

# **Baptist Contributions to Religious Liberty In America**

*~ By Russell P. Baker*

In March of 1789, the Baptists of Virginia, always in the forefront of those opposing tyranny in any form, addressed a letter to newly elected President George Washington. In it they expressed their unanimous concern that the recently adopted United States Constitution did not contain the absolute guarantee of freedom of religion that they desired. The first amendment had yet to be adopted. "Liberty of conscience," they wrote, "dearer to us than property and life, (is) not sufficiently secured" in the present document. They confided to Washington, their fellow Virginian, their fears that without a specific constitutional provision relating to this freedom of conscience, one religious group in America might gain a position of power over another and religious oppression be the result.

Washington, after acknowledging the nation's debt to Baptist support during the American Revolution, assured them that no one was more zealous than himself in wanting to establish effective barriers against "horrors of spiritual tyranny and ..religious persecution." "I have often expressed my sentiments," he said, "that every man...being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping (God) according to the dictates of his own conscience."

Encouraged by Washington's promise of aid, the Baptists of America continued a struggle for religious freedom begun over a century and a quarter before. They had vivid memories of government endorsed and sponsored ill-treatment at the hands of established churches in New England and in the Southern Colonies. "Our lot," they recalled, "has ever been mobs, arrests, bonds, fines, and the whipping posts." The Baptists of Virginia and elsewhere could not stop until they had insured that their new country would enjoy a complete separation between church and state.

A brief review of some of the events of Baptist history in early America will serve to explain our spiritual forefathers' devotion to liberty in all of its forms. The first and most brutal of a long series of injustices directed against our people occurred in the Puritan Colony of Massachusetts. It centered around Dr. John Clarke and Elder Obadiah Holmes, pastors of the Baptist Church at Newport, R.I., founded in 1638. These two brethren and several others were arrested at Lynn, Mass., in 1651 and charged with conducting an "unlawful" and "unauthorized" religious assembly in a private home. They were taken to Boston, thrown into prison, and sentenced to be publicly flogged on the Boston Common. Just as Dr. Clarke, "a scholar, a gentleman, and a reverend divine," was about to be "well-whipped", a sympathizer interceded and paid his fine. Bro. Holmes, however, went to the public whipping post and was given thirty lashes, a treatment that left him completely incapacitated for many days. To this brave brother belongs the honor of being the first Baptist in America to suffer such punishment for freedom of conscience. He also has one further claim to fame: he was the great-great grandfather of President Abraham Lincoln.

During this same period, a small Baptist congregation of Pepperel near Boston met to immerse six candidates in a local river. A mob of ruffians gathered and demonstrated their contempt and

scorn for these brave people of God by "baptizing" a number of dogs at the same place. No wonder that our Baptist forefathers often had to worship in secret. Isaac Backus, the

pioneer New England Baptist historian, tells of seeing his own mother Elizabeth, being taken to prison, where she was kept for two weeks. Her crime, being a Baptist!

As early as 1653, the Anglican Church, the established church in the South, began to regulate religious dissenters. During the decade before the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Baptists of Virginia were subject to what came to be called the "great persecution." During these ten years, over thirty Baptist preachers were thrown into jail, whipped by constables, or assaulted by mobs. They were usually charged with being "disrupters of the peace," callers of unlawful assemblies, or perverters of good social order. John Ireland, a Baptist preacher from Virginia, was one of those arrested for preaching without an Episcopal license. He was brought before eleven magistrates for trial. "They browbeat me," he later recalled, "(and) would admit of no defense I could make, but ordered me to hold my tongue and let them hear no more of my vile, pernicious, abhorrible, detestable, abominable, diabolical doctrines, for they were nauseous to the whole court." Further degradation awaited him in foul prison. However, during his five months in this jail, he refused to accept defeat and often preached through his prison bars with much good effect.

An even more graphic account of this time has come down to us from the pen of Elder John Waller written from the Middlesex County jail in August of 1771. Six Baptist preachers were arrested for unlawful preaching and charged with "carrying on a mutiny against the authority of the land." One of the men "was severely scourged," and another received "one lash, from one of the persecutors.." "I have also to inform you," Bro. Waller wrote, "that six (more) of our brethren are confined to Caroline jail. The most dreadful threatenings are arised in the neighboring counties against the Lord's faithful and humble followers." Yet, even in such a desperate situation, these Baptists found large crowds gathered often under the windows of their cell to hear them preach. "We cannot tell how long we shall be kept in bonds," he continued, "we therefore beseech you, dear brother, that you and the church supplicate night and day for us."

However, with the break from England came relief. In 1776, the Baptist General Association of Virginia petitioned the state assembly that they, as well as all other nonconformists, be allowed to worship God in their own way without interruption. "The New Testament Church," they said, "is ...established by the legislature of Heaven not by earthly powers." They exercised their newly won rights to vote by electing men favorable to religious liberty and freedom of conscience to local and state offices. They also enlisted the aid of such champions of person liberty as James Madison, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Jefferson. Their efforts were rewarded in 1786 with the passage of Jefferson's precedent setting "Act for Establishing Religious Freedom" in Virginia. It was revolutionary in concept. It set into law the principle that the state could not compel its citizens to "profess" or not to profess in any religious matter.

However, the Baptists of the New World knew that one victory did not win the war. As we have seen, they could not rest until they saw their beloved principle of religious freedom written into the organic law of the new nation. Their work and prayers paid off in June of 1789 with the adoption of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution. Its passage was largely due to the efforts

of freedom loving Baptists. For the first time there was a nation where all people truly could enjoy freedom of conscience. "Congress," the First Amendment reads, "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This is one of the debts that our nation owes to the people called Baptists.

"Faith of our fathers,  
Living still,  
In spite of dungeons, fire, and sword,  
Faith of our fathers, holy faith,  
we will be true to thee till death!"

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