

The Christian and Civil Government (29th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America and introduces John Leland and his valuable influence in securing the freedom of worship in our nation.)

We ended our last podcast by saying that we would consider John Leland and his role regarding the First Amendment. Obviously, a large study could be done about the life of John Leland and his role in securing religious freedom in America. However, we will endeavor to limit our time somewhat, but for those who desire to know more about him I would suggest *The Writings of John Leland* as edited by L. F. Greene. John Leland (1754-1841) was born and died in Massachusetts, though he spent considerable time in Virginia. We will consider his labors and influence regarding the struggles for religious freedom essentially during the time he lived in Virginia. While the struggles for religious freedom in all the colonies are vital to securing such in America, it may well be said that the struggles in Virginia were likely more influential and powerful in procuring these rights.

For those who would desire to know more about the struggles and persecution of the Baptists in Virginia by those religions of the reformed ideology regarding the use of civil government to regulate religious activities would do well by reading *History of the Baptist in Virginia* by Robert Baylor Semple and *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* by Lewis Peyton Little. To get an accurate picture of the influence of the Baptist in securing religious freedom in America, I would suggest another book entitled *Documentary History of the Struggles for Religious Liberty in Virginia* by Charles F. James. I mentioned this book in an earlier podcast, and I plan to supply various quotes from this source going forward. Protestants and some modern Presbyterians try to claim that religious freedom was derived from the teachings of the Reformers, but this work by James clearly documents that this is not the case. While it is not our intention to belittle anyone or cast odium on anyone, we do desire to make aware of our Baptist heritage and, hopefully, enlighten many in our day of the vital role played by the Baptists so that this generation of Baptists will be educated to the truth of the freedom. Also, I trust this will ignite a flame to emphasize the importance of maintaining this freedom because it appears that the dark cloud is rising on the horizon to rob us of this freedom. Truly civil government has no right or authority over the congregation of God. As Charles James said, "By religious freedom, or soul liberty, is meant the natural and inalienable right of every soul to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, and to be unmolested in the exercise of that right, so long, at least, as he does not infringe upon the rights of others; that religion is, and must be a *voluntary* service; that only such service is acceptable to God; and, hence, that no earthly power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, has any right to compel conformity to any creed or to any species of worship, or to tax a man for its support. . . . This principle gives to 'Caesar' 'the things that are Caesar's' but it denies to Caesar 'the things that are God's.' . . . No government in the Old World had recognized this doctrine, and, unless Rhode Island be an exception, it did not find full and unequivocal recognition in any of the colonies of the New World. Virginia was the first to recognize it in her organic law, and this she did in Article XVI. of her Bill of Rights, which was adopted on the 12th day of June, 1776. From that time down to January 19, 1786, when Jefferson's 'Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom' became the law of the State, the battle for soul liberty was on." Pages 9-10. Sadly, we are witnessing in our day when civil government is working feverishly to deny the "soul liberty" secured in the *Constitution*. Time will tell whether there are men in our day with the spirit, determination, and dedication of Obadiah Holmes, Isaac Backus, John Leland, and many others that will work to assure this freedom of religion. Will we obey God or men? Or, have we succumbed to the philosophy and lifestyle of the world in such proportions that the Lord has given us over and we have neither the will, the spirit, nor the wisdom to fight this battle? As previously stated, "Time will tell." However, let us turn our attention and see if we can learn from the life and labors of John Leland so that we might know more how to do what we can to maintain and secure this freedom.

Obviously, every man cannot be "a John Leland." God uses various men in different ways. While the Lord called one man, the prophet Elijah, to stand in the gap and challenge the prophets of Baal,

He still had a remnant composed of seven thousand that did not bow to the image of Baal. Therefore, the Lord may, or may not, call you to be in the forefront of the battle as John Leland (or Elijah) was in his day; yet, if you are a believer in Christ you have a place in the battle. For example, a widow may think that her life is small and insignificant and that she cannot do anything of any importance or benefit, but that is far from the case. Listen to I Timothy 5:5 regarding the labors of a widow: “Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusted in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day.” I implore you to believe me when I say that this is no small thing. Every believer knows how hard it is to pray and that Satan will assault him in his prayers and often cause him to think that God will not hear him and that he should simply give up and not pray. This is not true. Proverbs 15:8 says, “...the prayer of the upright *is* his delight.” God delights to hear His people pray, even the desolate widow that trusts in God. “He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer,” Psalm 102:17. Dear widow, your prayers are essential in securing freedom of worship as the labors of a John Leland in our day.

Allow me to digress here and encourage you pastors to remind the widows of their value and importance to the congregation of the Lord and their work in advancing the kingdom of God. Too often these women are shut in and believe they are not important and are laid aside on the shelf. Not so! These women are vital to health and strength of any congregation and they need to be encouraged in this “labor of love.”

Please be patient with me as I digress further to give another example of a young man that I know who contributes weekly (I believe) to his local newspaper. While he is currently a deacon in the congregation where he worships, if I remember correctly he began submitting letters to the local newspaper in his teen years or shortly afterwards. He continually reminds the readers what the Scriptures say regarding abortion, sodomy, and other sins that destroy society. Some of his co-workers and supervisors have made it known to him their opposition and hatred to him and his articles, but he continues to do what he can to encourage godly living in the community. I do not know what the Lord will have you to do and time will not allow me to give suggestions for believers in every area of life in society, but I assure you that the Lord can use the testimony of the blessed housewife as she tirelessly labors to fulfill her desire and calling in life as well as other believers whether young or old.

John Leland was not only a minister of the gospel, but he prayed, wrote letters, lectured, served as a representative of the Baptist, and did many other things in his labors for religious freedom in America. He was first and foremost a minister of the gospel. However, he understood the relationship of civil government and the congregation of God and the boundaries of each. This needs to be clearly understood today. Sad to say that the philosophy of the Reformers and the influence of reformation thinking of the Protestants has not only been adopted by society at large, but many (if not most) people who profess to be Baptist have espoused them too. Before we can wage an accurate warfare, we must know the logistics of the battles. This was noted in our previous podcast in a quote by William McLoughlin’s: “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.” *Isaac Backus on Church State, and Calvinism*, page 50.

We will close this session with some quotes of Leland to give a glimpse of his insight. He said, “Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics.” *The Writings of John Leland* as edited by L. F. Greene, p. 184. This may seem a

strange statement but, the influence of governmental education on the destruction of our nation was clearly shown a previous podcast. The idea that government is not to be involved in the education of our children is foreign in the minds of modern man, but civil government knows from the earliest days that it is essential for sovereign rule. Caesar wants absolute power. Nevertheless, Leland went on to say, "Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing, i.e., see that he meets with no personal abuse, or loss of property, for his religious opinions. Instead of discouraging him with proscriptions, fines, confiscations of death, let him be encouraged, as a free man, to bring forth his arguments and maintain his points with all boldness; then, if his doctrine is false, it will be confuted, and if it is true, (though ever so novel,) let others credit it." *Ibid*, p. 184. This is a far cry from many today who desire to stop worshipers who differ from them. I have seen where professed Baptists have posted on social media their desires that our government would send out of our country those who profess a religion different from that of their professed "Christian" desires.

However, our time is exhausted for today. The Lord willing we will continue studying this important subject in our next broadcast. Farewell.