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Reflections on Virginia's Baptist Heritage

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REFLECTIONS ON VIRGINIA'S BAPTIST HISTORY

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Reflections on Virginia's Baptist Heritage
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REFLECTIONS ON VIRGINIA'S BAPTIST HERITAGE

By Homer Massey

Background

From 1607 when the Angelical Cavaliers landed in Virginia to 1789 when the Bill of Rights was added to the nation's new Constitution, two struggles dominated the political and religious arenas in colonial America. On the one hand was the struggle for freedom from domination by England, on the other the fight for religious liberty. One, well known to most Americans, was resolved by the adoption of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1789, the other by the passage of the Statute for Religious Freedom by the Virginia Legislature in 1786.

The brightest stars in the struggle for the nation's independence were also featured players in the dramatic story of the fight for religious liberty. Men such as Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison not only helped lay the foundation for the greatest example of individual freedom and democratic government in the world's history, but they also secured true religious liberty for the new nation. Accordingly, the religious leaders involved in the separation of church and state were also heavily involved in the cause for independence for the colonies. Baptist historian Thomas Armitage explains this dual activity:

Whatever oppressions England inflicted upon the colonies she seldom deprived them of their religious liberties, but from the first left them to manage these alone. Excepting in Virginia, the colonies, and not the mother

government, laid the heavy yoke of religious oppression upon the Baptist neck. On several occasions they had appealed to the crown and their religious grievances had been redressed, as against their colonial oppressors. Hence, in the revolution they were to fight a double battle: one with their political enemies on the other side of the sea, and the other with their religious tyrants on this side.¹

The seeds that eventually produced victory for the cause of religious freedom included the pilgrims who settled in America, all of whom came with dreams of an oppression-free religious experience only to find the opposite. They included such daring examples as Roger Williams and his Rhode Island settlement. Williams was to influence the thinking of Thomas Jefferson as he formulated many of the principles of the new government he eventually helped found. They included men like Isaac Backus, a Baptist pastor in New England whose brilliant mind and scholarly writings carried on and extended Williams' dream. Indeed, many heroes outside the scope of this paper deserve praise for their contributions to the cause.

The Baptists, however, were the constant "pusher" in the struggle. Historian John Christian explains:

So far as this work was a work of intelligent conviction and religious faith, the chief honor of it must be given to the Baptists. Other sects, notably the Presbyterians, had been energetic and efficient in demanding their own liberties; the Friends and Baptists agreed in demanding liberty of conscience and worship, and equality the law, for all alike. But the active labor in this cause was mainly done by the Baptists. It is to their consistence and constancy in the warfare against the privileges of the powerful "Standing Order" of New England, and of the moribund establishments of the South, that we are chiefly indebted for the final triumph in this country of that principle of the

¹ Thomas Armitage, *History of the Baptists*, vol. 2 (New York: Bryan, Taylor & Co., 1890), 777.

separation of church and state, which is one of the largest contributions of the New World to civilization and the church universal.²

The Problem of Established Religion in Virginia

Except for Rhode Island all of the American colonies had official state churches. Those who accepted this sort of arrangement were “conformists” or the “establishment, while those who wanted total freedom or at least toleration of their church were “non-conformists” or “dissenters.” As the dissenters became bolder and grew in number the conflict became more of a problem to the officials in each colony.

In Virginia “so stringent were the laws against dissenters and the supremacy of the Establishment so evident that Baptists were kept out of the colony for more than a hundred years after it was settled.”³ Even after the dissenters began to be active, Virginia was known as “the colony that first made persecuting laws, and had equaled all others in the bitterness of her intolerance, if indeed she had not surpassed them all.”⁴

As early as 1629 “the Assembly forbade any minister lacking Episcopal ordination to officiate in the colony, and this rule was enforced by severe penalties

² John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1922), 251.

³ Lewis P. Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg: J. P. Bell and Co., 1938), 12.

⁴ Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), 319.

right up to the Revolution. Baptists were also taxed for the support of the Episcopal Church and their property was seized and sold to pay such taxes.”⁵ The “glebe lands” or property and buildings owned by Virginia for use of the Episcopal Church and housing for the parsons, were to be a point of contention all along the way and a problem not completely solved until January of 1802.

By 1740 other church groups began to spring up Virginia making it necessary for the officials to grudgingly alter their rules. Provision was made “permitting one, but only one, Baptist preacher to a county. He was permitted to preach but once in two months. Later this law was modified permitting him to preach once in each month. But even then, only one definite place in the county, and only one sermon on that day, and never at night.”⁶

Before these scant privileges could be enjoyed, however, the dissenting minister would have to pass whatever test the local parson had set up in order to receive a license. As will be shown later, the parson had available to him the local sheriff and whatever else he needed to enforce the rules in his own way. This sort of arrangement resulted in confrontation, because the dissenters were determined to carry the gospel into every part of the New World. This confrontation caused frustration for the Established Church and for officials, leading them to persecute

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood* (Lexington: Byron-Page Co., 1931), 47.

the dissenters mercilessly. It also caused rapid growth for the dissenting churches, as has always been the case in church history when Christians are persecuted.

Armitage observed that this problem continued right up to the Revolution:

The bitterest persecutions which they (the Baptists) had endured ran through the twelve years between 1763 and 1775, and they gained their full freedom only point by point and inch by inch; as is evident from the fact that all which the Convention could be induced to do, under the lead of the three great statesmen named (Jefferson, Madison, Henry) was to return a complimentary answer to the Baptists, and to pass an order that the ministers of other denominations should be placed on the same footing as the chaplains of the Virginia army with those of the Episcopal Church.⁷

The stage was being set for the dramatic resolution of both the struggle for independence and the fight for religious liberty.

The Courage of Virginia's Baptist Preachers

The attention of Virginia's statesmen was caught and held by the tenacity of non-conformist preachers who were willing to suffer harassment, physical beatings, deprivation and imprisonment rather than forgo the preaching of the gospel or be subject to the strict limitations placed on them. Their justification for disobedience was the oft-quoted Scripture "...whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak of the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20), and "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts :29).

⁷ Armitage, 790.

Robert Torbet tells of this new phase of oppression in the colony:

Beginning in 1768 Baptists in Virginia began to face legal prosecution by the authorities. This prosecution was stimulated largely by irate clergymen of the Established Church, who resented the barbed criticisms leveled at them by the Separate preachers and who envied the swift growth of the Baptist congregations. The first instance of actual imprisonment occurred on June 4, 1768, in Spotsylvania County, when John Waller, Lewis Craig, James Childs, James Read and William Mash were arrested as disturbers of the peace. This was often the charge, even though in each instance preachers were brought to trial because they had preached without proper licenses, or at times or places other than those permitted. Craig was held for four weeks, the others for forty-three days.⁸

These young preachers were just a few of the unsung heroes responsible for helping to bring to a head the growing conflict. The valuable book *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* by Lewis P. Little contains lengthy documentation and details about each imprisonment, including numerous instances of harassment during jail time. Here is a condensed list:

- Fredericksburg, June 4, 1768: Lewis Craig, John Waller, James Childs, James Read, William Mash
- Orange County, July 28, 1768: Elijah Craig, John Corbley, Allen Wyley, Thomas Chambers
- Culpeper, November 15, 1769: James Ireland
- Chesterfield County, December 1770: William Webber, Joseph Anthony
- Ruther Glen, June 1771: John Young
- Spotsylvania County, July 1771: Lewis Craig, Joseph Craig, Aaron Bledsoe
- Ruther Glen, July 15, 1771: Bartholomew Chewning, James Goodrich, Edward Herndon
- Middlesex County, August 10, 1771: John Waller, William Webber, Robert Ware, James Greenwood
- Chesterfield County, May 1772: Augustine Eastin
- King and Queen County, August 1772: James Greenwood, William Lovell

⁸ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), 241.

- Ruther Glen, August 12, 1772: James Ward, James Pitman
- Chesterfield County, June 1773: John Tanner, John Weatherford
- Chesterfield County, June 1773: Jeremiah Walker
- Fairfax County, 1773: Jeremiah Moore
- Culpeper, August 21, 1773: Nathaniel Saunders, William Maclannahan
- Orange County, October 23, 1773: Joseph Spencer
- Chesterfield County, February 4, 1774: David Tinsley
- Essex County, March 13, 1774: John Waller, John Shackelford, Robert Ware, Ivison Lewis
- Accomack County, May 1778: Elijah Baker

Church minutes, diaries and the like contain records that indicate other preachers or laymen were jailed also, without specific dates or places: Thomas Ammon, Thomas Maxfield, Adam Banks, John Delany, Anderson Moffett, William Fristor, Charles Williams, Philip Spiller, Andrew Tribble, Thomas Mastin, John Clay, John Koontz, Martin Kaufman, Thomas Waford, John Affernan, John Taylor, David Barrow, Lewis Lunsford, and John Alderson.⁹

Out of this group of fledgling preachers, mostly young men, came the leadership for Baptist churches and associations in Virginia for years to come. One of the early group efforts produced a petition which was submitted to the Virginia Convention of 1776:

That they (the Baptists) be allowed to worship God in their own way, without interruption; that they be permitted to maintain their own ministers and none others; that they be married, buried and the like without having to pay the clergy of other denominations; that these things granted, they will gladly

⁹ Little, 54.

unite with their brethren and to the utmost of their ability promote the common cause.¹⁰

The Baptists learned how to mobilize their forces and “lobby” the decision-makers to bring about change. But it took suffering and imprisonment to get a foot in the door.

One representative story shows how God worked in individual lives during this collective effort. John Waller was one of the first preachers put in jail in 1768, but his conversion was the result of an earlier courtroom encounter which did not result in imprisonment for anyone:

John Waller served on the jury that heard the case of Lewis Craig who had recently been converted and had been arrested for preaching without a license. (around 1776). After the jury was dismissed Craig turned to them and said, ‘I thank you gentlemen of the grand jury, for the honor you have done me. While I was wicked and injurious, you took no notice of me, but since I have altered my course of life and endeavored to reform my neighbors, you concern yourselves much about me.’

When Waller, better known in those days as ‘Swearin’ Jack’ heard his words and observed his meekness, he was convinced Craig possessed something he had never seen in anyone before. Waller began attending the Baptist meetings, was converted, baptized, and soon began preaching himself.¹¹

One incident in Waller’s ministry is typical of the numerous occasions of harassment suffered by dissident preachers apart from imprisonment:

¹⁰ Robert B. Semple, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, revised and extended by George W. Beale (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications, 1810, revision in 1894), 494-495.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

Once while John Waller was conducting an open-air service in Caroline County the local magistrate, along with the parson of the Episcopal Church, kept disturbing the proceedings by punching at Waller with the butt end of a horsewhip. When Mr. Waller began to pray, they jerked him off the stage, beat his head upon the ground, and carried him down a lane where he was given some twenty lashes with the horsewhip. After a tongue-lashing by the parson, Waller returned bleeding but singing praises to God, mounted the stage and preached with a great deal of liberty.¹²

William Cathcart wrote this summation of John Waller's ministry: "he preached thirty-five years, baptized more than two thousand persons, assisted in ordaining twenty-seven ministers and in constituting twenty churches, and lay one hundred and thirteen days in four different jails, and he was repeatedly scourged in Virginia. He now rests from his labors, and his works followed him.

Inglorious and largely unknown, these "apostles of religious liberty" were so very important in the formation of this great nation. Baptist associations in Virginia have erected monuments in several towns and cities with the names of the preachers imprisoned in their areas inscribed upon them. The Virginia Baptist Historical Society in Richmond has a collection of original documents, letters, and artifacts pertaining to the imprisonment of Baptist preachers during this colonial period.

The Convictions of Virginia's Statesmen

At least three outstanding statesmen deserve to be singled out for recognition for their part in the struggle for religious liberty.

¹² William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 1176.

Patrick Henry

Patrick Henry's name is forever linked with the word "liberty" because of his great speech at St. John's Church in Richmond, which included the stirring words, "give me liberty or give me death!" But many of his contributions to the cause of religious liberty were not so flamboyant. On several occasions he provided the defense for arrested Baptist preachers without charge in court, and in at least one instance paid the jail fees for a preacher whose health was threatened by imprisonment.¹³

Henry loved freedom and abhorred the limitations placed on dissenters. But he did not believe religion could survive without taxes and state support, thus he often ran counter to the effort for total separation of church and state. Nonetheless he played an important part in the struggle and his memory is greatly cherished by Baptists. He was there when they needed him.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson wrote his own epitaph that appears on his gravestone:

**Here was buried
Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of Independence
Of the Statute for Religious Freedom
And Father of the University of Virginia**

¹³ Joseph M. Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1956), 40.

That he ranked his labors for religious liberty so high in all his life's varied work speaks eloquently of his passion for it. He submitted his Statute for Religious Freedom to the Virginia Legislature in 1779, but it wasn't adopted until James Madison revived it in 1786. It is one of the few unchanged pieces of major legislation from the eighteenth century still in force today. An excerpt reads:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, not shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burthened in his body or goods not shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain their opinions in matters of religion and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.¹⁴

A large "Memorial to Religious Liberty" has been erected on a street filled with historic sites in Fredericksburg where tourists are reminded of Thomas Jefferson's great contributions.

James Madison

He came from an Episcopalian home but had a father who instilled in him a love for freedom. An example of the independent thinking of the elder Madison is his approval of his son's enrollment at Princeton (a Presbyterian college) rather than at William and Mary "because of hostility to church establishments."¹⁵

¹⁴ Armitage, 800.

¹⁵ Dawson, 92.

In a letter written January 24, 1772 to William Bradford, his college mate at Princeton, Madison wrote:

Poverty and luxury prevail among all sorts; pride, ignorance, and knavery among the priesthood, and vice and wickedness among the laity. That is bad enough, but it is not the worst I have to tell you. That diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some; and to their eternal infamy, the clergy can furnish their quota of imps for such purposes. That there is at this time, in the adjacent county, not less than five or six well-meaning men in close jail for publishing their religious sentiments, which in the main are very orthodox. I have neither patience to hear, talk or think anything relative to this matter...¹⁶

After graduation Madison returned to Orange County to practice law. Some of his first clients were Baptist preachers who had been arrested for preaching without licenses. He was quickly elected from Orange County to the Virginia Convention in 1776, thus beginning a long life of public service. He did not, however, lose his passion for religious liberty.

In the midst of the debate over church-state entanglements, he wrote "A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Assessments for Support of Religion." J. M. Dawson says that this 3,000 word paper has "become famous as an interpretation of the American doctrine of church-state separation."¹⁷

R. B. Semple, an early chronicler of Virginia Baptist history, said of it: "Among a great variety of compositions possessing different degrees of merit, a paper drawn up by Colonel James Madison (now President of the United States),

¹⁶ Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia* (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1955), 81-82.

¹⁷ Dawson, 105.

entitled 'A Memorial and Remonstrance' will forever hold a most distinguished place. For elegance of style, strength of reasoning, and purity of principle, it has, perhaps, seldom been equaled; certainly never surpassed by anything in the English language."¹⁸

But Madison's greatest accomplishment, one that would settle the matter of religious liberty in the United States once for all, would require the assistance of the Baptists.

Victory for Religious Liberty in Virginia and the United States

The Constitution of the United States was submitted to the various states for ratification on September 1, 1787. Each state dealt with the pros and cons on a grass-roots level, with public discussions and debates between candidates for that state's own Constitutional Convention.

In two states—Virginia and Massachusetts—there was considerable opposition to ratification because, in the minds of many, it had no specific guaranty of religious liberty. James Madison was the primary author and he felt confident that there was no major problem. As he was returning to his home in Orange County just prior to the election there for the Convention, he stopped at Fredericksburg. There he received "an urgent warning that he should be sure to visit an influential Baptist

¹⁸ Semple, 52.

leader and convert him from the idea that the Constitution (as it stood) menaced religious liberty.”¹⁹

The influential Baptist leader was John Leland, who lived outside the town of Orange on the road to Fredericksburg. Madison discovered that Leland had garnered sufficient support to keep him out of the ratifying convention, so he and Leland met in an oak grove six miles outside Orange in the Spring of 1788. Instead of converting Leland, however, Madison was the one who was converted. As a result of this meeting he agreed to introduce amendments to the new Constitution that would spell out specific items Leland and the Baptist were concerned about. In the county meeting shortly thereafter Madison was elected to the Convention with Leland’s support.

A local Baptist association has preserved the spot where the two men held their historic meeting, calling it “Leland-Madison Park.” A fine memorial marker now stands in the small park on Highway 20 in Orange County, briefly telling the story of how the Baptists played a crucial role in securing religious liberty in America.

“In June of 1789 James Madison introduced his promised amendments to the new Constitution. The first of them reads in part, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...’

¹⁹ Irving Brant, *James Madison, Father of the Constitution* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1950), 188.

This, when eventually adopted, embedded in the fundamental law of our country the historic Baptist principle of the separation of the domains of religion and civil government."²⁰

It would be 1802 before Virginia sold the glebe lands and gave the proceeds to the poor, thus ending all entanglements between church and state, but the taxation and the state church itself was effectively ended with the adoption of the First Amendment.

The contribution of the Baptists in the struggle for religious liberty was crucial. J. M. Dawson concluded "if the researchers of the world were to be asked who was the most responsible for the American guaranty for religious liberty their prompt reply would be 'James Madison;' but if James Madison might reply he would as quickly say, 'John Leland and the Baptists.'"²¹

²⁰ Ryland, 134.

²¹ Dawson, 117.

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