

Lesson Four

The Right To Choose

LESSON IDEA

The right to choose is a key element of freedom. We exercise it so often each day, in matters large and small, that we tend to take it for granted. Yet throughout history, when freedom has been at stake, the opportunity to make choices has often involved life and death decisions affecting millions of people.

VISUAL AID

Optional: newspaper clippings and magazine articles about life in Red China.

IT WAS a sunny, pleasant day in Virginia as dozens of delegates from throughout the colony assembled St. John's Church in Richmond. The date was March 23, 1775, and the gathering is known to history as the Virginia Provincial Convention.

A few months earlier, in September 1774, the First Continental Congress had convened in Philadelphia, where representatives from the original 13 colonies drafted a petition to King George III of England, reminding him of their rights as British subjects. For nearly a decade, the complaint that "taxation without representation is tyranny" had been periodically raised by the colonists. What did "taxation without representation" mean? [The colonists were being compelled to pay import duties on such items as cloth, glass, paper, paint, lead, and tea. But they had no voice in how the applicable laws were made. The money went into England's coffers, and the colonists resented having no say in the matter.]

By March 1775, many colonial leaders feared that the King, rather than heeding their appeals, would send troops to force compliance with his demands. The colonists faced a choice that would change the course of history.

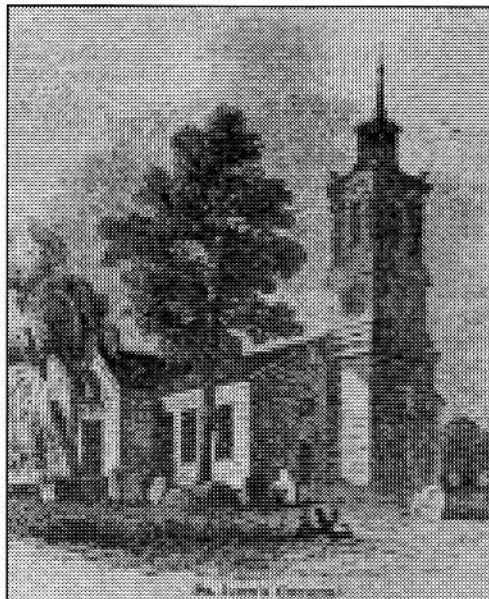
Many delegates at the Richmond meeting did not want to offend the King. They were English citizens who had built homes, farms, and businesses in the colonies, and they knew that if war broke out, they might lose not only their possessions, but their lives.

During the meeting a tall, slender delegate requested permission to speak. His name was Patrick Henry, an attorney elected to represent Culpepper County in Virginia's frontier area. Henry, who had been a delegate to the First Continental Congress, was an outspoken opponent of England's oppression of the colonies. His colleagues, aware of his fighting spirit, were anxious to hear what he had to say.

Looking over his audience, which included George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Henry began by reminding the delegates of the many wrongs suffered by the colonies under the King's "taxation without representation" strategy. He asserted that further appeals and petitions were useless, that compromise or surrender was unthinkable for men of honor, and that the time for action had come. He concluded with this ringing declaration:

Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

The words of this fiery orator jolted his audience. The hall was virtually silent as he made his way back to his seat. Then, from scattered points throughout the assembly, delegates began rising in agreement. It quickly became apparent that Patrick Henry's fervent appeal had carried the day.



St. John's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Many delegates were silent and solemn as they voted for Henry's resolution. They knew that they were risking their lives, and everything they owned, for the defense of freedom. In less than a month (April 19, 1775), Minutemen and Redcoats clashed in Massachusetts, first at Lexington and later in the day at Concord (where the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired), The War for Independence had begun. [The above account is adapted from Donzella Cross Boyle's *Quest Of A Hemisphere*.]

THE STORY of Patrick Henry is one of the most inspiring in our nation's history. He was a hunter, fisherman, farmer, and lawyer. Though he had little formal schooling, his father saw to it that he received a good education at home. Do you think that young Patrick's father taught him the importance of freedom and responsibility? How might that have been accomplished? What choice did Patrick Henry make? What risks would he take for freedom? Was he willing, if necessary, to die for it? [Give everyone an opportunity to answer.]

Thanks to the courage and conviction of such men as Patrick Henry, Americans today have the freedom to choose. How often do they exercise it? Let us pause for a moment and recall a few of the choices each of us made today. [Encourage each family member to list numerous examples. The possibilities could include: When to get up, what to wear, what to eat (and where), when to shop, what to buy, how best to close a business deal, when to do homework, what book or magazine to read, when to go to bed, etc.]

A single day's events clearly show how often we exercise the freedom to choose. And in turn, the choices we make largely determine whether we succeed or fail, and experience happiness or heartache.

FOR TENS OF MILLIONS of people in many other countries, the questions raised by Patrick Henry more than two centuries ago remain pertinent even today. Consider, for instance, the saga of Hongda "Harry" Wu.

Harry Wu is now an American citizen, but from 1960 to 1979 he was a political prisoner in Communist China. During his confinement, he saw fellow inmates die all around him while he himself went from 155 pounds to 80 pounds, grubbing for insects and raiding rat holes to supplement his meager food rations. For a lengthy period of time he was confined to a cell measuring six feet, by three feet, by three feet.

Following his release, he came to the United States in 1985, and immediately faced a pivotal choice. He could forget the prisoners left behind, and bask in his new-found freedom. Or, he could jeopardize his future by striving to expose the terrible conditions in the Red Chinese laogai (prisons), in the hope that some day the tens of thousands of other victims of the brutal system could also achieve their freedom.

He chose the latter course, and on numerous occasions returned to China to gather information about conditions in the forced-labor camps and verify other brutalities of the communist regime. On each occasion it meant risking re-arrest and re-imprisonment. Indeed, during one such ven-

ture in 1995 he was arrested while traveling on a U.S. passport, and accused of such "crimes" as sneaking into China under false names, stealing Chinese state secrets, and disseminating those secrets to institutions and organizations outside of China. The charges carried a potential death sentence. Wu was held incommunicado for three weeks (despite a treaty signed by China which guarantees diplomatic access to citizens within 48 hours of their detention), but was eventually released in the wake of extensive publicity about his plight, and because of efforts on his behalf by



PATRICK HENRY 1736-1799

