

The Christian and Civil Government (31th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America as took place in Virginia. It gives more insights of the persecutions in this colony during the life of John Leland.)

In the previous podcast, we endeavored to set the stage somewhat in Virginia and show the lack of religious freedom in that colony prior to and during the time of John Leland. We saw that even some Congregationalist (Puritans) ministers from New England, that believed much the same things that the Church of England (Anglican/Episcopalian) did, came to Virginia to preach the gospel and were “compelled to leave the colony.” Not only was religion required to be practiced in Virginia, but the required religion was that of the Church of England. This reminds us of what we saw in a previous study regarding the pagan laws of Plato where he stated that civil government should not only establish *what* religion was to be practiced but also *where* it could be performed. After all, as Plato taught, the common people were not educated enough to know what or how to worship the gods. This should ever remind us that the idea of civil government being connected with religion, especially being a “nursing father to Christianity,” is not only a Catholic/Reformed ideology, but a pagan one as well. In other words, it is the product of the natural man and not of God. The kingdom of God and of Christ is not of this world and Caesar (civil government) has no authority over it, John 18:36; Matthew 22:21. It is true that Israel under the Old Testament economy was a theocracy and it was under the laws established by God. However, that system of government and religious worship was not forced on other nations or citizens outside their realm. On the other hand, the New Testament economy is under a “better covenant ... established upon better promises,” Hebrews 8:6. This new covenant is “not according to the covenant” God made with Israel under the Old Testament. When Christ established the congregation of God while here on earth, He plainly declared that it was separate and apart from the kingdoms of the world.

As we saw in the previous lesson, Virginia taxed the people to support their system of religion. The taxes went toward not only the salary and support of the ministry, but to provide for the places in which worship was to be practiced. This was opposed by all the different branches of religion outside the Church of England.

To give further insight to John Leland, we will give the following from the *History of the Baptists in Virginia* by Robert Baylor Semple, pages 207-209:

Mr. Leland was a native of Worcester, in Massachusetts, was baptized in 1774, and in the fall of 1776 he married and moved to Virginia and settled in the county of Orange in the neighborhood of those churches. He continued in Virginia about fourteen years, in which time he traveled and preached very extensively and very successfully. He baptized between six and seven hundred persons while in the State, and in January, 1791, he removed to Massachusetts, and settled in Cheshire. Mr. Leland, as a preacher, was probably the most popular of any who ever resided in this State. He is unquestionably a man of fertile genius. His opportunities for school learning were not great, but the energetic vigor of his mind quickly surmounted this deficiency. His memory was so retentive that by a single reading he stored up more of the contents of a book than many would by a dozen careful perusals. It is probable that his knowledge derived from books at this day, taken in the aggregate, is surpassed by few. His preaching, though immethodical and eccentric, is generally warm, wise and evangelical. There are not many preachers who have so great command of the attention and of the feelings of their auditory. In effecting this his manner has been thought by some to

approach too near the theatrical. Cowper, the poet [William Cowper; the one who wrote “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” and many other poems.], says:

“He that negotiates between God and man
As God’s ambassador, the grand concerns
Of judgment and of mercy, should beware
Of lightness in his speech.”

Here Mr. Leland and the poet are at variance; he does sometimes, and, indeed, not unfrequently, “court the skitteth fancy with facetious tales.” If Cowper says, so did not Paul. Leland can say so did George Whitefield, Rowland Hill, &c., and they have been the most successful of modern preachers. Mr. Leland’s free and jocund manners have excited the suspicions of some that he wanted serious piety. His intimate friends are confident that these are groundless suspicions. They believe that among his other singularities he is singularly pious.

While in Virginia he wrote several treatises, and was certainly very instrumental in effecting the just and salutary regulations concerning religion in this State. He has been similarly employed since his removal to New England. He has always been a zealous advocate for republican government. When Mr. Jefferson was raised to the presidential chair the ladies of Mr. Leland’s congregation made a cheese of immense size* and sent it by Mr. Leland as a present to Mr. Jefferson. This affair made no little noise in the United States.

*It was said to have in it 1,400 pounds of curd, and to have weighed 900 weight [sic] when taken from the press. The enemies of Jefferson called it the Mammoth Cheese. They also wrote poems and vented much wit upon the occasion. It was, however, received by the President with pleasure, and viewed by the impartial as a singular pledge of patriotism.—
Author’s note.

Not only was suffering by taxation, but there were other forms of persecution in Virginia prior to religious freedom being established. Lewis Peyton Little documents in his book entitled *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* supplies a list of men and their punishment for worshiping according to their consciences. Allow me to supply some of the punishments which are as follows: cruelly beaten, jailed, pelted with apples and stones, ducked and nearly drowned, ordered to leave the county or go to jail, commanded to take a dram of liquor or be whipped, pursued by a man with a gun, meeting broken up by a mob, knocked down while preaching, arrested as a vagabond and schismatic, pulled down and hauled about by hair, almost pulled to pieces, shot with a shot-gun, and many other such-like treatments. Little also gives an account of James Ireland by supplying a quote from William Fristoe’s book entitled *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association*. Little’s quote is found on pages 176-177 of his book. It is as follows:

Another instance of cruelty we have to remind the reader of a Minister ... [that] was apprehended, torn from the stand [i.e., the pulpit] by violence in the time of prayer, and imprisoned; and such was the rage and malice of his persecutors, that a close prison was thought too good. In addition to confinement those of the vulgar sort took occasion to collect disagreeable and ill-savored trash, nauseous combustibles, and burn them in the prison window which filled the close dungeon with smoke that made it difficult for him to breathe or support life; and in the event so impaired his health, though he lived many years after, he had

to drag through life loaded with infirmity, distressing pains, disordered bowels, and a constitution throughout so affected and broken down, that made life often a burden.

James Ireland, in his autobiographical life, says that the nauseous material that was burned was Indian pepper, and he further stated that before this incident that some tried to blow up the jail. In fact, he said of this event, “they had fixed it for explosion, expecting I was sitting perpendicular over it, but in this they were a little mistaken. Fire was put to it, and it went off with a considerable noise, forcing up a small plank, from which I received no damage. I was singing a hymn at the time the explosion went off, and continued singing until I finished it.” (Taken from *The Life of the Rev. James Ireland*, pp. 141-142.)

Hopefully, this small vignette of the history of Virginia up to and during the time of John Leland will give you some idea of the persecution that took place in our country prior to the establishing religious freedom. The Lord willing, we plan to supply more of the history to show the struggles that were endured to provide for this freedom, but our time is up for today. Farewell, until the next study.