

The Christian and Civil Government (32nd)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America as took place in Virginia. It gives more insights regarding the times of John Leland and the persecutions in this colony prior to religious freedom.)

In our last podcast we saw some of the sufferings in Virginia of those who were not of the established religion. However, there were some who aided and assisted the Baptists during this time. One such man was Patrick Henry. Allow me to quote from the *History of the Baptists in Virginia* by Robert Semple, page 41, as he wrote around the time of 1774, regarding John Waller, John Shackelford, and Robert Ware being put in jail.

From the beginning, the Baptists were unremitting in their exertions to obtain liberty of conscience; they contended that they could not be imprisoned by any existing law; that they were entitled to the same privileges that were enjoyed by the dissenters in England. Their judges, however, decided otherwise, and as there was no regular appeal, the propriety of that decision has not been legally ascertained. [In a footnote at this point it was stated: In the trial of this question before the courts of the colony, with Peyton Randolph representing the one side, and the Rev. Samuel Davies the other, they latter obtained from the law offices of the Crown of England an opinion that the act of the Colonial Assembly of October, 1705 (Hening's Statues III., p. 380), gave effect in the colony to the Toleration Act of I. William and Mary.] The prevailing opinion in the present day is that their imprisonment was unlawful. When they could not succeed in this, they resorted to the general court, for the purpose of obtaining licensed places for preaching, etc., agreeably to the Toleration law in England.

It was in making these attempts that they were so fortunate as to interest in their behalf the celebrated Patrick Henry. Being always the friend of liberty, he only needed to be informed of their oppression, when without hesitation, he stepped forward to their relief. From that day until the day of their complete emancipation from the shackles of tyranny, the Baptists found in Patrick Henry an unwavering friend.

While other examples could be given of Patrick Henry defending Baptists and supporting freedom of liberty, I trust I will not weary the audience by giving another example. This is taken from the biography of Patrick Henry by his grandson William Wirt Henry. This was published in three volumes and has the title of *Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence and Speeches*. The following is taken from pages 118-119 of Volume I.

A characteristic incident of the times, and of Mr. Henry, was preserved and related by Rev. John Weatherford, one of the Baptist ministers. He was imprisoned for five months in the jail of Chesterfield, of which county Colonel Archibald Cary was the presiding magistrate, on the charge of creating a disturbance by preaching. By the aid of Mr. Henry he obtained an order of liberation. But the jailer refused to release him until the jail fees were paid, which from the length of his imprisonment were a considerable sum, much larger than the poor minister could pay. He was therefore forced to remain in prison. Not long afterward he was informed that some one [*sic*], whose name was concealed, had paid the charges, and he was set at liberty. With a thankful heart he walked out of the prison. More than twenty years afterward, upon removal of Mr. Henry to Charlotte County, he became a neighbor of Mr. Weatherford, who was then the pastor of a church near by [*sic*], and in recounting their

early experiences in the struggles for civil and religious liberty Mr. Weatherford learned for the first time that Mr. Henry had paid for him the fees demanded by the Chesterfield jailer. It need hardly be added, as stated by his biographer, that he never spoke of Mr. Henry but with a glow of affection.

While Mr. Henry was for religious freedom, he favored the idea of establishing all denominations alike and that they be supported by the State. Charles F. James, quoted from R. B. C. Howell's *Early Baptists of Virginia* in his book entitled *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, on page 98, as follows:

Meantime, a new theory of a State religious establishment was devised, and began, in private circles, to be warmly discussed. This theory had its origin with the Presbyterians, and was in their subsequent memorials tenaciously and elaborately advocated. It proposed, not the abrogation of the State religious establishment, the measure demanded by the Baptists, but that the State, instead of selecting one denomination, as the Episcopal, and establishing that as the religion of the State, and giving to that alone its support, should establish all the denominations—Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, as well as Episcopalians—and make them all equally and alike the religion of the State and to be supported by the State. ... Of this plan of reconciling and harmonizing all parties Patrick Henry was the ablest and most eloquent advocate.

From this we find that the Baptists alone of all religions not only labored for religious freedom but also that no religion (no not the Baptists) should receive support from civil government. In other words, Caesar (civil government) not only has no place in the house of God but it is not to support any religious system. To further support that it was the Baptists, and the Baptists alone, that battled and worked for full and total freedom of religion from civil government in Virginia, Charles James quoted from six sources that were not of "Baptist authority" and that they "were the principal promoters" in this work. (See pages 96-97.) For a fuller picture and more details of the struggles in Virginia I would recommend James' excellent book. He proves beyond any reasonable doubt that we owe the freedom of religion that we have experienced in the country to the Baptists and eventually we will see the tremendous role that John Leland had in this freedom being put into our Constitution. However, it must not be omitted that Thomas Jefferson and James Madison contributed much to secure religious freedom in Virginia, as well as it being a part of the Constitution. Nevertheless, while Presbyterians and other reformers often advance the idea that religious freedom is a product of reformed theology, history proves otherwise. I must confess that I am in a dilemma as to whether I should or should not supply lengthy quotes to document some of the details revolving around the securing religious freedom in Virginia and the vital role of Virginia ratifying the Constitution and the First Amendment being in the Bill of Rights due to the influence of the Baptist. I do not want to impose on the patience of you who listen to this podcast by doing so, but, on the other hand, there is much history that is lost to the people of today that needs to be emphasized and taught so that Baptists may know of their heritage. For those of you who take the time and energy to read and desire to know more details of this rich heritage, allow me again to refer you to previous podcasts and the resources I have mentioned. Charles James has astutely said, "The world—even the Christian world—was slow to understand and to lay hold of the true principle of soul liberty—a principle which had always been fundamental with the Baptists, and which, in the providence of God, they were destined to teach to their fellows." (*Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, on page 141.) It is extremely sad that many professing Baptists (as well as the public in general) of today know nothing of this truth. What is more depressing is that it appears that this nation has not only lost this

valuable history, but that the right of religious liberty is being denied by the general population as well as by the government that rules over us. Obviously, when a people forget the Creator of the universe and He leaves them to their own “wisdom” they will destroy themselves and fall under the hand of tyranny.

Our time is up for today. The Lord willing we will provide more history of the struggle for religious freedom and the role of John Leland in the First Amendment of the Constitution in future podcasts. As Don M. Fearheily said in his historical novel of Leland, “He was a Baptist. He was a preacher. He lived during the stirring times of the Revolution. He fought for religious freedom and saw the triumph of his ideals. Baptists owe a lot to John Leland. So does America.” (*The John Leland Story*, page 8.) Farewell.