BAPTISTS AND PATRIOTISM

Baptists, prior to the American Revolution, were a very small group. But, the New World of America had been a great place for the preaching and autonomy of Baptists to grow. We have always been staunch defenders of religious liberty for all people. That means that even though Baptists were devoted Christians, we would fight for Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Anglicans, and all to have the freedom to worship according to their conscience.

Following the Great Awakening in the 1730’s and 1740’s, Baptists begin to see significant inroads in the number of colonists converted and baptized in Baptist churches and a great number of slaves coming to know Christ in the Chesapeake region. The fire of separation of church and state (meaning no state run church) was an open flame that would not be quenched. Baptists were fortunate to have several great leaders that pushed for liberty to be established in the exercise of faith.

One of those men was Isaac Backus (1724-1806). A native of Connecticut, he fought tirelessly for religious freedom. In New England, he was instrumental in working with the leaders of the Revolution to make sure this new country would fully support the rights of conscience. When the Constitution was drafted, it was Isaac Backus that spoke eloquently and powerfully “in support of the right of every person…to act in all religious affairs according to the full persuasion of his own mind”. He was so effective and so clear in presenting his case for religious liberty that he has been quoted before the US Supreme Court in the case of Boerne v. Flores, 1997.

The Baptist fight in Virginia was much more challenging. The State Church of England saw all dissenters as dangerous disrupters of the faith. Because of the prejudice against them by the ruling officials of the “established church”, the actions of the dissenters were seen as division and creating dissension in the social order of Virginia. As a result, Virginia authorities seized, stripped, whipped, beat, and jailed Baptist preachers prior to the Revolution.

When the political relations between the colonies and England were at a critical state, Baptists in Virginia were being subjected to violent persecution of dissenters at the hands of the colonial government. Ironically, England had passed the English Act of Religious Toleration in 1689 which stopped the persecution of dissenters in England. In the New World, that persecution had intensified. And one further “quirk” was that even though dissenters had gained religious freedom in England, the dissenters in America fought with the colonies against England.

Baptists found a vocal ally in Patrick Henry. He stepped forward in 1770’s to defend Baptist preachers and their right to proclaim their message of egalitarian religious fellowship. His voice along with other national leaders pressing for “liberty and justice for all” began to grant a measure of freedom to Baptists.
Baptists were very visible and active in the Revolutionary War. Throughout the colonies, they served as soldiers, leaders, and chaplains. The choice to fight with the colonists was not as easy as one might think. Many of the immigrants had just recently come from England, were loyal to their homeland (as we would be to America), and were suddenly called upon to bear arms against the armies of England. Many of them did forsake England for the hope of full freedom in the quest to establish a new nation.

Several names stand out as leaders during the time of the Revolution. Richard Furman, pastor of High Hills of Santee Church in South Carolina, was a young zealot for freedom. He became one of the most effective recruiters of men to fight in the Revolution. He was so good at what he did that the British placed a large reward for the capture of Furman. On more than one occasion, they came very close to taking him prisoner, but he always was able to escape.

Hezekiah Smith and John Gano were chaplains to the troops. Six of the twenty-one chaplains were Baptists. Washington was greatly appreciative of Gano during the war and often corresponded with Hezekiah Smith following the war. In his correspondence, Washington praised the role of Baptists in the fight for freedom.

Two of our Founding Fathers, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, that were giants in the quest for liberty, worked to make “disestablishment” (doing away with any “state run church”) a reality in Virginia. They became allies of Baptist people and leaders in the fight. Interestingly enough, both Madison and Jefferson were Deists but they worked along with the deeply dedicated Baptist people to gain the passage of “The Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia in 1786.

The journey to get that legislation passed was arduous and challenging.

In 1784 Patrick Henry brought a bill in the Virginia Legislature for a “religious assessment”. Henry was a strong advocate for individual liberty, but he was also for the sponsoring or “establishing” of a religion. James Madison publicly opposed Henry’s bill. In 1786 Leland was appointed to represent Baptist interests at the Virginia Legislature by the Baptist General Committee. L. H. Butterfield has noted that the Baptists were Madison’s only allies at first in the religious assessment controversy.

The Episcopal Church was trying to protect, “the extensive property it held under the old establishment.” The Episcopal Church had obtained the property and land from the colonial governments or by taxation of all the people. Therefore, the Baptists thought the property and land should belong not only to one denomination. Baptists were opposed to this legislation granting this privilege to the Episcopal church and worked to get it overturned. They were successful.

James Madison was the primary author of the Constitution of the United States, and on September 17, 1787 the Philadelphia Convention approved and signed it. Shortly after, at the
Confederation Congress in New York, the federalists blocked any proposed changes and ruled out a bill of rights. They closed by deciding to send the Constitution as it was to the states for ratification. It was common knowledge that if Virginia did not ratify the Constitution, that the Constitution would have failed overall.

Virginia was trending against the Constitution, and they were going to have a Constitutional Convention on June 2, 1788 to vote on whether or not to ratify. Each county could send two delegates, and Madison eventually decided to run in his home county of Orange. The influence of Patrick Henry and George Mason, both against ratification of the Constitution in Virginia, finally convinced Madison to come back.

John Leland had penned a letter that found its way to the attention of Mr. Madison. In Leland’s letter, he had outlined ten objections to the Constitution, and he was especially critical of the vote against a bill of rights and no guarantee of religious liberty. Without the support of Virginia Baptists, Madison was, “seriously at risk of being excluded from the convention unless he could overcome Leland’s well-formed objections.”

By this time Madison may also have heard that on March 7, 1788, the Baptist General Committee had considered, “[w]hether the new Federal Constitution . . . made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty,” and had “agreed unanimously, that, in the opinion of the General Committee, it did not.”

On June 25, 1788, after rejecting a motion to ratify it conditionally with amendments, the delegates to the Virginia Convention ratified the Constitution by a vote of 89 to 79. The Constitution was ratified by Virginia based on Madison’s promise to the electorate that he would pursue amendments to the Constitution, and that if it was ratified their proposals for amendments would be considered, “Without Madison at the ratifying convention to oppose Patrick Henry, it seems likely the result would have been different.” News of Virginia’s ratification influenced New York to ratify the Constitution later in July by a close vote of 30 to 27.

After his election, Madison brought the amendments that became the Bill of Rights, further unifying the country and establishing religious liberty. Religious liberty, also known as the “Establishment Clause”, was outlined and protected in the very first Amendment. Here is the Amendment that Leland and so many others worked tirelessly to establish:

Amendment I -

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.
In 1834, at 80 years of age, Leland wrote, “The plea for religious liberty has been long and powerful; but it has been left for the United States to acknowledge it a right inherent, and not a favor granted: to exclude religious opinions from the list of objects of legislation.”

The events of Leland’s life as a statesman patriot provide part of the context for how we should understand the development and observance of Establishment Clause of the Constitution of the United States. Leland’s involvement makes it clear that the Establishment Clause was not created in order to discourage religious leaders from participating in politics. Even Jefferson’s concept of a “wall of separation” comes from a letter to Connecticut Baptists written one year into his presidency on January 1, 1802.

On October 7, 1801, the Danbury Baptist Association complained to President Jefferson of their second-class status in the Congregationalist State of Connecticut:

"Sir... Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty-

-That religion is at all times and places a matter between God and Individuals......
-That no man ought to suffer in name, person or effects on account of his religious opinions
-That the legitimate power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbor:

But Sir...our ancient charter (in Connecticut), together with the Laws made coincident therewith...are; that...what religious privileges we enjoy (as Baptists)...we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights..."

The Danbury Baptists continued:

"Sir, we are sensible that the President of the united States is not the national Legislator & also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the Laws of each State; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial Effect already, like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine & prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and Tyranny be destroyed from the Earth.

Sir... we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of State... May God strengthen you for the arduous task which Providence & the voice of the people have called you...

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his Heavenly Kingdom through Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator."
On January 1, 1802, Jefferson wrote back agreeing with the Baptists:
"Gentlemen... Believing with you
-that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God,
-that he owes account to none other for faith or his worship,
-that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions,

I contemplate with solemn reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore man to all his natural rights...

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of man."

Here's how Lyman Butterfield, an editor of Thomas Jefferson and the Adams family papers, described John Leland’s influence:

Leland played a substantial part in molding [an] American tradition that is full of meaning to all of us today—the separation of church and state in the United States . . . In 1774, when Leland was converted to the Baptist faith, the Baptists were generally regarded as a set of ignorant enthusiasts, without social standing, without legal sanction for their religious services or for marriages performed by their ministers. In Virginia Baptist preachers were being regularly thrown into prison as strollers and vagabonds; mob actions breaking up their services went unpunished by the magistrates; their petitions to the legislature for relief from these oppressions were largely disregarded. In Massachusetts and Connecticut Baptists were fined and their property was distrained for taxes to pay Congregational ministers whose teachings were repugnant to them, and to build and repair meeting houses they would not attend. Much of Leland’s sixty-seven year career as a Baptist evangelist was expended in fighting to remove these disabilities—not only for Baptists but for persons of all faiths, Christian and non-Christian, and even for those who held no recognized religious faith. When he died the battle for complete religious freedom in the United States had been very largely won, though this was not a battle in which there could ever be a final victory.
In this world, religious freedom is not a battle in which there could ever be a final victory. May God, in His grace, raise up yet more to tirelessly preach the gospel and defend and uphold religious liberty for the glory of God.

To live like him, is to mourn over the sins of the earth, and hold up God’s everlasting truth to a dying world. To die like him, is to stand on the confines of earth, looking off into eternity, and to depart with the ‘prospect of heaven clear.’ To rest, at last, like him is, we doubt not, to rest forever in the Paradise of God.

(This segment in bold italics was taken from THE LIFE OF JOHN LELAND: STATESMAN, by Noah Braymen, May 16, 2014, CANON AND CULTURE, Christianity and the Public Square, A Project of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention).

Baptists were at last hopeful that they would be granted the right to live completely free in matters of religion. Leland was considered a “radical” in his lifetime. He fought long and hard to remove the last vestiges of religious establishment in America. His “radical” views were that he defended the rights of Pagans, Turks (Muslims), and Jews as well as Catholics to full liberty of conscience. He fully believed that men would try to use the state control of religion as a means to promote and defend personal and self-interests. He finally won and the last states to disestablish a State Church were the New England states in the 1830’s (nearly 50 years after the ratification of the Constitution and Bill of Rights).

Through the years, Baptist people are prominent in service to this country. Here are a few of those that you would recognize….

William Penn – son of an English Baptist.

Abe Lincoln and Jefferson Davis – both sons of Baptist deacons.

Sam Houston died a loyal Baptist.

William Jennings Bryant – son of a Baptist father.

William Howard Taft – grandson of Baptists.

Charles Evans Hughes – Supreme Court Justice – son of a Baptist preacher and member of a Baptist church.

President Warren G. Harding (term served…March 4, 1921 – August 2, 1923) was a Baptist.

Many prominent national leaders have been Baptists….
Folks such as Chuck Colson, Mike Huckabee, Jesse Jackson, President Andrew Johnson, Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, John McCain, and Ron Paul to name a few.

Baptists have been represented in the Supreme Court of the United States.....

Black, Hugo, Supreme Court associate justice
Hughes, Charles, Supreme Court Chief justice
Jackson, Howell Supreme Court, associate justice.
Moore, Roy Alabama state Supreme Court chief justice, removed from office.
Thomas, Clarence Supreme Court, associate justice (raised Baptist, converted to Catholicism).

Industrialists and Business Leaders.....

Cathy, S. Truett, billionaire founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants
Lindner, Carl, former owner of the Cincinnati Reds
Penney, J(ames) C(ash), department store magnate, son of a Primitive Baptist lay minister.
Rockefeller, John D, 20th-century oil tycoon

Two famous outlaws were reared Baptist....

Jesse James – son of a Baptist Preacher
Longabaugh, Harry -- "The Sundance Kid"

Baptists have an honorable history. Their record is clean upon the separation of church and state. Having given to the US religious freedom, at the cost of their property, their liberty, their good name, and their lives, it is their chief glory that, suffering all martyrdom themselves, they never yet have persecuted others. (McDaniel, p.13).

Baptists have been leaders in communities, states, and national areas since our nation was birthed. George McDaniel, a Baptist historian, wrote the following paragraph to define what it takes as a denomination to make a difference in the world.

A denomination must so serve that those whom it reaches shall have a fuller, diviner life. The denomination which points out that the high road to the betterment of the world lies through
moral principles rather than legal enactments; which preserves the mass by proclaiming the inexpressible value of the person; which as the mentor or national conscience by reflecting with faultless precision the conscience of the individual; which preaches a gospel of industrial and social repentance; which breaks down the middle walls of partition between classes and reveals the meaning of brotherhood and love; which has the spirit of self-sacrifice and willingness to lose its own life for Christ; that is the denomination which the future belongs. Such a denomination makes a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. (copied from THE PEOPLE CALLED BAPTISTS, George W. McDaniel, Sunday School Board, Nashville, 1925, p.28-29).

**BAPTIST IMPACT ON CHRISTIAN HISTORY**

Baptists are unique people. Throughout our history, we have believed these foundational truths unapologetically:

1) People that had no creed other than the Bible.
2) We believe the Bible to be the inerrant and infallible Word of God that does not change.
3) No authority over us but Christ Jesus. Every church is autonomous.
4) No practice of baptism unless one professes faith in Jesus “personally”.
5) No support of man-made legislation to worship God…each person worships God as they determine is appropriate according to their personal faith.
6) Every person has access to God without human intervention.
7) Once a person is truly saved by God’s grace through the blood of Jesus and sealed by the Holy Spirit, they are saved forever without end.
8) Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven and the only way to make peace with God.

The “founder” of our faith is Jesus. Other groups name certain leaders of history as their founders…..

Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ – Alexander Campbell.

Methodists – John Wesley.

Presbyterians – John Calvin.

Lutherans – Martin Luther.

**Baptists have produced some of the greatest preachers in history….**

Alexander Maclaren – called the “greatest Biblical sermonizer of his century.
F.B. Meyer – his sermons and writings went “literally” around the world.


Andrew Fuller – one of the first great mission’s pastors and “held the rope” for William Carey to mine the spiritual riches of India.

Robert Hall – tremendous in sermon preaching because of His marvelous diction…”unsurpassed by any English orator”.

Christmas Evans – his impassioned eloquence won thousands to faith in Christ.

Charles Spurgeon – his sermons were heard or read by more people that those of any other Preacher of his time.

Mordecai Hamm – Evangelist that preached when Billy Graham was saved.

And, we have had many more in our more recent history….


**Baptists have been responsible for founding of some of our best US colleges and universities…..**

Henry Dunster – president of Harvard College but lost his office because of this Baptist views.

Brown University – founded by Baptists in 1764; charter required that the president be Baptist.

Matthew Vassar – founded Vassar College, the first college for women in America.

Over the years, more and more universities have been birthed from Baptists….Furman (now state school), Mercer (now a state school), and a host of others. Just in the states immediately around us, here are some of the Baptist colleges and universities….

**TEXAS** – Baylor, The College at Southwestern, Criswell College, Dallas Baptist University, East Texas Baptist, Hardin-Simmons, Houston Baptist, Howard Payne, University of Mary Hardin Baylor, and Wayland.
ARKANSAS – Ouachita Baptist, Williams Baptist College.

OKLAHOMA – Oklahoma Baptist University

MISSOURI – Hannibal-LaGrange University, Midwestern Baptist College, Southwestern Baptist University.

W. H. Doane, a Baptist, wrote the music for many of our popular hymns, such as:

Pass Me Not
Near the Cross
I Am Thine, O Lord
Rescue the Perishing

More Love to Thee
Rescue the Perishing
To The Work

It’s also noteworthy to mention that Baptists are credited for one of our most popular national hymns, “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”. Some of our greatest hymns were written by Baptists, such as:

How Firm a Foundation
The Solid Rock
Take the Name of Jesus With You
Shall We Gather at the River
He Leadeth Me
Jesus Loves Even me
Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing
On Jordan’s Stormy Banks
Bringing in the Sheaves

My Jesus, I Love Thee
Wonderful Words of Life
Whosoever Will
The Light of the World is Jesus
Bringing In the Sheaves
Almost Persuaded
I Need Thee Every Hour
Wonderful Words of Life
(This material was taken from THE PEOPLE CALLED BAPTISTS, George W. McDaniel).