

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 23

Baptist History – Part 1

By Mark Lanier

INTRODUCTION

Ever heard of the Southern Baptist Convention? Of course! It's the United States' second largest Christian denomination (second to the Roman Catholic Church). How about the National Baptist Convention, USA or the Baptist Association of America? The American Baptist Churches USA? The American Baptist Association (Landmark Baptists)? Maybe the Baptist Union of Great Britain or the Baptist Union of Sweden? There is the Association of Regular Baptist Churches in Canada (but there is no Association of Irregular Baptist Churches!) as well as the Canadian Convention of Southern Baptist Churches. In fact, there are well over 50 separate groups of Baptist Churches in the United States alone. One of every five people in the United States is estimated to attend a Baptist Church or affiliate him/herself as a "Baptist."¹

Consider the diversity of the famous people who are Baptist. We have Presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Harry Truman, Andrew Johnson, Abraham Lincoln, and Vice President Al Gore. We have the world famous athletes Jim Brown and George Foreman. Hollywood has seen many Baptists including Lucille Ball and Kevin Costner. As for business, James Cash Penney (yes, we know him by his initials, "J. C. Penney") and J. L. Kraft of macaroni and cheese fame were Baptists. How about some more historical Baptists of note like John Bunyan or Charles Spurgeon? Also, those greats of the 20th century including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billy Graham (who extends into the 21st century!)?

Now, one may fairly ask, "But how could all those people be the same religion?" One might also wonder why there are so many different "Baptist" groups? The answers to those questions are hopefully contained in today's lessons. With the great number of Baptist and the rich diversity that carries the Baptist label, we have a large heritage to explore in the next few weeks. This first lesson will seek to understand the origins of the Baptist church, the early Baptist movements, and a little insight into how the Baptist church evolved over time.

BAPTIST ORIGINS

When one reads the scholastic world of Baptist history, one finds a number of different theories about the origins of the Baptist church. In the 1800's and early 1900's, it was popular to write that the Baptist Church had existed since the New Testament, although

¹ See the American Religious Identity Survey (2001) and the National Survey of Religious Identification (1990). These surveys are accessible online at:
http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm.

often underground and not really noticed by history. This view (called the “Perpetuity” view) has lost most support of accepted academia and seems more of an effort to read back into history rather than learn from history.

A second view that one can find in the academic literature relates the Baptist Church to the Anabaptist and Mennonite movement (see Lessons 56 & 57). These churches do, after all, share the name “Baptist” and share the belief of “believer’s baptism” (as opposed to infant baptism). In spite of these similarities, however, there are enough noteworthy and fundamental differences between these faiths (involvement in government, for example) that most scholars do not attribute the Baptist church to the Anabaptist movement.

A number of scholars are able to use early Baptist material to argue that the Puritans are the genesis of the Baptist church. There is undoubtedly a Puritan connection to the Baptists, but notwithstanding that, most scholars do not consider the Baptists a Puritan break off. Many Puritans sought to win over the Church of England while many others were part of a larger movement within England now called the “Separatist Movement” (see Lessons 66 & 67). From that movement, there were a number of Christians who sought status as a “Free Church” or a church that practiced its faith free and independent of the Church of England. These who separated themselves from England (hence, the name “Separatists”) included the Puritans as well as the Baptists.

Before honing in on the historical evidence of Baptist origins within the Separatist or Free Church movement, we should note something of the theories that have minority support in academic circles. One can fairly marshal evidence from the New Testament and early Church history that supports linking the Baptist Church, just as one can find points of identification and contact with the Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Puritans. The reason is fairly simple: most Baptist Churches center themselves on the New Testament as the source of their practice and so will naturally have points of connection both with the New Testament and other churches who have used the New Testament as a rule of practice. Similarity, however, does not equate to genetic history!

To really discover Baptist roots, we need to immerse ourselves (there is a bad pun there!) in the Free Church Movement of 17th century England.

EARLY BAPTIST MOVEMENTS

The Free Church movement gave birth to a number of Christian expressions. One could trace many Anabaptist and Puritan churches to this movement. The thrust of the Free Church movement was to establish a faith and practice that was free from domination and control by “secular” or governmental forces. Until this movement, most churches were expressions of the ruling government, and this had been true since Constantine (see Lesson 18 & 19). While government and the church often struggled against each other for control, there was no doubt that the government claimed its ruling right through divine authority (as opposed to America’s ultimate rule “by the people and for the people”). Similarly, when

government stepped out of line, the Church felt itself the proper institution to rectify matters.

Into this political world came the Free Church Movement. This movement believed that the ruling government had no authority over the religious choices of the individual. There was something quite distinct about the religious mentality of the leaders of this movement. Historically, one's salvation and destiny was deemed controlled by whether one was a part of the "Church." For the Church was seen as the eternal kingdom of Christ in its earthly manifestation. The particular life of the individual may have made a difference in one's placement in purgatory once eternity began (see Lesson 44 on Dante's writings), but salvation itself was dependant on being in the Church.

At the time of the reformation movement, a different direction was setting in, not only in protestant churches, but also in the Catholic Church to some. This change, therefore, I do not link as much to the "Reformation" as to something that *spawned or allowed* the Reformation. That something is the printing press!

With the printing press, books became available to everyone. With the ready availability of books, reading became an important skill that most people sought for themselves and their offspring. As more people were able to read, and as the Bible became available in ordinary languages that people could understand, a change started taking place. This change brought about not only the Free Church Movement, the Baptist Church, but also a direct change in the way old line churches viewed faith and the faithful.

The change was a focus from the Church as the Christian structure and institution into a more personal and private faith on the individual. Before the ready availability of the scriptures for the common man, one could still find the power of individuals who walked with God in a personal and direct way (see, for example, Lesson 42 on St. Francis) but most of these individuals were monks and scholars particularly trained in scripture. Once most everyone had a readable copy of God's word in their own possession, they began to get a personal understanding of the scriptures and of God. This launched new understandings of what the institutional church should be and a more personal approach to faith.

As people sought to live out a direct personal relationship to God, as opposed to simply affiliating themselves with the recognized Church of their geographic region, there was a strong movement to worship with other like-minded people. This manifested itself in the Free Church Movement.

Early Baptist, Thomas Helwys, put it this way in his plea for freedom to worship apart from the Church of King James (the Church of England!):

Let the King judge, is it not most equal that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves... for men's religion to God is betwixt God and

themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man.²

We might add that to our 21st century mentality, this seems like a gimme!

We might say, “Of course we all appear before God as individuals, no one should dictate our faith. Let the King of England decide for me what I should believe and how I should practice *only* when the King of England stands and takes the heat for me on judgment day!” But in Helwys’s day, proclamations such as his were deemed treasonous. It was believed that the King was rightfully dictating the faith of men because God had ordained the King to be God’s representative on earth ruling over men. If this were not so, then the King really had no *right* to rule, he merely had the *power* to rule.

This fit hand in hand with the strong Baptist embrace of Luther’s doctrine of the “Priesthood of all believers.” Recognizing the call of verses like 1 Peter 2:9 (“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light”) the Baptist church always taught individual responsibility before God and man.

Needless to say, the early Baptists, like many in the Free Church Movement, were a persecuted faith. Which brings us back to Church History Lesson 67, Puritans, Separatists and Pilgrims – Part 2. On page 2 of that lesson we discussed a preacher named John Smythe that many recognize as a founder of the English Baptist Church. Smythe was closely affiliated with the people that would become famous as the “pilgrims” that began the community ultimately off Cape Cod. Smythe took his congregation to Holland seeking religious freedom in the early 1600’s. It was in Holland, no doubt influenced by the Anabaptists and Mennonites that Smythe decided in late 1608 or early 1609 that Christ commanded his apostles to make disciples by teaching and baptizing. Since one could not teach and baptize an infant, Smythe saw the divine command as one that applied to those of teachable age!

Because Smythe did not agree with or choose to affiliate with the Mennonites at that time, Smythe made the decision to baptize himself! Smythe then baptized those in the group with him and so began what some scholars consider the first documented Baptist Church! These handfuls of people (including Thomas Helwys quoted earlier) were trying daily to work out and understand this new territory they were blazing theologically and practically. As a result, they frequently disagreed over many theological matters, at times splitting and reuniting. In 1611 or 1612, Helwys took a group of the followers back to England to take their new understanding of faith back to their countrymen. This “mission mindedness” would soon be a hallmark of the Baptist Church as we will see in coming lessons on William Carey and Lottie Moon.

Back on British soil, Helwys wrote four books, including the one quoted earlier, over the next year. In these books, Helwys set out positions that differed from the Calvinists and

² Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery (sic) of Iniquity*. This book and the attitudes in it resulted in Helwys’s imprisonment.

Mennonites. These books sought religious freedom (which resulted in the imprisonment and death of Helwys around the age of 40) as well as personal responsibility and accountability before God.

As the Baptist churches began to grow on English soil, there was a recognition that each individual was personally responsible to God, and yet there was still a role for the church as a collection of souls. The church itself was understood as an expression of the body of Christ that was a larger picture than any individual or any individual church. Accordingly, the Baptist churches sought to associate themselves together from an early time to give a fuller expression to the body of Christ as well as to coordinate mission efforts.

The earliest Baptist association dates from 1624 when five Baptist churches joined together to repudiate the ideas of Mennonites that Christians should avoid governmental involvement. This association was of “General Baptist” churches.

The General Baptist Churches were already distinct from the Particular Baptist Churches, a distinction still present to some degree in some Baptist churches today. The General Baptist churches took their name from a “general” view of the atonement (Christ’ sacrifice on Calvary). These were the Baptist that took an Arminian view that Christ died for all, and that salvation was available to all, regardless of the issue of Predestination (see Lesson 64 on Arminianism and predestination). The Particular Baptists viewed the atonement as particular to the chosen, elect. These were Calvinist in the doctrine of predestination.

Over the decades of the 1600’s the Baptist would consolidate into a number of Associations based on doctrinal views of various matters. By and large, the doctrine of most Baptists churches was what scholars would call “orthodox.” By that we mean the basic tenets of Christian belief as set out in the Nicene Creed (see Lesson 19).³ Baptist Churches have consistently stood for the autonomy of each church (local control as

³ The orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed in its Arminian version is: We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the begotten of God the Father, the Only-begotten, that is of the essence of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father, by Whom all things came into being, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.

Who for us humanity and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made human, was born perfectly of the holy virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. By whom He took body, soul, and mind, and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance.

He suffered, was crucified, was buried, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven with the same body, [and] sat at the right hand of the Father. He is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead; of His kingdom there is no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, in the uncreated and the perfect; Who spoke through the Law, prophets, and Gospels; Who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles, and lived in the saints. We believe also in only One, Universal, Apostolic, and [Holy] Church; in one baptism in repentance, for the remission, and forgiveness of sins; and in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies, and the Kingdom of Heaven and in the everlasting life.

opposed to the control over Bishops or some larger ecclesiastical unit). Understandably, however, differences arose on matters less core to orthodoxy. This is not surprising in light of the genesis of the Baptist Church centered in individual accountability and study before God. So we see many different expressions of perspective on the nature of the end times, predestination, frequency of the Lord's Supper and similar issues.

Over time, these differences caused the "groupings" of Baptist churches to change. This has brought about the hundreds of different groupings that exist worldwide today. Along the way, there have been many noteworthy people whom we will discuss in later lessons. The Baptist Church has left its mark on world missions, on Christian literature (Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*), and on theology. In fact, as early as the 1600's, Baptists produced Confessions of Faith that have stood the test of time. The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith (a document of the "Particular Baptist" persuasion) was brought into the United States and proudly stands next to the Westminster Confession of Faith (see Lesson 65) as one of the Reformations clearest expressions of Christian belief.

The London Baptist Confession is 32 articles of faith with supporting scriptures. It begins with the Holy Scriptures, and writes of God, the Trinity, Creation, the Fall, Justification, Sanctification, Repentance, Baptism, The Lord's Supper, Judgment and the Afterlife, as well as many other subjects.⁴ The confession begins with,

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience; Although the light of Nature, and the works of Creation and Providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will, which is necessary unto Salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that His will unto his Church; and afterward for the better preserving, and propagating of the Truth, and for the more sure Establishment, and Comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the World, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of Gods revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

Scripture is proved for each claim. The Confession ends with,

As Christ would have us to be certainly perswaded (sic) that there shall be a Day of judgement (sic), both to deter all men from sin, and for the greater consolation of the godly, in their adversity; so will he have that day unknown to Men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour, the Lord will come; and may ever be prepared to say, *Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly, Amen.*

In the middle of these two profound sections is a truly incredible condensation of core Christian beliefs.

⁴ See the online version at: <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/bcf/bcf.htm>.

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Baptist History – Part 2

By Mark Lanier

Baptist Expansion in America

In the 21st century, most Baptists proudly use the Baptist label when describing their religion or on their church signs. But, it was not always so. We have studied the origins of the Baptist denomination through the Free Church Movement in England, and we have also seen the Baptist label used in association with a number of churches in that movement. The label “Baptist” was not at first considered a compliment! It was a derogatory label that, either by itself or in combination with other words, was used in an insulting manner. The “Catabaptists” were so called because they “perverted baptism.” The Anabaptists were so labeled because they “rebaptized” their members (see Lesson 56). The simple term “Baptist” was originally used to describe those who were considered overemphasizers of baptism.⁵

What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The answer is not easy to give. Albert Henry Newman, the early Baylor professor of Church History wrote in 1915⁶ that there were a number of consistent factors in most Baptist churches. He listed 5:

1. Scripture is the absolute authority for belief and practice of the Church and the Christian.
2. Infant baptism is contrary to Scripture and cannot lead to church membership.
3. Church membership belongs only to those who are saved.
4. Salvation is a personal issue of faith and belief or faith cannot be forced on anyone, and
5. Baptism should be by immersion.

History has shown us that these 5 are not fully absolute on all who claim the label “Baptist,” but they are fairly representative of most Baptists historically. There are many other points that can be made about Baptist beliefs. Almost all Baptists have embraced the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed (see Lesson 18). Baptists would say, however, that these creeds are accepted not because they were a consensus opinion of the church, but rather because the creeds accurately explain Christian doctrine found within scripture.

⁵ “Baptist” itself comes from the English term “baptize” or “baptism.” The English words “Baptize” and “baptism” have evolved from middle English (*bapteme*) and Old English (*baptesme*). Most likely, the Old English came from the Old French (*bapteme*, *baptesma*, and *baptiser*). The French, no doubt, came from the Latin (*baptisma*, *baptizare*). The Latin came from the Greek where in the New Testament we have the actual words *baptisma* as a noun meaning an immersion or dipping in water and *baptizo/baptizein* a verb meaning to immerse, submerge or dip.

⁶ Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*, (American Baptist Publication Society: Philadelphia 1915) at 1-4.

Within this description of the Baptist church, we can fairly concentrate on the baptism issue as an early line of demarcation. This line not only sourced the Baptist label, but also sourced much of the controversy that went with early Baptist churches.

The Baptist church arose at a time when the Catholic, the Lutheran, the Anglican, and the Calvinistic churches were all baptizing infants. Baptist scholars pointed to the New Testament as teaching and illustrating only baptism of believers who had placed their faith and trust in Christ (which, by definition, an infant could not do). The scholars also pointed out that New Testament baptism was, again by definition, an act of immersion. This was understood as the symbolic meaning of going down into the water as signifying the death of Christ, and coming out of the water as signifying Christ's resurrection.

Baptist scholars would assert that the influx of infant baptism into the church came out of a phase where the church was seeing baptism as a magical effect on sinners rather than simply the "response of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pet. 3:21). "By the close of the second century the pagan view that water baptism possesses in itself magical efficacy begins to find expression."⁷ The step from this to infant baptism was seen as logical. If one needed the magic waters of baptism to save from sin, and if one was born with inherited sin from Adam, then one must be baptized soon after birth, lest one die in an unregenerate state.

The Baptists took issue with this doctrine. Because the Baptists denied the doctrine that baptism itself was a regeneration act, the baptism was seen as appropriate only in the New Testament exemplars of people who put their faith into the sacrifice of Christ as their atonement. This brought the "Baptists" into direct conflict with the Church of England and most Reformation churches.

BAPTISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

While the Baptist churches were forming in England in the 1600's, they were also taking shape in the English colonies that we now call the United States. In understanding the shaping of the Baptists in the U.S. as well as the critical role the Baptists took in the formation of our country, we shall look first at several key individuals:

ROGER WILLIAMS

Roger Williams was born a Puritan somewhere between 1600 and 1603 in London, England. He took his degree from Cambridge in 1627, a first rate scholar. Williams not only knew English, but also Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Dutch, and French. During Williams' studies at Cambridge, he joined up with the "Separatist" movement in England (see Lesson 60). He considered the Church of England apostate and sought to worship outside its control.

⁷ Newman at 9.

Out of a concern for personal safety, Williams fled England in 1630 and left for the colonies of New England in an effort to find religious liberty. Williams came to the Boston colony and was actually offered a job leading the Boston Church, but Williams considered the church tethered too closely to the Church of England and refused to take the job. Williams also took the bold step of telling the people why he would not take the job and the strident separatist arguments he had against the established church. As a result, Williams left the Boston church and his notoriety accompanied him. Williams later tried to get a job pastoring the church at Salem (which had separatist sentiments), but the rumor mill caught up with him and the Church withdrew its offer.

Williams spent a few years teaching the separatists at the Plymouth colony and used the time to learn the Indian languages of the various local tribes. Because Williams viewed the Indians as rightful landowners that the King had no right to rob of land, the Plymouth church soon ousted Williams from their ranks. Williams returned to Salem where he was allowed to pastor the church. Williams' knowledge of the Indian language came in handy when just a few years later, Williams was banished from Massachusetts because of his renegade views on the church and religion. Massachusetts had an official church and failure to ascribe to the views of that church resulted in banishment.

Williams went to the Indian tribes and negotiated for his own land on Narragansett Bay. There, Williams set up his own town with a strong declaration that any who settled there would have the freedom of conscience to worship as they liked. Williams was adamant that the truth of the church and Christ could withstand the presence and influence of those who failed to believe or understand true Christianity. In 21st century speak; Williams believed that "truth will out." In William's own tongue, who wrote it thus:

Is the religion of Jesus Christ so poor and so weak and so feebly grown, so cowardly and base, that neither the soldiers nor commanders in Christ's army have any courage or skill to withstand sufficiently in all points a false teacher, a false prophet, a spiritual cheater or deceiver?⁸

So, Williams founded his territory on the principles of liberty of conscience and civil democracy. Because of his belief that God had led him to that place and provided for him, Williams named his town, Providence. Within a matter of a few years, the territory would get official chartering from England (during the time when the Puritans ruled England with the King having been beheaded. See Lesson 66) and would bear the name "Rhode Island."

Rhode Island quickly became a refuge for those persecuted for their faith, be they Quaker, Baptist, or Jew. In fact, so concerned was Williams for the freedom and liberty of all, that Rhode Island passed the first law in North America that made slavery illegal in 1652! (Over 200 years before the Civil War.)

During the time of this moving into Providence, Williams studies and interactions led him to a number of new conclusions about his faith. Williams had long believed the Church of England to be corrupt. In Williams' understanding, the true church is made up of

⁸ Quoted by Newman on 73.

regenerate (modern term: “born again”) believers. Because Williams had received baptism through the Church of England, Williams repudiated that baptism in 1639. This was two years after Williams was banished from Massachusetts.

A man named Ezekiel Holliman baptized Williams whereupon Williams then baptized Holliman and 11 others. Williams is credited with beginning either the first or second Baptist church in America.

Williams died in 1684 estranged from the church he started. Later in life, Williams got caught up in reading Revelation and the end time passages in the Bible in a way that forced an understanding of the passages as fulfilled in his time. This and other personal views and issues were a part of what kept him from staying within the fellowship of that Baptist church he started.

One can go to Providence, Rhode Island today and play in the Roger Williams National Memorial, a park in downtown Providence. Among the famous descendants of Williams was the Baptist Nelson Rockefeller, Vice President under Gerald Ford.

JOHN CLARKE

Earlier it was mentioned that Roger Williams started either the first or the second Baptist church in America. The other contender for the title of first is that church started by John Clarke.

John Clarke was born October 8, 1609 in England. Although scholars are uncertain where Clarke received his education, he certainly got a good one! When Clarke came to America in 1637, he was trained in theology, multiple languages, and medicine. While Williams was settling Providence, Clarke bought land from the Indians and began the town of Newport some 20 miles away. Clarke started his Baptist church in Newport somewhere in the range of 1640-1645. The uncertainty in the date is why scholars cannot decide which Baptist church started first.

Clarke traveled with Williams to England to secure the charter for Rhode Island and is recognized as its co-founder by historians today. Like Williams, Clarke was highly opinionated on the issue of religious liberty. He also emphasized that everyone should have the freedom to worship as they deem proper without state interference. Clarke came by this belief through personal turmoil. In 1651, Clarke had returned to Lynn, Massachusetts where he was arrested and imprisoned for conducting an “illegal” worship service.

The arrest and imprisonment is credited with affecting a significant man in Massachusetts at the time – Henry Dunster.

HENRY DUNSTER

Henry Dunster was born November 26, 1609, in Lancashire, England. After receiving two degrees with an emphasis in Asian languages (he was proficient in Hebrew, Greek and Latin) from Cambridge in 1634, Dunster soon came to Boston (1640). Almost immediately, Dunster was made President of Harvard College.

Dunster had been at Harvard just over 10 years when Clarke was arrested for the illegal worship service. Clarke, of course, was a well-known “Baptist” and his arrest brought attention to that fact. Sometime in this same period, Dunster became convinced that the infant baptism of his upbringing was not scriptural. So when the Dunsters had a child born in 1650 (some scholars reckon the child at issue was born in 1653), Dunster opted not to have the child baptized as an infant. This put Dunster at odds with the government and the school.

On February 2 and 3, 1654, a debate of sorts was held on the issue between Dunster and 9 leading ministers from the vicinity. By all accounts, Dunster pressed his views with clarity and bluntness, but history shows that the views did not persuade the judges. Dunster was forced to resign from Harvard, most likely not just for the views, but also for Dunster’s refusal to keep silent on those views.

A year later, Dunster would be tried for disturbing public worship with his heretical views. Dunster would then leave Massachusetts for the religious toleration of Plymouth Colony.

Before we leave the Northeast, we should note that the strong contingency of Baptists in the Philadelphia area had formed an association of Baptists called the Philadelphia Association. In 1762, this group met and a year later sent James Manning back into Rhode Island to start a Baptist College. The school was to have non-sectarian admission, but 22 of the school’s 36 trustees were to be Baptists. That school? Brown University!

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By the time of the American Revolution, there was still religious turmoil in Massachusetts involving the Baptists. The King of England was assessing taxes on tea (remember the Boston Tea Party?) and paper. Not leaving well enough alone, the Massachusetts government was also taxing Baptists for being Baptists! A Baptist activist named Isaac Backus wrote the Massachusetts Congress:

Great complaints have been made about a tax which the British Parliament laid upon paper... That which made the greatest noise is a tax of three pence a pound upon tea; but your law of last June laid a tax of the same sum every year upon the Baptists in each parish.⁹

Concerns over such issue were not limited to Massachusetts. In Virginia, the clergy of the Church of England were paid from taxes with the rate set in tobacco prices. When the

⁹ Newman at 359.

tobacco price went up, the Anglican clergy pay went up. There were a number of Presbyterians (including Patrick Henry) and Baptists who were upset at having to pay for the clergy of a church with which they so vociferously disagreed. In 1775, the Baptist General Association met in Virginia and adopted a platform to abolish the state run/funded church and allow full religious liberty to the people. Thomas Jefferson pushed this platform during the legislative assembly of Virginia the following year.

As the Revolution came and went, the new country established, the United States of America, had a number of Baptists very concerned with the issue of religious freedom. While the war ended in 1778, the United States did not have an agreed upon Constitution until 1787. The Constitution had a provision for religious liberty under Article VI that sets out that “no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” The Baptists in Virginia did not consider that provision strong enough or complete. In fact, before Virginia voted to adopt the Constitution, this limited religious liberty provision was subject to a major dispute.

As Virginians were nominating and electing the men who would be the delegates to the Virginia convention to ratify the Constitution, the Orange County delegate was set to be either the Baptist leader and spokesman John Leland¹⁰ or the man who would become the 4th president, James Madison. The night before the election, Madison paid a visit to Leland. A man named Eugene Bucklin Bowen documented the meeting:

They finally met under a certain oak tree near Orange which has been carefully preserved to this day, and fought it out. It was a battle royal with Leland insisting that there should be an article in the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty. Madison, however, was afraid to put it in on account of the opposition of some of the colonies, Massachusetts in particular. A compromise was agreed upon. This was that Leland should withdraw and advocate the election of Madison. This, they thought, would ensure the adoption by Virginia. It was a tough battle but on the vote of 168 they won out by a margin of 10 over Madison's remaining opponents....This agreement between Madison and Leland was conditioned upon Madison's joining Leland in a crusade for an

¹⁰ Leland taught that, “Every man must give an account of himself to God and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in that way that he can best reconcile it to his own conscience.” (Leland, *Virginia Chronicle* 25 – 26).

This same John Leland introduced a resolution in a meeting of the Virginia General Baptist Association on May 8, 1790 asserting, “Resolved, That slavery, is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature, and inconsistent with a republican government; and therefore recommend it to our Brethren to make use of every legal measure, to extirpate the horrid evil from the land, and pray Almighty God, that our Honorable Legislature may have it in their power, to proclaim the general jubilee, consistent with principles of good policy.” (Virginia Baptist General Committee, *Minutes*, 6 -7)

amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty, free speech and a free press.¹¹

The Constitution was ultimately ratified by the colonies, and then the Baptists set to work on an amendment to more adequately secure religious liberty. In 1788, the Baptist General Committee of the Virginia Association drafted a letter to President George Washington. In the letter, the Baptists wrote:

When the Constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, feared that the liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently secured.¹²

President Washington wrote back that,

If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution...might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure. I beg you will be persuaded that no one will be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution.¹³

It was shortly after this that James Madison, with the approval of the President, submitted for voting the first amendment to the Constitution mandating “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....” Thus, religious liberties have been assured for all Americans since. (By the way, Massachusetts did not vote for that first amendment!)

POINTS FOR HOME

By Brent Johnson

1. **Know** what you believe and why; Measure yourself by Scripture, not by others.
2. **Grow** in your follow-ship and love for the Lord Jesus Christ by being daily in His Word.
3. **Go** boldly, in Jesus Name, making disciples and teaching them everything you know.
4. Be independent as a Baptist while “living in community”... like a Baptist!

*NOTE: Any parenthetical reference to a Lesson # is referencing “Church History Literacy” 2006-2007 found at www.Biblical-Literacy.org/lessons (14th from the to

¹¹ J.M. Dawson, Baptists and the American Republic, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1956, p. 108-109 quoting the Bowen manuscript on file in the Library of Congress.

¹² Newman at 372.

¹³ Newman at 373.