

## Church History (60): Baptists and the Revolutionary War

### I. Baptists and the Revolutionary War

1. *The Revolutionary War (1775-1783)*. "Since their foundation, the British colonies in North America had enjoyed a measure of autonomy. This was aided by the political and religious convulsions that shook England during the seventeenth century, making it more difficult for the British government to exercise authority overseas. Given these circumstances, many of the colonies had organized their government and their trade as best suited them, and not as best suited the interests of England. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the British government began seeking more direct rule in the colonies, and the latter reacted vigorously against this encroachment by royal authorities" (Gonzalez).<sup>1</sup> Gonzalez then suggested three primary reasons tension grew between England and the colonies: first, the British quartered seventeen regiments in the colonies; second, taxes were a constant point of friction; third, there were conflicts over Indian lands.<sup>2</sup> "This led the colonial militia to build up its arsenals, and in 1775, when British forces threatened to destroy one of those arsenals, the militia offered resistance, and thus began the American War of Independence. On July 4, 1776, more than a year later, delegates from each of the thirteen colonies, calling themselves the Continental Congress, gathered in Philadelphia to proclaim their independence from Britain" (Gonzalez).<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the war, Baptists had been fighting for liberty from forced state taxes, to support non-Baptist ministers. "Down to the Revolution, all the colonies, with the exception of Rhode Island, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, had a Church established either by law or custom as the rightful controller of the spiritual interests of the people, and those of Massachusetts and Virginia were peculiarly intolerant. In these the influence of the Baptists, as the champions of religious equality, was especially felt, as they resisted the legislative, judicial and executive departments combined (Northern colonies were Congregational and Southern were Anglican)" (Armitage).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Baptist in general saw in the rising leadership of the colonies, a separation of church and state, that would allow them to worship God according to their conscience. It was for this reason, the majority of Baptist ministers and churches, fought for independence in the Revolutionary War. Many Baptist ministers become close friends with George Washington and others served as chaplains in his army. "Several Baptist ministers served as chaplains, for out of twenty-one whose names are now known, six of them, or nearly one third of the number, were our own brethren, who rendered marked service, some of them being of national reputation and influence" (Armitage).<sup>5</sup>

That the Baptists had confidence in the newly budding American Government, is evident in that they sent a delegation, led by Isaac Backus (1724-1806), a Baptist minister in Massachusetts, to the first Continental Congress. Backus was sent by the Warren Baptist Association (Rhode Island) to Philadelphia to first meet with other Baptist Associations to collectively present Congress with a unified plea for religious toleration. Backus carried a resolve that summarized the desires of the Warren Association: "This county, confiding in the wisdom and integrity of the Continental Congress, now sitting at Philadelphia, will pay all due respect and submission to such measures as may be recommended by them to the colonies, for the restoration and establishment of our just rights, civil and religious."<sup>6</sup> Backus also carried a resolve from an Association of twenty Baptist churches from Medfield, Massachusetts:

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<sup>1</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2:319

<sup>2</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2:319-320

<sup>3</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2:320

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:777

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:793

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Backus, *A History of New England Baptists*, 2:200

To the honorable delegates of the several colonies in North America, met in a general congress at Philadelphia: HONORABLE GENTLEMEN: As the Anti-pedobaptist churches in New England are most heartily concerned for the preservation and defense of the rights and privileges of this country, and are deeply affected by the encroachments upon the same, which have lately been made by the British Parliament, and are willing to unite with our dear countrymen, vigorously to pursue every prudent measure for relief; so we would beg leave to say that, as a distinct denomination of Protestants, we conceive that we have an equal claim to charter rights with the rest of our fellow-subjects; and yet have long been denied the free and full enjoyment of those rights, as to the support of religious worship. Therefore we, the elders and brethren of twenty Baptist churches, met in association at Medfield, twenty miles from Boston, September 14, 1774, have unanimously chosen and sent unto you the reverend and beloved Mr. Isaac Backus, as our agent, to lay our case, in these respects, before you, or otherwise to use all the prudent means he can for our relief.<sup>7</sup>

The Baptists began their presentation before Congress, with a reading from Mr. Manning, a Baptist minister from Massachusetts, "of our chief grievances in Massachusetts, on religious accounts."

It has been said by a celebrated writer in politics, that but two things were worth contending for – Religion and Liberty. For the latter we are at present nobly exerting ourselves through all this extensive continent; and surely no one whose bosom feels the patriot glow in behalf of civil liberty, can remain torpid to the more ennobling flame of RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. The free exercise of private judgment, and the unalienable rights of conscience, are of too high a rank and dignity to be subjected to the decrees of councils, or the imperfect laws of fallible legislators. The merciful Father of mankind is the alone Lord of conscience. Establishments may be enabled to confer worldly distinctions and secular importance. They may make hypocrites, but cannot create Christians. They have been reared by craft or power, but liberty never flourished perfectly under their control. That liberty, virtue, and public happiness can be supported without them, this flourishing province (Pennsylvania) is a glorious testimony; and a view of it would be sufficient to invalidate all the most elaborate arguments ever adduced in support of them. Happy in the enjoyment of these undoubted rights, and conscious of their high import, every lover of mankind must be desirous, as far as opportunity offers, of extending and securing the enjoyment of these inestimable blessings.

It may now be asked – *What is the liberty desired?* The answer is; as the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, and religion is a concern between God and the soul with which no human authority can intermeddle; consistently with the principles of Christianity, and according to the dictates of Protestantism, we claim and expect the liberty of worshipping God according to our consciences, not being obliged to support a ministry we cannot attend, whilst we humble ourselves as faithful subjects. These we have undoubted right to, as men, as Christians, and by charter as inhabitants of Massachusetts Bay.<sup>8</sup>

The confidence of the Baptist in George Washington (and other newly elected colonial leaders), can be further illustrated in an event that occurred after the war. In 1789, the Association of Baptist Churches in Virginia sent a letter to "General Washington, the new President of the Republic," concerning their

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<sup>7</sup> Alvah Hovey, *The Life and Times of Isaac Backus*, 202

<sup>8</sup> Alvah Hovey, *The Life and Times of Isaac Backus*, 204-210

continued taxation at the hand of the State (to support non-Baptists ministers). Washington's response was in part: "If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution framed by the Convention where I had the honor to preside might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution. For, you doubtless remember, I have often expressed my sentiments that any man, conducting himself as a good citizen and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience."<sup>9</sup> Washington ended the letter by saying: "While I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members have been, throughout America, uniformly and almost universally the firm friends to civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious revolution, I cannot hesitate to believe that they will be the faithful supporters of a free yet efficient general government. Under this pleasing expectation, I rejoice to assure them that they may rely upon my best wishes and endeavors to advance their prosperity."<sup>10</sup>

Following the war, Isaac Backus asked the question: "Since the Baptist have often been oppressed in this land, and would have suffered more than they did, had it not been for restraints from Great Britain, how came they to join in a war against her?" He then provided five basic reasons: "(1) Where Episcopalians have had all the power of government, they have never allowed others so much liberty as we here enjoyed. In England all are taxed to their worship, while none are admitted into civil offices but communicants in their church. In Virginia they cruelly imprisoned Baptist ministers, only for preaching the gospel to perishing souls without license from their courts, until this war compelled them to cease therefrom. Therefore we could have no rational hopes of any real advantage in joining with them. (2) The worst treatment we here met with came from the same principles, and much of it from the same persons, as the American war did. (3) The first Baptist minister in America publicly held forth, that all righteous government is founded in compact, expressed or implied; which is equally binding upon rulers and ruled; so that every officer, whether succeeding or elected, who intermeddles in any matter not fairly derived from thence, goes beyond his commission. When therefore our countrymen adopted these principles, and founded their opposition to arbitrary claims wholly thereon, how could we avoid joining with them? (4) Those claims appeared to us absolutely unjust, and a direct violation of the immutable rules of truth and equity; so that a concurrence with them would have brought such guilt upon our consciences, as is infinitely worse than all the frowns of men. (5) Though heavy corrections were to be expected, yet a strong hope was begotten of final deliverance to this land; the good effects whereof might hereafter return to the people who now invaded our rights. It is not pretended that our denomination were all agreed, or had equal clearness in these points; but a majority of them were, more or less, influenced thereby."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to Isaac Backus, other men such as John Gano (1727-1804), John Leland (1754-1841), and Richard Furman (1755-1825), were Baptist ministers who served as chaplains in the war. "Isaac Backus and John Leland both fought against religious oppression as colonialists and as among the first generation of citizens of the new country, the United States of America. Both had deep conversion experiences and both preached earnestly for the salvation of their hearers. Both changed from Congregationalist affliction to Baptist conviction. They were both politically active and unrelenting as advocates of separation of church and state. They knew the value of and worked for the written guarantee of religious

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<sup>9</sup> George Washington, as quoted in Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:806-807

<sup>10</sup> George Washington, as quoted in Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:807

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Backus, *A History of New England Baptists*, 2:197-198

liberty" (Nettles).<sup>12</sup> "John Leland was born in Grafton, Massachusetts, in 1754 and died in Cheshire, Massachusetts in 1841. He spent more than fifteen years in Virginia, from 1777-1792, and contributed greatly toward the disestablishment of a state church in both states. The Declaration of Independence, the Revolution, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, the initiation of a two-party system, friendships with George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Andrew Jackson, all made the life and times of John Leland remarkable and memorable" (Nettles).<sup>13</sup>

Scarcely was the first shot fired at Lexington, when every Baptist on the continent sprang to his feet and hailed its echo as the pledge of deliverance, as well from domestic as foreign oppressors. They were amongst the first to suffer and to sacrifice. This required plain, honest men, of Leland's will and nerve, to meet this state of things and he never flinched, nor did his Virginia brethren. They organized their resistance as a denomination, and in May, 1775, sixty Churches met at the Dover Church, when their representatives resolved to address the Convention which Virginia had called to consider the state of the country. The address of the Baptists is spread upon the Journal of this political body. It states that they were alarmed at the oppressions which hung over America, and had determined that war should be made with Great Britain, that many of their brethren had enlisted as soldiers, and many more were ready to do so, and that they would encourage their young ministers to serve as chaplains in the army which should resist Great Britain.<sup>14</sup>

John Gano was born in Hopewell, NJ, in 1727, and ordained to the ministry May, 1754. He was sent by the Philadelphia Association to make two missionary journeys in the South. "In 1756, he was invited to pastor a church in North Carolina. After two years, he relocated to New York, and eventually assumed the pastorate of that church for nearly twenty-six years, excepting the time he was obliged to be absent on account of the war. After the war, Gano returned to NY, only to leave for KY in 1787, where he pastored another church until his death in 1804." (Sprague).<sup>15</sup> "Mr. Gano was, for some time, a Chaplain in the War of the Revolution; and, by his earnest prayers and patriotic counsels, did much to encourage his countrymen in their struggle for national freedom" (Sprague).<sup>16</sup> "Gano's activities as a chaplain in the Revolutionary War showed great courage and resolute commitment to the gospel. His accounts of the engagements to which he was witness and in which he always was in danger are vivid but simple. One example, may suffice. Under command of General John Sullivan, the brigade encamped for six weeks and became restless. On Saturday, Sullivan received orders to move out on Monday. He did not want to let the troops know until after services on Sunday and told Gano not to mention it. Gano selected as his text that day, 'Being ready to depart on the morrow.' During battle, Gano was required to remain with the surgeons. During the heat of one battle, however, Gano got in front of the regiment. Though he could have left quickly to go to his appointed place, as he gives the account: 'I durst not quit my place, for fear of damping the spirits of the soldiers. Or of bringing on me an imputation of cowardice. Rather than do either, I chose to risk my fate. This circumstance gave an opportunity to the young officers of talking; and I believe it had a good effect upon some of them'" (Nettles).<sup>17</sup>

His attachment to his country, as a citizen, was unshaken, in the times which tried men's souls; and, as a Chaplain in the army for a term of years, while excluded from his church

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Nettles, *The Baptists*, 2:51

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Nettles, *The Baptists*, 2:58-59

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:789

<sup>15</sup> William Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*, 1:63

<sup>16</sup> William Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*, 1:64

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Nettles, *The Baptists*, 2:116-117

and home, he rendered it essential service. Preserving his moral dignity with the purity which becomes a gospel minister, he commanded respect from the officers; and, by his condescension and kindness, won the affections of the soldiers, inspiring them, by his example, with his own courage and firmness, while toiling with them through military scenes of hardship and danger. He lived to a good old age; served his generation according to the will of God; saw his posterity multiplying around him; his country independent, free and happy; and Church of Christ, for which he felt and labored, advancing. And thus he closed his eyes in peace; his heart expanding with the sublime hope of immortality and heavenly bliss.<sup>18</sup>

"Richard Furman was born in NY, in 1755, but, while an infant, his parents removed to South Carolina and settled on the High Hills of Santee. After becoming a Christian at the age of eighteen, he began to preach, and was ordained as pastor of the Hills Baptist Church (1774). He was scarcely twenty-two when the Revolution commenced, and he threw all his powers into the American cause. When the British invaded South Carolina he was obliged to retire into North Carolina and Virginia, and afterwards Cornwallis put a price on his head. In Virginia he became intimate with Patrick Henry. In 1787 he accepted the pastoral charge of the Baptist Church in Charleston, where he remained for eight and thirty years" (Armitage).<sup>19</sup> On July 4, 1802 (on the twenty-sixth anniversary of the Day of Independence), Furman preached a sermon entitled, *America's Deliverance and Duty*, from Exodus 13:3, "Remember this Day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the House of Bondage; for by strength of Hand the Lord brought you out from this place." "Whatever specific differences may be noticed as existing between the origin of the Jewish theocracy, and the rise, independence and establishment of these United States; yet it must be acknowledged there is a striking similarity; and if we have not received an *express command* from heaven to remember the day of our deliverance; yet, *the analogy of holy-writ* unites with reason and gratitude to declare it a duty. By their united voice, we are directed to recollect the merciful interpositions of the Deity in our favor; and devoutly to acknowledge the obligations we are brought under to His delivering and preserving goodness."<sup>20</sup>

He then suggested two main headings: "1st. That there is a great reason to believe, the American Revolution was effected by the special agency of God. 2dly. What duties and obligations are incumbent on our citizens, in consequence of His kind interposition."<sup>21</sup> With respect to the first point, Furman offered five reasons to believe, the American Revolution was effected by the special agency of God:<sup>22</sup> (1) The justice of our cause. "The principle of right, taken both in a moral and political sense, forms a strong argument in our favor. God is the patron of those who are engaged in the cause of justice; and on this principle America withstood the claims of the British government." (2) The manner in which our citizens entered on, and supported the contest. "The congress, and other public bodies invested with authority; the governors of the states; general Washington, and other commanders of armies, acknowledged publicly, the necessity of our seeking Divine aid, and in their several spheres of authority, urged the performance of this duty." (3) The apparent interposition of Providence, in favor of the revolution. "Under this head we may notice, with propriety, the time when the contest began; in respect of the numbers, strength, and richness of the colonies; their general union, notwithstanding a diversity in habits and interests; and their possessing citizens, equal to the difficult services which were necessary for the council and the field. In these we may discover strong evidences of a kind superintending Providence. To which may be added, an apparent control over our enemies, manifested in the wrong

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Furman, as quoted by William Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*, 1:67

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:812-813

<sup>20</sup> Richard Furman, *Life and Works*, 392-393

<sup>21</sup> Richard Furman, *Life and Works*, 393

<sup>22</sup> Richard Furman, *Life and Works*, 394-401

measures adopted by them, in some instances; and the frustrations of their best concerted plans in others." (4) The happy termination of the war, and the consequences which followed. "The war was terminated in a manner truly glorious to America. She had been supported against the gigantic efforts of a powerful nation, was completely delivered from her oppressive designs, and from the calamities of the conflict with her, in a much shorter time than could have been reasonably expected; and this by means, that, in many instances, appeared to be quite inadequate to the end proposed. The formation of the federal constitution, and its adoption by the United States, must be ranked among the principal events which have manifested the kindness of Divine Providence, and its superintendence over our country since the war. We have also been since highly favored with peace, while a great part of the old world has been shaken with war. God has also smiled on the United States, by granting the effusions of His Spirit and grace to His churches among us; and by extending the influence of vital religion." (5) The original destination of this country, in the scheme of Divine Providence. "From what has transpired and exists, it seems reasonable to conclude, that it was originally designed as a sanctuary for religion and liberty; and a theatre, on which the power and excellency of both were to be exhibited to the greatest advantage."

Its first peopling from civilized nations, was generally by those who fled from tyranny and persecution. Its inhabitants have been distinguished for their adherence to religion and the rights of man. The first truly free government, in respect of religion, since Christianity began its progress, was formed here (i.e., the state of Rhode Island). The rapid increase of population, and advancement in civilization, its remote situation from the great powers of the old world, with all the advantages it possesses, of climate, soil, and extent of territory; and above all, the excellent constitution of its government, with the prevailing principles of religion among its inhabitants, are favorable to the sentiment. They encourage us to look forward, with pleasing hope, to a day when America will be the praise of the whole earth. Upon the whole, therefore, if God is the supporter of justice; if a reliable people who fear, worship Him, and seek His aid, are the proper objects of His paternal care; if a remarkable control over the minds and actions of individuals and nations, directing, or over ruling them for good, manifests His interposition; if events favorable to righteousness, to the honor of God, and the happiness of man, and these of extraordinary magnitude, are the proper effects of His interposing goodness; and, if His eternal counsels of loving kindness and mercy must have their completion, by means worthy of the author and the end. Then, surely, we may say: the American revolution was effected by the special agency of God.<sup>23</sup>

Concerning his second main heading (the duties incumbent on our citizens, in consequence of His gracious interposition), Furman provided a vast list of points: "gratitude to the great Author of our deliverance; improving the blessings He has conferred upon us; future reliance on His providence and grace for preservation and happiness." "So signal has been our deliverance, so excellent are the blessings conferred on this nation, that at every remembrance of them, our hearts should glow with love and gratitude to their great Author; and our lips should joyfully praise Him."<sup>24</sup> "Let us not rest satisfied with the establishment of republicanism alone, virtue must be added to make us truly respectable and happy. The Republican form of government, though the best for an enlightened, virtuous people; has, like all other human institutions, its imperfections. Let us give particular attention to the principles and conduct of those who are invested with public trust by the votes of the people. The virtuous and wise, alone, should be chosen."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Furman, *Life and Works*, 400-401

<sup>24</sup> Richard Furman, *Life and Works*, 401

<sup>25</sup> Richard Furman, *Life and Works*, 405