

The Christian and Civil Government (36th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America as took place in Virginia. This podcast contains the letter sent to President George Washington from the Baptist General Committee as prepared by John Leland and the President's reply to it.)

In our previous podcast, we mentioned that the Baptists appealed to President George Washington for his aid in securing religious freedom in the United States. We further said that we would supply the letter to him and his reply. I ask your patience in supply such lengthy reading, but I believe such information is profitable to see some of the efforts of the Baptists and the influence in particular of John Leland in these matters. The letter sent to President Washington from the Baptist General Committee was prepared by John Leland. Leland's letter to Washington and his reply are found (as noted by Charles James) in Bitting's "Notes on the Century History of the Strawberry Association," and also in Leland's Works, 52-54." I am copying both letters from James' *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, pages 171-174.

"Address of the Committee of the United Baptist Churches of Virginia, assembled in the city of Richmond, August 8, 1789, to the President of the United States of America:

"Sir—Among the many shouts of congratulation that you receive from cities, societies, States, and the whole world, we wish to take an active part in the universal chorus, in expressing our great satisfaction in your appointment to the first office in the nation. When America, on a former occasion, was reduced to the necessity of appealing to arms to defend her natural and civil rights, a Washington was found fully adequate to the exigencies of the dangerous attempt; who, by the philanthropy of his heart and the prudence of his head, led forth her untutored troops into the field of battle, and, by the skillfulness of his hands, baffled the projects of the insulting foe and pointed out the road to independence, even at a time when the energy of the Cabinet was not sufficient to bring into action the natural aid of the confederation, from its respective sources.

"The grand object being obtained, the independence of the States acknowledged, free from ambition, devoid of thirst of blood, our hero returned, with those he commanded, and laid down the sword at the feet of those who gave it him. 'Such an example to the world is new.' Like other nations, we experience that it requires as great valor and wisdom to make an advantage of a conquest as to gain one.

"The want of efficacy in the confederation, the redundancy of laws, and their partial administration in the States, called aloud for a new arrangement in our systems. The wisdom of the States for that purpose was collected in a grand convention, over which you, sir, had the honor to preside. A national government, in all its parts, was recommended as the only preservation of the Union, which plan of government is now in actual operation.

"When the constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, had unusual struggling of mind, fearing that the liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently secured. Perhaps our jealousies were heightened by the usage we received in Virginia under the regal government, when mobs, fines, bonds and prisons were our frequent repast.

"Convinced, on the one hand, that without an effective national government the States would fall in disunion and all the consequent evils, and on the other hand, fearing that we should be accessory to some religious oppression, should any one society in the Union

preponderate over the rest; amidst all these inquietudes of mind our consolation arose from this consideration—viz., the plan must be good, for it has the signature of a tried, trusty friend, and if religious liberty is rather insecure in the Constitution, ‘the Administration will certainly prevent all oppressions, for a WASHINGTON will preside.’ According to our wishes, the unanimous voice of the Union has called you, sir, from your beloved retreat, to launch forth again into the faithless seas of human affairs, to guide the helm of the States. May that divine munificence which covered your head in battle make you a yet greater blessing to your admiring country in time of peace! Should the horrid evils that have been so pestiferous in Asia and Europe—faction, ambition, war, perfidy, fraud, and persecution for conscience sake, ever approach the borders of our happy nation, may the name and administration of our beloved President, like the radiant source of day, scatter all those dark clouds from the American hemisphere.

“And, while we speak freely the language of our hearts, we are satisfied that we express the sentiments of our brethren whom we represent. The very name of Washington is music in our ears, and, although the great evil in the States is the want of mutual confidence between rulers and people, yet we all have the utmost confidence in the President of the States, and it is our fervent prayer to Almighty God that the Federal Government, and the governments of the respective States, without rivalry, may so co-operate together as to make the numerous people over whom you preside the happiest nation on earth, and you, sir, the happiest man, in seeing the people whom, by the smiles of Providence, you saved from vassalage by your valor and made wise by your maxims, sitting securely under their vines and fig trees, enjoying the perfection of human felicity. May God long preserve your life and health for a blessing to the world in general, and the United States in particular; and when, like the sun, you have finished your course of great and unparalleled services, and go the way of all the earth, may the Divine Being, who will reward every man according to his works, grant unto you a glorious admission into his everlasting kingdom, through Jesus Christ. This, sir, is the prayer of your happy admirers.

“By order of the Committee.

“SAMUEL HARRIS, Chairman.

“REUBEN FORD, Clerk.”

WASHINGTON’S REPLY

“To the General Committee, Representing the United Baptist Churches in Virginia:

“Gentlemen—I request that you will accept my best acknowledgements for your congratulations on my appointment to the first office in the nation. The kind manner in which you mention my past conduct equally claims the expression of my gratitude.

“After we had, by the smiles of Divine Providence on our exertions, obtained the object for which we contended, I retired at the conclusion of the war, with an idea that my country could have no further occasion for my services, and with the intention of never again entering public life. But when the exigencies of my country seemed to require me once more to engage in public affairs, an honest conviction of duty superseded my former resolution, and became my apology for deviating from the happy plan which I had adopted.

“If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution framed by the Convention, where I had the honor to preside, might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might be so administered as to render the

liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that none would be more zealous than myself to establish effective barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution; for you doubtless remember I have often expressed my sentiments, that any man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience.

“While I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members have been, throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously the firm friends to civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious revolution, I cannot hesitate to believe that they will be the faithful supporters of a free, yet efficient, general government. Under this pleasing expectation, I rejoice to assure them that *they may rely upon my best wishes and endeavor to promote their prosperity.*

“In the meantime, be assured, gentlemen, that I entertain a proper sense of your fervent supplications to God for my temporal and eternal happiness.

“I am, gentlemen, your most obedient servant,

“GEORGE WASHINGTON.”

Again, I hope this lengthy reading has been profitable as well as interesting to you. Nevertheless, our time is exhausted for today. Farewell.