

Portraits – Isaac Backus

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Isaac Backus was born in a Connecticut farmhouse in 1724. His family was Congregationalists and it was that faith in which he was raised throughout his formative years. Few people are allowed to live during such important times as Isaac Backus was. He was just reaching denominational stature as the American Revolution began. Indeed, Backus' thoughts and beliefs can be seen echoed in much of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Backus was a spiritual child of the Great Awakening and his conversion is directly linked to the work of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. The writings of Edwards influenced more than one Baptist as can be seen in the life of Backus and John Bunyan.

It is not too much of a stretch also to think that Edward's example as a pastor had much influence on many American Baptists. Though a Congregationalist, Edwards came to reject the half-way covenant of his own grandfather Solomon Stoddard. Edwards firmly believed that only the truly converted should partake of communion. Such was a radical shift from the practices of New England church of the time. If Edward's writing influenced then Whitefield's preaching did even more. It was through a preacher influenced by Whitefield that Backus came to know the God of whom he had heard most of his life. Sometime after hearing the aforementioned visiting preacher Backus wrote:

“As I was mowing alone in the field, August 24th 1741, all my past life was opened plainly before me, and I saw clearly that it had been filled up with sin. I went and sat down in the shade of a tree, where my prayers and tears, my hearing of the Word of God and striving for a better heart, with all my other doings, were set before me in such a light that I perceived I would never make myself better, should I live ever so long. Divine justice appeared clear in my condemnation, and I saw that God had a right to do with me as He would. My soul yielded all into His hands, fell at His feet, and was silent and calm before Him ... The Word of God and the promises of His grace appeared firmer than a rock, and I was astonished at my previous unbelief. My heavy burden was gone, tormenting fears were fled, and my joy was unspeakable.”¹

Backus was foremost a pastor; but his importance to American Baptist and the Church in general is immense. “The role which Backus played during the formative years of his denomination in America was so crucial that he has been termed the father of American Baptists.”² Roger Williams may have been the biological father of Baptists in America but

Backus stands as their adoptive father. What Rogers began, Backus consolidated and gave a clear mandate to. In particular, Backus restored to Baptists their theological roots which had been mostly lost in the years after Williams. He, became the chief spokesman for the 'evangelical Calvinism' which replaced the Arminianism prevalent among the older Baptist churches. In spite of the Calvinism of the earliest New England Baptists, a shift to the Arminian outlook had been completed by the time of the Awakening. The ... Separate Baptists ... largely followed the 'evangelical Calvinism' of Jonathan Edwards ... Backus was their chief spokesman, articulating in the Baptist context the themes of sovereign grace which had been so eloquently espoused by Edwards." 3

Much of his latter life was given to writing against the inroads of Arminianism which ultimately led to Universalism. Disregarding the trend of his time, Backus staunchly upheld the traditional doctrines of Grace and warned of the dangers of straying from them. Like other Baptists (i.e. Bunyan and Fuller), Backus felt he was going back to Calvinism in its purest form. He saw God's sovereignty and man's individual responsibility as both being necessary and Scriptural.

"For Backus, God was the governor of the universe to whom all earthly civil governments must appeal ..." At the same time man is individually responsible to God. "Religion is ever a matter between God and the individuals ." In short, religion is a relationship between the individual and God, mediated only by the Holy Spirit illumined by Scripture."4

Like other Baptist, however, Backus did not fall in lock step with the Covenant Theology of most other Puritans. Many other books have been written on this subject so little time will be spent here. Backus strove valiantly to uphold the Puritan concept of a theocratic kingdom (God ruling all men through the Church), but Scripture would not allow him to. The same Scriptures which led Backus to see his need for personal salvation also led him to see the very personal nature of God's call to man in all areas of life.

Backus and Baptist are often misunderstood as making baptism itself a test of Christianity. While Baptist do emphasize immersion, that is not the core issue. To Backus, it was the Believer part of believer's baptism that most concerned him. Covenant theology in New England had to come to allow just about anyone to be a member of the church and to partake of communion. This weakness of the halfway covenant to stress personal decision was what drove Backus from the Congregationalists to the Baptists. "He argued that the earliest Christian congregations were those joined by believers baptized on profession of their faith ... and that those congregations were themselves independent of any superior earthly authority."5 "The visible church He (God) had established upon earth was an assembly of true and real saints and ought therefore to be inaccessible to the wicked and the unrighteous."6

Theology always precedes application as can be seen in the natural conclusions Backus drew from Scripture. "He rejected the Covenant Theology of the Puritans by arguing as the Baptists

had long done that the Bible contained not one covenant but two. The first of these was the old covenant of works made with the Jews, and the second was the covenant of grace made with those who believe in Christ. The people and events of the Old Testament foreshadowed the work of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament – the Gospel or Christian church is the anti-type of the Jewish church or Israel and Jesus Christ is the anti-type of Abraham.”⁷ Recognizing this difference in the physical kingdom of Israel and the spiritual kingdom of the Church led Backus to formulate his views on the separation of Church and State.

“Basic to the Baptist position was the belief that all direct connection between the State and institutionalized religion must be broken in order that America might become a truly Christian country.”⁸ In other words, the Church should not allow the State to govern in matters which belonged to the Church. Among these infringements which Backus saw were taxation to support State churches, tax exemption only for churches with ministers recognized by civil authorities, and various other matters. . In his last years, Backus fought against the desire by some Baptist churches to be incorporated by the state. This desire for civil recognition derived from the early American policy of taxing citizens to provide salaries for ministers. Backus was totally opposed to this practice. Incorporation gave the State authority over the church and this was unacceptable.

Backus offered a Bill of Rights for consideration to friends at the time of the writing of the American Constitution. His second right read as follows:

“As God is the only worthy object of all religious worship, and nothing can be true religion but a voluntary obedience unto His revealed will ... every person has an unalienable right to act in all religious affairs according to the full persuasion of his own mind, where others are not injured thereby ...”

Some in our present day have sought to use Roger Williams and Isaac Backus as models for what they would have considered a perversion of the concept of separation of Church and State. Early Baptist never envisioned their words being used to strike down school prayer or to legitimize non-Christian religions. Their wall of separation was one between government and the Christian church alone.

“Backus’ principles of separation of church and state ... were not ... the same as those set forth by Jefferson and Madison ... Jefferson, who viewed all religious creeds and sects as potential tyrannies over the mind of man, explicitly denied that America was or should be a Christian nation ... Backus and Baptists wanted to separate Church and State in order to create a truly Christian state in which men rendered to Caesar only what was truly Caesar’s and devote the bulk of their energy to serving God...”⁹

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