

Written for Amanda Tero (blog)

September 2021

608 words

Religious Freedom in America

Hello, fellow book-lovers! I'm so happy to be on Amanda's blog today. Since this post is part of the blog tour for my historical novel *Preacher on the Run*, and since themes of history and religious liberty are such a big part of the novel, I'd like to talk a bit about the freedoms we have and why we have them.

Many Americans are familiar with the promises of the First Amendment—freedom of religion, freedom of speech and the press, the right to assemble and petition. But why were those freedoms such a big deal in early America?

Let's back up, before the Constitution and even before the Declaration of Independence. The Pilgrims came to America in search of freedom to worship God as they saw fit. But once they had that freedom, they didn't want to share it. Those who didn't worship as they did were often banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony. I was pretty surprised when I learned about this. The Pilgrims? Those really spiritual people (well, most of them, anyway) who braved the New World to find freedom? But the Pilgrims weren't the only ones who persecuted nonconformists. Almost all of the Thirteen Colonies had an official religion sanctioned by the state. The most common "state church" was the Church of England, and that's what we find in North Carolina at the time of *Preacher on the Run*.

In North Carolina, dissenters from the Church of England were tolerated, but they faced restrictive legislation, such as laws that forbade dissenter preachers to perform marriages and required couples to hire magistrates or Anglican clergy to officiate. North Carolina's government also levied a so-called "vestry tax," a compulsory tithe that forced dissenters to support the clergy they disagreed with. By 1764, when Governor William Tryon took office, extortion and unjust officials had made these difficulties worse. And freedom of speech or assembly? The Johnston Riot Act made it a felony to stay at a meeting longer than one hour after an official deemed it "seditious."

This kind of government overreach, combined with Governor Tryon's refusal to act on behalf of his citizens, sparked an outcry known as the Regulator Uprising. Similar situations in other parts of the colonies eventually triggered the American Revolution and the complete disavowal of England's authority over America—and by extension, the Church of England's authority and officials' right to curtail speech. But in many places (especially southern states like Virginia, where some preachers were jailed on the very eve of the Revolution), fear of such power remained. It was this fear that led to the Bill of Rights. As the Constitution neared ratification, dissenters and their friends in high places argued for—and obtained—specific recognition of God-given rights like freedom of religion.

If you're going to have freedom of religion, you also need freedom of expression so you can share your beliefs, and freedom of assembly so you can meet about your beliefs. That's what our Founding Fathers had in mind when they said, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Never again could a church join with the state and force its beliefs on citizens.

Thanks to men and women like those in *Preacher on the Run*, you and I are free to live by the dictates of our consciences. Truth can't be defeated, so it doesn't need to be forced on others. As Robert Boothe says in *Preacher on the Run*, the truth will hold its own. No state church required. I hope you take advantage of the freedoms we have and use them for the glory of God!