

The Christian and Civil Government (35th)

(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 his influence in getting James Madison elected to the House of Representatives and the Bill of Rights added to the Constitution.)

Our last podcast showed the influence of John Leland in sending James Madison to the Continental Congress to ratify the Constitution of the United States in 1788. However, the Constitution as it stood was not clear enough for the Baptists. They thought that the Constitution at that time lacked specific guarantees of individual right. In 1789, the first Congress submitted the first constitutional amendments and it was James Madison that introduced those amendments. There were some who opposed the amendments because they believed that since the Constitution was so new that they ought not to be quick to change it. Nevertheless, Madison had pledged his support to the Baptists and he considered himself duty bound to submit the amendments. He told the House of Representatives that he believed himself “bound in honor and in duty” to see that the amendments were brought to a vote immediately. At first there were twelve amendments submitted, but the states only ratified ten of them. The first two were not ratified and the third amendment became the first which stated “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” These ten amendments were adopted to become the Bill of Rights to the Constitution on December 12, 1791. However, the life and influence of John Leland should be brought to our attention in order to understand somewhat the history between June 21, 1788, and December 12, 1791.

After the Constitution was ratified, the next step was to organize a new government. George Washington was elected as President and Thomas Jefferson was selected as Secretary of State. What should be the post for the “Father of the Constitution,” James Madison. Naturally, some notable place would be occupied by him, but that was not the case. Charles James, in *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, page 159, summed it up this way.

The situation in Virginia was different from that of any of the other ratifying States, in that “the politics of the legislature were at variance with the sense of the people, expressed by their representatives in the convention.” The Legislature, being dominated by [Patrick] Henry and opposed to the Constitution, was hostile to Madison, and when he was nominated by his friends for the United States Senate, he was defeated. ... This left Mr. Madison to run for a seat in the House of Representatives, which he preferred.

Madison was well aware of his opposition and the task before him. James (on page 160) quoted from the *Writings of Madison*, Vol. I, from a letter of his to Mr. Jefferson while he was at Philadelphia. It was dated December 8, 1788, and is as follows:

I shall leave this place in a day or two for Virginia, where my friends, who wish me to coöperate in putting our political machine into activity as a member of the House of Representatives, press me to attend. They made me a candidate for the Senate, for which I had not allotted my pretensions. The attempt was defeated by Mr. Henry, who is omnipotent in the present Legislature, and who added to the expedients common on such occasions a public philippic [i.e., a bitter attack or denunciation, especially a verbal one] against my

Federal principles. He has taken equal pains, in forming the counties into districts for the election of representatives, to associate with Orange [his resident county] such as are most devoted to his politics and most likely to be swayed by the prejudice excited against me. From the best information I have of the prevailing temper of the district, I conclude that my going to Virginia will answer no other purpose than to satisfy the opinions and entreaties of my friends.

Nevertheless, with all the opposition and politics against Madison, James said, “And as, in the case of his candidacy for a seat in the Convention, John Leland and his Baptist following turned the scale in Madison’s favor in Orange, so now, when running for Congress, it was the large Baptist element in his district which turned prospective defeat into victory and secured his triumph over all opposing forces.” (Page 163)

Regarding the Constitution as it was originally ratified, the Baptists were the only denomination in Virginia that expressed any dissatisfaction with it. The Baptist General Committee in Virginia had open “correspondence with the Baptists in the other states, especially in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York, with John Leland at the head of the committee.” (Page 167) Along this line, William Cathcart wrote, “Denominationally, no community asked for this change in the Constitution but the Baptists. The Quakers would probably have petitioned for it if they had thought of it, but they did not. John Adams and the Congregationalists did not desire it, the Episcopalians did not wish for it, it went too far for most Presbyterians in Revolutionary times, or in our own days when we hear much about putting the Divine name in the Constitution. The Baptists asked it through Washington; the request commended itself to his judgment and to the generous soul of Madison, and to the Baptists, beyond a doubt, belongs the glory of engrafting its best article on the noblest Constitution ever framed for the government of mankind.” *Baptist Patriots and the American Revolution*, pp. 109-111.

Cathcart mentioned that Baptists sought the aid of President Washington in securing religious freedom. We will supply you with the letter sent to him as prepared by John Leland as well as Washington’s reply. However, we will have to postpone this for the next podcast because it is too lengthy to insert with the study today.

Allow me at this time to add some comments as to why the Baptists fought so hard for religious liberty. I am quoting from an address given by Charles F. James “before the Baptist Young People’s Union of Virginia, Charlottesville, March 15, 1899.” This is found in Appendix A in his *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*.

1. In the first place, *Baptist principles furnish the only true basis and guarantee of religious liberty*. By religious liberty is meant the right of every one to worship God, or not, according to the dictates of his own conscience, and to be held accountable to none but God for his belief and practice. It differs from religious toleration, however broad and liberal, in that toleration implies the right to withhold, or to refuse license, whereas religious liberty means that the civil power has nothing to do with a man’s religion except to protect him in the enjoyment of his rights. Now, let us see how this principle is grounded in certain fundamental tenets of our denomination.

(1) We hold that religion is and must be perfectly *voluntary*, that nothing except a voluntary surrender to Christ, and a voluntary service under him, is acceptable to God, and hence that no earthly power, parental, social, civil, or ecclesiastical, has any right to compel conformity to any creed, or to any form of worship. It is for this reason that Baptists have always opposed the support of religion by taxation....

(2) Another fundamental principle of the Baptists is that of a *converted church membership*. This grows out of the spirituality of Christ’s kingdom....

(3) Another fundamental principle of Baptists is that Christ is the only king in Zion, and that his will, as revealed in the New Testament, is the only rule of faith and practice. They believe in rendering “to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” but they do not believe in rendering to Caesar “the things that are God’s.” Hence their refusal to recognize the right of the civil authorities to regulate their faith, or their practice, or to dictate to them as to whether they shall preach the Gospel, and if so, when and where and how. It has not been out of any rebellious or anarchistic spirit that they have ever refused to obey man rather than God. It is not sectarian bigotry, nor blind adherence to outward forms, that has ever prompted them to resist and denounce the mutilation and multiplication of the ordinances of the Gospel. It is out of loyalty to the great head of the Church, their only Lord and Master, to whom, and to whom alone, they are accountable, that they have sought to do just what he commanded, and to oppose all taking from, and all adding to, the divine prescript.

Our time is up for today and, the Lord willing, we will supply you with John Leland’s letter to President George Washington and his reply in our next podcast. Farewell.