

How The Baptists Affected American History

I honestly believe that to not understand Baptist history is to not understand our nation's history or its principles of freedom. To teach American history without regard to men who helped our Forefathers understand that true freedom and liberty comes from soul-liberty and freedom of "tender conscience" is a great disservice to our nation. I agree with President Obama's statement, "America needs to face the fact that she is no longer a Christian nation." Now the reason he made the statement and the reason I agree with him are totally different. I agree with his statement because America never was a Christian nation. We have been taught this so much and know so little of Baptist history that we believe America is a Christian nation. America is not a Christian nation. America is more than that... Our nation's principles of freedom come from Baptist Bible doctrine and had it not been for the Baptist's like Isaac Backus and John Leland we would have no bill of rights. The United States Constitution was written to outline our government. There was nothing in the Constitution that defined or protected personal liberty. Without the Bill of Rights you have no personal liberty or freedom. No one understood personal freedom and liberty like the Baptists because they had been persecuted so much by Catholic and Protestant alike.

After the Separate Baptist Revival that took place in the south, the churches continued to grow and multiply. In Virginia especially, a stunning revival took place. In 1771 the Virginian churches had 1,355 members. By 1773, they had increased their enrollment to 3,195 members.

They steadily increased and immediately after the Revolutionary War, another astounding revival took place in Virginia. Because of the great revival, they became **the largest religious body in the state**. One great leader among them was **John Leland**, who was a personal friend to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. It is a known fact that Jefferson envisioned a republic styled after the order of a Baptist church and that he greatly admired the Baptists' zeal and courage.

Jefferson, the Baptists and a Brief History of Liberty

Referring to the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson said he "turned neither to book nor pamphlet." He also wrote, that the principles of the document were not original to him, but were instead, "intended to be an expression of the American mind." Historians falsely give credit to the English philosopher, John Locke, for helping Jefferson develop his "American mind." However, **forty-five years before Locke** put his ideas on paper, Roger Williams read the writings of the anonymous Baptist from Newgate prison. This was a tract that was circulated in England on the subject of "liberty of conscience." After reading the tract and being introduced to its principles, Roger Williams wrote "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution." Here is an excerpt from what Roger Williams wrote:

First, whereas they say, that **the Civil order may erect and establish what for me of civil Government may see me in wisdom most meet**, I acknowledge the proposition to be most true, **both in itself**, and also considered with the end of it, that a civil Government is an Ordinance of God, to conserve the civil peace of people, so farre as concernes their Bodies and Goods, as formerly hath beene said.

But from the Grant I infer, (as before hath been touched) that the Sovereigne, originall, and foundation of civill power lies in the people, (whom they must needs meane by the civill power distinct from the Government set up). And if so, **that a People may erect and establish what forme of Government seemes to them most meete** for their civill condition: **It is evident** that such Governments as are by them erected and established, **have no more power, nor for no longer time, then the civill power or people consenting** and agreeing shall betrust them with. This is cleere not only in Reason, but in the experience of all common-weales, where the people are not deprived of their naturall freedome by the power of Tyrants (Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, Vol. 3, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*, P. 249-250).

Let an astute mind now compare the Baptist prisoner of Newgate/Williams with the **first principles of the American republic**, immortalized in the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson wrote:

We hold these truths to be **self-evident**, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, **deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed**,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, **it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government**, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers **in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness**—Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence.

When comparing Jefferson with anonymous/Williams, it is clear that Jefferson had in his mind the principles of the Baptists when he wrote the **founding** document of the American nation. The great Baptist historian Thomas Armitage wrote:

There was a small Baptist Church which held its monthly meetings for business at a short distance from Mr. Jefferson's house, eight or ten years before the American Revolution. Mr. Jefferson attended these meetings for several months in succession. The pastor on one occasion asked him how he was pleased with their Church government. Mr. Jefferson replied, that it struck him with great force and had interested him much, that he considered it the only form of true democracy then existing in the world, and had concluded that it would be the best plan of government for the American colonies. This was **several years before the Declaration of Independence** (Thomas Armitage, *History of the Baptists*, Vol. 2, P. 734).

Madison and Leland

John Leland told Madison that the Virginians would not approve of the Constitution without a guarantee of religious liberty. Pastor John Leland was the nominated Orange county delegate to the Virginia convention to ratify the U.S. Constitution. James Madison knew that Pastor Leland's concerns were not so much with what the Constitution said but rather with what it specifically did not say about personal freedom so he set up a private conference with John Leland because he was so influential with the people. James Madison assured John Leland that he would lobby for a favorable amendment as a forthcoming member of the Virginia House of Representatives. John Leland also stepped aside, and allowed the more persuasive and articulate Madison to attend the convention in his place. This meeting was held in Orange County, Virginia and John Leland's Memorial can be seen from the highway.

Virginia ratified the Constitution July 28, 1788. Within a year Madison went to congress and helped draw up the Bill of Rights, fulfilling the promise made to Leland. The First Amendment to the Bill of Rights which was ratified on December 15, 1791 reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

After 1,757 long years after God's first preachers were confronted by local authorities who "*laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day...*" (Acts 4:3a), the dawn of a new era had arrived. This is why John Locke wrote: "The Baptists were the first and only propounders of absolute liberty." Thanks to the determination of a patriotic Baptist preacher, America could now be "*...free indeed.*" (John 8:36b)

William Cathcart, on John Leland:

Leland was born in Grafton, Massachusetts, May 14, 1754. Within a month after his conversion, in June, 1774, he made his first attempt at public speaking. Having connected himself with the church in Culpeper County, Virginia, he was ordained by the choice of the church. He preached from place to place, everywhere proclaiming "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Wonderful revivals everywhere followed the labors of Mr. Leland in Virginia. Hundreds came under the power of his ministry in Virginia is thus recorded, - 3009 sermons preached, 700 persons baptized, and two large churches formed, one of 300 members and another of 200.

Having finished the work which he thought his Master had given him to do in Virginia, Mr. Leland returned to his native State, and made his home for the most of the remainder of his life in Cheshire, Massachusetts. Here, and in the region about, the same power and the same success followed his ministry. He reports the whole number of persons whom he had baptized down to 1821 as 1352. "Some of them," he says, "have been men of wealth and rank, and ladies of quality, but the chief part have been in the middle and lower grades of life. Ten or twelve of them have engaged to preach." Missionary tours were made in almost every direction, and multitudes crowded to hear him."

A sensational preacher he was not, nor a mere bundle of eccentricities. The discriminating and thoughtful listened to him with the most interest and attention. He was evidently "a born preacher." The life of a settled pastor would have been irksome to him. He wanted freedom from all restraint, and to do his own work at his own time and in his own way. His warmest sympathies went out to his Baptist brethren in their efforts to secure a complete divorce of the Church from the State. Everywhere he pleaded with all the energy of his soul for civil and religious liberty, and he had the satisfaction of seeing it at last come out of the conflict victorious over all foes. Among the class of ministers whom God raised up during the last century to do the special work which it was given the Baptist denomination to perform, John Leland occupies a conspicuous place. We doubt if his equal will ever be seen again. Mr. Leland died January 14, 1841" (William Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, P. 683).

I will say it again, America is not a Christian nation, America is a nation built on principles of freedom that were learned from the Baptists and their understanding of soul liberty.