

## RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Religious liberty is a distinctive doctrine of the Baptists. Our consistent witness to this principle has been our chiefest glory. To claim this is no mere proudful boast of our people, but is the unhesitating tribute of others.

Religious freedom means that, so far as human authority is concerned, every man has the inalienable right to choose for himself in religion. It means that government shall refrain from fining, punishing, imprisoning or taking the life of a citizen for any religious views he entertains or propagates. It means that a man's religious beliefs shall not put him to any disadvantage before the law. Religious freedom implies that when a government inflicts any penalty or imposes any disadvantage on a person because of his religion it violates sacred rights of conscience and impiously invades a realm that belongs to God alone.

Baptists have always been the champions of religious liberty. In the early history of our nation Baptists were pioneers in the struggle for separation of church and state. Before the Revolutionary War members of this religious group were alone in agitating for the right to worship God according to the dictates of one's conscience. Roger Williams, John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes (who was whipped in the streets of Boston for preaching the gospel), Isaac Backus, and President Manning of Rhode Island College spearheaded the movement in New England.

In Virginia the battle was most bitter. For a while Baptists of that state fought alone in the struggle for religious freedom. Later they were joined by others. Fortunately, such noble statesmen as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Patrick Henry participated in the movement. Jefferson wrote his famous "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," which finally became law January 19, 1785. It provided: "That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall likewise, on account of his religious opinions or beliefs; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

Jefferson so prided himself upon the authorship of this statute that he requested that it be engraved upon his tombstone: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." He thus helped to achieve not only religious freedom, but also intellectual and political freedom.

However, the people called Baptists made the most significant contribution in the struggle for religious freedom in America. Dr. W. W. Sweet, one of our ablest church historians, has conceded that "justice compels the admission that Jefferson's part in this accomplishment was not so great as that of James Madison, nor were the contributions of either or both as important as was that of the humble people called Baptists.

Baptists in Virginia were taxed to support the established church. They were thrown into filthy prisons for preaching. When they sought to baptize, horses were ridden into the water, and dogs were "baptized" in mockery. They were subjected to every cruelty and indignity imaginable. When ridicule failed, the enemies resorted to the law and enforced rigid and unjust laws.

When the Revolution came, Baptists responded with a zeal and self sacrifice unequalled by any. Six of the Brigade Chaplains were Baptists. With the winning of independence and the framing of the Constitution, Baptists played the biggest role. They generally did not approve of the Constitution because they felt it did not guarantee enough religious freedom. When it was up for ratification in September, 1787, there was a requirement

of nine states to ratify. Virginia was the State. Patrick Henry of Virginia was bitterly opposed to ratification while Madison favored it. In the County of Orange, Elder Leland was the candidate against adoption and Madison for. The County of Orange was strongly Baptist and against adoption, and no doubt would have elected Leland. Madison visited Leland and talked with him. When the day for the stump speech came Madison addressed the crowd for two hours, and then to the surprise of every one Elder Leland, the opposing candidate, got on the stump and declared himself for Madison, who was easily elected.

It is fairly certain that Madison promised Leland that the Constitution would be amended to guarantee Baptists and others the religious freedom they desired. The first thing Madison did on entering Congress in 1789 was to offer the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion; or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of people peaceably to assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances."

You can readily see why this First Amendment has been regarded as virtually a Baptist amendment.

Baptists believe that every man should have the right to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience or not to worship him; that he should have the right to propagate his religious beliefs; and that he should have the right to change his religious convictions and affiliation without fear of reprisal.

Religious liberty is the greatest contribution that America has made to civilization. And historic justice compels me to say that it was pre-eminently a Baptist contribution. The impartial historian, whether in the past, present or future, will ever agree with our American historian, Mr. Bancroft, who said: "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists." Such historians will concur with John Locke who said: "The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty." Baptists have ever been the unwavering champions of liberty, both religious and civil. Our fundamental principles have made our Baptist people the unyielding protagonists of religious liberty, not only for themselves but for everybody else as well. More than any other people, Baptists have contributed to the world the belief that the union of church and state is contrary to God's Word and to natural justice, and that it is injurious to both parties when there is such a union.