

The Christian and Civil Government (25th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America. It provides some background of this struggle around the life of Isaac Backus who was introduced in the previous podcast.)

In our last lesson we ended by introducing Isaac Backus and gave a list of some of his writings. Much valuable information is in his works to give a broader picture and many details of the struggles for religious freedom in America. Like Obadiah Holmes before him, he was first a Protestant but later became a Baptist and suffered for his faith. Backus (1724-1806) was born forty-two years after the death of Holmes and while some progress was made in the New England colonies during this time, persecution by those who believed that civil government should be involved in punishing people for religious “crimes” was still practiced. In fact, in 1665, a Baptist congregation was established in Boston by seven men and two women. The website (see supplied link: <https://www.firstbaptistboston.org/history.html>) of the First Baptist Church of Boston states, “The story of the First Baptist Church of Boston traces back to the year 1651 when Obadiah Holmes (a glassmaker from Rhode Island) was whipped for being a Baptist.” History further tells us that the congregation was “...formed in defiance of two laws, passed by the General Court: (1) That all persons wishing to form churches must first obtain consent of the ‘magistrates and elders of the greater part of the churches within this jurisdiction.’ (2) That ‘if any person or persons within this jurisdiction shall ... condemn or oppose the baptizing of infants ... such person or persons shall be subject to banishment.’” (See supplied link: <http://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/boston.fbc.history.html>.) The congregation’s website says that this congregation is the “fifth oldest Baptist Church in the United States.” For several years the congregation met in homes and in 1678 it endeavored to build a meeting house. In 1680, though the meeting house was disguised as a brewery, the General Court (legislature) of Massachusetts ordered it to be nailed shut. As stated above, such persecution was practiced in the time of Isaac Backus and during the time of the Revolution.

We should keep in mind that from the period of the *Declaration of Independence* written in 1776, the *Constitution of the United States* written in 1787 and ratified in 1788, and the *Bill of Rights* ratified in 1791 was a period of fifteen years. Part of this time (1775-1783; 8 years) the country was engaged with the Revolution War with England. Obviously, a lot of interesting history could be presented but time will not allow us to do so. Nevertheless, we will endeavor to give enough information to show the influence of the Baptists in securing the rights and freedom of religion in this nation and its introduction to the world at large.

As stated in the previous podcast, Isaac Backus suffered for his faith for being a Baptist and for his labors in seeking to secure religious freedom with the founding of our nation. Again I want to stress that it was religious freedom and not religious liberty that was desired and finally achieved, though we are fast losing it today. In previous studies this distinction was noted and for some it may seem to be merely a war of words, but I assure you that is not the case. In England, when William and Mary came to the throne in 1689, some liberties were given with certain rules. Later, in the New World, there were some liberties also provided with various restrictions though the limits and boundaries were not always the same within the various colonies. In fact, in 1791, John Leland said, “The state of Rhode Island has stood above one hundred and sixty years without any religious establishment. The state of New York never had any. New Jersey claims the same. Pennsylvania has also stood from its first settlement until now upon a liberal foundation” Quoted from “The Rights of Conscience Inalienable,” as found in *The Writings of John Leland*, edited by L. F. Greene, Arno Press, p. 182. (The Lord willing, we will hear more from and about John Leland.)

In the New England colonies, we will study this struggle for religious liberty in relation to Isaac Backus and the Warren Association. This was the first Baptist association in New England and it was established in 1767 in the colony of Rhode Island. Regarding Isaac Backus and the Warren Association, William McLoughlin said the following:

The Warren Association was even more important, for it provided the unity and organization which enabled the Baptists to wage an aggressive campaign for religious equality throughout New England during the remainder of the century. Unity was provided by the adoption of a strict Calvinistic confession of faith to which all member churches were required to subscribe, and by annual meetings at which delegates from the member churches met to discuss their common problems. Backus and his church at first hesitated to join this association, fearing that it would threaten the autonomy of the individual churches. Both the Congregational Separates and the Separate-Baptists, like the early Puritans, were firm believers in the independence of each church from any outside ecclesiastical authority; they wanted no bishops, presbyteries, or synods to overrule the decisions of the local church bodies. As Backus put it “a particular church of Christ is the highest judicature that he has established upon earth to carry his laws into execution in his name.” Backus had seen what happened in Connecticut when the Congregational churches adopted the Saybrook Platform in 1708 and permitted ministerial associations and consociations to appoint and dismiss ministers and to decide cases of discipline and order with the backing of the civil authority. Not until 1770 was Backus persuaded that the Warren Association meant what it said when it denied jurisdiction over the member churches except for counsel and advice.

Probably the deciding factor in Backus’ decision to join and support the association was the opportunity it offered for united action against the “persecution” of Baptists by the tax collectors. The first step in this direction was taken in 1769 when the association formed its Grievance Committee “to prepare petitions to the General Courts of Massachusetts and Connecticut for redress” of grievance and, if necessary, to petition the King in Council. . . . Backus was appointed a member of this committee in 1769 even though his church was not yet officially a member of the association. Throughout the rest of his life Backus played an important role in this committee’s efforts to alter the ecclesiastical system of Massachusetts. He helped it to draft many petitions, remonstrances, and memorials to the General Assembly. He took affidavits from persecuted Baptists and testified on their behalf in the courts. On one occasion he took part in an appeal to King George III over the heads of the legislature and succeeded in having one of its laws disallowed. So active were he and other members of the committee that when the Revolution approached many Congregationalists doubted their loyalty to the patriot cause. Backus himself had to admit that the King and his royal governors had been more friendly and helpful to the Baptists than the Sons of Liberty had been.

However, in 1774, rather than appeal to the King, Backus and the Warren Association decided to appeal to the First Continental Congress. Backus and James Manning went to Philadelphia in September where they sought the aid of the Philadelphia Baptists, and accepted also the support offered by the Quakers. Together they drew up a memorial which they presented to the delegates from Massachusetts—John Adams, Samuel Adams, Robert Treat Paine, and Caleb Cushing. The meeting in Carpenters Hall on October 12 was stormy; neither side succeeded in convincing the other. John Adams told Backus and Manning that “We might as soon expect a change in the solar system as to expect that they would give up their establishment.” Robert Treat Paine returned to Massachusetts to spread the rumor that Backus and the Quakers had deliberately tried to sabotage the Continental Congress by causing a division among them on the trumped up issue of religious liberty.

But the following spring, when the Battle of Lexington and Concord was fought, Backus was as ready to break with England as were his Congregational neighbors. In a sermon he delivered to his congregation on the Sunday after the battle he attacked the doctrines of “passive obedience” and “non-resistance to kings” and pointed out that it was not necessary to obey bad rulers. He went on to say that “it was a foundation point in the constitution of the English government that the people’s property shall not be taken from them without their consent... Upon the whole I declared I fully believed our cause was just.” From *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism*, “Introduction,” pp. 11-13.

This somewhat lengthy quote from McLoughlin should give us a small introduction to Isaac Backus. The Lord willing, we will study him and his labors in future podcasts. Yet, before closing, allow me to note that he was battling such men as John Adams and others of the Sons of Liberty before the war broke out or before the *Declaration of Independence*. Our time is exhausted for today. Farewell.