

The Christian and Civil Government (28th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America and concludes our review of the life and influence of Isaac Backus in securing this freedom for our nation.)

In our last podcast, we interrupted our study of the First Amendment as centered around the life of Isaac Backus by providing a brief overview to show why such a study is vital today. In reality this struggle has continued from the beginning when Satan sought to bring man into captivity and away from the kingdom and rule of God. The believer's "pledge of allegiance" has always been first and foremost to God, the Creator, and to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Few people are aware that the Pledge of Allegiance of the United States was written by a "Christian socialist" named Francis Bellamy. Obviously, the phrase "under God" was not included in his version. In fact, "under God" was not added until the 1950's. Also, originally the "salute" to the flag involved stretching out the arm toward the flag similar to that of the later Nazi salute to the German flag. A massive study could be done regarding Francis and his brother Edward and their influence in spreading socialism in the 1800's. Truly the ideal of socialism with the government controlling all of the affairs of life is no new philosophy in this country and it begins with the idea of allegiance to government first. The government does not understand that it has no better citizens than the Christian so long as the state does not demand the believer to disobey the Lord. However, let us return to our study regarding the influence of the Baptist, Isaac Backus, in working to secure religious freedom in America.

In previous podcasts, we saw that Backus as a representative of the Baptist Warren Association (the first New England Baptist Association) in conjunction with the Philadelphia Baptist Association (the first Baptist association in America) met with the general Congress in Philadelphia, in 1774, to labor toward the freedom of religion in the forming of the new government. At that time the "sons of liberty" as headed by John and Samuel Adams opposed the idea of such a freedom, and the Baptists were told by John Adams, "We might as soon expect a change in the solar system as to expect that they would give up their establishment." However, when the war with England was declared, Isaac Backus and the Baptists in general supported the American cause. Not only did the Baptists of the colonies support the war against England, but the Baptists in England also supported the American cause. Now we shall look somewhat at the role of Backus regarding the framing of the *Constitution of the United States* written in 1787 and ratified in 1788.

Though Backus supported the war against England, he continued to labor for freedom of religion in Massachusetts. This was not easy for him. In a letter to a brother minister in London, he wrote, "I should have fainted long ago, had I not believed that wherein men dealt proudly God was above them. And he fixed a persuasion on my soul that if we faithfully improved the advantage he gave us, rulers would be forced to give up their tyrannical power over the church of God and the consciences of men. A large part of my good friends here, rather wished than believed we should obtain so great a blessing; and, therefore, have often been clogs instead of helps, in this great work." *The Life and Times of Isaac Backus* by Alvah Hovey, p. 247. Hovey further stated, "From a passage in this letter it appears that the bold and unyielding course advocated by Mr. Backus, was not approved by all his brethren. Some of them at length became disheartened, and were ready for the sake of peace to make the best of existing laws without subjecting themselves to yet further and seemingly profitless toil or expense." Page 248. Nevertheless, Backus was willing to suffer to the uttermost for religious freedom. Listen again to the words of Alvah Hovey:

“For many years in public and in private he had solemnly protested against this submission, and had urged his brethren to suffer their property to be all confiscated rather than to recognize the validity of human laws in the domain of religion. Whether his views were correct or erroneous, they were the result of protracted examination, were endorsed by his conscience, and were maintained with christian [*sic.*] fidelity to the last. His was not the spirit of falter and turn back at the prospect of danger. There was moral heroism in his soul, and he was ready for the severest conflict. To find his brethren prepared to relinquish in discouragement their high position and plant themselves on lower ground, was therefore a sore trial to his patience and charity; but so far as we can ascertain, he was enabled to bear this trial, if not without complaint, yet without bitterness of feeling. Had his brethren throughout the State refused at this time to give in certificates and cheerfully taken the consequences, it is at least probable that Mr. Backus would have been permitted to welcome in his own day that complete separation of church and state for which he longed. As it was, he died in faith, not having seen the blessing which he desired for the churches of Christ.” Pp. 249-250.

Yes, the First Amendment to the *Constitution of the United States of America* was passed declaring, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances,” in 1791. However, it was not until 1917, that Article 46, Section 1, of the Massachusetts’ Constitution was ratified and adopted which stated, “No law shall be passed prohibiting the free exercise of religion.” Therefore, Backus did not live to see this full freedom in his state during his lifetime.

Isaac Backus continued to labor for religious freedom in Massachusetts as well as in all the colonies. In 1786, a law was passed in Massachusetts that “confounded ministerial and civil taxes.” Hovey gives some letters of Backus during this time to show somewhat his views and beliefs. Obviously, we cannot include all the letters recorded, but I believe one will be adequate to manifest this. It is from Hovey’s book on pages 251-252 and is as follows:

To George Washington, Esq., President of the United States.

SIR: Among the many addresses to your Excellency since your advancement to the highest seat of government in America, I suppose you have received none from any community of Baptists in the State of Massachusetts. Not because they have not as hearty a regard for your Excellency as any denomination therein, but for want of a convenient opportunity when you were in these parts. But an obscure individual begs your acceptance of a private token of love, which may be of more real service than many flattering public addresses. Indeed, if elegance of style and composition were necessary to render any book acceptable to your Excellency, the author would not have presumed to send such a present as his History of New England. But believing that the knowledge of principles and facts, and of their influence on mankind through various changes, is of great importance in your view, he hopes that this work will not be unacceptable. Much of it was taken from original records and papers which were never before published; and none of them have ever since been disputed in any newspaper among us. The Quakers were so much affected with my first volume, published in 1777, that one of them wrote a considerable volume against it; but when he came to lay it before their committee, they thought it better to apply to me for corrections; and a committee of theirs met with me in Providence, in December, 1780, and after two days’ labor we agreed upon the corrections which are in the end of the second volume, which agreement was signed by me, and by * * * their committee. If any others would have favored me with

their corrections, as they might have done and concealed their names if they pleased, it might have been of public benefit. But no such favor hath been granted me.

The continuance of tax and compulsion for religious ministers in New England, while it is abolished in Virginia, is a clear demonstration of the narrow selfishness of mankind. The continuance of it here for Congregationalists, and the abolishing of it there for Episcopalians, are both commended by Dr. Gordon in his History of the American Revolution, in which is much impartiality about civil and military affairs. But religious ministers, when supported by force, are the most dangerous men upon earth; while no men are more necessary and useful to human society than faithful teachers. Of this further evidence is given in two late pieces which I here send you.

That your Excellency may still be guided and preserved in your exalted and difficult station until righteous government shall be well established in this land; that your latter days may be peaceful and happy, and your end be eternal life, is the earnest prayer of

Your humble servant

Isaac Backus

November 15, 1790

While much more could be given regarding the life and influence of Isaac Backus in laboring for religious freedom in America, allow me to supply a brief summary from page 50 of William G. McLoughlin's *Isaac Backus on Church State, and Calvinism*:

The net conclusion regarding Backus' position on church and state after a careful reading of his tracts on the subject must be that while his pietistic arguments provided a powerful cutting edge against New England's ecclesiastical system and particularly against the practice of compulsory religious taxes, his subordination of the doctrines of natural rights, his advocacy of a Christian state, and his essentially theocentric concern for revealed truth produced a far less logical and consistent exposition of separation than that of Madison, Mason, Jefferson, or even John Leland. In fact, in certain respects Backus had more in common with the transformationists or theocrats than the separationists. Backus and the New England Baptists were Jeffersonians in politics primarily in reaction to the Standing Order's Federalism, but basically they shared the socially conservative heritage of their region, or at least their eastern spokesmen did.

Our time is exhausted for today. The Lord willing we will begin studying the influence of the Baptist, John Leland, and his role in securing religious freedom in America in our next podcast. Farewell.