

# Patrick Henry on Religious Freedom

Taken from the book entitled, "Religious Denominations" by Belcher

Three Baptist preachers were brought to trial for preaching. The indictment brought against them was "*For preaching the gospel of the Son of God,*" contrary to the statute in that case provided, and therefore disturbers of the peace. The clerk was reading the indictment in a slow and formal manner, and he pronounced the crime with emphasis, "*For preaching the gospel of the Son of God,*" when a plain-dressed man dismounted his horse, entered the court-house, and took his seat within the bar. He was known to the court and lawyers, but a stranger to the mass-of spectators, who had gathered on the occasion. This was PATRICK HENRY, who, on hearing of this prosecution, had rode some fifty or sixty miles from his residence in Hanover County, to volunteer his services in the defense of the prisoners. He listened to the further reading of the indictment with marked attention, the first sentence of which that had caught his ear, was, " For preaching the gospel of the Son of God." When the indictment had been read, and the prosecuting attorney had submitted a few remarks. Henry arose, stretched out his hand received the paper, and then addressed the court:

"May it please your worships: I think I heard read by the prosecutor as I entered this house, the paper I now hold in my hand. If I have rightly understood, the king's attorney of this colony has framed an indictment for the purpose of arraigning and punishing by imprisonment inoffensive persons before the bar of this court, for a crime of great magnitude—as disturbers of the peace. May it please the court, what did I hear read ? Did I hear it distinctly, or was it a mistake of my own? Did I hear an expression, as if a crime, that these men, whom your worships are about to try for a misdemeanor, are charged with that!" and continuing, in a low, solemn, heavy tone, "For preaching the gospel of the Son of God!" Pausing amidst the most profound silence and breathless astonishment of his hearers, he slowly waved the paper three times around his head, then, lifting up his hands and eyes to heaven, with extraordinary and impressive energy, he exclaimed, "GREAT GOD!" The exclamation—the action—the burst of feeling from the audience were all overpowering. Mr. Henry resumed:—

"May it please your worships:—in a day like this, when truth is about to burst her fetters—when mankind are about to be raised to claim their natural and inalienable rights—when the yoke of oppression which has reached the wilderness of America, and the unnatural alliance of ecclesiastical and civil power, is about to be dissevered—at such a period,—when liberty—liberty of conscience, is about to awake. from her slumbering and inquire into the reason of such charges as I find exhibited here to-day in this indictment!" Another fearful pause, while the speaker alternately cast his sharp, piercing eyes on the court and the prisoners—and resumed:— "If I am not deceived, according to the contents of the paper I now hold in my hand, these men are accused of 'preaching the gospel of the Son of God.'—GREAT GOD!" Another long pause, during which he again waved the indictment around his head—while a deeper impression was made on the auditory. Resuming his speech—"May it please your worships; there are periods in the history of man, when corruption and depravity have so long debased the human character, that man sinks under the weight of the oppressor's hand and becomes his servile—his abject slave; he licks the hand that smites him; he bows in passive obedience to the mandates of the despot, and in this state of servility he receives his fetters of perpetual bondage. But, may it

please your worships, such a day has passed away! From the period when our fathers left the land of their nativity for settlement in these American wilds—for LIBERTY—for civil and religious liberty—for liberty of conscience—to worship their Creator according to their conceptions of Heaven's revealed will; from the moment they placed their feet on the American continent, and in the deeply imbedded forests sought an asylum from persecution and tyranny—from that moment despotism was crushed; her fetters of darkness were broken, and Heaven decreed that man should be free—free to worship God according to the Bible. Were it not for this, in vain have been the efforts and sacrifices of the colonists; in vain were all their sufferings and bloodshed to subjugate this new world, if we, their offspring, must still be oppressed and persecuted. But, may it please your Worships, permit me to enquire once more, for what are these men about to be tried? This paper says 'for preaching the Gospel of the Son of God.' GREAT GOD. For preaching the Saviour to Adam's fallen race."

After another pause, in tones of thunder he enquired—"WHAT LAW HAVE THEY VIOLATED?" Then, for the third time, in a slow, dignified manner, he lifted his eyes to heaven, and waved the indictment around his head. The court and the audience were now wrought up to the most intense pitch of excitement. The face of the prosecuting attorney was pale and ghastly, and he appeared unconscious that his whole frame was agitated with alarm; and the judge, in a tremulous voice, put an end to the scene, now becoming extremely painful, by the authoritative command—"Sheriff discharge those men!"

PATRICK HENRY was a native of Virginia, of which state he became Governor. He was eminent through life as a statesman and an orator. A little before his death, he remarked to a friend, who found him reading his Bible, "Here is a book worth more than all the other books which ever were printed; yet it is my misfortune never to have, till lately, found time to read it with proper attention and feeling."

This excellent man left in his Will the following important passage;—

"I have now disposed of all my property to my family: there is one thing more I wish I could give them, and that is, the Christian religion. If they had that and I had not given them one shilling, they would, be rich; and if they had not that, and I had given them all the world, they would be poor."

The descendants of Patrick Henry are now members of Baptist churches, and the inhabitants of the counties in Virginia where the Baptists were then persecuted, are now almost all connected with that denomination.

*Editor's Note: The attack is on against the founding fathers of America. As Yellow Times says of Patrick Henry, "He was once described by Jefferson as "an emotional volcano with little guiding intelligence." If the forefathers of America were not Godly Christian men why do they have God on their money and in their national songs?*

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