

The Christian and Civil Government (20th)

(The study today turns from the time of the Reformation to the early days of the colonies of the United States of America and the struggles for religious freedom.)

In previous lessons we gave a brief overview of the role of civil government being used to punish “heretics” as initiated by Augustine and developed and practiced by the Catholics and continued by the reformers during and after the Reformation. Before leaving this historical setting, I would like to present an interesting bit of history to show that the Baptists in the reformation were opposed to the civil government being joined to the house of God. Notice the following quote from the Protestant historian, Philip Schaff, in his *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, Chapter 3, and Article 24:

Having considered Zwingli’s controversy with Romanism, we must now review his conflict with Radicalism, which ran parallel with the former, and exhibits the conservative and churchly side of his reformation. Radicalism was identical with the Anabaptist movement, but the baptismal question was secondary. It involved an entire reconstruction of the Church and of the social order. It meant revolution. The Romanists pointed triumphantly to revolution as the legitimate and inevitable result of the Reformation; but history has proved the difference. Liberty is possible without license, and differs as widely from it as from despotism.

Nothing could be clearer, with our Baptist forefathers, “the baptismal question was secondary,” and “an entire reconstruction of the Church and of the social order” was deemed paramount toward the goal of “liberty . . . without license.” In other words, the assembly of the saints is free from the rules, regulations, guidelines, and restraints of civil government. Nevertheless, one wonders how much is accredited to the belief and influences that civil government should be involved in religious activities in that many ministers are required to seek a license in many states before their performing marriages, or other religious functions. History clearly shows that in the early days of this country that ministers were required to get a license from the government before they could not only perform marriages, but to preach the gospel as well. We plan to say more about this going forward.

We have chosen to omit much of the struggles for religious freedom in the countries of the United Kingdom and focus our attention closer to home. With this being said, we will turn our attention to the struggles regarding the influence of civil magistrates upon the congregation of the Lord as seen in the colonies in the early days of America and the *Constitution of the United States of America*. In order to properly explain this, it is necessary that we provide some historic background of America from the earliest days.

While the Spanish Catholics were some of the earliest to arrive on the continent of North America, we will center our studies around the early settlers from England and the New England colonies. These would generally be identified as the thirteen original colonies. While many of the settlers came to the new country for adventure and wealth, there were others who came here to avoid the pressures of religion from England and the European countries. In Virginia there was a strong influence of the Anglican Church of England from which the Episcopal Church was founded. In Massachusetts and the Plymouth Colony, there was a strong influence of the Puritans from which the Congregationalist Church was derived in some of the northern colonies. Even Maryland was founded to provide safety for the Catholics from the Protestants. It was through the influence of William Penn that Pennsylvania was established to provide a safe haven for the Quakers and anyone else who desired to live there, though struggles abounded there. Presbyterians and Baptists too came to the new land, but there was not any colony that centered around their religious beliefs initially. While Pennsylvania provided for religious freedom and a democratic type

of government, the government was essentially run and controlled by the Quakers. After a new constitution was signed in 1701, Sydney G. Fisher wrote the following in *The Quaker Colonies*, pp. 73-74. This book is from the “Yale Chronicles of America Series” edited by Allen Johnson.

The Church of England people in Pennsylvania entertained great hopes of this proposal to turn the proprietary colonies into royal provinces. Under such a change, while the Quakers might still have an influence in the Legislature, the Crown would probably give the executive offices to Churchmen. They therefore labored hard to discredit the Quakers. They kept harping on the absurdity of a set of fanatics attempting to govern a colony without a militia and without administering oaths of office or using oaths in judicial proceedings.

To further verify Quakers ruling in civil government, notice the words of Isaac Backus (1724-1806), from the “Author’s Preface to Volume III” as found after the preface to Volume II in volume 2 of his *History of New England Baptists*, with notes by David Weston, as reprinted by Arno Press in 1969.

The Quakers hold that their children are born in their church, which, by a secret policy, has been upheld as one great body in Europe and America; and they held so much with Britain in the late war, that two of them were hanged, and others were banished, by the government of Pennsylvania, as enemies of their country. But as the Baptist hold all religion to be personal, between God and individuals, and that all church power is in each particular church, it is impossible for them ever to form any great body, that can be dangerous to civil government. The Baptists and Quakers have therefore been unjustly ranked together, when their principles are opposite to each other. And when the church of Christ shall come to be governed wholly by his laws, independent of all the inventions of men, all sectarian distinctions will cease, and wars will come to an end.

So while seeking freedom from civil government and seeking to provide freedom of religion, there was still a union of religion and civil government in this Quaker colony. Therefore, the only religion that sought religious freedom that did not unite with civil government was the Baptists. Going forward we will witness that the Baptists not only suffered throughout in the new land but they were instrumental in establishing religious freedom as recognized in the *Constitution of the United States of America*. To give an overview of the colonies in their early days, we will give a quote of David Weston as found in *The Story of the Baptists* by Richard B Cook on page 204.

When colonists settled America, they brought with them across the Atlantic, the system of legislation for consciences. Massachusetts and Connecticut fined, imprisoned, whipped, banished or even put to death those who opposed the established orthodoxy. Catholic Maryland, fined, whipped or banished all who uttered reproachful words against the Virgin Mary and put to death a denier of the Trinity. Virginia had her nine pound tobacco tax for the support of Episcopacy.”

From this we see that religious persecution was well alive among the colonists in the early days and civil government as outlined by the Catholics and further advanced by the reformers was used to exercise “church discipline” to assure purity of “doctrine.” As Weston further stated, “When Roger Williams, banished from Massachusetts because he was a Baptist, founded a settlement in Rhode Island, then for the first time in history of the world, there was a civil government which claimed no jurisdiction in religion. The great principle of religious freedom was first practically applied by Roger Williams.” While it is debated by some as to whether Roger Williams was really a Baptist, it is generally believed that he was. Obviously, it is not the purpose of this study to determine that. Nevertheless, the principle of religious

freedom from civil government as established in the colony of Rhode Island was that as believed and practiced by the Baptists down through the ages. It did not originate with Roger Williams. Nevertheless, the colony of Rhode Island cannot be overestimated in the founding of religious freedom in America as well as the idea of such freedom throughout the world.

In future studies we plan to show some of the historic details of the struggles and persecutions of Baptists in the new land and their influence in securing religious freedom as outlined in the *Constitution of the United States*. However, we have exhausted our time for today's study. Farewell.