

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.
Christian Persecution During the American Revolution (15–20 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Goal

A follow-up on the section on the Declaration of Independence, this handout helps students see the persecution of Christians who refused to revolt against British rule and join the revolution.

Instructions

1. Divide students into pairs or small groups.
2. Give students roughly 10 minutes to read the attached article and answer the review questions in pairs or small groups.
3. Discuss the review questions as a class.

Review Questions/Key

1. What is your general reaction to the above information about Christians and the Revolution?
AWV.
2. What does the Bible command Christians to do in regard to their rulers and paying taxes?
To pray for them, to honor them, and to pay those taxes that the government requires of them (“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”).
3. What does it say about the revolutionaries who so harshly persecuted Christians because of their refusal to join the Revolution?
AWV.
4. Would it be right for Christians today to overthrow the U.S. government by killing government officials, if those Christians believed that the government officials were making them pay too much in taxes, or oppressing them in other ways? Why or why not?
AWV, but one hopes that students would answer “No.” Asking this question ideally will make students think more about the actions of those revolutionaries, especially the ones who were Christians (or claimed to be Christians).

Wrap-Up/Final Direction

Note: As the Teacher’s Guide explains, this is not meant as a totalLY dogmatic take on the American Revolution; Christians certainly can disagree about various aspects of it. But this information—which is only the tip of the iceberg on the terrible persecution that Christians suffered during the revolution—can be surprising to students who have only learned a simplified version of history.

As a context, many American Christians were *very* happy about the numerous, almost unlimited freedoms they had as British subjects in the colonies, especially compared to nations in Europe they had moved from, and were baffled at the complaints of the revolutionaries:

As three Mennonite bishops in Pennsylvania wrote in 1773, **“Through God’s mercy we enjoy unlimited freedom in both civil and religious matters”** (Harvey Yoder, “To Exit or Remain? The July 4, 1776 Question,” July 4, 2016, *Anabaptist World*, <https://anabaptistworld.org/to-exit-or-remain-the-july-4-1776-question>).

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.

Christian Persecution During the American Revolution (15–20 Minutes)

Many peaceful Christians during the American Revolution—especially Anabaptists such as Mennonites, Amish, Brethren, and Quakers—were dreadfully persecuted for refusing to support the revolution, fight in the war, swear loyalty oaths, or contribute financially to military efforts. From their perspective, however, these punishments were persecution for obeying Christian convictions about nonresistance and submission to authority. But as one Christian writer points out...

[Many of] the clergy were already keeping the fires of revolution burning....One in particular, an Anglican parson named John Hurt, proclaimed on the one hand that “Americans would never accept British tyranny ‘while the cause of religion, the cause of nature, and of nature’s God cry aloud’.” On the other hand, “Hurt told the troops that ‘the love of your country’ should be ‘the governing principle of your soul’.” Jesus clearly stated that “no man can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24a). Here, Hurt exhorts the troops to make their patriotism their first duty, even apart from loving God....All that mattered to most people was breaking off from Great Britain by any means. Thus, while patriotic clergymen exhorted the colonial armies to have their patriotism as their chief loyalty, this meant that they had to crush all Loyalist opposition.

Here are several ways that Christians were persecuted during the American Revolution:

1. **Forced Loyalty Oaths** – Revolutionary governments often required citizens to swear loyalty to the new states or to the Revolution. Here is a typical loyalty oath of the time, from Albemarle County, Virginia:

We whose names are hereunto subscribed do swear that we renounce and refuse all Allegiance to George the third King of Great Britain, his heirs and successors and that I will be faithful and bear True Allegiance to the commonwealth of Virginia as a free and independent state, and that I will not at any [time] do or cause to be done, any matter or thing that will be prejudicial or injurious to the freedom and independence thereof as declared by congress and also that we will discover and make known to someone...all treasons or traitorous conspiracies which we now or hereafter shall know to be formed against this or any of the united states of America, so help me God.

Many Christians in the American colonies refused to swear oaths such as this one, because the Bible clearly instructs Jesus followers not to (“Swear not at all...” – Jesus in Matthew 5:34–37; “...swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath” – James 5:12). Those American Christians who refused to swear oaths were often fined, denied their legal rights, barred from voting or holding office, treated as traitors, or jailed.

2. **Seizure of Property** – Revolutionary authorities sometimes confiscated horses, wagons, food, grain, livestock, blankets, and other supplies for military use. This especially harmed peaceful farming communities. Some Christians were even jailed for refusing to financially support the war.
3. **Public Humiliation and Social Harassment** – Christians who refused to revolt against those whom they saw as their rightful, God-given rulers were frequently denounced as cowards, traitors, enemies of liberty, or secret supporters of Britain. Communities that had previously tolerated them became increasingly hostile during wartime hysteria, even in states such as Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, which were founded specifically as havens of religious freedom! After the Revolution began, as one writer put it, “the freedom of nonviolent Christians to live by their religious convictions became much more limited.”
4. **Jail and Execution** – Some Christians were thrown into prison and even executed for refusing to support the American Revolution:

...[O]ne had to question just how free from tyranny America really was if this was how they handled dissent. As their neighbors who shared similar hesitations to them, the Quakers and Anabaptists soon found themselves the latest targets of the American Revolution. Refusing to sign the oath...may as well have said that death would be the sentence. [Historian] John L. Ruth notes that some people were executed for their stance, and this in spite of the fact that numerous residents appealed to their fellow Christians running the government to consider the implications of such actions. One of these in particular was an elderly Quaker. But what would prompt those who claimed to follow Jesus to execute innocent people?

Questions for Review (Discuss in Pairs/Small Groups):

1. What is your general reaction to the above information about Christians and the Revolution?
2. What does the Bible command Christians to do in regard to their rulers and paying taxes?
3. What does it say about the revolutionaries who so harshly persecuted Christians because of their refusal to join the Revolution?
4. Would it be right for Christians today to overthrow the U.S. government by killing government officials, if those Christians believed that the government officials were making them pay too much in taxes, or oppressing them in other ways? Why or why not?

Sources:

“Rebellion: 1775–1776: 5. The Pacifists,” National Humanities Center: America in Class, <https://americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/rebellion/text5/text5.htm>.

“Revolutionary War: 1775–1783,” Third Way: Simply Following Jesus, <https://anabaptistworld.org/to-exit-or-remain-the-july-4-1776-question>.

“Radicals in the Revolution: The Persecution of Christians During the Revolutionary War,” Kevan D. Keane, 2016, *Fidei et Veritatis: The Liberty University Journal of Graduate Research*, 2016, Volume 1, Issue 1. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=fidei_et_veritatis).