

The Christian and Civil Government (37th)

(The study today continues with the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America and John Leland's work after he returned to Massachusetts from Virginia.)

In the preceding podcast the letter John Leland wrote for the Baptist General Committee to President George Washington and President Washington's reply was presented. This, with previous studies, exhibited the tremendous influence of the Baptists with the assistance of John Leland in securing religious freedom in the United States. As Edwin Gaustad said, "John Leland led Virginia's Baptists in a concerted drive for full liberty, not mere toleration. When the Revolution was over, his vigilance increased as he pushed for complete disestablishment of the Anglican Church. In 1788 Leland headed the group opposing ratification of the Constitution because of its lack of specific guarantees for religious freedom, while James Madison led the faction favoring ratification. The two met for debate, Madison proving so persuasive that he won Leland's support. This fortunate agreement made Virginia's critical support of the Constitution a virtual certainty. In 1791 Leland returned to New England, his original home, there to assist in a longer struggle for disestablishment." *A Religious History of America* by Edwin Scott Gaustad, page 119.

In the letter to President Washington, it was stated that "the liberty of conscience" is "dearer to us than property or life." Can we say this today? Are we willing to sacrifice our property, even our life, for the liberty of conscience? Recently Caesar, civil government, issued mandates, fines, and imprisonments against religious institutions, even the congregation of the God, and there was (and still is in some places) wholesale caving in of all congregations and denominations and religious establishments. This was not only world-wide, but in the United States of America where the Constitution clearly declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." The laws in our country are to be made by Congress. If a President issues an Executive Order it can be overturned by Congress. However, the government under the domination by presidents, health officials, governors, and mayors have (and are continuing) to exercise power and domination to prohibit the house of God to peaceably assemble. Additionally, large corporations and mega media businesses are exercising their power to abridge "the freedom of speech" and even the press in some cases for the purpose of establishing their totalitarian beliefs. In other words, they are seeking to establish their beliefs (i.e., their religious ideologies) as they seek to crush all who oppose them. Our forefathers, especially our Baptist forefathers, sacrificed persecution by fines, imprisonments, torture, loss of property, and loss of life to secure this freedom that is rapidly being taken from us. Again I ask if there is such a spirit in us today, or have we sold out to the world and its systems that are seeking to place its foot of tyranny on our necks? Time will tell, but it appears that many professing Christians are in name only. If nothing else, I believe, there is one barometer or gauge that will indicate where we are on the scale—prayer. If our minds and hearts are consumed with the affairs of this life and we are not devoting ourselves in prayer to the Lord regarding these things, it is a large sign that we are part of the problem. Yes, this is one thing that each Christian can do; he can pray. Are you praying about these things? Do you believe God can overrule the powers that be? Are you willing to give your property or life for liberty of conscious? I believe these and other such like questions need to be faced by us and answered honestly before the Lord. Where do you stand, or are you willing to simply ignore such questions and go on with your jobs, video games, entertainments, and social activities as you become enslaved to the totalitarian system? If you strive to do anything, please remember that we must conduct ourselves as a Christian and seek to present a

Christ-like spirit. We must, at all cost, not engage in such a battle in the energy of the flesh. Equally, the focal point in all our endeavors must be for the honor and glory of the Lord. We should not desire or seek for liberty and freedom to simply live a life of ease and comfort. We should seek for the blessing of assembling for the purpose of worshiping the Lord and hearing the gospel proclaimed. God, by the writings of the Apostle Paul, exhorts us to pray for kings and all that are in authority not only that we might live “a quiet and peacefully life,” but that it be done “in all godliness and honesty,” I Timothy 2:1-2.

However, to return to the life and influence of John Leland, I would like to devote some time to Gaustad’s closing sentence, “In 1791 Leland returned to New England, his original home, there to assist in a longer struggle for disestablishment.” Though freedom of religion was established in the Constitution of the United States, some states continued to practice suppression of religion. In an earlier podcast, we noted that the state of Massachusetts continued to maintain laws of taxation for the support of certain religious sects for years after the first amendment was added to the Constitution. In fact, it was not until 1917, that Article 46, Section 1, of the Massachusetts’ Constitution was ratified and adopted which stated, “No law shall be passed prohibiting the free exercise of religion.” John Leland labored to remove such laws. “As soon as he landed again on its shores [i.e., the shores of New England], he commenced anew the warfare against religious intolerance, and the defence [sic] of the cause that had so signally triumphed in Virginia. During his stay in New London, he published his ‘Right of Conscience Inalienable,’ and afterwards, from time to time, other works of the same character ...” *The Writings of John Leland*, Edited by L. F. Greene, page 55. We covered some of the struggles for religious freedom in Massachusetts while studying the lives of Obadiah Holmes and Isaac Backus. Now we will look somewhat at the influence of Leland as he, too, labored with Backus in seeking for full religious freedom in this state. Please allow me to quote again from *The Writings of John Leland*:

It [i.e. religious liberty] had struggled for existence, and found some advocates from the first settlement of the state, but was kept constantly shackled by certificate laws, and other expedients of ecclesiastical tyranny. At length, in the beginning of 1811, a decision by Judge Parsons, that no society, not incorporated by law, could claim even the pitiful privilege of drawing back money, awakened the fears of the dissenters, and a circular Address, accompanied by a petition to the legislature, pray for a revision of the laws respecting public worship, was circulated through the state. As the solicitations of the people of Cheshire, Mr. Leland accepted a seat in the legislature, for the special purpose of aiding the measures petitioned for. His speech, delivered during the debate on the subject, may be found in another part of this work [i.e., in this book from which I’m quoting.]

A law was finally passed that gave some relief, but not complete satisfaction. The “stump” of the tree of ecclesiastical oppression, so carefully preserved “with a band of iron and brass,” continued, therefore, to furnish a subject for his animadversion [i.e, criticism or censure; a comment or remark, especially a critical one], in various essays, addresses, etc., and he improved such opportunities as were offered him, as a matter of duty, and in fulfillment of the public pledge he had given, that “as long as he could speak with his tongue, wield a pen, or heave a cry to heaven, whenever the rights of men, the liberty of conscience, or the good of his country were invaded by fraud or force, his feeble efforts should not lie dormant.” ... To neutralize the effect of these, and to destroy the confidence reposed in him, reports were industriously circulated in some newspapers, that “he had renounced the Christian faith, and the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper, and been excommunicated from the church.” Pages 55-56.

Before closing this study, I will supply a couple of quotes from Leland. “Disdain mean suspicion, but cherish manly jealousy; be always jealous of your liberty, your rights. Nip the first bud of intrusion on your constitution. Be not devoted to men; let measures be your object, and estimate men according to the measures they pursue. Never promote men who seek after a state-established religion; it is spiritual tyranny—the worst of despotism. ... Guard against those men who make a great noise about religion, in choosing representatives. It is electioneering intrigue. If they knew the nature and worth of religion, they would not debauch it to such shameful purposes. If pure religion is the criterion to denominate candidates, those who make a noise about it must be rejected; for their wrangle about it, proves that they are void of it. Let honesty, talents and quick dispatch, characterize the men of your choice. Such men will have a sympathy with their constituents, and will be willing to come to the light, that their deeds may be examined. Remember that the genuine meaning of republicanism is self-government; if you would, then, be true disciples in your profession, govern yourselves.” Page 267 of *Writings*. “Let Christianity stand upon its own basis, it is the greatest blessing that ever was among men; but incorporate it into the civil code and it becomes the mother of cruelties.” Page 356 of *Writings*.

While I am tempted to quote much more from John Leland, our time is up for today. Farewell.