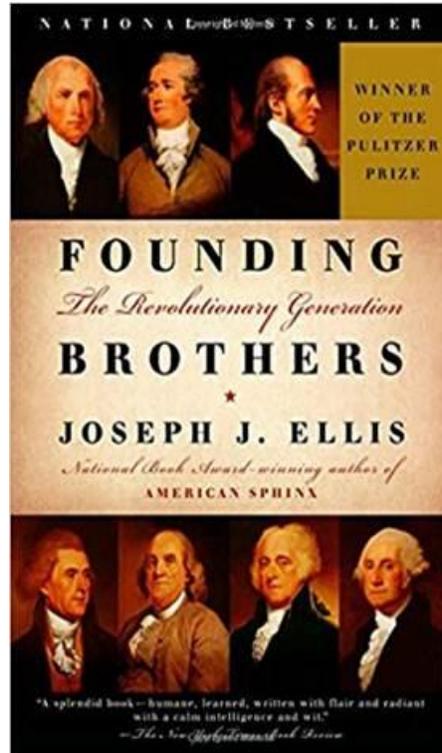


Black History Month: the Quaker Objection

Over Slave Trade in 1790



Excerpt from *Founding Brothers*, 82-83:

Just a few months before Jefferson staged his historic dinner party, something happened in the Congress of the United States that no one had anticipated; indeed, most of the political leadership considered it an embarrassing intrusion. On February 11, 1790, two Quaker delegations, one from New York and the other from Philadelphia, presented petitions to the House calling for the federal government to put an immediate end to the African slave trade. . . . Representative James Jackson from Georgia was positively apoplectic that such a petition would even be considered by an serious deliberative body. The Quakers, he argue, were infamous innocents incessantly disposed to drip their precious purity like holy way over everyone else's sins. They were also highly questionable patriots, having sat out the recent war against British tyranny in deference to their cherished consciences. What standing could such dedicated pacifists enjoy among veterans of the Revolution, who, as Jackson put it, "at the risk of the lives and fortunes, secured to the community their liberty and property?"

William Loughton Smith from South Carolina rose to second Jackson's objection. The problematic patriotism of the Quaker petitioners was, Smith agreed, reprehensible. But his colleague from Georgia need not dally over the credentials of these pathetic

eccentrics. The Constitution of the United States, only recently ratified, specifically prohibited the Congress from passing any law that abolished or restricted the slave trade until 1808. (Article 1. Second 9, paragraph 1, read: ‘The Migration or Importance of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight.’)

Jackson, however, was not about to be consoled by the constitution protections. He detected even more sinister motives behind the benign smiles of the misnamed Society of Friends. “I apprehend, if through the interference of the general government, the slave-trade was abolished,” he observed, “it would evince to the people a general disposition toward total emancipation..” In short, the Quaker petition for an end of slave trade was really a stalking horse for a more radical and thoroughgoing scheme to end the institution of slavery itself.

James Madison rose to assume his customary role as the vigilant voice of cool reason. His college from Georgia was overreacting. Indeed, his impassioned rhetoric, while doubtless sincere, was both misguided and counterproductive. The Quaker petition should be heard and forwarded to a committee “as a matter of course.” If, in other words, the matter were treated routinely and with a minimum of fuss, it would quickly evaporate. As Madison put it, “no notice would be taken it out of doors.” On the other hand, Jackson’s own overwrought opposition, much like airbursts in a night battle, actually called attention to the issues the Quakers wished to raise. If Jackson would only restrain himself, the petition would go away and “never be blown up into a decision of the question respecting the discouragement of the African slave-trade, nor alarm the owners with an apprehension that the general government were about to abolish slavery in the states.”

For, as Madison assured Jackson, “such things are not contemplated by any gentlemen in the congress.”

A few of my thoughts:

- 1) Injustice: Money, political power, and compromise led to 620,000 dead Americans in the Civil War and unfathomable evil throughout our country that continues to haunt us.
- 2) Slavery was not simply "a product of the age." Quakers and many others vociferously opposed it. Mammon/greed was the issue then, now, and in the future when the Babylon world power (America?) will enslave human beings for profit (Rev. 18:13).
- 3) "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it," George Santayana.
- 4) 'Founding Brothers' is a profound book.

In His Matchless Grace,
Pastor Don