and resurging faith of John Hancock became apparent as President of the Continental Congress. In his Proclamation for a day of Fasting and Prayer on April 15, 1775, only a few days before the battles of Lexington and Concord, he wrote:

*In circumstances as Dark as these... All confidence must be withheld from the Means we use; and reposed only on that GOD who rules in the Armies of Heaven, and without whose Blessing the best human Counsels are but Foolishness – and all created Power Vanity. It is the Happiness of His Church that, when the Powers of Earth and Hell combine against it... that the Throne of Grace is of the easiest access and its Appeal thither is graciously invited by the Father of Mercies, who has assured it, that when his Children ask Bread he will not give them a Stone...<sup>17</sup>*

The teachings of the Bible from Rev. Cooper, especially the teachings against tyranny, must have inspired John Hancock. The Bible warns against tyranny in ways that parallel the five ingredients of tyranny mentioned in the Declaration. The 31 clauses of the Declaration written against the dictatorial conduct of King George III constitute two thirds of the entire document. They fall into five categories that were addressed consistently by the clergy and founders; (1) *obstruction of justice*, (2) *military political bullying*, (3) *abuse of power*, (4) *chaos to increase control*, and (5) *the promotion of corruption*.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Declaration as a Document Resisting Tyranny**

### **(1) Obstruction of Justice**

- Isaiah 1:17 - *seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.*
- Clause 8 of the charges against King George III state that King George III *has obstructed the Administration of Justice by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers*. In other words, the King refused to acknowledge local courts, wanting justices dependent on the Crown in both their opinions and salary.
- William Blackstone wrote in 1753; *to bereave a man of life, or by violence to confiscate his estate, without accusation or trial, would be so gross and notorious an act of despotism, as must at once convey the alarm of tyranny throughout the whole kingdom.*<sup>19</sup>

### **(2) Military bullying of Civil Power**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:1-2 declares the purpose of civil law is to help us *lead a quiet and peaceable life*. This means civil powers are limited. They don't regulate the details of our lives.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.03800700/?st=text>

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Edel's commentary - <https://www.uscc.edu.au/a-tyrant-is-unfit-to-be-the-ruler-of-a-free-people>

<sup>19</sup> Blackstone, William, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Volume I - <https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/sir-william-blackstone-provides-a-strong-defence-of-personal-liberty-and-concludes-that-to-secretly-hurry-a-man-to-prison-is-a-dangerous-engine-of-arbitrary-government-1753>

- Clause 12 of the charges state; *He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.* Political bullying has been a trait of tyranny for centuries. The Military, if not checked by civil law, becomes a force for tyranny. Tyrannical forces can maintain their grip on a society by constantly advocating for war, because that brings them funds through their monopoly on warfare's industrial complex.
- James Madison wrote in 1795; *Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, for it comprises and develops the germ of every other... no nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.*<sup>20</sup>

### (3) Abuse of Power

- Proverbs 29:2 states *when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, the people groan.*
- Clause 18 charges the King with *depriving us, in many cases, of the benefit of Trial by Jury.* The common law Jury was considered an essential part of liberty and government intervention to prevent a citizen of trying both the law and fact was considered tyranny.
- John Locke writes in 1690 that *tyranny is "the exercise of power beyond right."*<sup>21</sup>

### (4) Using chaos to gain Control

- Genesis 4:7 declares that God told Cain, *sin lies at the door, it's desire is for you, but you are to rule over it.* That sin was anger and violence. We can be angry and not sin, (Ephesians 4:26,) but the key is to conquer the rage on the inside so it can't be used to bring you under greater control.
- Clause 27 charges the King with *domestic insurrections among us.* A wicked ruler utilizes or promotes (through financing) chaos for an excuse to gain tyrannical control.
- Alexander Hamilton wrote in 1788; *Are not popular assemblies frequently subject to the impulses of rage, resentment, jealousy, avarice... and violent propensities? ...governed by a few individuals?*<sup>22</sup> His point was that government was necessary to bring order. A government that permits chaos for its own ends is obviously tyrannical.

### (5) The Promotion of Corruption

- Isaiah 5:20 states; *Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light...* and Isaiah 10:1-2 says; *Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune, which they have prescribed to rob the needy of justice... that widows may be*

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<sup>20</sup> Madison, James, *Letters and Writings of James Madison*, 1795.

<sup>21</sup> Locke, John, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1690.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, Alexander, *Federalist #6* - [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed06.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed06.asp)

*their prey*. These exhortations were given by the prophet to expose corruption in their civil leaders and call for justice!

- Clause 28 makes the charge that, *In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury*. Corruption is a problem of the heart and character and thus when it is promoted and not just tolerated, it is tyranny.
- Baron de Montesquieu wrote in 1730; *No tyranny is more cruel than that which is practiced in the shadow of the law and with the trappings of justice*.<sup>23</sup> When justice is corrupted the process appears to be there, but corruption pre-determines the outcome.

As part of Clause 28, nearing the conclusion of the final exposure of corruption in the Crown, Declaration stated, *A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people!* Today, governments around the world should take notice that as we celebrate the 248<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration, it is not just King George III, but any system that is characterized by such ingredients that is unfit to rule a people who know their rights are God-given and wish to defend their liberties!

### **The Declaration as a Document of Interposition**

So what does one do if such a tyranny is imposed upon them? What did the Colonists do? Well, first, they understood clearly the “doctrine of the lower magistrate” taught to them by the clergy and firmly rooted in Biblical theology.<sup>24</sup> Essentially, the doctrine asserts that *direct resistance to a higher power is rebellion in the eyes of God*. Therefore, *only the lawfully instituted civil official (lower or lesser magistrate) can stand between the people and a tyrannical higher power*. In Biblical terms, this means that one must demonstrate submission to God and His law more than merely resistance to evil (as James 4:7 exhorts).

Old Testament examples Rehoboam and Jeroboam (2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 10:16-11:4), the civil resistance to Queen Ahtaliah (2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 22-23; 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 11), and the church’s civil interposition to Uzziah’s illegitimate attempts to violate the jurisdictional separation of church and state (2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 26:16-23). The New Testament affirms as much in Romans 13:1-7.

The Declaration itself is a document of interposition. The militias that resisted the British troops were under the civil authority of the Continental Congress. The Congress itself was formed to follow this doctrine, since the people could not directly resist the higher powers (Romans 13) without the wrath of God and His judgment coming upon them. When Britain dissolved the royal governments of the colonies, the people formed the Continental Congress = a body of lesser magistrates resisting the tyranny of a higher power. That is why they could with authority both from God and the people, assert the following:

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<sup>23</sup> See <https://harpers.org/2010/05/montesquieu-tyranny-in-the-shadow-of-the-law/>

<sup>24</sup> See <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1296&context=eleu>. See also the author’s treatise on “Interposition”, a series of four lectures plus the accompanying notes; [www.plymrock.org](http://www.plymrock.org).

*We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare,*

*That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.*

*And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.*

On March 5, 1774, in his oration commemorating the Boston Massacre, John Hancock spoke at the Old South Church in Boston. Early in his oration he stated, *Some boast of being friends to government; I am a friend to righteous government, to a government founded upon the principles of reason and justice; but I glory in publicly avowing my eternal enmity to tyranny.* He then closed with these words:

*I have the most animating confidence that the present noble struggle for liberty will terminate gloriously for America... ..let us humbly commit our righteous cause to the great Lord of the universe, who loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity. And having secured the approbation of our hearts, by a faithful and unwearied discharge of our duty to our country, let us joyfully leave our concerns in the hands of him who raiseth up and putteth down the empires and kingdoms of the world as he pleases; and with cheerful submission to his sovereign will devoutly say, "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the field shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet we will rejoice in the Lord, we will joy in the God of our salvation."<sup>25</sup> (Habakkuk 3:17-18)*

May we, as residents of the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and citizens of the United States of America, celebrate the Declaration much deeper than fireworks, backyard barbecues, or flags of red, white and blue. We must *appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world, and with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, mutually pledge to each other our Lives, Fortunes and our sacred Honor.* May God bring us to repentance, so that the Church can model the attitudes, actions and service of Jesus Christ on how we can change the world!

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<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.famous-trials.com/massacre/200-oration>