

The Case of Rev. K.J. Stewart: A Victim of Lincoln's "Reign of Terror"

by John A. Marshall

A constitution may be set aside by the political necessities of men in power; houses and towns may be destroyed under military necessity, and vested rights may be disregarded by men who seek to gain or maintain empire for the public good. But no cause can ultimately succeed, whose leaders openly disregard the rights of the Church, and trample upon the persons of innocent and helpless men, women, and children, whose only fault is that they cannot agree with them in devastating homes and subverting their government.

Men, therefore, who were loyal to the United States Government during the war, but at the same time desired to be loyal to the great interests of religion, and to the interests of our common humanity, must be vexed, if not fearful of divine retribution, as they discover, if such persons can ever venture to read, what history must reveal.

In the fall of 1861, the first year of the war, Rev. K.J. Stewart, a clergyman of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Alexandria, Va., was rudely interrupted while at the altar of the church, on the Lord's day, and in the act of offering up prayers for all Christian rulers and magistrates, by a detail of armed men, under the command of a captain, lieutenant, and sergeant, by the direct authority of the Government of the United States, under circumstances of peculiar sacrilege, tyranny, and shame. The alleged ground of the arrest was that he refused to pray for the President of the United States. The true object was to intimidate and compel the clergy of the Border States to withdraw the support and consolation of the Christian religion from a stricken people, who fled to it as their only hope, and who used it to strengthen themselves to great endurance.

It will be seen that the whole matter was planned at Washington, by the head of the State Department; that it was executed by agents selected with reference to the moral degradation of the work, and that it was done deliberately; that the Government refused to repudiate the act, and that the time, mode, and sequel were a refinement upon the atrocities perpetrated on religion in the reign of the bloody Mary.

Nor has any apology ever been made, or any reparation offered. A quiet and peaceful minister of the Gospel was arrested without cause, condemned without trial, his church closed, and subsequently polluted and ruined -- the people scattered and shut out from public worship, and he driven forth a homeless wanderer. And all this without the shadow of military necessity or political obstruction. For the clergyman had not refused to use the forms of prayer prescribed in any and all places where he sojourned; and the people had been so often arrested in their beds at night, that they were as a flock of timid sheep, unarmed, and incapable of resistance, who crowded together in their fold, the temple of God, to worship Him and seek protection from those who, with a refinement of cruelty, came upon them almost every night, burned their homes, and took away to prison men, women, and children.

It was indeed a reign of terror. No man was safe, no place, or sanctuary, or conduct was secure. Laws were set aside; rank, character, and religious principles only invited ridicule, insult, or hatred. Few found themselves so secure as to be safe in asking justice for fellow-citizen, and none thought of mercy to the imprudent.

It was one of those solemn occasions when even the most hardened men are subdued. The priest was about celebrating the supper of our blessed Lord -- the silent but eloquent emblems of love wre upon the altar. In order to avoid any embarrassment or misunderstanding in the conduct of the services, the priest had written to the Department and explained his exact position (he was personally known to more than one of the heads of the Departments).

The gentlemanly officer in charge as military governor of the district had been invited to be present and inspect the services, which he reported to the Government as unexceptionable, except in the private feelings of the people and the non-committal nature of the prayers.

The priest had taken the additional precaution to explain from the desk, that while the prayer appointed to be used for the President of the Confederate States was voluntarily omitted, being an American citizen, he could not allow the State to dictate to the Church what petition should be asked of the Great King. That it would be better to die than allow the Church to be used as a political tool.

In order to avoid the possibility of mistake, an old sermon had been preached; but it alluded to the historical fact that all our most precious things were "blood-bought," as was that salvation now about to be commemorated. But while these people were thus seeking strength in and from our blessed Lord, in their eucharistic feast, that they might the more constantly subdue their excited passions and yield due obedience to the stern powers that were over them, two emissaries of that very Government were engaged in noting down from the distant galleries such words as might justify meditated outrage.

Captain. "All precious things are 'blood-bought'; that means that freedom is blood-bought; it means the Magna Charta is blood-bought; it is aimed at the President's proclamation. Write it down as treason. Damn the priests! I intend to make them preach and pray my way. We'll see which has the longest sword, their master, or ours!"

Government agent. "If I break this fellow down, all the rest will cave in."

It was then arranged that they should return and report to the head of the State Department at Washington; that they should come back to church on the next Sunday; that the most desperate characters should be selected, armed, and brought to church; and that in the midst of public worship this armed band should surround the minister while in the very act of presenting the request of the people to his God, and, by presenting sabres and revolvers at his breast, they would compel him to say such prayers as they should dictate.

This was carried out to a fuller extent than they contemplated. The high official who had authority from the State Department to set aside all laws, and arrest any one, even the general in command, stood before the altar of God and demanded of his ambassador to pervert the power of religion to the purposes of political jurisprudence, and pray at his dictation. The officers and men formed around the altar. The minister calmly continued:

"From all evil and mischief; from all sedition, privy conspiracy--

The people. "Good Lord, deliver us."

Minister. "Bless all Christian rulers and magistrates, and give them grace to execute justice and maintain truth."

Government officer. "You are a traitor! in the name and by the authority of the President of the United States, I arrest you!"

The minister, finding, in the indescribable confusion which had ensured, that his friends were likely to become involved in trouble (for men, whose ideas of religious toleration were American, were becoming mad by oppression), slowly arose (but not until an officer had wrested the holy book from his hands, and dashed it on the floor), and facing the chief officer, said (as if remembering his Master's words), "'Let these go, take me'; but before I yield myself up to you, I summon you to appear before the bar of the King of kings, to answer the charge of interrupting his ambassador, while in the house of God, and in the discharge of his duty."

Conscious-stricken, the whole band fell back, and one of them remonstrated at the proceedings; but the order was given, and two sergeants, with drawn revolvers, had the honor of escorting a surpliced priest to prison, through the streets of the city. There were attendant circumstances, such as the dragging through the streets young and delicate females of his family and friends, persons whose rank, sex, and tenderness of years should have shielded them from the brutal gaze of the street mobs: circumstances which were enough to make wise men mad.

And this was on the Lord's day, and under the precincts of the seat of Government. General Montgomery said to them: "What! could you not come on a week-day? Could you not have had some sort of investigation or trial? Could you not have consulted me?" They replied, that they acted with the knowledge and under the direct orders of Government.

Upon inquiry, this was found to be a fact.

The newspaper that published a statement of the facts was destroyed and its office burned. The type of a religious journal, the Southern Churchman, was burned, and the enormities that ensued exceeded those perpetrated upon peaceable Christian communities by the Mohammedans.

They drove the minister from his home, and after revenging himself by ministering to the soldiers who had oppressed him, upon the field of battle, in the prisons, etc., binding up their wounds, and administering to them the consolation of religion in the hour of death, and after having the satisfaction of holding back the soldiers of the Confederate States from interrupting another minister, when praying for President Lincoln, he awaits the grand conclusion of these things. It is said that a stranger, who was present on the occasion of this sacrilege, observed, "If the men engaged in this affair do not all meet with some signal judgment of the Almighty, I shall begin to question the truth of religion!"

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