

## **The Christian and Civil Government** (38<sup>th</sup>)

(The study today gives an overview of the podcast concerning the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America and demonstrates some of the inconsistencies of the Baptists during the same era.)

In previous studies we found that the idea of civil government seeking to enforce religion on society is a pagan philosophy as witnessed in the writings of Plato. This thinking was adopted by the Catholics in the writings of Augustine and others of his day. When the Emperor Constantine joined the Catholic religion to the Roman government, this juggernaut sought to eradicate all those who refused to bow to Caesar and deny their allegiance to Jesus Christ. The conscious of the Christian is devoted to Christ as his Lord and Master and he is not to allow any other (person or thing) to occupy that throne. When the Protestant reformation took place, they likewise adopted the beliefs of Rome and sought to stamp out all who would not bow to their tyrannical practices. At first, reformers such as Martin Luther proclaimed the truth of liberty of conscious, but eventually denied this tenet and persecuted those who would not bow to the reformed ideology. Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and all who accepted the reformed practice of civil government overruling religion sought to eliminate anyone who would not bow to their beliefs and practices. All who opposed them were generally classified as Anabaptists. Other names were also ascribed to them, but the broad overall term was that of Anabaptist. While the term “anabaptist” was used to designate all who opposed the reformers and Catholics that practiced the union of civil government to religion, there were a people that were classified by their enemies as Anabaptists that did not wish to be identified as such. They preferred to be called simply Baptists. In fact, the 1646 London Baptist Confession of Faith was composed by “seven congregations . . . of Christ in London, which are commonly (but unjustly) called Anabaptists.” There were various reasons as to why they did not want to be identified as such, but that is not our objective at this time. We simply desire to note that Baptists have ever opposed the idea that civil government is to rule over or interfere with the congregation of God. In fact, scripturally speaking, there is no human authority higher than the assembly of Christ. The concept of a denomination or any organization as a ruling body over congregations is totally foreign to the Word of God. The Head or Authority over each God ordained congregation is the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, a congregation may join another congregation or congregations for a common cause, or a congregation may invite a congregation(s) or a minister(s) to assist them in a matter, but the final say or authority is the membership of the congregation. Likewise, “parachurch” organizations are not found in Bible. Such organizations are man-made and are to be avoided by the house of God. Such organizations are of modern origin. While I digress somewhat, it is important to know that not only civil government has no authority over or within the congregation of the Lord, but no other entity does either. Additionally, it is important to know that no assembly of Christ should submit itself to civil government by signing itself up under a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status with the government for governmental benefits. Nor should congregations or religious institutions appeal to civil government to maintain or advance the commission given by the Lord Jesus Christ. Oddly, while the Baptists labored so intently for religious freedom, those in New England did not see the inconsistency of their doctrine when they appealed to Congress to govern over the publications of the Bible to assure they were correct.

In 1790, Isaac Backus recorded in his diary that the Warren Association received a letter from the Committee of the Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts of Boston “to move us to address the Congress about new editions of the Bible, to see that they were correct.” *The Diary of Isaac Backus*,

edited by William G. McLoughlin, Volume III, page 1295. In a footnote, McLoughlin supplied the following footnote:

*[Taken from the minutes of the association the following:]*

Dr. Stillman communicated a letter to the Association, which he had received from the Committee of the Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts, informing him, that they had presented a petition to Congress, requesting their “attention to several impressions of the Bible now making, representing the importance of accuracy in these impressions; and earnestly praying that they would take such measures as the Constitution may permit, that no edition of the Bible, or its translation be published in America, without it being carefully inspected, and certified to be free from error; and requesting the concurrence of the Baptists interest, throughout the United States, in this matter, which is of the highest importance to all denominations of Christians, as they all appeal to the Holy Bible as the standard of truth.” Upon due consideration of this matter,

Voted, That we the Members of this Association feel ourselves under very great obligations to our reverend brethren, for their early attention to the preservation of the purity of the Holy Scriptures.

Voted, That Dr. Stillman, Mr. Backus, Mr. Smith, Mr. Baldwin, and Mr. Green, be appointed a committee, on behalf of this Association, to prepare and transmit a petition to Congress on this important subject.

*[McLoughlin’s follow-up comments.]*

The petition was drawn and sent, the Baptists being as willing as the Standing Order to think of the United States as a “Christian” (i.e., evangelical Protestant) state. Congress, they believed, had the right and duty to protect and promote evangelical Christianity for the good of society, and they assumed that the Holy Bible was accepted as the source of revealed authority by all denominations. A few years later the Baptists of New England even suggested that it would be perfectly proper for Congress to allocate some of the taxpayers’ money for the support of foreign missions. Not even Backus saw the threat to religious freedom involved in assigning such powers to the legislature. Congress, of course, took no action upon the petition. But it was not the last time the Baptists cooperated with the Standing ministers in seeking congressional enactment of religious laws—in 1828 both groups fought against Sunday mail delivery. And both sanctioned, after 1830, outlawing the Mormons and prohibiting the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages. Pages 1295-1296.

John Leland would not have agreed and was more consistent regarding the separation of civil government from religious involvement. McLoughlin said of him, “Next to Backus the outstanding American Baptist exponent of the separation of church and state in the eighteenth century, Leland was associated with Jefferson and Madison in the fight for disestablishment of the Episcopal church in Virginia. Like them, he spoke and wrote from a rationalists Enlightenment standpoint, so that his statements on the separation of church and state are less representative of the pietistic Baptist position than are Backus’s. *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, Volume III, pages 1260-1261.

That Leland would not fight against Sunday mail delivery can be seen from “Extract of a Letter to Col. R. M. Johnson, Dated January 8, 1830,” “Transportation of the Mail,” and “Extracts From a Letter to Hon. R. M. Johnson, March 29, 1830” as found on pages 561-569 in *The Writings of John Leland*, edited by L. F. Greene. Also, in the first document listed, he further commented on Congress paying chaplains for their services rendered. Note the following:

I am sorry the Congress have committed themselves by a precedent of giving their chaplains a legal reward for religious services. How preposterous the sound! A far-fetched construction supports it. The law of reason and revelation enjoin a reward to the laborer; but if Congress should reward the chaplains with their own contributions, it would look more like simple Christianity. The people at large have none of the devotion or instruction of the chaplain, nor any voice in electing him; why then should they be taxed where they are not represented? The chaplain, who would not attend, on request, and trust to the promise of Christ and the benevolence of his friends for his reward, without legal obligation, would be selling his prayers for money, and turning the gospel into merchandise. The thing here spoken of, is a small thing, which the nation can never feel; but trace it to its root, and it contains that principle which is so pernicious in the world, and is now used as a stirrup, by the petitioners, to mount the steed and ride down the people. Page 563.

I apologize for the abrupt ending, but our time is up for today. Farewell.