

Religious Liberty

By J. W. Porter

Few things are more gratifying than the knowledge of the fact that those of our own flesh or faith have done something worth while in the world, and have, therefore, justified their mission among the children of men. The man, or Baptist, who cares nothing for his history, is usually the one who believes his history uneventful or unfortunate.

Of all people, Baptists have probably suffered more from the world's lack of knowledge of their history. All too long have Baptists been indifferent in acquiring a knowledge of their history, and affording to others an opportunity, at least, of knowing what they have done for the enlightenment and betterment of mankind. No true Baptist can be content to hide the light of his people's history under a bushel, or bury the deeds of Baptists with their bodies. Whatever the Baptist contribution to history, justice to man and gratitude to God demand that this contribution be made manifest.

The world is not as slow as it may seem, in acknowledging and discharging obligations to its benefactors, when those obligations are properly presented to its attention. To do this, as far as our limited space will allow, is the purpose of these pages.

We mention, as the first item in the list of the world's indebtedness to Baptists, the right of every individual to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience.

This age-long contention of Baptists for liberty of conscience is predicated upon the teaching of both Testaments, that the soul is only responsible to its Creator; that neither civil court nor ecclesiastical council can enter the realm of the soul or dictate in matters of conscience.

It may be well to state, just here, what Baptists believe to be the meaning of the words "religious liberty." They do not believe, as many seem to teach, that religious "toleration" and liberty are identical in meaning. Toleration accords to dissenters the right to support their own churches, and at the same time compels them to support the state church. According to the *Baptist* conception of religious liberty, the individual has a perfect legal right to worship, or not worship, as he may see fit, and that no nation has a right to establish a "state church," or to make or enforce a law compelling any one to support any ecclesiastical institution.

All the nations worthy of note now offer religious toleration, but many of them still withhold the God-given and inalienable right of religious liberty. Baptists do not ask religious toleration either for themselves or others, but absolute religious liberty for all mankind. This has been their contention through the centuries, and will be to the end of time. We may thank God and take courage that our labor of love has not been in vain in the Lord. Baptists have issued the proclamation of religious emancipation to the universe, and as a result the shackles of ecclesiastical slavery have fallen from millions of hearts and hands.

This blessed privilege of religious liberty, which is now well-nigh universally recognized and generally enjoyed, is assumed by many as a mere matter of course. Little indeed do those who now enjoy this priceless privilege realize what it has cost in tears and blood. The question, however, is not so much the worth of this inestimable gift, but rather to whom is due the credit for this, probably the greatest of all earthly blessings. We confidently affirm that Baptists have been the benefactors who have made this mighty contribution to the world's welfare. In proof of this contention we offer, in these pages, testimony which it is believed will be deemed quite sufficient to establish the claim.

It has been said that there are two things in the world worth contending for religion and liberty. Certainly these constitute a priceless heritage, and Baptists as a people may thank God that they have been permitted to preserve the one in its purity, and to procure the other at the greatest price that was ever paid by human hearts and hands. Indeed, the mightiest and most tragic struggle of the ages has been the one ceaselessly waged for the freedom of the soul. It is entirely safe to say that no battle known to history has cost so much in tears and blood, and brought such blessings, alike to the victor and the vanquished.

Probably the earliest recorded plea in behalf of religious liberty was made by Tertullian, who lived in the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era. This Christian hero, in his splendid advocacy of the Baptist principles of religious liberty, said

"It is easily seen to be unjust to compel free people against their will to offer sacrifice, for in the acts of religious services a willing mind is required. It should be counted quite absurd for one man to compel another to do honor to the gods."

From the days of Constantine, when Christianity became a state religion, till this good day and hour, there has never been a time when there were not those who were ready to suffer, and, if need be, to die, for the imperishable principles of soul liberty. As early as the fourth century, the Donatists, who were Baptists in theory and practice, if not in name, earnestly contended that the conscience should not be coerced, and that the state and the churches were separate and distinct institutions. In spite of persecution, and death to many of their numbers, they resisted the right of the state to dictate in religious matters, and by their sufferings and lives sanctified the struggle for religious freedom. Speaking of these people, Neander says: "For the first time the ideas which Christianity, as opposed to the pagan religion of the state, had first made men distinctly conscious of, became an object of contention within the state itself the ideas concerning universal, inalienable human rights, concerning liberty of conscience, concerning the rights of free religious conviction." The Donatists as declared by Neander, and generally conceded by church historians, were afterwards merged with the Waldenses, who for centuries continued to contend for the rights of conscience, and its corollary, separation of church and state.

Other denominations sought to establish themselves by alliances with the state, and too frequently by becoming the persecutors of their brethren. The Mennonites, who sprang out of the Waldenses in 1536 (Mosheim, Cent. XVI., Sec. 3, part 2, chap. 111), contended for perfect liberty of conscience, and that the magistrates had no right to interfere with religious convictions. This opinion is founded on "the one principle" which, as Mosheim

justly remarks, is at the basis of all their peculiarities; *i.e.*, "the Kingdom which Christ has established on earth is a visible society or company, in which is no place for any but holy or pious persons."

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