

**Ray Hammond**  
***I Renounce My Independence***

**Scripture** – 1 Corinthians 10 (Message)

6-10 The same thing could happen to us. We must be on guard so that we never get caught up in wanting our own way as they did. And we must not turn our religion into a circus as they did—“First the people partied, then they threw a dance.” We must not be sexually promiscuous—they paid for that, remember, with 23,000 deaths in one day! We must never try to get Christ to serve us instead of us serving him; they tried it, and God launched an epidemic of poisonous snakes. We must be careful not to stir up discontent; discontent destroyed them.

11-12 These are all warning markers—danger!—in our history books, written down so that we don't repeat their mistakes. ... Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence....14 So, my very dear friends, when you see people reducing God to something they can use or control, get out of their company as fast as you can.15-18 I assume I'm addressing believers now who are mature. Draw your own conclusions: When we drink the cup of blessing, aren't we taking into ourselves the blood, the very life, of Christ? And isn't it the same with the loaf of bread we break and eat? Don't we take into ourselves the body, the very life, of Christ? Because there is one loaf, our many-ness becomes one-ness—Christ doesn't become fragmented in us. Rather, we become unified in him. We don't reduce Christ to what we are; he raises us to what he is.

**Preface**

We enter into the fourth month of America's health, wealth, and stealth crisis. It's a health crisis, because COVID-19 is the worse pandemic we've seen in 100 years with some of the worse leadership we've seen in our country's History, compounded by the worst death figures among developed countries as a President and governors who say they are trying to keep the economy alive succeed only in killing people and killing the economy they were supposed to be saving. It's a wealth crisis, because thousands of renters and small landlords are likely to find out that while America is excellent at repeatedly bailing out the wealthy, it soon grows tired of bailing out the middle class and the poor. And that stealth crisis is an allusion to the origin of the world stealth which unsurprisingly is steal. What do we do about the stealing of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness from native Americans, African slaves, and poor colored immigrants who could never quite get on that escalator called the American dream? What does a nation do about stolen land, stolen labor, stolen lives, stolen liberty—especially when those pesky cellphone cameras will not let you get away with saying, “This is all in the past; let's just move on from here.” What do you do when you wake up from electing the first Black president and discover that all your articles and conversations about being postracial were really silly! As a nation, you're not postracial, you're not even postracist!

The 4th of July Weekend and, for Christians, Communion Sunday is a wonderful opportunity to think about just that and a lot more. Let's start with the Fourth of July.

**History of the Fourth**

The Fourth is an interesting holiday with a history that is pretty straightforward. As one writer has noted:

“On June 11, 1776, the colonies' Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia formed a committee with the express purpose of drafting a document that would formally sever their ties with Great Britain [i.e. make them independent]...The final version was officially adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4...[That document,]The Declaration of Independence[,] has since become our nation's most cherished symbol of liberty....Congress established Independence Day as a holiday in 1870, and...today, communities across the nation mark this major midsummer holiday with parades, fireworks, picnics and the playing of the "Star Spangled Banner" and marches by John Philip Sousa.”[1]

### **Problems with Independence**

Now I have to confess that I have always been a little uneasy with the whole 4th of July thing and the Independence thing. It begins with the words of a 34-year-old freed slave named Frederick Douglass who in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852 delivered his most famous speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" You must read this text. It is amazing, but let me call upon a few of his young descendants to tell the story (<https://youtu.be/NBe5qbnkqoM>) (0:00-2:21):

Eventually, Douglass says this, “I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us...Fellow citizens! The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie[2]

Modern History Sourcebook: Frederick Douglass: The Hypocrisy of American Slavery, July 4, 1852

Douglass saw clearly the link between slavery and independence. Independence for southern planters and northern merchants meant continued slavery for African-Americans. Financial independence for many in our current economy comes, at least in part, from profits built on the slavery of people to tobacco, overpriced drugs, unhealthy food, or wages they can't really live on. During COVID, the independence of the stay-at-home was clearly a consequence of the low-wage labor of “essential workers”, 2/3 of whom never got hazardous duty pay and many of whom would have made more money not working than continuing to support the independence of others. It's not quite slavery but that hardly fits the definition of fair labor.

### **Explanation of My Problem with Independence**

Let me be clear. I don't have a problem with the kind of independence that the dictionary defines as “showing a desire for freedom”;...“not bound by or committed to a political party”;...“taking responsibility for myself and for others.” There's nothing wrong with desiring freedom and politically I've been a registered independent voter for year. God knows we need more people to step up to the plate and take responsibility for themselves, for their families, for their communities, for this church, and for God's world. I have no problem with independence in those contexts. My problem is with independence that means “not subject to (any) control by

others” or “not requiring or relying on others.” I’ve got a problem with the independence people are talking about when they try to pass themselves off as self-made men or women—as if they gave birth to themselves, breast- or bottle-fed themselves, wiped their dirty bottoms by themselves, taught themselves to speak, thought up reading, writing, and arithmetic themselves, got confident all by themselves, gave themselves that first job, mentored themselves, promoted themselves, avoided every pitfall trap and stumbling block themselves, prayed all by themselves, wept all by themselves, sacrificed all by themselves, and succeeded all by themselves. That kind of independence thinking can be deadly.

That kind of thinking makes babies but doesn’t raise them or support their mothers;...converts communities into free-fire zones where 14 year-olds who don’t have a nickel in the quarter get cut down;...makes people insist on their right to not wear a mask, no matter how risky that might be for elders and those with chronic conditions in our community. It’s the spirit that deludes people into thinking that they are the sole superpower and they can start wars anywhere and anytime they desire—independent of world opinion, independent of Geneva conventions on torture, independent of the need to use war as a last resort. It’s the spirit that makes human beings think the planet can be used and abused—polluted, its atmosphere filled with carbon dioxide and methane, its waters polluted with oil or chemicals—as if their health, their livelihood, their future is independent of their stewardship over God’s creation.

When Frederick Douglass talked about “the venomous creature...that seriously disturbs and endangers your Union...feters your progress;...is the enemy of improvement,... fosters pride;...breeds insolence;...promotes vice;...shelters crime;[and]...is a curse to the earth that supports it,” he was not just talking about American slavery and all the injustice that followed it. I believe the same words could be applied to the spirit of independence that rules in too many hearts and heads and churches today. And that’s why on this Communion Sunday on this Independence Weekend, I renounce my independence and encourage you to renounce yours. Indeed if we are human beings, and especially if we are for-real Christians, we are highly dependent—first on the head, who is Christ, and then we are interdependent on others. We are interdependent, not independent.

## **I Declare My Dependence on Christ**

### **Rooted in Reality**

Humanity, despite its artistic pretensions, its sophistication and many accomplishments, owes the fact of its existence to a six- inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.

Source Unknown.

"Since God has put [God’s] work into your weak hands, look not for long ease here: You must feel the full weight of your calling: a weak [person] with a strong God."

Lady Culross to John Livingston of the Covenanters, quoted in *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*, Ruth Bell Graham, 1991, Focus on the Family Publishing, p. 23.

Let me make it even plainer—if you ever think you're in control, just remember that a submicroscopic creature has turned our world upside down—sickened us, killed us, kept us at home, brought our economy to its knees, displayed American incompetence and paralyzing polarization for the whole world to see, and helped kick off the greatest of social upheaval since the 1960s. Not bad for a little bug!

### **Rooted in Redemption**

I declare my dependence because I'm in touch with reality. But also declare it because I'm in touch with redemption—that is, I am deeply aware of what Paul is alluding to when he talks about taking “into ourselves the body, the very life, of Christ.” Paul is first reminding me that Jesus paid the cost to be the boss. He talks about that cost, that sacrifice Three chapters earlier when he says this (1 Corinthians 7, Message): 23-24 All of you, slave and free both, were once held hostage in a sinful society. Then a huge sum was paid out for your ransom. So please don't, out of old habit, slip back into being or doing what everyone else tells you. Friends, stay where you were called to be. God is there. Hold the high ground with him at your side.” Hook those verses up with Paul's declaration in Galatians 3 (NRSV), “26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

There isn't enough time to talk about how much these verses meant to African slaves praying and working for their freedom. Let me just say that they, and any Christians who could read outside of the pernicious doctrine of white supremacy, knew that all people were equal in the sight of God and that redemption was available to all of them. Slaves saw what slaveowners missed; blacks saw what whites missed; the poor saw what the rich missed; the illiterate saw what the supposedly learned missed. We are all utterly dependent on God, we are leveled at the feet of that same God, and we are all accountable to that same God. We are all the recipients of a great and glorious gift from God and that is the gift of redemption.

The bottom line is that I am dependent—not just physically, but spiritually. I'm dependent—dependent on the one in whom I live and move and have my being; ...who asked me to be faithful until death;... told me that if I would persevere and be patient I would inherit the promises of God;... reminded me that God would never let me be tempted beyond what I could stand and what I could bear and before I got to the breaking point, He would make a way out of no way, a bridge across my troubled waters;...promised me that He would never leave me nor forsake— and even when I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, I don't have to fear any evil, for He is with me. He assured me that I could do all things through Him and that whatever my needs might be, He would supply them. He's totally committed to me and He asks me to be totally committed to Him, because I am dependent—dependent on the One whose blood purchased forgiveness for our sins (Mt.26:28); ...made it possible for God's Spirit to remain in us and for us to remain in the Spirit (Jn.6:56)... reconciled our long overdue accounts and debts to God (Col.1:20). ... weaved robes of righteousness that cover our weakness and

imperfection and allow a Holy God to have fellowship with us. ... washed our sinful minds and hearts, gave us His mind, and made it possible for us to see things from a Godly perspective (Heb.9:14). ... dissolved the chains of sinful thinking and sinful living that held us so long and so tightly and He made it possible for us to say “No” to the Devil and “Yes” to God (Rev.1:5). ... purchased the Church back from the Devil and with the same blood He is washing and purifying that church, His bride, so that one day He will return to receive Her without spot or blemish (1Jn.1:7; Rev.7:14).

I declare my dependence on Christ.

### **I Declare My Interdependence on Others, especially other believers**

My identity is not solely rooted in my relationship with God or with the Son of God, Jesus. The problem and the promise is that if we are children of God, then, of course, we are also members of family that has many children and we are related to those children, responsible for those children, connected to those children. They are our brothers and sisters—no matter how similar or different they are from us in appearance, temperament, personality, likes or dislikes. They are our brothers and sisters—wherever they might be in the world. As he puts it in this morning’s text, “Our many-ness becomes our oneness.”

But here’s the rub. We couldn’t be one when white churches were preaching “Slave, obey your master,” while Black Christians were singing, “And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave; I’ll go home to my God and be free.” We couldn’t be one nation under God as long as some states insisted on holding people in bondage and resisting redemption while others, like President Lincoln, understood, as one writer has said “that the death and destruction wrought by the [Civil] war was divine retribution to the U.S. for possessing slavery, [and] that God may will that the war continue “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword”.<sup>[3]</sup> We couldn’t be one when the Klan met in a white church at one end of town, while anti-lynching activists, legal desegregation lawyers, civil rights and voting rights organizers meet in black churches in another part of town. We couldn’t be one then.

And we still can’t be one—not when whites can kill a black jogger named Ahmaud Arbery and take two months to be arrested while black George Floyd gets a nine-minute knee to the neck and a death sentence for allegedly using counterfeit money to buy cigarettes. We still can’t be one when whites in Boston hold an average of \$250,000 in wealth and blacks hold an average of \$8 in wealth. We can’t be one when to be brown or black in the current epidemic is to be subject to death rates that are 50-500% greater than your representation in the population. And we certainly can’t be one when the overwhelming majority of white evangelicals excuse and enable any and all of our current President’s racist, misogynist, homophobic, and science-denying pronouncements in exchange for a Supreme Court that still refuses to give them the rulings they want. Ah, what does it profit a person to gain a Supreme Court justice and lose your own soul?”

Thank God, all is not lost. I close my sermon as Frederick Douglass closed his 4th of July speech. “Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day

presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. "The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope."<sup>[4]</sup>

Clear about my utter dependence on God in Christ and my utter interdependence with you, my sisters and brothers, I face the future, not just for America, but for God's creation, with hope and joy. Hope and joy for the thousands, yes hundreds of thousands of many races, religions, and languages, marching across this country and this globe, embracing and proclaiming the message that "Black Lives Matter."; working to make words like equality and equity flesh and laws and policies and practices. I have hope and joy for that small number of evangelicals who refused to sell their votes for photo ops and some Supreme Court nominations and who sometimes paid a high price for refusing to obey the modern-day Pharisees and Sadducees. I have hope for the tearing down of that principality called white supremacy and it's allied power called black and brown inferiority. I have hope for a People who seriously realize that they are part of (2 Peter 2:9) ...a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [they] may declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light." They're not drinking the poisoned Kool-aid of "rugged individualism" or social Darwinism. They know that they are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ; that they are new creatures and while they haven't been all they needed to be, and may not be all they want to be, they can thank God they aren't what they used to be. These are the Somebodies, that others may have labeled nobodies, yet they realize that they are the inheritors of a great legacy of faith and overcoming—that their ancestors came to this country, perhaps by choice, but in this congregation called Bethel, most likely in chains. And though they arrived here bereft of rights, forfeit of family, largely unconscious of culture, and defined as dirt, they refused to quit, refused to die, refused to stop dreaming, hoping, singing, celebrating, resisting, and passing on to the next generation the prayers of a people who could yet proclaim, "Tell old Pharoah, to let my people go."

6. Deeply conscious of their redemption and interdependence, they can declare to God in the words of the old hymn:

I need Thee , Oh I need Thee / Ev'ry hour I need Thee!  
O bless me now, my Savior / I come to Thee.

And can declare to family, friends, fellow-saints and neighbors

I need you, you need me.

We're all a part of God's body.

Stand with me, agree with me.

We're all a part of God's body.

It is God's will that every need be supplied.

You are important to me, I need you to survive.

This Fourth of July I renounce my independence.

[1] From "History of the Fourth: When in the Course of Human Events" in A Capitol Fourth: America's Independence Celebration. <http://www.pbs.org/capitolfourth/history.html>

[2] From "What To The Slave Is 4th of July?" by Frederick Douglass (1817-1885)" at Chicken Bones: A Journal for Literary and Artistic African-American Themes. <http://www.nathanielturner.com/fourthofjulyspeech.htm>.

[3] Wikipedia. "Abraham Lincoln's 2nd Inaugural Address." Found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham\\_Lincoln%27s\\_second\\_inaugural\\_address](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln%27s_second_inaugural_address). 4 July 2020

[4] Document: "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass July 5, 1852 Found at <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>. 4 July 2020

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