

When America Put Pastors in Prison

The Baptist Battle for Religious Liberty

by

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In 1774, James Madison wrote to a friend in Pennsylvania about troubling developments in Virginia. There were reasons to worry about oppressive British taxes, of course, but that was not Madison's primary concern in this letter. The "worst" news he had to deliver was that the "diabolical Hell conceived principle of persecution" was raging in the colony. "There are at this [time] . . . not less than 5 or 6 well meaning men in [jail] for publishing their religious sentiments. . . . Pray for liberty of conscience to revive among us." While today we tend to think of early America as a bastion of religious liberty, many in the colonial era lamented its absence.

No one suffered more persecution than Baptists. They were the most likely "well meaning" Christians to be thrown in jail on the eve of the American Revolution. While leaders like Madison and Thomas Jefferson learned much about the need for religious freedom from "Enlightened" authors such as John Locke, their deepest convictions about liberty of conscience came from watching it being denied to fellow Americans.

What Set Baptists Apart

Baptists caught the brunt of persecution because of their unusual practices and brash style. Baptists had begun to appear in early seventeenth-century England, and were present in America by the early colonial period. Insisting that the baptism of believers by immersion was the biblical mode, they were fighting an uphill battle in the religious culture of the day. With few exceptions, Christians had taught for a millennium that baptism was meant for infants. Infant baptism introduced a child into the covenanted community of the church, and hopefully put them on the path of salvation. Depriving babies of that blessing seemed tantamount to child abuse, the Baptists' persecutors believed.

Baptists were among the most fractious of all dissenters. They refused to attend the state-backed churches of England or America, or to pay religious taxes to support those churches. They flamboyantly violated rules that required dissenters to secure licenses from the government to preach.

Sometimes local authorities would not agree to have these dissenters preach at all. Regardless, Baptist itinerants traveled throughout the colonies, often holding outdoor baptismal services in rivers and lakes, drawing crowds of mockers.

The Troublers of Churches

Baptists, Quakers, and other nonconformists suffered discrimination and maltreatment in the American colonies that believers today in places from China to Nigeria would find strangely familiar. In 1651, for example, a man named Obadiah Holmes, accused of proselytizing for the Baptists, was taken from his cell at Boston's prison to receive a punishment of thirty lashes with a three-corded whip. Holmes had been alone in prison for weeks, struggling to come to terms with the impending travail. But the day of his whipping, an unusual calm came over him. Although his captors tried to keep him from speaking, he would not be silent.

"I am now come to be baptized in afflictions by your hands," Holmes said, "that so I may have further fellowship with my Lord, and am not ashamed of his sufferings, for by his stripes am I healed." Holmes was tied to a post. The officer tasked with meting out Holmes's sentence spit on his hands, took up a whip, and began flailing him with all his might. Still, Holmes felt the presence of God as at no other time in his life. The pain of the scourging lifted away. When they untied him, Holmes stood up and smiled. "You have struck me as with roses," he chided them.

A 1645 Massachusetts law had specifically banned Baptists from the colony, calling them "the incendiaries of commonwealths" and "the troublers of churches in all places." Quakers sometimes endured even rougher treatment than that faced by Baptists. Massachusetts expelled several Quaker missionaries in the late 1650s, warning them not to come back. Three did return, and Massachusetts executed them by hanging.

Freedom for Some

Colonial America did have an embryonic tradition of religious liberty, of course. Rhode Island founder Roger Williams had been expelled from Massachusetts for criticizing that colony's mingling of state and church. Accordingly, when he started his new colony, he mandated that Rhode Island would not sponsor any particular Christian denomination. No one would suffer persecution for their beliefs or religious practices there. Likewise,

William Penn's Pennsylvania, founded in the 1680s, offered religious liberty not only to persecuted Quakers, but to a host of Christian sects.

By 1700, many of the worst aspects of persecution against dissenters in England and America had ended, but most of the colonies (like England) still had official denominations. New radical movements emerging from the Great Awakening of the 1740s ran afoul of the "established" church's requirements, and a new wave of American persecution began.

The Persecution Progresses

The great New England Baptist pastor and historian Isaac Backus recorded numerous instances of the harassment of Baptists in Connecticut and Massachusetts during the mid-1700s. When Baptists of Sturbridge, Massachusetts refused to pay to support the Congregationalist Church, authorities imprisoned some of them for tax evasion, while from other Baptists they seized property including livestock, tools, pots, and pans.

Madison's and Jefferson's Virginia saw the era's worst outbreak of persecution against Baptists. During the 1760s and 1770s, more than thirty Baptist pastors were jailed for illegal preaching in the colony. Many more Baptists suffered violence and intimidation. Itinerant Baptist preacher James Ireland was among those arrested, but even jail time would not shut him up. His friends and supporters came to listen to him preach through the cell grate. Some of these were African American Christians, whom white authorities dragged away to be whipped. Ireland's tormenters devised other means to keep him quiet — some burned noxious materials to drive away his audience. Some even urinated on him as he spoke to the crowd.

Our Costly, Fragile Freedom

The troubles in Virginia generated a backlash, as Enlightened elites and evangelical Christians alike called for a new era of religious freedom. That reaction birthed the most important statutes regarding religious liberty in American history. Backed by legions of Baptists and other evangelicals, Madison and Jefferson finally secured the adoption of the Bill for Establishing Religious Liberty in 1786, stopping formal support for the Church of England and promising an end to religious persecution. That law was the critical precedent for Madison's religion clauses in the First Amendment, which committed the new nation to "free exercise of religion" and prohibited Congress from establishing a national denomination.

America has historically set the global pace for religious liberty, though even in America that freedom was hard won. Long before secularism took hold in America, persecution was already part of the American story. Where religious freedoms failed the Baptists, they endured oppression for their theological commitments. Every generation of Christians should be prepared for it. “A servant is not greater than his master,” said Jesus. “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

We should also be thankful life in America today for Baptists is not as oppressive as earlier generations faced. But neither should we indulge the fantasy that religious liberty is permanently secure. If there was a time when free exercise of religion was viciously denied to many Americans, we would be foolish to think that this could never happen again.

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