

## The Christian and Civil Government (33<sup>rd</sup>)

(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 regarding the times of John Leland and the pivotal role of Patrick Henry in ratification of the Constitution.)

In the previous podcast we gave some attention to Patrick Henry. He was a friend of the Baptists and labored somewhat for the freedom of religion in Virginia. However, he still supported religion being propped up and sustained by the government. True and full liberty as advanced by the Baptists owes more of its gratitude to the labors of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, with Madison being the essential warrior for the insertion of the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights. Much more could be supplied to show the influence of the Baptists in securing religious freedom in Virginia, but we will turn our attention to the struggles and efforts that reflect securing this freedom as established in the Constitution. Therefore, we will focus our attention around John Leland and his influence on James Madison. This will also show somewhat the opposition they faced by Patrick Henry. To give some of the background leading up to securing religious freedom, which included many other issues, we will quote extensively from *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* by Charles F. James.

This narrative would not be complete without some account of the agency of the Baptists of Virginia in engrafting the principle of religious liberty upon the Constitution of the United States by means of the famous first amendment; and, in order to appreciate properly the part performed by them, it is necessary that we consider, not only what they did towards securing that first amendment, but also their attitude towards the Constitution and its ratification....

After the independence of the colonies had been established, it soon became apparent that the old "Articles of Confederation" were too weak, that they did not give to Congress sufficient power to secure coöperation at home or respect abroad. Hence a movement was set on foot by James Madison to revise those "Articles" and give additional power to Congress—a movement which culminated in the calling of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787. Virginia selected as her representatives a number of her best men, including Washington, Madison, and Henry. Mr. Henry, however, declined to serve, and his refusal excited criticism and caused apprehension....

But the attempt to patch up the old Articles was vain, and so a new paper was prepared—the Constitution of the United States, of which James Madison was the father. ... It was submitted to the several States for ratification, with a *proviso* that when ratified by nine States the new government should be organized. Eight States—viz., Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Georgia, Maryland, and South Carolina—had passed articles of ratification when the Virginia Convention met on the 2d day of June, 1788. Patrick Henry and George Mason were there to oppose ratification without *previous* amendments, while Madison led the forces which favored immediate ratification and *subsequent* amendments. It was a "battle of giants," which culminated, June 25, in a victory for ratification by a majority of ten.

When the Constitution first appeared, in the fall of 1787, the impression made upon the Baptists was unfavorable. It did not seem to make sufficient provision for religious liberty. And when the General Committee met at Williams' meeting-house, Goochland county, March 7, 1788, this was one of the questions considered: [James quoting Semple's history] "Whether the new Federal Constitution, which had not lately made its appearance in public,

made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty; on which it was agreed unanimously that, in the opinion of the General Committee, it did not.” Semple, page 76.

The only provision in the Constitution touching religion was in the sixth article, and in these words: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” This was virtually a declaration in favor of the most absolute religious liberty, in that it published to all the world that this government, at least, would not allow a man’s religion to bar his way to the highest office in the gift of the people. But the Baptists were not satisfied. They had been great sufferers in the past, and, having just emerged from a long and arduous struggle for their rights, they were apprehensive that, if they entered into this new and stronger union with States that still had religious establishments, there might be a reaction disastrous to their liberties. Hence they resolved to oppose ratification, and Elder John Leland, the most popular Baptist minister in Virginia, was nominated as a delegate from Orange County to the Convention. This was done while Madison was yet in the North, where he remained some months after the Constitution was framed and published, engaged, with Jay and Hamilton, in writing articles in explanation of the new scheme of government—articles since known as “The Federalist.” Patrick Henry, who was strenuously opposed to the Constitution on other grounds, and especially as having “a squint towards monarchy,” was quick to take advantage of this prejudice of the Baptists to enlist them on the side of the opposition.

... Although he had been opposed to them in their war against the Establishment and in their fight against the assessment, he now poses as their champion in opposition to the Constitution, and seeks to array them against their old leader, James Madison. Pages 150-154.

Regarding this, John Blair Smith, president of Hampden-Sidney College, wrote to James Madison, June 12, 1788, detailing some of the tactics of Mr. Henry in his opposition to Mr. Madison and his followers.

As stated above, the Baptists in opposing the ratification of the Constitution as it stood nominated John Leland as a delegate from Orange County. This placed him in opposition to James Madison. However, before looking at this important and critical historical event in the final stage of religious freedom in America, I believe it is important to give some details regarding the importance of the Baptists in Massachusetts. Regarding the importance of Massachusetts and Virginia and the Constitution, William Cathcart said, “The two great States that supported the Revolution were nearly equally divided about the Constitution; and some of the best men in these powerful centres [*sic*] of political life regarded it with unmixed alarm, and resisted it with all their influence and eloquence.” (*Baptist Patriots and the American Revolution*, p. 91.) Further quoting from Cathcart:

In Massachusetts, the Convention called to ratify the Constitution assembled on the 9th of January, 1788. It was composed of nearly four hundred members. It possessed much of the 92 intellect and the patriotism of the State. The parties for and against the Constitution were about equal. The debates lasted for a month, and the contest was carried on with great earnestness. The entire United States took the deepest interest in the deliberations. It was universally felt, as Dr. Manning [This was James Manning the founding president of Brown University.] expressed it, that “Massachusetts was the hinge on which the whole must turn,” and that if she rejected the Constitution it would be discarded in the other States. The Baptists held the balance of power in the Convention, and they were generally opposed to the Constitution in Massachusetts. The Baptist delegates were chiefly ministers who had the highest regard for Dr. Manning. And he, fully convinced that nothing but the new

Constitution could save the country from anarchy, spent two weeks in attendance upon the Convention, and he and Dr. Stillman [another prominent Baptist] exerted themselves to the utmost to persuade their brethren to support the Constitution. With the Rev. Isaac Backus, the fearless friend of the Baptist cause, and of liberty of conscience, they set out, and they met with success in several cases. And the Constitution was adopted by a majority of nineteen votes. There were 187 yeas and 168 nays on the last day of the session, and before “the final question was taken, Governor Hancock, the president, invited Dr. Manning to close the solemn convocation with thanksgiving and prayer.” ... There is a strong probability that the Baptists of the Convention would have followed Isaac Backus, and changed the insignificant majority into a small minority, if it had not been for Manning and Stillman. Pages 91-93.

However, our time is exhausted for today. The Lord willing, we will return to Virginia and the important role of John Leland in our next podcast. Farewell.