

The Christian and Civil Government (30th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America and sets the stage showing somewhat the lack of religious freedom in Virginia and the influence of John Leland in securing the freedom of worship in our nation. While government does not have the right to govern the conscience of man, man must ever know that he is responsible to be obedient to the law of God.)

We saw in previous studies some of the struggles for religious freedom in Massachusetts revolving around the life of Isaac Backus. Today we are beginning to show somewhat the struggles of the freedom of religion in Virginia focusing on the life of John Leland. We ended our previous podcast by supplying a couple of quotes from Leland supporting the freedom of religion. In order to get some insight into the colony of Virginia and the laws instituted for the promotion of a certain religion and the suppression of any other that differed from it, we will give some examples.

First, to set the stage somewhat, we will supply from *History of the Baptists in Virginia* by Robert Baylor Semple, pages 46-47, the following:

Our ancestors, being chiefly emigrants from England, brought with them all that religious intolerance which had so long prevailed in the mother country. Thus we see that the first care of our early legislatures was to provide for the Church of England, as established by the act of Parliament. By the first act of 1623, it is provided that in every plantation or settlement there shall be a house or room set apart for the worship of God. But it soon appears that this worship was only to be according to the canons of the Church of England, to which a strict uniformity was enjoined. A person absenting himself from divine service on a Sunday without a reasonable excuse, forfeited a pound of tobacco; and he that absented himself a month, forfeited fifty pounds. Any minister who was absent from his church above two months in a year, forfeited half his salary; and he who absented himself four months, forfeited the whole. Whoever disparaged a minister whereby the minds of his parishioners might be alienated, was compelled to pay 500 pounds of tobacco and ask the minister's pardon publicly in the congregation. No man was permitted to dispose of any of his tobacco till the minister was satisfied, under penalty of forfeiting double his part of the minister's salary.

The first allowance made to the ministers was ten pounds of tobacco and a bushel of corn for each tithable; and every laboring person, of what quality or condition soever, was bound to contribute. In the year 1631 the Assembly granted to ministers, besides the former allowance of ten pounds of tobacco and a bushel of corn, the twentieth calf, the twentieth kid and the twentieth pig. This was the first introduction of tithes, properly so called, in Virginia. But it did not continue long, for in 1733 the law was repealed.

To preserve the purity of doctrine and unity of the church, it was enacted in 1643 that all ministers should be conformable to the orders and constitution of the Church of England, and that no other persons be permitted to preach publicly or privately. It was further provided that the governor and council should take care that all non-conformists departed the colony with all conveniency.

Regarding ministers other than those of the Church of England being banished from the colony of Virginia, Charles F. James gives the following from his *Documentary History of the Struggles for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, p. 18:

Winsor's "Narrative and Critical History of America" (Vol. III., page 148) has the following notice of that act of 1643. After stating that Sir William Berkeley became Governor in 1642, he says: "During the year, three Congregational ministers came from Boston to Virginia to disseminate their doctrines. Their stay, however, was but short; for, by an enactment of the Assembly, all ministers other than those of the Church of England were compelled to leave the colony.

You will remember from our previous podcasts that the Congregational ministers from the colony of Massachusetts likewise persecuted those who differed from them by the use of civil government. Now, in Virginia, we find that one Protestant religion is persecuted by another Protestant religion. While the Congregationalists (Puritans) came out of the Church of England which was the ruling religion in Virginia, much of their doctrine was the same, but they were not to be tolerated in Virginia.

Another quote from the *History of the Church of God* by Elders Cushing Biggs and Sylvester Hassell, page 523, will further enlighten the conditions in the early days of Virginia.

In 1643 the "Church of England" was established by law in Virginia. In 1653 Sir William Berkeley, royal governor of Virginia, strove, by whippings and brandings, to make the inhabitants of that colony conform to the Established "Church," and thus drove out the Baptists and Quakers, who found a refuge in the Albemarle country of North Carolina, a colony which "was settled," says Bancroft, "by the freest of the free, by men to whom the restraints of other colonies were too severe."

In 1790, John Leland stated in "The Virginia Chronicle" as given on pages 122-123, in *The Writings of John Leland*, edited by L. F. Greene, the following:

The subject of religious liberty, has been so canvassed for fourteen years, and has so far prevailed, that in Virginia, a politician can no more be popular, without the possession of it, than a preacher who denies the doctrine of the *new birth*; yet many, who make this profession, behave in their families, as if they did not believe what they profess. For a man to contend for religious liberty on the court-house green, and deny his wife, children and servants, the liberty of conscience at home, is a paradox not easily reconciled. If a head of a family could answer for all his house in the day of judgment, there would be a degree of justice in the controlling them in the mode of worship, and joining society; but answer for them he cannot; each one must give an account of himself to God, and none but cruel tyrants will prevent their wives, children or servants, either directly or indirectly, from worshipping God according to the dictates of their consciences, and joining the society they choose; for as religion does not destroy either civil or domestic government, so neither of them extend their rightful influence into the empire of conscience.

The rights of conscience are so sacred, that no mortal can justly circumscribe them, and yet the conscience is so defiled by sin, as well as the other powers of the soul, that it may lead men into error. The word *conscience*, signifies *common science*; a court of judicature, erected by God in every human breast: and, as courts of justice often give wrong judgment, for want of good information, so it happens with conscience. The author of our religion said, "the time will come, when he that killeth you will think that he doeth God service." And Paul verily thought that he ought to do many things against the Lord Jesus. So that conscience is not the

rule of life, but the word of God. Though conscience should be free from human control, yet it should be in strict subordination to the law of God.

You will notice in this quote that while Leland believed in the freedom of conscience for each person and not be under control by human law, it was never free from the duty of being in subjection to the law of God. Today, it is feared that too many people are unable to make this separation. Yes, legally one's conscience is not to be governed by civil authority; nevertheless, each of us is responsible to God to worship and honor Him as they are to (as Leland said) "be in strict subordination to the law of God." All men must know and be constantly reminded of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment," Matthew 12:36.

Our time is exhausted for today. The Lord willing, we will continue this in our next podcast.