



Baptists and the American Revolution

Baptists Struggle for Political and Religious Freedom

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XX. The Baptists and The American Revolution

A. Baptists Struggle for Political and Religious Freedom

Baptists Appeal to the Continental Congress

The Baptists were among the first of the religious bodies to recognize the authority of the Continental Congress which assembled in Philadelphia, September 5, 1774. In eight days there was a Committee of Baptists, headed by Rev. Isaac Backus, who solemnly recognized its authority as the highest civil resort. They bore the following memorial from the Warren Association of the Baptist churches of New England: "This county, confiding in the wisdom and integrity of the Continental Congress, now sitting in Philadelphia, will pay all due respect and submission to such measures as may be recommended by them to the colonies, for the restoration of our just rights, civil and religious."¹

To the Honorable Delegates of the several colonies in North America, met in a general Congress in Philadelphia:

Honorable Gentlemen: As the Antipaedobaptist churches in New England are most heartily concerned for the preservation and defense of the rights and privileges of the country, and are deeply affected by the encroachments of 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 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 the twenty Boston churches met in Association at Medfield, twenty miles from Boston, September 14, 1744 [should be 1774], have unanimously chosen and sent unto you the reverend and beloved 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.

John Gano. *Moderator*, 2
Hezekiah Smith, *Clerk*.

Philadelphia Baptist Association

The Philadelphia Baptist Association, the oldest in America, likewise sent a Committee to assist the appeal from New England, as follows:

The case of our brethren suffering under ecclesiastical oppression in New England, being taken under consideration, it was agreed to recommend to our churches to contribute to their necessities, agreeable to the pattern of the primitive churches, who contributed to the relief of the distressed brethren in Judea.

The case of our brethren above considered induced us to appoint a committee of grievances, who may from time to time receive accounts of the sufferings and difficulties of our friends and brethren in the neighboring colonies; and meet as often as shall appear needful in the city of Philadelphia, to consult upon and to prosecute such measures for their relief, as they shall judge most expedient; and may correspond with the Baptist committee in the Massachusetts Bay, or elsewhere.³

1John T. Christian, II, pp. 229-230.

2John T. Christian, II, p. 230, and citing Backus, **A History of New England**, II.

3John T. Christian, II, p. 231, and citing **Minutes of the Philadelphia Association**, pp. 141-142.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

464

Dr. Samuel Jones, who assisted Backus in presenting the Baptist petition to the Continental Congress, preached the “Century Sermon” before the Philadelphia Association in 1807. He gave the following account:

When the first Congress met in this city, I was one of the committee under the appointment of your body, that...met with the delegates in the Continental Congress...to see if we could not obtain some security for that liberty, for which we were then fighting and

bleeding by their side. It seemed unreasonable to us, that we should be called upon to stand up with them in defense of liberty, if, after all, it was to be liberty of one party to oppress the other.

But our endeavors availed us nothing. One of them told us that if we meant to effect a change in their measures, respecting religion, we might as well attempt to change the course of the sun in the heavens.⁴

The constant plea of the Baptists was for liberty of conscience. To this memorial the Continental Congress gave a faithful hearing and a sympathetic reply as follows, under the date of December 9, 1774:⁵

On reading the memorial of the Reverend Isaac Backus, agent of the Baptist Churches in this government,

Resolved, That the establishment of civil and religious liberty, to each denomination in the province, is the sincere wish of this Congress. But being by no means vested with powers of civil government, whereby they can redress the grievances of any person whatever, they therefore recommend to the Baptist churches, that when a General Assembly shall be con-

vened in this colony, they lay the real grievances of said churches before the same, when and

where their petition will most certainly meet with all the attention due to the memorial of a denomination of Christians so well disposed to the public weal of their country.
By order of Congress,

John Hancock, *President*
Benjamin Lincoln, *Secretary*.⁶
A true extract from the minutes.

Christian commented,
The great dominating idea of America at this time was political liberty. They understood to a less degree the liberty of the human conscience, and do not fully grasp that conception even now. They were approximating the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The contest was certain to be of a long duration, and would demand exertions and sacrifices exceeding anything the colonies had previously experienced.⁷

B. Baptists take Stand for Revolution

Christian wrote,
Up to this date, as has been seen, the Baptists had been persecuted in the colonies, and their labors had been directed toward the overthrow of the iniquitous laws. The Revolutionary War opened up possibilities to overthrow the entire system of persecution. The Baptists were not slow to seize and improve the opportunity thus presented. They were everywhere the friends of liberty.

4John T. Christian, II, p. 232, and citing **Minutes**, pp. 459-460.

5John T. Christian, II, pp. 231-232, and citing Backus, II.

6John T. Christian, I, p. 389 and citing Backus, II. p. 202.

7 John T. Christian, II, pp. 220-221.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

465

When the surrender of Cornwallis was published in England, in the House of Commons, six months after this date, Fox adopted the words Chatham uttered at the beginning of the Revolution, and said: "Thank God that America has resisted the claims of the mother country."⁸ Christian continued, "Burke and other noted Englishmen expressed themselves in the same manner. The Baptists of England were on the side of America."⁹

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 for deliverance... They were among the first to suffer and to sacrifice, and then their enemies were mean

enough to charge them with ingratitude to the king who had interposed for their help in Massachusetts.¹⁰ Armitage continued,

Excepting in Virginia, the colonies, and not the mother government, laid the heavy yoke of religious oppression upon the Baptist neck. On several occasions they had appealed to the crown and their religious grievances had been redressed, as against their colonial oppressors. Hence, in the Revolution they were to fight a double battle: one with their political enemies on the other side of the sea, and the other with their religious tyrants on this side... the Baptists demanded both, and this accounts for the desperation with which they threw themselves into the struggle, so that we have no record of so much as one thorough Baptist history.¹¹

Down to the Revolution, with the exception of Rhode Island, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, all the colonies had a church established either by law or custom as the rightful controller of the spiritual interests of the people. 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. They were emboldened in this resistance, and by piece-meal efforts secured recognition of their rights.¹²

Rhode Island Favored Revolution

The little Baptist colony of Rhode Island had more to lose and less to gain than any of her sister colonies. Unlike Massachusetts and Virginia, she had no Governor appointed by the Crown, who could veto her acts of legislation. Bancroft stated that Rhode Island enjoyed “a form of government under its charter so thoroughly republican that no change was required beyond a renunciation of the King’s name, in the style of its public acts.”¹³

Although revolution would imperil her secured liberties, complete success in independence from Britain would add little to the rights already enjoyed. But failure in the revolution would endanger those rights, for very probably the Crown would then appoint a Governor and control her legislation, by the threat of veto power.¹⁴

Christian elaborated,

8John T. Christian, I, p. 386 and citing Hume, Smollett and Farr, **History of England**, III. pp. 155, 182.

9John T. Christian, I, p. 387 and citing Hall, **Works**, IV. p. 4849. New York, 1844.

10Thomas Armitage, p. 789.

11Thomas Armitage, p. 777.

12 Thomas Armitage, p. 777.

13 Thomas Armitage, p. 796 and citing **History of U. S.**, ix, p. 261.

14 Thomas Armitage, p. 796.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

466

The first colony to take an official stand against Great Britain was Rhode Island. This was twenty-two days before Virginia acted. However reluctant other portions of the continent may have been to entertain the idea of a final separation from the Mother Country, in this

colony the desire for absolute independence was early conceived and steadily followed.

The democratic character of Rhode Island enabled the legislature to represent fairly and fully the will of the people, and their will was, at all hazards, to preserve that charter, albeit at the expense of their former loyalty. ¹⁵

Christian stated,

May 4, 1776, just two months before the Declaration of Independence, Rhode Island withdrew and repudiated the rule of George III. This was thirty-two days before Virginia renounced allegiance.¹⁶

In an “act to repeal” the misdeeds of George III were included:

...entirely departing from the duties and character of a good king, instead of protecting, in

endeavoring to destroy the good people of this Colony, and of all the United Colonies, by

sending fleets and armies to America, to confiscate our property, and spread fire, sword, and desolation throughout our country, in order to compel us to submit to the most debasing and detestable tyranny; whereby we are obliged by necessity, and it becomes our highest duty, to use every means which God and nature have furnished us, in support of our invaluable

rights and privileges, to oppose that power which is exerted only for our destruction.¹⁷

Christian continued,

When the Constitution of the United States was adopted Rhode Island had long enjoyed freedom. Arnold says:

Rhode Island for more than a century and a half has enjoyed a freedom unknown to any of her compeers, and through more than half of that period her people had been involved with rival Colonies in a struggle for political existence and for the maintenance of those principles of civil and religious freedom which are now everywhere received in America.¹⁸

Christian concluded,

In large numbers they sent their sons to the army. The people were tremendously in earnest. They immediately removed the artillery from the royal fort to be used by the colonists. When the Declaration of Independence was announced they were enthusiastic with shouts of “liberty o’er and o’er the globe.”

“The Rhode Islanders were such ardent patriots,” wrote Farr, “that after the capture of the island by Sir Peter Parker, it required a great body of men to be kept there, in perfect idleness for three years to retain them in subjection.”¹⁹

The Baptists in Virginia also Took a Bold Stand

The Baptists organized their resistance as a denomination. In May, 1775, sixty churches met at the Dover Church, when their representatives resolved to address the

15 John T. Christian, II, p. 232 and citing Benjamin Cowell, **The Spirit of '76 in Rhode Island**, 42. Boston, 1850.

16 John T. Christian, I, p. 387 and citing Howison, **History of Virginia**, II. p. 138.

17 John T. Christian, II, p. 233, and citing Arnold, **History of the State of Rhode Island**, II.

18 John T. Christian, I, p. 388 and citing Arnold, **History of Rhode Island**, II. p. 563.

19 John T. Christian, II, p. 233 and citing Hume, Smollett and Farr, **History of England**, III.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

467

Convention which Virginia had called to consider the state of the country. According to Armitage,

they were alarmed at the oppressions which hung over America, and had determined that war should be made with Great Britain... Also, they declared that “Toleration by the civil

government is not sufficient; that no State religious establishment ought to exist; that all religious denominations ought to stand upon the same footing; and that to all alike the protection of the government should be extended, securing to them the peaceable enjoyment of their own religious principles and modes of worship.²⁰

The sixty churches also stated, “Make military resistance to Great Britain, in her

unjust invasion, tyrannical oppression and repeated hostilities” and we will sustain you, ministers and people.”²¹

They argued and fortified these positions, and they sent this memorial to the Convention by a Committee. This Convention instructed the Virginia delegates in Congress to declare American independence on May 15, 1776.²²

In his “Notes on Virginia,” Jefferson supplied some background on the problem.

Armitage summarized,

He states that at the time of the Revolution two-thirds of her population had become Dissenters; for the most part they were Quakers, Presbyterians and Baptists. By the intolerable sufferings and indefatigable labors of the Baptist preachers they had cherished and diffused their own love of liberty throughout the whole colony for half a century. Their memorial to the Convention had deeper root than the feeling of the hour; it was grounded in those evangelical convictions which were shared by a majority of the people in Virginia. That Virginia cast her royalists antecedents aside and loyally espoused the cause of the revolution was largely due to the fact that Baptist suffering, preaching and democratic practice had educated her people for the issue.

Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and James Madison

felt the throb of the public heart, saw that its patriotism was founded on religious conviction, and, like wise men, instead of stemming the strong tide they gave it their leadership... The Baptists of Virginia, however, did not rush hastily into this struggle, nor were they without a definite purpose; they counted the cost and anticipated the legitimate result of their position.²³

The records of the Colonial Convention of June, 20, 1776, recorded the petition

“of sundry persons of the Baptist Church, in the County of Prince William. In their petition they requested:

That they be allowed to worship God in their own way, without interruption; that they be permitted to maintain their own ministers and none others; that they may be married, buried and the like without paying the clergy of other denominations; that, *these things granted*, they will gladly unite with their brethren, and to the utmost of their ability promote the common cause.²⁴

Dr. Hawks wrote,

The Baptists were not slow to discover the advantageous position in which the political troubles of the country placed them. Their numerical strength was such as to make it

20 Thomas Armitage, p. 789.

21 Thomas Armitage, p. 797.

22 Thomas Armitage, p. 789.

23 Thomas Armitage, pp. 797-798.

24 Thomas Armitage, p. 798.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

468

important to both sides to secure their influence. They knew this, and therefore determined to turn the circumstance to their profit as a sect. Persecution had taught them not to love the Establishment, and they now saw before them a reasonable prospect of overturning it en-

tirely. In their Associating, they had calmly discussed the matter, and resolved upon their course; in this course they were consistent to the end, and the war which they waged against the church was a war of extermination.²⁵

Baptists of South Carolina Favored Revolution

Christian stated,

The Baptists of South Carolina likewise took a noble stand. Richard Furman, a young man, was pastor in Charleston.

He was an ardent advocate of rebellion. Everywhere, on stumps and in barns, as well as in pulpits, he preached resistance to Britain. Pursued by the Tories, young Furman fled to

the American camp, and there by his prayers and eloquent appeals so reassured the patriots that Cornwallis is said to have remarked that 'he feared the prayers of that godly youth more than the armies of Sumpter and Marion.²⁶

The colonists did not decide on a final resistance to England till 1776. The Baptists, in 1775, anticipated this action by one year. In a memorial to the House of Burgesses soldiers

were promised; the overthrow of the Establishment suggested; and the parity of all ministers requested.

The memorial stated:²⁷

Alarmed at the shocking Oppression which in a British Cloud hangs over the American Continent, we, as a Society and part of the distressed State, have in our Association consid'd what part might be most prudent for the Baptists to act in the present unhappy Contest. After we had determined "that in some Cases it was lawful to go to War, and also for us to make a Military resistance against Great Britain, in regard to their unjust Invasion, and tyrannical Oppression of, and repeated hostilities against America," our people were all left to act at

Discretion with respect to inlisting, without falling under Censure of our Community. Sign'd by order and in behalf of the Association the 14th of August, 1775.

Sam'l Harriss, *Moderator*

In reply the Convention passed the following resolution:

Resolved, That it be an instruction to the commanding officers of the regiment or troops to be raised, that they permit dissenting clergymen to celebrate divine worship, and to preach to the soldiers, or to exhort from time to time, as the various operations of the military service may permit, for the ease of such scrupulous consciences as may not choose to attend divine service as celebrated by the chaplain.²⁸

Growing Influence of the Baptists

The growing influence of the Baptists and their unanimity made them most formidable in elections. Howison wrote,

The influence of the denomination was strong among the common people, and was beginning to be felt in high places. In two points they were distinguished. No class of people in America were more devoted advocates of the principles of Revolution; none more willing

25John T. Christian, II, p. 234, and citing Hawks, **Contributions to Ecclesiastical History**.

26John T. Christian, II, p. 234, and citing McCrady, **History of South Carolina under the Royal Government**, 456.

27John T. Christian, II, pp. 234-235 and citing **American Archives**, Fourth Series, 1775, III. 383.

28John T. Christian, II, p. 235 and citing **Journal of the Convention of 1775**, 17.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

469

to give their money and goods to their country; none more prompt to march to the field of battle, and none more heroic in actual combat than the Baptists of Virginia. Secondly, in their hatred of the church Establishment. 29

Headley stated, "Thoughtfully 'they had considered what part it would be proper to take in the unhappy contest, and had determined that they ought to make a military resistance to

Great Britain in her unjust invasion, tyrannical oppression, and repeated hostilities.'"30
Sample

stated, "They proclaimed that to 'a man they were in favor of the Revolution.'"31

Virginia Baptists were motivated in the struggle for political independence, believing that religious freedom would be concomitant.

The Forces Against America

Christian elaborated, "The forces arrayed against them at home and abroad were formidable. George III had allied himself with many persons and nations opposed to liberty. He was on good terms with Pope Pious VI." He admonished the Roman Catholic bishops, vicars-apostolic,

in Great Britain to include obedience to King George.

The Pope wrote, "The good will of George III makes this virtue a goodness. He is the best of sovereigns; his authority is full of mildness to Catholics. Nor has the beneficent monarch

shown his goodness only to Catholics of his kingdom; he has favored and supported them in the vast Indian realms subject to his authority."³²

The Clergy of the Established Church of England

Christian continued,

Likewise consideration must be given to the attitude of the clergy of the Established Church of England. Some of the people adhered to the mother country, but that number was not large. At the close of the Revolutionary War scarcely an Episcopal clergyman remained in the country. That church was completely destroyed.

At the beginning of the struggle a large number of Episcopal clergy assumed a position that favored Great Britain, and against the liberty of the colonies. They brought the subject

into their pulpits; they denounced the people as insurrectionists and traitors; and commanded them to abandon the rebellion, and submit, without resistance to their legitimate rulers.

So offensive were the sermons of some that the citizens felt themselves insufferably outraged. At least on one occasion, a clergyman was seized by the congregation, carried into a neighboring forest, fastened to a tree, and there received thirty-nine lashes vigorously applied.

Another, to avoid a like fate, carried his pistols into the pulpit, and laying them by the side of his prayer book, in the presence of the assembly, told the congregation that he should proceed with the service; that England had a right to govern them; that he would read all the prayers for the king, the royal family, and the government; and that he would shoot any man who attempted to restrain him. Not many of the clergy, however, were so intrepid. The fearful and the fainthearted, therefore, fled with all practical haste.³³

Christian wrote,

²⁹John T. Christian, II, pp. 235-236 and citing Howison, **History of Virginia**, II, 170.

³⁰John T. Christian, II, p. 236 and citing Headley, **Chaplains and Clergy of the Revolution**, 250.

³¹John T. Christian, II, p. 236 and citing Semple.

³²John T. Christian, II, p. 221 and citing Chevelier Artant de Montor, **The Lives and Times of the Roman Pontiffs**, II.

³³ John T. Christian, II, p. 226 and citing Howell, **the Early Baptists of Virginia**.

Surrounded as the patriots were by Tories and opposed by foreign armies, yet they had friends in England. When William Pitt stated in the House of Commons, May 30, 1781, that “the American war was conceived in injustice and nurtured in folly, and that it exhibited the highest moral turpitude and depravity, and that England had nothing but victories over men struggling in the holy cause of liberty, or defeats which filled the land with mourning for the loss of dear and valuable relatives slain in a detested and impious quarrel”; and when six

months later, in the same assembly, and two days after the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown had been published in England, the eloquent Fox adopted the words of Chatham, uttered at the beginning of the Revolution, and said: “Thank God that America has resisted the claims of the mother country!’³⁴ and Burke and others in the same legislature, spoke

words of kindred import, full of peril to themselves, they expressed the sentiments of the Dissenters of England, and especially those of the Baptists.³⁵

Christian explained, “So great was the peril and the uncertainty of the actions of foreign-born persons that the generals in the army could only trust native-born citizens... After the great conspiracy on the life of Washington the lifeguard was reorganized, April 30, 1777.” Washington sent the commanders a confidential letter, which stated in part: “I want to form a company for my guard. In doing so I wish to be extremely cautious,...

After stating some physical qualifications, he stated, “... [I] am satisfied that there can be no absolute security for the fidelity of this class of people, but yet I think it most likely to be found in those who have family connections in this country. You will, therefore, send me none but natives.”³⁶ Christian continued,

These statements give a good insight into the perils which surrounded the Americans in the period of the Revolutionary War. They were surrounded by enemies from without; and by Tories and traitors within. The most careful watchfulness was demanded. Only patriots could be trusted; and true men with the American spirit and liberty were imperatively de-

manded. The Baptists were such men. They were accustomed to a hardy life; had long been trained in the rugged school of experience; were loyal and trusted citizens; and above all were endued with the spirit of wisdom and liberty. Not a man of them proved a traitor. They cast their united strength into the American cause.³⁷

The Baptists in the Army

Christian wrote,

The Baptists everywhere enlisted in the army. The Baptist General Association notified the

Convention of Virginia that they had considered what part it would be proper to take in the unhappy

contest, and had determined that they ought to make a military resistance to Great Britain in her unjust

invasion, tyrannical oppression, and repeated hostilities.”³⁸ They proclaimed that “they were to a man

favorable to any revolution, by which they could obtain freedom of religion.”³⁹

34 John T. Christian, II, p. 227 and citing Hume, Smollett and Farr, **History of England**, III.

35 John T. Christian, II, p. 227.

36 John T. Christian, II, pp. 228-229.

37 John T. Christian, II, p. 229.

38 John T. Christian, I, p. 389 and citing Headly, **Chaplains and Clergy of the Revolution**, p. 250. New York 1864.

39 John T. Christian, I, p. 389 and citing Semple, **History of Virginia Baptists**, p. 62. Richmond, 1890.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

471

The Baptists Render Service to the Country

A volume would be necessary to fully detail the service rendered the country by

the Baptists during the Revolutionary War. Christian stated,

Persecutions had greatly added to the numbers and determination of the Baptists. They were patriotic and hearty supporters of the Revolution. This brought them into favor with Washington and assisted their cause. Their ministers were officially permitted to preach among the soldiers; and thus, so far as the army was concerned, were on a level with the others.

Dr. Hawks reported:

No dissenters in Virginia experienced, for a time, harsher treatment than did the Baptists. They

were beaten and imprisoned, and cruelty taxed its ingenuity to devise new modes of punishment and

annoyance; but the men, who were not permitted to speak in public, found willing auditors in the

sympathizing crowds who gathered around the prisons to hear them preach from grated windows.

Persecutions had taught the Baptists not to love the Establishment, and they now saw before them

a reasonable prospect of the overturning it altogether. In their Association they had calmly

discussed
the matter and resolved on their course; in this course they were constant to the end; and the war
they
waged against the Church was a war of extermination. They seemed to know no relents, and
their
hostility never ceased for seven and twenty years. They revenged themselves for their sufferings
by the
almost total ruin of the Church; and now commenced the assault, for, inspired by ardor of
patriotism,
which accorded with their interests, they addressed the convention, and informed that body that
their
religious tenets presented no obstacle to their taking up arms and fighting for their
country;... A
complementary answer was returned, and the ministers of all denominations, in accordance
with the
address, placed on an equal footing. This, it is believed, was the first step toward
religious liberty in
America.⁴⁰

Charges against the Baptists

Christian stated, "Likewise terrible charges were brought against the Baptists and others for their preaching and methods. The following is a fair sample of some of the charges made by members of the Establishment

...setting forth that they are greatly alarmed at the progress which some of the dissenters from the church as by law established are daily making in various parts of the country by

persuading the ignorant and unwary to embrace their erroneous tenets, which the petitioners conceive to be not only opposite to the doctrines of Christianity, but subservient of the morals of the people and destructive of the peace of families, tending to alienate the affection of

slaves from their masters and injurious to the happiness of the public; that while such attempts are making them pull down all the barriers which the wisdom of our ancestors has erected to secure the church from the inroads of sectaries, it would argue a culpable lukewarmness tamely to sit still and not to make known their sentiments, so contrary to such innovations;... praying that the church may be maintained in all its legal rights, and that the sectaries may be indulged with such a regulated toleration as shall be thought reasonable, and that the clergy of the Established Church may be made accountable for their conduct, and removable for misbehavior.⁴¹

Chaplains in the Army

Several Baptist preachers did great service in the army as chaplains. In 1775 the Baptist General Association of Virginia sent Jeremiah Walker and John Williams to preach to the soldiers. These were the most popular Baptist preachers in the Old

40John T. Christian, II, pp. 261-262 and citing Hawks, **Contributions to Ecclesiastical History in the United States**, I, p. 121.

41John T. Christian, II, pp. 263-264. (apparently from Fristoe).

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

472

Dominion. McClanahan raised a company chiefly of Baptists whom he commanded as captain and preached to as chaplain. Charles Thompson of Massachusetts served as chaplain three years and Hezekiah Smith was from the same State. Samuel Rogers of Philadelphia was one of the foremost preachers of the day. He was appointed chaplain of a brigade by the Legislature. David Jones followed Gates through two campaigns. John Gano was the foremost chaplain of the American Revolution. Gano had great mental powers and “as a minister of Christ he shone like a star of the first magnitude in the American churches, and moved in a widely extended field of action.”

Headley wrote of him: “In the fierce conflict on Chatterton’s Hill he was continually under fire, and his cool and quiet courage in thus fearlessly exposing himself was afterwards commented upon in the most glowing terms by the officers who stood near him.”⁴²

Christian wrote,

Such was the trusted friend of Washington. He was brave and true, and made an indelible impression on the soldiers with whom he was associated.

There were several other Baptists who served in conspicuous positions in various capacities. Oliver Hart was one of the foremost pastors in South Carolina. He was useful not only as a minister, but also as a citizen, and especially in connection with the events of the

Revolution. In 1775 he was appointed by the Council of Safety... to travel into the interior of the State, to enlighten the people in regard to their political interests, and reconcile them to certain Congressional measures of which they were disposed to complain. ⁴³

Other Baptists served the Revolutionary cause in many ways. James Manning, the President of Brown University, was the most popular man in Rhode Island. He filled for the government many delicate positions and was elected unanimously to Congress. John Hart, a member of the old Hopewell Baptist church, was one of the signers of The Declaration of

Independence. Col. Joab Houghton was a valuable officer in the army. It was thought by many that the Baptists were too patriotic.⁴⁴

C. The Baptists and the American Constitution

From the age of the Reformation, the Baptists were consistent in maintaining the doctrine of religious liberty. When Dr. Samuel Jones presented the appeal to the Continental Congress, he said: “It seemed unreasonable to us that we should be called to stand up with them in defense of liberty, if, after all, it was to be a liberty for one party to oppress another.”⁴⁵

The Constitution

Christian stated,

At the close of the war a congress of representatives was called to draft a Constitution for the United States. The new Constitution was submitted for ratification by the various states September 17, 1787. There was much opposition to the proposed Constitution, especially as it determined that there should be no religious tests. For a long time it seemed

42John T. Christian, I, p. 390 and citing Headley, **Chaplains and Clergy of the Revolution**, p. 255.

43John T. Christian, II, pp. 237-238.

44John T. Christian, I, p. 390.

45Thomas Armitage, p. 796.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

473

doubtful the Constitution would be ratified. The issue hung upon the action of two states,

Massachusetts and Virginia. In each of these States the Baptists held the balance of power.⁴⁶

Two Objections to the Constitution

Christian analyzed,

There were two currents of thought against the article on religion, the one finding it excessive and dangerous, the other insufficient and maimed... The opposition was particularly strong in Massachusetts, where the liberal ideas were combated by the legislature. Other states were unable to find in the article a sufficiently wide and certain guarantee of religious liberty, and therefore they opposed amendments.⁴⁷

Liberty not Sufficiently Guarded

January 9, 1788, a convention of delegates assembled in Boston, Massachusetts, from all parts of the State. The debate was long; and the issue uncertain. Some of the Baptists looked upon the Constitution with suspicion as not giving full guarantee of freedom. James Manning, President of Rhode Island College, was an earnest advocate of the adoption of the Constitution and he had much influence in the body.

He fully believed that the future of the country depended upon the adoption. Christian continued, "Just before the final vote, Governor Hancock, the President of the Convention, called upon Dr. Manning to pray; and, though the request took him by surprise, he fell upon his knees, and offered a prayer in which patriotism and piety were most delightfully blended, and which left an extraordinary impression upon the whole assembly."⁴⁸

Dissatisfaction with this provision was expressed by the Baptists in all states, but Virginia became the stage of contention. On March 7, 1788, representatives of the Virginia Baptist Churches met in their General Committee at Goochland. The records of the minutes reported: The first Religious Political subject that was taken up was: "Whether the new Federal Constitution, which had now lately made its appearance in public, made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty; on which it was agreed unanimously that it did not." Armitage wrote, "Many of the political and social leaders of Virginia were opposed to the Constitution, and amongst them Patrick Henry, who resisted its adoption in the Virginia Convention, because, as he phrased his difficulty, it "squinted toward monarchy," and gave no guarantee of religious liberty."⁴⁹

Opposition to the Constitution in Virginia

Strong and popular men led the opposition to the Constitution in Virginia. The people were about equally divided on the measure. The Convention met in Richmond, in June, 1788. The Baptists in Williams meeting house, Goochland county, March 7, had canvassed the Constitution and reached the conclusion that the new Federal Constitution failed to make sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty. Christian continued,

⁴⁶John T. Christian, II, p. 241.

⁴⁷John T. Christian, II, p. 241.

⁴⁸John T. Christian, II, pp. 241-242.

⁴⁹Thomas Armitage, p. 804.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

474

The leader in favor of the Constitution was James Madison, and Patrick Henry was opposed to it. Madison had been absent in Philadelphia, and the candidate for Orange County was John Leland. It was a great Baptist county and the probabilities were that Leland would be elected. Madison called on Leland, spent half a day with him, and Leland came

down from the race and supported Madison. He believed Madison would properly represent

the cause.⁵⁰

When the Convention assembled, Patrick Henry spoke against the Constitution with vehemence never surpassed by himself on any occasion in his whole life. Once, while this

matchless orator was addressing the Convention, a wild storm broke over Richmond. At this moment Henry seemed to see the anger of heaven threatening the State, if it should adopt the Constitution. And such was the effect of his speech, that the Convention immediately dispersed.⁵¹

Pleasant Incident

James Madison led the Virginia party which favored ratification. However, he was in Philadelphia during the selection of delegates to the State Convention. He was engaged with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton in preparing the “Federalists Papers,” which were actually written in defense of the Constitution.

When he returned to Virginia, he learned that John Leland had been selected in Orange, his own county, by the party opposed to ratification. The opposing candidates soon met at a political meeting, when Madison mounted a tobacco barrel, and addressed his fellow citizens in a calm, candid and statesmanlike manner for two hours. He presented his side of the case and answered all the arguments of his opponents. Armitage stated, Leland’s advocacy of Madison’s claim to a seat in the Convention led directly to the adoption of the Constitution in Virginia, for at the time of the election it was confirmed by only eight states. Hence, the ninth was absolutely necessary, and at the moment everything appeared to turn on the action of Virginia.⁵²

The Baptists not Satisfied in Securing Religious Liberty

Up until this time, none of the other states had proposed the full expression of religious liberty in the Constitution; this honor was reserved for the State of Virginia. But the struggle was difficult. Madison, who at first insisted on ratification without amendments, was obliged to shift his position. Patrick Henry submitted a number of amendments, demanding that they be inserted into the document before it received Virginia’s sanction. Among these was a “Bill of Rights,” which included the following as the 20th section:

The religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men have an equal, natural, and inalienable right to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience, and that no particular sect or society ought to be favored or established by law in preference to others.⁵³

Eventually Mr. Madison conceded the need of amendments; however, he also warned of the danger of disunion and the jeopardy of aborting the effort. He

⁵⁰John T. Christian, II, pp. 242-243.

⁵¹John T. Christian, pp. 244-245.

⁵²Thomas Armitage, pp. 804-805.

⁵³Thomas Armitage, p. 805.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

475

recommended that the Convention proceed with ratification, but he also recommended the amendments and urged their embodiment in the Constitution.⁵⁴

The Convention finally ratified the Constitution by a vote of 89 for the Constitution with 79 opposed. We have already seen that the Baptists did not think the Constitution sufficient in securing religious liberty. Christian continued, “There was

large opposition to any amendments. Many noble men continued to favor the union of Church and State. Massachusetts was wedded to an establishment. John Adams, her favorite son and later President of the United States, was indignant that the Baptists addressed the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in behalf of religious liberty.”⁵⁵

Armitage reported,

From that moment a most exciting controversy arose in other states on the subject of altering the Federal Constitution to provide for religious liberty and equality as the right of all inhabitants of the land as the fundamental law. The Baptists of the whole country opened a simultaneous movement in that direction. Those of Virginia sent John Leland to their brethren of New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and other states to solicit their co-operation.... although the Virginia leaders were divided on other subjects. Patrick Henry became the leader in the next State Legislature and led that body to memorialize Congress to amend the new Constitution.⁵⁶

Even after the adoption of the Constitution, some continued to advocate a State Church. Thomas Jefferson, in a letter written to Benjamin Rush, stated, The successful experiment made under the prevalence of that delusion (of a State Church) on the clause of the Constitution, which, while it secures the freedom of the press, covered also the freedom of religion, had given to the clergy a very favorable hope of obtaining an establishment of a particular form of Christianity through the United States; and as every sect believes its own form the true one, everyone hoped for his own, but especially the Episcopalians and Congregationalists.⁵⁷

Massachusetts did not ratify the first amendment to the Constitution. The suggested amendment came from the Baptists. William Cathcart reported, Denominationally no community asked for this change in the Constitution but the Baptists. The Quakers probably would have petitioned 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 it; it went too far for most Presbyterians in Revolutionary times... 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 articles on the noblest Constitution ever framed for the government of mankind.”⁵⁸

James Madison Spoke for Amendments

Still the Baptists were not satisfied with the amendment expressing freedom of worship. In a June 8, 1789, speech on the general subject of amendments to the Constitution, James Madison asserted,

54Thomas Armitage, p. 805.

55John T. Christian, II. p. 245.

56Thomas Armitage, p. 805.

57John T. Christian, II, p. 245, and citing Jefferson, **Writings**, X. 174, 175.

58John T. Christian, II, p. 246, and citing Cathcart, **Centennial Offering**.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

476

It is to provide those securities for liberty which are required by a part of the community. I allude in a particular manner to those two States (Rhode Island and North Carolina) that

have not thought fit to throw themselves into the bosom of the confederacy. It is a desirable thing, on our part as well as theirs, that a reunion should take place as soon as possible... But I will candidly acknowledge that, over and above all of these considerations, I do conceive

that the Constitution may be amended; that is to say, if all powers of the general Government may be guarded against in a more secure manner than it is now done, while no one advantage arising from the exercise of that power shall be damaged or endangered by it. We have in this way something to gain; and, if we proceed with caution, nothing to lose.⁵⁹

The Baptists Appeal to President Washington

Upon the advice of James Madison the subject was presented to General Washington. John Leland prepared the petition on behalf of the United Baptist Churches in Virginia. It read in part:⁶⁰

When the constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, had unusual struggles of mind, fearing that the liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life,

was not sufficiently secured.

Convinced, on one hand, that without an effective national government the States would fall into disunion and all the consequent evils, and on the other hand, fearing that we would be accessory to some religious oppression, should any one society in the union predominate over the rest; amidst all these inquietudes of mind our consolation arose from this consideration. Viz.: the plan must be good, for it has the signature of a tried, trusty friend, and if religious liberty is rather insecure in the Constitution, "the Administration will certainly prevent all oppressions, for a Washington will preside." According to our wishes, the unanimous voice of the Union has called you, sir, from your beloved retreat, to launch forth again into the faithless seas of human affairs, to guide the helm of States. May the divine munificence which covered your head in battle make you a greater blessing to your admiring

country in time of peace.

The very name of Washington is music in our ears, and, although the great evil in the States, is the mutual confidence between the rulers and the people, yet we have the utmost

confidence in the President of the States, and it is our fervent prayer to Almighty God that

the Federal Government, and the governments of the respective States, without rivalry may cooperate together as to make the numerous people over which you preside the happiest nation on earth, and you, sir, the happiest man, in seeing the people whom, by smiles of Providence you saved from vassalage by your valor and made wise by your maxims, sitting securely under their vines and fig trees, enjoying the perfection of human felicity.

By order of the Committee.

Samuel Harriss, *Chairman*

Washington's Cordial Answer

To this petition, President Washington answered:

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 on it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you that none will be persuaded, that none will be more zealous than myself to establish effective barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution;...

59John T. Christian, pp. 246-247 and citing James Madison, **Annals of Congress**, I.

60John T. Christian, pp. 247-248 and citing John Leland, **Works**.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

477

While I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members, throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously were the firm friends of 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.⁶¹

The First Amendment

A month after this correspondence James Madison, with the approval of Washington, brought several Constitutional amendments before the House of Representatives. On June 8, 1789, the following amendment to the Constitution of the United States was presented: "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 petition the government for a redress of grievances."⁶²

The Constitution's only provision on the subject of religion was found in Article VI: "No religious Test shall ever be required, as a Qualification to any office or public Trust under the United States."

The chief difference between the old Article VI and this amendment lay in the fact that in the first instance Congress was left at liberty to impose in other cases than those of "office or public trust under the United States," whereas, this amendment removed the power to make any "law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."⁶³

The Baptists felt secure under this new provision of the Constitution. Long afterwards, March 2, 1819, Madison wrote to Robert Walsh as follows:

It was the universal opinion of the century preceding the last that civil government could not stand without the prop of a religious establishment, and that the Christian religion itself would perish, if not supported by a legal provision for its clergy. The experience of Virginia conspicuously corroborates the disproof of both opinions. The civil government, though bereft of everything like an associated hierarchy, possesses the requisite stability and performs its functions with complete success; whilst the number, the industry, and the morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the Church from the State.⁶⁴

In *A History of American Christianity*, Bacon wrote:

In the establishment of the American principle of the non-interference of the State with religion, and the equality of all religious communions before the law, much was due, no doubt, to the mutual jealousies of the sects, no one or two of which were strong enough to

maintain exceptional pretensions over the rest combined. Much also is to be imputed to the indifferentism and sometimes the anti-religious sentiment of an important and numerous class of doctrinaire politicians of which Jefferson may be taken as a type.

So far as this work was a work of intelligent conviction and religious faith, the chief honor of it must be given to the Baptists. Other sects, notably the Presbyterians, had been

energetic and efficient in demanding their own liberties; the Friends and Baptists agreed in demanding liberty of conscience and worship, and equality before the law, for all alike. But the active labor in this cause was mainly done by the Baptists. It is to their consistency and

⁶¹John T. Christian, II, pp. 249-250, and citing Sparks, **Writings of Washington**, XII.

⁶²John T. Christian, II, p. 250.

⁶³Thomas Armitage, p. 807.

64Quoted by John T. Christian, II, p. 250.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

478

constancy in the warfare against the privileges of the powerful 'Standing Order' of New England, and of the moribund establishments in the South, that we are chiefly indebted for the final triumph, in this country, of that principle of separation of church and state, which is one of the largest contributions of the New World to civilization and the church universal.⁶⁵

However, Christian also quoted Ruffini who wrote:

By this the United States solemnly promised that they would never elevate any one form of belief to the rank of the official religion of the Confederation, but that, on the contrary,

equal liberty would be conceded to all the churches. It was, therefore, the most absolute separation of the two powers which the United States, at the moment of constituting themselves into a Republic, placed at the basis of their relations with Churches, and to that separation they entrusted the guarantee of the fullest religious liberty.

There is, however, one thing that must be especially noted. The Constitution of the United States did not abolish the union between the State and the Church within those particular States in which the separation had not already taken place. Now, no separation had been effected, nor was it realized for a whole century, in the New England States. Again, the Constitution did not guarantee full religious liberty except in federal relationships, and it did not remove those restrictions in the internal relations of single States... Some of them (the States), however, still remained intolerant in spite of and after the Federal Constitution.⁶⁶

Conclusion

This proposition met with great opposition in Congress, but it passed that body Sept. 23, 1789, and was then submitted to the several states for ratification. Eleven of the thirteen states ratified it between Nov. 20, 1789 (New Jersey) and Dec. 15, 1791 (Virginia), and the others between these periods, excepting Connecticut and Massachusetts. Dr. Armitage wrote:

Thus, the contemned, spurned and hated old Baptist doctrine of soul-liberty, for which blood had been shed for centuries, was not only engrafted into the organic law of the United States, but for the first time in the formation of a great nation it was made its chief cornerstone. For the first time on that subject the quiet, pungent old truth asserted its right to immortality as expressed by Scripture: "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head-stone of the corner."⁶⁷

Unfortunately, liberal interpretations have concluded that the first amendment should be titled "separation of church and state." And rather than freedom of worship with no church-state relationship, the amendment has been interpreted to suggest that no religious observances should be permitted on public property or at public gatherings, and thus ultimately promotes the concept of a secular government. It would be splendid if those who interpret the "First Amendment" as complete separation of church and state would study the actual background and intent of James Madison and the other "founding fathers."

D. The Baptists and the Abolishment of the Establishment

⁶⁵John T. Christian, II, pp. 250-251, and citing Bacon, **A History of American Christianity**.

⁶⁶John T. Christian, II, p. 251 and citing Ruffini.

⁶⁷Thomas Armitage, p. 807.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

479

John Adams had said: "We might as well expect a change in the solar system, as to expect they would give up their establishment" The Baptists did not at this time gain their cause but progress was made toward true liberty.

Virginia Battleground for Religious Freedom

The Constitution of Massachusetts did not guarantee the complete separation of Church and State until 1833. Christian continued, Virginia was the great battleground for religious freedom. The Colony was founded by members of the Church of England, and none others were tolerated in its jurisdiction. The charter, 1606, provided: "The presidents, councils and ministers should provide that the true word and service of God should be preached and used according to the rites and doctrines of the Church of England."⁶⁸

The Evils of the Establishment in Virginia

Christian observed, Another phase of the liberty of conscience must now be recorded. Already the persecutions of the past, the enlistment of soldiers in the army, the struggles of the War of the Revolution, the adoption of the Constitution and the first Amendment to the Constitution of the United States have been considered. In all these measures the Baptists had an honorable part. There was proceeding at the same time another conflict which was scarcely less intense. Several of the States had establishments of religion incorporated into the government by law. The most oppressive of these was in Virginia. The laws supporting the Establishment were exacting and had been administered with severity. Dissenters were loaded with taxes to support a system of religion for which they had no love; the marriage laws were unsatisfactory; the glebe lands belonging to the Church brought in rich revenues which were a constant menace to the peace of the people, and, indeed, there were many vexatious things which disturbed the public welfare. Entrenched as was the Establishment in the laws of the land, it was a tremendous problem to overthrow such an institution. It was this task that the Baptists, together with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and other noble heroes, undertook to accomplish.⁶⁹

The Destruction of the Establishment

Christian continued, "These statutes were put into execution. The Baptists were democrats from principle and naturally did not love the Establishment. Hawks, the historian of the Episcopal Church of Virginia, wrote:

No dissenters in Virginia experienced, for a time, harsher treatment than did the Baptists. They were beaten and imprisoned; and cruelty taxed its ingenuity to devise new modes of punishment and annoyance. The usual consequences followed; persecution made friends for its victims; and the men, who were not permitted to speak in public, found willing auditors in the sympathizing crowds who gathered around the prisons to hear them preach from grated windows.⁷⁰

Hawks further wrote:

Persecution had taught the Baptists not to love the Establishment, and they now saw before them a reasonable prospect of overturning it entirely. In their Association they calmly discussed the matter, and resolved on their course; in this course they were consistent to the end; and the war which they waged against the Church, was a war of extermination. They

⁶⁸John T. Christian, I, p. 381.

⁶⁹John T. Christian, II, p. 261.

⁷⁰John T. Christian, I, p. 382 and citing Hawks, **Contributions to Ecclesiastical History in the United States**, I. 121. New York, pp. 186-9.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

480

seem to have known no relentings, and their hostility never ceased for seven and twenty years. They revenged themselves for their sufferings by the almost total ruin of the Church; and now commenced the assault, for, inspired by the ardours of patriotism which accorded to their interests. . . they addressed the convention, and informed that body that the religious tenets presented no obstacle to their taking up arms and fighting for the country; and they

tendered the services of their pastors in promoting the enlistment of the youth of their persuasion.... A complimentary answer was returned to their address; and the order was made that the sectarian clergy should have the privilege of performing divine service to their re-

spective adherents in the army, equally with the chaplains of the Established Church. This, it is believed, was the first steps towards placing the clergy of all denominations, upon an equal footing in Virginia.⁷¹

Bishop Perry summed up the situation in the following words:

It was in 1779, during the darkest days of the war, that the "establishment" in Virginia "was finally put down."⁷² In the language of the annalist of the religious body to which this result was chiefly due, "the Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Deists, and the covetous had all prayed for this."⁷³ To prayers had been added untiring and most energetic labor. Taking ad-

vantage of existing and acknowledged evils, growing out of the utter want of ecclesiastical discipline in restraining delinquent clergymen, and the lack of men of devout life and conspicuous ability among the incumbents of the vacant parishes, these sectaries had multiplied on every side.

It was but natural that men of earnest convictions and inward spirituality should turn from those possessing only the form of godliness to hang upon the lips of the wandering evangelists and lay preachers whose sincerity and devotion could not be gainsaid, and who introduced and propagated dissent in various forms throughout the length and breadth of the land. It was not to be expected that men whose shining parts and exemplary character made them sought after at home would leave their comfortable livings in England to put themselves at the mercy of sordid and ignorant vestries in a distant colony where the “livings” yielded only a precarious support, and there was little hope of preferment.⁷⁴

The Baptists concealed nothing. For full liberty, civil and religious, they were ready to give their lives and all that they had, but for less they would risk nothing; they might as well be the civil vassals of Britain as the religious vassals of a republic in Virginia.

This was understood all around, and hence they kept influential commissioners in constant attendance on the Legislature and Conventions of the State, from the beginning to the close of the struggle for perfect religious freedom; or, as Bishop Meade expressed it, when their full rights were secured: “The warfare begun by the Baptists seven and twenty years before was now finished.”⁷⁵

They had a great advantage in the fact that three men—Jefferson, Henry, and Madison—who were prominently identified with the Revolutionary cause in Virginia understood their cause and co-operated with them. Although these men did not share

⁷¹John T. Christian, I, p. 382 and citing Hawks, p.138.

⁷²John T. Christian, II, p. 191 and citing Hawks, I. 152.

⁷³John T. Christian, II, pp. 191-192 and citing **The Virginia Baptist Chronicle**, by John Leland in Hawks, I. 139.

⁷⁴John T. Christian, II, p. 192 and citing Perry, **History of the American Episcopal Church**, II.

⁷⁵Thomas Armitage, p. 798.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

481

the same religious convictions that actuated the Baptists, their immense breadth of mind, logical adherence to conclusions drawn from the premises which justified the Revolution, brought these mighty men to the same positions.

Between 1763 and 1775, the Baptists gained their freedom by increments. In response to their first united effort, a complementary answer was received by the Baptists, and it was ordered that the ministers of other denominations be equally recognized with those of the Episcopal Church as chaplains in the Virginia army.

A second and more important gain came with the adoption in 1776 of the

Virginia Declaration of Rights. Article XVI laid out the “Baptist principle of soul-liberty as the cornerstone of Virginia’s government. This was followed by a general petition that all sects should be exempted from legal taxes for the support of any one particular church.” Further, in October “the state salaries of the Episcopal clergy were suspended.”⁷⁶

Thomas Jefferson stated, “The first Republican Legislature which met in 1776 was crowded with petitions to abolish this spiritual tyranny. These brought on the severest contest in which I was ever engaged,” and he added that the measure to suspend this and certain other old laws touching the established church was carried only after “Desperate contests” in the Committee of the whole house, “almost daily from the 11th of October to the 5th of December.” It was not until 1779 that these salaries paid by legal taxation were finally abolished.⁷⁷

Baptists Unrelenting Concerning Establishment

Christian stated, “The Baptists were, however, unrelenting in their warfare upon the Establishment. They were criticized that during the Revolutionary War they pursued their opposition to the Church. They felt now that above all other periods they were likely to secure their rights. William Fristoe observed,

The Baptists having labored under oppression for a long time inclines them to seek redress as soon as a favorable opportunity offered. In the year 1776, they united in a petition to the Assembly of Virginia, stating the several grievances they labored under, requesting a repeal of all such laws as might occasion an odious distinction among citizens.

And it appeared at this juncture the most favorable opportunity offered that had ever been—a time when the nation was struggling for civil liberty and casting off British tyranny—a time of aiming to support their independence and relieving themselves from monarchical usurpation. ...the State Legislature became sensible that a division among the people would be fatal to this country; but the Assembly being chiefly of the Episcopalian order, and being in the habit heretofore of governing with rigor, it was with great reluctance they could pass a law favorable to dissenters and raise them upon a level with themselves. What in-

clined dissenters to be more anxiously engaged for their liberty was that, if time passed away and no repeal of these injurious laws, and the nation to whom we belonged succeeded in

supporting their independence, and our government settled down with these old prejudices in the hearts of those in power, and an establishment of religion survive our revolution, and religious tyranny raise its banner in our infant country, it would leave us to the sore reflection: What have we been struggling for?⁷⁸

⁷⁶Thomas Armitage, p. 790.

⁷⁷Thomas Armitage, p. 790.

⁷⁸John T. Christian, II, p. 265 and citing Fristoe.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

482

During the struggle to abolish the state religion, some suggested that Christianity itself might fail. Armitage wrote:

Even Patrick Henry felt some alarm here, champion as he was for religious liberty. He looked upon the success of the Republican movement, and rightly, as depending upon the

virtue of the people, without which it must miserably fail. He saw that the influence of the war would be corrupting, that the country was threatened with the destructive ideas of France, and the religious teachers of the country were so poorly supported that he was alarmed,... he caught the idea that the state authorities should regulate religion by imposing a tax on all its citizens, leaving each person at liberty to appropriate his tax to the support of his own church.

This measure seemed healthful to and was supported by nearly all Christian denominations in Virginia except the Baptists, who refused to be taxed by the state even for the support of their own churches.

They took this ground on principle, namely: That the state had no jurisdiction in the matter, as the question of religion was left amongst his inalienable rights in the hands of every man, subject to his choice, and that Christianity needed no state support by compulsory measures; therefore, it was an abuse and a usurpation of power over the citizen of the state to touch the subject at all. 79

They said in their remonstrance: "Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity in exclusion of all other religions may establish, with the same case, any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects." They argued that an established church destroys all equality before the law, in that matter of religion, as it imposes burdens on some and exempts others. They insisted that the liberties of man and the prosperity of the common wealth required Virginia to renounce all interference in the religion of her citizens. In consequence of their resistance the Assessment Bill was defeated, and Dr. Hawks writes: "The Baptists were the principal promoters of this work, and, in truth, aided more than any other denomination in its accomplishment."80

The Establishment Law Repealed

Christian wrote, "The final vote on the measure came December 13, 1779, when the law enforcing the Established Church was repealed. This destroyed the Establishment in Virginia." Robert B. Semple analyzed, Republican principles had gained much ground, and were fast advancing to superiority. The leading men of that side viewed the Established clergy and the Established religion as

inseparable appendages of monarchy—one of the pillars by which it was supported.

The dissenters, at least the Baptists, were republicans from interest as well as principle; it was known that their influence was great among the common people;... the dissenters were too powerful to be slighted, and they were too watchful to be cheated by any ineffectual sacrifice. There had been a time when they would have been satisfied to have paid their tithes if they could have had liberty of conscience; but now the crisis was such that nothing less

than a total overthrow of all ecclesiastical distinctions would satisfy their sanguine hopes.

It is said, however, and probably not without truth, that many of the Episcopalians who voted for the abolishing of the Establishment did it upon an expectation that it would be succeeded by a general assessment. And considering that most of the men of wealth were on that side, they supposed that their funds would be lessened very little. This, it appeared in

the sequel, was a vain expectation. The people having once shaken off their fetters, would not again permit themselves to be bound.

79Thomas Armitage, pp. 790-791.

80Thomas Armitage, p. 791.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

483

Moreover, the war now rising to its height, there were in too much need of funds to permit any of their resources to be devoted to any other purpose during that period; and we

shall see that when it was attempted, a few years after expiration of the war, the people had set their faces against it.⁸¹

Christian evaluated,

The bill cut the purse strings of the Establishment, so that the clergy were no longer supported by taxation. But they still obtained possession of the rich glebes,⁸² and enjoyed a

practical monopoly of marriage fees. It was at this session of the legislature that the famous bill of Jefferson on Religious Freedom was introduced. The bill attracted both favorable and unfavorable notice. It was reported to the house June, 1779, just after Jefferson was elected

governor to succeed Patrick Henry. Several years elapsed before it became law.

A complete victory was not yet won. The period which followed the Revolution was favorable to a renewal of an Establishment upon a more liberal basis than formerly; and it

came dangerously near a passage. Various petitions were sent up by religious bodies asking

for such an Establishment. The Baptists alone stood firm.⁸³

One such petition was the “Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of Religion,” otherwise known as the “General Assessment Bill,” which was reported to the legislature on December 3, 1784. The bill was postponed until November, 1785. With the Episcopalians, Presbyterians and others supporting it the passage seemed inevitable.

However, the Baptists opposed the bill for the following reasons given by Fristoe:

First, it was contrary to their principles and avowed sentiments, the making provision for the support of religion by law; that the distinction between civil and ecclesiastical governments ought to be kept up blending them together; that Jesus Christ has given laws for

the government of his kingdom and direction of his subjects, and gave instruction concerning collections for the various purposes of religion, and therefore needs not legislative interferences.

Secondly, Should a legislative body undertake to pass laws for the government of the church, for them to say what doctrines shall be believed, in what mode worship shall be performed, and what the sum collected shall be, what a dreadful precedent it would establish; for when such a right is claimed by a legislature, and given up by the people, by the

same rule they decide in one instance they may in every instance... so when legislatures undertake to pass laws about religion, religion loses its form, and Christianity is reduced to a system of worldly policy.

Thirdly, it has been believed by us that that Almighty Power that instituted religion will support his own cause; that in the course of divine Providence events will be overruled and the influence of grace on the hearts of God’s people will incline them to afford and contribute what is necessary for the support of religion, and therefore there is no need for compulsory measures.

Fourthly, it would give an opportunity to the party that were numerous (and, of course, possessed the ruling power) to use their influence and exercise their art and cunning, and

multiply signers to their own party, and last, and most deserving, the faithful preacher, who in a pointed manner reprov’d sin and bore testimony against every species of vice and dissipation, would, in all probability, have been profited very little by such a law, while men-

pleasers, the gay and the fashionable, who can wink at sin, and daub his hearers with

⁸¹John T. Christian, II, pp. 268-269, and citing Robert B. Semple, p. 44-45.

⁸²A plot of land granted to a clergyman as part of his benefice during his tenure of office.

⁸³John T. Christian, II, p. 270.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

484

untemper’d mortar,... it follows the irreligious and carnal part of the people would richly reward them for their flattery, and the undeserving go off with the gain.⁸⁴

The bill was printed and circulated throughout the various counties of the State.

Madison wrote to Monroe, May 29, 1785:

the adversaries of the assessment begin to think the prospect here flattering to their wishes. The printed bill has excited great discussion, and is likely to prove the sense of the community to be in favor of the liberty now enjoyed. I have heard of several counties where the representatives have been laid aside for voting for the bill, and not a single one where the reverse has happened. The Presbyterian clergy, too, who were in general friends to the scheme, are already in another tone, either compelled by the laity of that sect or alarmed at the probability of further interference of the Legislature, is they begin to dictate matters of religion.⁸⁵

“Act for Religious Freedom”

Christian stated, “Mr. Jefferson prepared the Act for Religious Freedom.” On October 17, 1785, the bill died in committee.

Jefferson’s bill was again introduced and on December 17, 1785, was passed the General Assembly of Virginia and upon January 19, 1786, was signed by the Speaker. This bill is still the fundamental law of Virginia. The Act was as follows:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever; nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument maintain their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.⁸⁶

And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies,

constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare the act irrevocable, would be of no effect in law, yet we are free to declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such an act will be an infringement of natural rights.⁸⁷

Christian concluded, “Thus was liberty of soul secured in Virginia by the Baptists. The Establishment was finally put down. Dr. Hawks says: ‘The Baptists were the principal promoters of this work, and in truth aided more than any other denomination in its accomplishment.’”⁸⁸

Bishop Meade, another Episcopalian, wrote: “The Baptist Church in Virginia took the lead in dissent, and was the chief object of persecution by the magistrates and

⁸⁴John T. Christian, II, pp. 271-272, and citing Fristoe, **History of the Kettocton Association**.

⁸⁵John T. Christian, II, p. 272, and citing Rives, **Life and Times of James Madison**, I.

⁸⁶John T. Christian, II, pp. 272-273 and Thomas Armitage, p. 800.

⁸⁷John T. Christian, I, p. 384 and citing Jefferson, **Notes on the State of Virginia**, pp.

379, 382.

88John T. Christian, I, p. 384 and citing Hawks, **Ecclesiastical Contributions**, p. 152.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

485

the most violent and persevering afterward in seeking the downfall of the Establishment.”⁸⁹

And again he wrote: “The warfare begun by the Baptists, seven-and-twenty years before was now finished: The Church was in ruins, and the triumph of her enemies complete.”⁹⁰

Christian summarized,

In the period ending with the Revolutionary War religious tests were everywhere. They were consistently opposed by the Baptists. As a result the Baptists were persecuted and came under the heavy hand of the law. Only in Rhode Island was liberty of conscience maintained. The Baptists in bringing liberty of conscience to a Continent had undertaken a supreme task, but they were equal to the occasion. Professor George P. Fisher has given a fine statement of the case. He says:

At the beginning of the American Revolution, the Episcopal Church was established in the Southern colonies. In New Jersey and New York, it enjoyed the special favor of the government officials. In Massachusetts and Connecticut there had never been an establishment, in the strict sense of the term. Every town was obliged to sustain public worship and support a minister. There was an assessment upon the inhabitants for this purpose. As the people were for a long time almost exclusively Congregationalists, the worship was of this character. As other denominations arose, the laws were so modified as to allow the tax to be paid by each of the organizations to the support of its own worship. Such an act was passed in Connecticut in reference to the Episcopalians in 1727, shortly after the founding of Christ Church in Stratford, for their first religious society in the State; and in 1729 the same right was extended to Quakers and Baptists.

In places where no congregations had been gathered by dissidents from the prevailing system, individuals, whatever their religious beliefs might be, were compelled to contribute to the support of the Congregational worship there existing. This requirement was more and more counted a hardship. It is believed that in all the colonies there were religious tests in some form. Even in Pennsylvania and Delaware, none could vote save those who professed faith in Christ. When the revolutionary contest began, it was natural that there should spring up movements to abolish the religious inequalities which were a heritage from the past.

The Baptists, who were outnumbered by none of the religious bodies except the Congregationalists, and who had felt themselves especially aggrieved, at once bestirred themselves in Massachusetts and Virginia to secure the repeal of obnoxious restrictions. A Baptist committee laid their complaints before the Massachusetts delegates in the first Continental Congress at Philadelphia. The support which the Baptists lent to the patriotic cause, and the proclamation of human rights which was made on every hand, won a hearing for their demands, and rendered them, after tedious delays, successful. In Virginia, Patrick Henry, Jefferson, and Madison enlisted in their favor. In 1785, the statute of religious freedom was adopted, of which Jefferson deemed it a great honor to have been the author, by which intervention in matters of faith and worship was forbidden to the State.

All denominations were put thus on a level, and none were taxed for the support of religion. In New England, the release from this last requirement, or from the payment of a tax for a particular form of religion to be chosen by the citizen, was accomplished later. It took place in Connecticut in 1818; and the last of the provision of this character did not vanish from the statute-book in Massachusetts until 1833, when Church and State were

89John T. Christian, I, p. 384 and citing Meade, **Old Parishes and Churches in Virginia**, I. p. 52. Philadelphia, 1872.

90John T. Christian, I, p. 385 and citing Meade, II. pp. 449, 450.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

486

fully separated. In that State, from 1780 to 1811, a religious society had to be incorporated in order to have its members exempted from taxation for the parish church.⁹¹

Jefferson's Support of the Baptist Position

Christian evaluated,

Jefferson was the statesman of the Revolution, Washington the general and Franklin the sage. The attitude of Jefferson toward liberty and the Establishment brought upon him much obloquy. He was thoroughly hated by that class and especially the New England clergy. They called him an infidel and an atheist. As a matter of fact he was an Episcopalian with Unitarian tendencies.

On the other hand the Baptists loved and supported him. His views on liberty were so closely united with theirs that they were his devoted friends. When he was elected President the church at Cheshire, Massachusetts, made a cheese, which weighed fourteen hundred and fifty pounds, and sent it to Washington to Jefferson, in 1801, by the celebrated John Leland, their pastor, as an expression of the warm regard they entertained for their great leader in the battle for freedom. John Leland was a man of singular ability, independence, frankness, humor and piety. He wrote for the Baptists to the State papers.⁹²

Jefferson associated with the Baptists. They admired him, and he admired them.

He addressed the members of the Baltimore Baptist Association on October 17, 1808:

In our early struggle for liberty, religious freedom could not fail to become a primary object. All men felt the right, and a just animation to obtain it was exhibited by all. I was only one among the many who befriended its establishment, and am entitled but in common with others to a portion of that approbation which follows the fulfillment of duty.

Excited by wrongs to reject a foreign government which directed our concerns according to its own interests, and not to ours, the principles which justified us were obvious to all

understandings, they were imprinted in the breast of every human being; and Providence ever pleased to direct the issue of our contest in favor of that side where justice was. Since the happy separation, our nation has wisely avoided entangling itself in the systems of European interests, and has taken no side between its rival powers, attached itself to none of its ever

changing confederacies.⁹³

Jefferson addressed the Ketauton Baptist Association on October 18, 1808:

The views you express of the conduct of the belligerent powers are as correct as they are afflicting to the lovers of justice and humanity. Those moral principles and conventional usages which have heretofore been the bond of civilized nations, which have so often pre-

served their peace by furnishing common rules for the measure of their rights, have now given way to force, the law of Barbarians, and the nineteenth century dawns with Vandalism of the fifth. Nothing has been spared on our part to preserve the peace of our country, during this distempered state of the world.⁹⁴

Thomas Armitage stated, “Jefferson comprehended Baptist aims perfectly, for he was in perpetual intercourse with their leading men, and they intrusted him with the charge of their public documents.”

91John T. Christian, I, pp. 385-386 and citing Fisher, **History of the Christian Church**, pp. 559, 560.

92John T. Christian, II, p. 275.

93John T. Christian, II, p. 276, and citing Jefferson, XVI.

94John T. Christian, II, p. 276, and citing Jefferson, XVI.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

487

Jefferson’s experience with the Baptists probably originated with visits he made to his mother’s sister, his favorite aunt, who was a Baptist. Young Jefferson loved to visit the Woodson home and accompany his aunt to the Baptist church of which she and her husband were members.

Armitage concluded, “It is through the members of his uncle’s and aunt’s family, as well as through the Madisons, that the tradition has come down that he caught his first views of a democratic government while attending these meetings.”

While preparing the manuscript, Armitage referred to a letter from a woman whose husband was a direct descendant of the Woodson family. He stated, “his mother knew Jefferson intimately, and has kept the tradition alive in the family.” She said that “when grown to manhood these impressions became so fixed that upon them he formulated the plan of a free government and based the Declaration of Independence.”⁹⁵

It has usually been suggested that two Baptist churches were known to exist in Albemarle Co., in which Monticello was located, and that he frequented the Buck Mountain Baptist Church to observe their business meeting. After his tenure as President, Jefferson addressed the following note to the church which was located in his neighborhood:

I thank you, my friends and neighbors, for your kind congratulations on my return to my native home, and of the opportunities it will give me of enjoying, amidst your affections, the comfort of retirement and rest... *We have acted together from the origin to the end of a memorable*

revolution, and we have contributed each in the line allotted to us, our endeavors to render its issues a permanent blessing to our country... Accept the offering of my affectionate esteem and respect.⁹⁶

John Leland, who was in constant communication with Jefferson stated, “By his writing and administration, he has justly acquired the title of the Apostle of Liberty.” Armitage summarized, “The replies of Jefferson to three Baptist Associations, and to the Baptists of Virginia in General Meeting assembled, speak of the satisfaction which the review of his times gave him, in remembering his long and earnest cooperation with them in achieving the religious freedom of America.”⁹⁷ Christian observed, “In his complete works there are replies to congratulatory addresses from the Danbury, Baltimore and Ketoc-ton Associations; and from the representatives of six Baptist Associations which met at Chesterfield, VA, November 21, 1808. The last body was the General Meeting of the Baptists of Virginia. To them he says: In reviewing the history of the times through which we have passed, no portion of it gives greater satisfaction than that which presents the efforts of the friends of religious freedom with which they were crowned. We have shown, by fair trial, the great and interesting experiment whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving one to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵Thomas Armitage, p. 799.

⁹⁶Thomas Armitage, p. 799 and citing **Complete Works**, by Washington; N. Y., p. 168.

⁹⁷Thomas Armitage, p. 799.

⁹⁸John T. Christian, I, p. 391 and citing Jefferson, **Complete Works**, VIII. p. 139.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

488

Christian concluded,

When the Constitution of the United States was presented to the States for ratification it was doubtful whether it would pass. Massachusetts and Virginia were the pivotal States. Massachusetts was evenly divided and it was only through the labors of Manning, Stillman and Backus that the Constitution was adopted by that State. The majority was nineteen votes. There were 187 yeas and 168 nays on the last day of the session, and “before the final question was taken, Governor Hancock, the president, invited Dr. Manning to close the solemn invocation with prayer. The prayer was one of lofty patriotism and every heart was filled with reverence.”

The vote of Virginia was equally in doubt. John Leland, the Baptist preacher; and James Madison were candidates, in Orange County for the Legislature. Orange was a Baptist county and the probabilities were that Leland would be elected. He withdrew in favor of Madison, and Madison was elected and in the legislature he was just able to save the Constitution. J. S. Barbon, of Virginia, in 1857 in an eulogy of James Madison said: That the credit of adopting the Constitution of the United States properly belonged to a Baptist clergyman, formerly of Virginia, by the name of Leland . . . If Madison had not been in the Virginia Convention, that Constitution would not have been ratified by the State, and as the approval of nine States was required to give effect to this instrument, and as Virginia was the ninth, if it had been rejected by her, the Constitution would have failed (the remaining States following her example), and that it was by Elder Leland’s in-

fluence that Madison was elected to that Convention.99

Patrick Henry and the Baptists

As has been previously indicated, the Baptists were fortunate in securing the assistance of Jefferson, Madison and Patrick Henry to agree with them and plead their cause. Robert B. Semple wrote:

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—without hesitation, he stepped forward to their relief. From that time, until the day of their complete emancipation from the shackles of tyranny, the Baptists found in Patrick Henry an unwavering friend.¹⁰⁰

Patrick Henry was also important in helping frame the Virginia Bill of Rights in 1776, which guaranteed perfect religious liberty. When the Bill of Rights was first presented from committee, it was felt that proper provision had not been made for religious liberty. In response, Patrick Henry proposed the fifteenth and sixteenth sections in these words:

That no free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved, to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.

That religion, or the duty we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, and not by force and violence; and, therefore, that all men should enjoy the fullest toleration in the exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience, unpunished and unrestrained by the magistrates, unless, under the color of

⁹⁹John T. Christian, I, p. 391-392 and citing Sprague, **Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit**, p. 179.

¹⁰⁰Robert B. Semple, **History of the Baptists in Virginia**, p. 41.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

489

religion, any man disturb the peace, the happiness, or the safety of society; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.¹⁰¹

James Madison

James Madison, who was also a member of the Committee, “detected serious danger lurking in the word “toleration,” and moved the following amendment, which was subsequently adopted:

That religion, or the duty we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, and not by force and violence; and therefore all

men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity to-

ward each other.¹⁰²

Because James Madison’s brother, General, was a member of a Baptist Church, the family took a deep interest in the struggles of the Baptists.

One measure succeeded another...in which the Baptists took the leading part...

Through the influence of these three great statesmen, the last step was taken in 1802.

The glebes were ordered to be sold in payment of the public debt, on the ground they had been purchased by the public tax and belonged to the State. Thus ended the struggle for religious liberty in Virginia. With the disappearance of the Established Church, the last vestige of ecclesiastical tyranny was wiped from the statute-books of Virginia.¹⁰³

Although the Baptists were the largest group of dissenters in Virginia, they were aided by all the Quakers and most of the Presbyterians, as lesser but influential bodies.¹⁰⁴

Christian suggested, “The intense opposition to the Baptists in Virginia, in 1772, may be gathered from a letter written by James Madison to a friend in Pennsylvania.” He wrote: “That diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some; and to their eternal infamy the clergy can furnish their quota of imps for such purposes. There are at this time, in the adjacent county, not less than five or six well meaning men in close jail for publishing their religious sentiments, which, in the main, are very orthodox (sic.).”¹⁰⁵

In 1775 the Baptists of Virginia met in regular session in their General Association. Robert Semple, their historian, wrote:

This was a very favorable season for the Baptists. Having been much ground under the British laws (sic.), or at least by the interpretation of them in Virginia, they were, to a man, favorable to any revolution by which they could obtain freedom of religion. They had known from experience that mere toleration was not a sufficient check, having been imprisoned at a time when the law was considered by many as being in force. It was therefore resolved at this session, to circulate petitions to the Virginia Convention or General Assembly, throughout the State, in order to obtain signatures. The

¹⁰¹Thomas Armitage, p. 800.

¹⁰²Thomas Armitage, p. 800.

¹⁰³Thomas Armitage, p. 801.

¹⁰⁴Thomas Armitage, p. 801.

105John T. Christian, I, p. 383.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

490

prayer of these was, that the church establishment should be abolished, and religion left to stand upon its own merits; and, that all religious societies should be protected in the peaceable enjoyment of their own religious principles.¹⁰⁶

Christian added,

Accordingly, in 1776, the Baptists were enabled to place upon their records that the bill had been passed and in their judgment that religious and civil liberty were duly safeguarded. This simply suspended the old laws of persecution.

An Assessment Bill was passed, in 1784, by the General Assembly of Virginia, through the influence of the Episcopalians and Presbyterians. The bill provided that a tax be levied

upon all persons for the support of religion, and the money be divided among the leading

sects. The Baptists would come in for a large share of the patronage. The legislature declared that "a general assessment for the support of religion ought to be extended to those who profess the public worship of the Deity."¹⁰⁷

Madison, wrote of this struggle, under the date of April 12, 1785: "The Episcopal people are generally for it (the tax) . . . The Presbyterians seem ready to set up an establishment which is to take them in as they were to pull down that which shut them out. . . I do not know a more shameful contrast than might be found between their memorials on the latter and the former occasion."¹⁰⁸

Christian stated, "In this contest the Baptists stood alone and won. They were supported by individuals of all denominations. "It is a matter of record," says Howell, "in their proceedings that when, in 1785, they had repeated their Declaration of Principles, the General Committee placed them in the hands of Mr. Madison, with the request that he would employ them in their behalf, in a memorial to the legislature, praying for the passage of the law." His voice and that of Jefferson sounded the sentiments which were victorious.¹⁰⁹

Bishop Perry described the attitude of the Baptists and the results of their enmity upon the Established Church:

The most unrelenting opposition to the church as an establishment came from the Baptists, who, in the decade preceding the opening of the war of the Revolution had grown from an inconsiderable sect to a body of numerical strength sufficient to make their influence and support worth any price when the question of loyalty or revolution was to be settled. They had not been slow to take advantage of the position in which they found themselves at the beginning of the war. Remembering the harsh treatment that had been meted out to them by the royal authorities, their ministers being "imprisoned and the disciples buffeted," as their chronicles describe it, they readily embraced the opportunity of weakening the "establishment" as well as opposing the crown. Thus their dislike of the church and state was gratified at the same time.

Consequently they formally addressed the Convention of the delegates to the Virginia Legislature, which succeeded the last royal assembly ever convened in the "Old Dominion,"

with a proffer of their cordial support... They accompanied this tender of service with a petition "that they might be allowed to worship God in their own way without interruption;

106John T. Christian, I, pp. 382-383.

107John T. Christian, I, p. 383 and citing **Journal of the House of Delegates**, October, 1784, p. 32.

108John T. Christian, I, pp. 383-384 and citing Rivers, **Life and Times of Madison**, I. p. 630.

109 John T. Christian, I, p. 384 and citing Howell, **Early Baptists of Virginia**, p. 92.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

491

that they might be permitted to maintain their own ministers, separate from others; that they might be married, buried, and the like, without paying the clergy of other denominations." This was the beginning of a series of assaults against the "establishment" and the Church itself in which all the dissenters, with the exception of the Methodists, who had not at this time formally separated from the Church, united with zeal and untiring energy until the end was gained, and the "establishment" was destroyed.

The result was such as had been anticipated by those who had strenuously opposed the act of the Legislature. Deprived of their livings, the clergy, many of whom were politically, if not personally, obnoxious to the majority of their parishioners, found themselves reduced to the necessity of abandoning their calling, in the exercise of which they could no longer hope for support.

Many left the country; the sacraments were no longer administered in the parishes thus abandoned, and, although a few faithful priests traveled over large circuits for the purpose of administering baptism and the holy communion, they could not supply the lack of the constant and regular services and administrations which had been of old.

The churches, deserted and uncared for, went rapidly into decay. Often required for public uses in the necessities of the State arising from the struggle then going on; more frequently despoiled and desecrated by the hands of the sacrilegious and sordid, who coveted and appropriated for their private uses the very materials of the fabric of the Church of God; there was every prospect that the Church, whose officers were first celebrated on Virginia

soil, would be utterly uprooted and destroyed.¹¹⁰

Safeguarding the Liberty of the Land

Christian concluded Vol. 1 of his History of the Baptists:

One thing more must be done to secure soul-liberty in this country beyond peradventure.

There was an open question whether the Constitution in the form adopted safeguarded liberty. A General Committee of the Baptists of Virginia met in Williams' meeting-house, Goochland County, March 7, 1788. The first question discussed was: "Whether the new federal constitution, which had now lately made its appearance in public, made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty on which, it was argued unanimously, that, in the opinion of the general committee it did not."¹¹¹

Upon consultation with Mr. Madison the Committee addressed General Washington.

The next year, within four months after Washington had become President, this address was formally presented, in which they expressed the fear "that our religious rights were not well

secured in our new Constitution of government.” They solicited his influence for proper legislation, and he returned a favorable answer. As a result, an amendment to the Constitution was made the next month, September 25, which says:

Congress shall make no law, establishing articles of faith, or mode of worship or prohibiting the free exercise of religion, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition to the general government for a redress of grievances.¹¹²

No more fitting conclusion can be had to this volume than to quote the language of the Father of this Country. The days of persecution, of blood and of martyrdom were passed.

Civil and soul liberty, the inalienable rights of man, enlargement, benevolent operations, educational advantages, and world wide missionary endeavor,—all had been made possible

110John T. Christian, II, pp. 273-274, and citing Perry, **History of the American Episcopal Church**, II.

111John T. Christian, I, p. 392 and citing Semple, **History of the Virginia Baptists**, pp. 76, 77.

112John T. Christian, I, p. 392.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

492

by the struggles of the past. George Washington had been consulted by the Baptists to assist in securing freedom of conscience, and he replied:

I have often expressed my sentiments, that every 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. While I recognize with satisfaction, that the religious society of which you are members have been throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously the firm friends to civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious revolution, I cannot hesitate to believe, faithful supporters of a free, yet efficient general government. Under this pleasing expectation, I rejoice to assure them, that they may rely on my best wishes and endeavors to advance their prosperity.¹¹³

The Faith of George W. Bush

The following excerpt from *The Faith of George W. Bush*, by Stephen Mansfield, is included because it clearly indicates the diversion of the “first amendment” from its original intent, to serve the purpose of those who desire to divest our nation of all references to Christianity.

Among the beliefs many of these settlers shared was that the national churches of Europe had made a mockery of pure religion. When time came to design a national government of their own, Americans included in their founding document a First Amendment that guaranteed every citizen the right to worship as he pleased but forbade the federal government from ever estab-

lishing a national church. Thus, Congress could neither “make a law respecting an establishment of religion”—meaning a national church—or “prohibit the free exercise” of religion by

an individual.

It meant that men could be as religious as they wanted to be and that even states could be distinctly Christian in their laws, but that the federal government was forbidden to intrude. Still, the federal government was permitted to encourage religion in general. Chaplains were funded, Bibles were printed, federal buildings were used as churches, missionaries were sent to the Indians—and all at federal expense. Days of prayer and fasting were declared, and speeches on the floor of Congress repeatedly referred to the Christianity of the American People. Within a century of the nation's birth, the way Americans interpreted the First Amendment began to change dramatically. This was primarily for two reasons: First, patterns of immigration in the post-Civil War years began, producing a more religiously diverse population. Second, as the Supreme Court issued rulings intended to apply federal protections to newly freed slaves, it took the First Amendment protections that once pertained only to Congress and applied them to the states as well. Before long, school districts and city governments were bound from encouraging religion in any form—a disorienting change from the habits of a century or more.

When the Supreme Court adopted language Thomas Jefferson had used in a private letter and began making rulings in terms of a “wall of separation between church and state,” the break from original intent was complete.

Soon, practices once commonly understood as bequeaths of a Christian heritage were somehow deemed violations of the new understanding of a secular state. Courts found that the Ten Commandments posted on government buildings, the prayer that started each day in the public schools, the “release time” that permitted students to study their faith during school

113John T. Christian, I, pp, 392-393 and citing Sparks, **Writings of George Washington**, XII. p. 155. Boston, 1855.

XX. The Baptists and the American Revolution

493

hours, and even nativity scenes on government grounds were all in violation of the First Amendment safeguards.

Accompanying this shift in law was shift in culture. Government began to be perceived as nonreligious, and elected leaders were expected to follow suit. This meant a change in what

men brought from their private lives into public office. That a man was a devoted church

member might be celebrated as a reason to vote for him, but he was not supposed to allow what he learned in that church to affect what he did in office.

This produced an odd and somewhat schizophrenic culture. Candidates for office routinely affirmed their faith in God as the most important aspect of their lives, and then all but promised to disregard that God once in office so as not to violate the separation of church and state. In essence, the American electorate was asking candidates for office to sacrifice the most important part of themselves in order to take office.¹¹⁴

Books for further reference:

The writings of Thomas Jefferson containing his Autobiography, Notes on Virginia, Parliamentary Manual, Official Papers, Messages and Addresses, and other Writings Official and Private. Andrew A. Lipscomb, Editor in Chief, Albert Ellery Bergh, Managing Editor. 18 volumes.

The writings of George Washington being the Correspondence, Addresses, Messages and other Papers, Official and Private by Jared Sparks. Boston, 1838. 12 volumes.

J. T. Smith, Life and Times of Rev. John Leland, **The Baptist Quarterly**, V. 230-256. Philadelphia, 1871.

Ruben A. Guild, The Denominational Work of President Manning, **The Baptist Review**, III. 74-85. Cincinnati, 1881.

John T. Christian, The Religion of Thomas Jefferson, **The Review and Expositor**, XVI. 295-307. Louisville, 1919.

¹¹⁴Stephen Mansfield, **The Faith of George W. Bush**, pp. 170-172.