

# Congregational Church of the Messiah

*Memorial Day Sunday*

May 25, 2008

## **“Renewing America’s Soul”**

I Peter 2:13-25; 4:8-11

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The title for today’s sermon comes from Howard E. Butt, Jr’s’ book by the same title. He believes America’s soul will be renewed only when America learns how to honor God’s authority.

Few of us like to hear the word “authority.” “Authority” automatically sends up red flags, and we find ourselves becoming defensive and prepared to defend that individuality, which God has given us and which makes each of us special in His sight. We prepare to do battle with anyone or systems that try to make us conform to someone else’s idea of what we should do.

We object to being considered just another unit to be researched or another statistic to be compared showing how many people bought a certain item or fall into a particular category. Impulsively, we respond to standing up for our rights and resist other people’s concepts of who we are. We especially dislike being told what we think, let alone what we believe or how we must act.

As Congregationalists we have developed a traditional phrase “faith, freedom, and fellowship,” which we often use to justify our being non-conformists, separating ourselves from Christians of other denominations as well as other faiths.

A similar independent streak runs throughout our whole American society where laws are made to protect the rights of the individual from infringement from our own government. We talk about individual’s rights and state’s rights as protection from the authority of our national government forcing us to comply with rules and regulations with which we may disagree.

Children often see parents and teachers as authority figures. To guide and develop a child’s interests and values is a daunting task for anyone, and it truly does take an entire community to bring up a child in the world today.

America’s soul is sometimes hard to find since its glorification of individual rights is so blatantly proclaimed and publicly championed. It is almost as though America as a country is like an individual only *writ large*.

We as individuals have been brought up to resist and question authority from an early age. Of course, families have very different traditions, and children may be brought up in

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a strict or permissive environment. There may be one parent often present or no parent around providing supervision.

In our postal zip code, there are some 33% single parent families with at least one child under 18 living at home. This relates to over one-third of the families in our area not having a parent at home during the day.

Even before the child is out of his or her crib, some parents may give their children choices to make by asking them, "Would you like some applesauce or some Jell-O? Do you want more milk or cookies? Would you like to wear this dress today or a different one? Do you want to go to sleep now or stay up awhile longer?"

Human life and society are so structured that we are expected to make some choices and to accept authority from others in a large number of cases. Whenever we come to an intersection with a stop sign or traffic light, we are forced to accept authority over our actions or suffer potentially serious consequences.

To protect our individual rights this great country has established perhaps the greatest, most powerful military force the world has ever known. We have weapons that can destroy the entire planet, change the atmosphere and make the entire planet uninhabitable.

We have discovered ways of altering the genes that create human life forms and that of animals as well. America and other countries know how to use biological warfare, which can affect children for generations to come.

When young men and women enter the military, they are required to accept the military's authority over nearly every aspect of their lives. One of the very first things that happens is the breaking down and replacing of an individual's personal control over when to get up, when to go to bed and what to do during the day. Control is extended to even how a person thinks so that he or she responds automatically to commands from superiors.

This automatic response is essential if groups of persons are to act together. Their own lives as well as those of others may depend on how immediately a person follows orders without questioning them. Passing on an order from a superior to those who are to carry out the order is especially important if the military personnel are in a critical situation in the air, on land, or at sea. Military persons must not interject their own opinions, hesitate or change the commands in any way. They do not have all the information. The command must be transmitted quickly, accurately and clearly. Their lives and that of others may depend on obedience.

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Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote about this kind of courage and trust in “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” which reads in part:

“Half a league, half a league,  
half a league onward,  
All in the Valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred...  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die:  
Into the Valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.”

*(One Hundred and One Poems, p. 7)*

For some men and women the transition from freethinking to required acceptance of authority is too much. They break down under the strain. Others are able to adjust their personalities and values and grow into responsible leaders of hundreds and thousands. Some people are able to provide mature military leadership, which protects and restores the most valuable of human rights throughout the world.

The soul of America depends on a balance of freedom and authority. The authority of God over our lives needs to be voluntarily accepted and followed. God does not force His authority upon us as some politicians or military people do. Freedom and authority without a balance, is mutually destructive of the blessings God has given to us. We are a people who belong to God first, not to any one political party or nation.

The soul of America will never be renewed until it accepts God's authority over its life rather than pandering to its own human ideological power groups, seeking their own human ideological power, and their own good at the expense of others.

I believe we must learn to accept God's authority over both our lives and life of our country. By accepting His authority, we glorify God instead of justifying our own right to do whatever we want with little regard for how our actions may impact our fellow citizens.

God has followers of Jesus Christ in every country in the world—individuals who are willing to risk their very lives because they put Christ first and a political party or rule second. In the 20th century, there were over 200 Congregational martyrs of faith and thousands of other Christians who also died because their Christian faith was not acceptable to the political, military power in their own country. In fact, some of the greatest wars in human history seem to have been fought largely over different religious beliefs. Today is no exception.

Jesus taught us that human life is sacred because of the divine Spirit God placed within each person. The qualities of faith, which we are to live by, are the fruits of the Spirit of God. When people believe and follow the God known to us through Jesus Christ, their

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behavior should evidence these fruits of the Spirit of God. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) If everyone sincerely tries to live up to even some of these qualities, there will never be war.

However, when people follow other concepts of God or wrongly interpret the teachings of Christ, misunderstandings can lead to violent persecution in every age.

Fundamental is the question of authority and who interprets it as God's authority rather than just of human beings. And always there is the question to be wrestled with when life is given by God, by whose authority life taken away? Christ died to save us all.

To put God first has never been an easy thing to do. God gave us the free will to choose whether to accept His authority over our lives and actions or to turn away and ignore God's way of living in peace through faith in Him. When we become faithful followers of Christ, we respect all of God's creation, especially persons who are different from us and not under our control.

Memorial Sunday is an appropriate time for us to remember why Christians of every ethnic race and economic class have and still are giving their lives to worship the God and heavenly Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Would you be willing to speak up and be counted as a follower of Christ if it meant being arrested or even executed?

Memorial Sunday is a day when we remember not only those who gave their lives in military service but also those who died professing their Christian faith in the face of atheists, agnostics, or even other Christians. Believers who refused to accept a way of worship dictated by the King of England lost their lives. One woman was burned to death tied to the post in her wheel chair because of the breaking of her legs by the civil authorities trying to make her repent of her faith in Christ instead of worshipping the King.

In the first letter attributed to Peter, who was loved and trusted by Jesus, the Big Fisherman wrote to Christians who lived under pagan kings. Some of the Christians were slaves. Others were landowners. Peter wrote seeking to guide them to "act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil...Honor all persons, love the believers, honor God, respect the king"(I Peter 2:16-17)

When Peter wrote for us "to honor authority," I believe he did not mean we had to agree with it but rather we were not to worship it. We were not to condone what authority forced people to do but rather to respect worldly authority always while keeping one's priorities clear—*God is always first*.

One way to show that God was first was not to oppose and rebel against other rightful authorities, for that outward opposition would give authorities reason to persecute.

In addition, Peter clearly says: "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ,

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keep on rejoicing...If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (I Peter 4:13-14)

To hear these words is easy. They are much harder to put into practice as Christ did for us. He did not revile when He was betrayed or when He was spit upon as he carried the Cross through the streets of Jerusalem. He did not argue with anyone when he was brought to trials though he had done nothing wrong.

We tend to pride ourselves in thinking logically. At times, thinking logically is appropriate, but at other times the analytical way of thinking can get in the way of our faith and accepting God's having authority over our lives.

Let us remember the powerful prayer by an anonymous seeker.

“I asked God for strength,  
that I might achieve:

I was made weak, that I might learn to humbly obey...

I asked for health  
that I might do greater things.

I was given infirmity, that I might do better things...

I asked for power,  
that I might have the praise of men.

I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God...

I asked for all things,  
that I might enjoy life.

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things...

I got nothing I asked for...  
but everything that I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all,  
most richly blessed.” (Quoted in *Stories for the Heart*, p. 240)

America will renew its corporate soul as each of us individuals renews our own soul's right relationship with God.

Amen.