

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ALL

"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

God created man in His own image. In order for man to bear the image of God, he was endowed with a sovereign will. Free to choose for himself between right and wrong, man chose to go astray, and became separated from God. In consequence all mankind became enslaved in the bondage of sin, depraved in nature, and separated from the fellowship of God.

Man's disobedience presented God the opportunity to reveal the depth of His love for His creature. God became incarnated in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ, Who died on the cross for our sins. Thus the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of God's love for sinful humanity stood revealed in all of its infinite majesty. That love is too great to be comprehended, of course; but we may at least stand amazed in its presence.

The practical realization of our heritage of religious liberty has proved to be very costly. It cost God His only-begotten Son. And the end was not yet, even when Christ had risen in triumph over sin and all the powers of darkness in His resurrection from the dead. His followers, too, through the centuries, have been compelled to pay a terrible price for the liberty of worship which is ours to enjoy and its concomitant freedom of conscience.

It has been said that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." That statement has been verified from the days of the Apostles. All the original group, with one exception, are said by tradition to have suffered martyrdom for their faith. Paul, also, met a martyr's death for Christ's sake.

Christians of the first few centuries after Christ felt the full force of the powers of darkness as they faced an awakened Roman Empire which began to understand that Christianity was not a mere harmless branch of the Jewish religion, but a spiritual power that threatened the throne of the Caesars. Nero burned Christians as torches in the gardens of Rome. Some were thrown to the lions in the Colosseum to make a Roman holiday. Others were compelled to find refuge in the Catacombs, where they carried on their worship in secret, relying on the Sign of the Fish as their mark of identification.

Time permits only the barest mention of the army of heroes who have laid down their lives through the years as their contribution toward the realization of such freedom as we enjoy. One thinks of John Huss, a disciple of Wycliffe, who was burned at the stake in Bohemia because of his insistence that the Scriptures supplied the only rule of faith and practice in matters of religion; one thinks of the thirty-one thousand and more victims of the Spanish Inquisition; and one thinks of the persecution of the Puritans in England which led to their eventual flight to the shores of New England where they might find refuge from religious oppression.

Nor are the pages of American history free from the record of persecution for conscience's sake. The Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth and Salem proved to be quite as intolerant as the English clergy from whom they fled to America. Roger Williams, who dared to question whether the rite of infant baptism was in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament, was banished from his pastorate at Salem, and was compelled

to find refuge with friendly Indians through a dreadful New England winter. But in 1637 he obtained a grant of lands, covering what is now part of Rhode Island west of Narragansett Bay, from the Indians. In 1639 the first church in the new world was established at Providence in which absolute liberty of conscience was recognized. In 1644 a royal charter was obtained uniting various settlements about Narragansett Bay into a colony, which eventually grew into the present State of Rhode Island. The charter provided for absolute liberty of conscience, either to worship God or not to worship. The church which Williams established, and the neighboring church at Newport, were the first in history which accepted the New Testament as the sole rule of religious faith and practice, and where none was bound to the observance of any rites and ceremonies beyond those that were set forth in its pages.

Once the idea of religious freedom or liberty found lodgment in the hearts and minds of the common people, its progress was by leaps and bounds. All along the Atlantic seaboard, congregations of baptized believers in Christ, equal in rank and privilege, united by a common covenant to follow the will of the risen Lord as revealed in the New Testament, began to spring up. Still, they encountered opposition. The clergy of the established church, especially in Virginia, looked with vast disfavor upon these groups, which they considered to be interlopers. Some of the dissenting ministers were arrested on charges of preaching the gospel of Christ without the approval of constituted legal authority, and were thrown into jail.

On November 23, 1644 the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony decreed: "If any persons within this jurisdiction either openly condemn or oppose the baptizing of infants every such person shall be banished from the Colony." That same year, Thomas Painter was tied up and whipped because he refused to have his child baptized. Ten years later, 1654, Henry Dunster, first president of Harvard, was compelled to resign that office because he had accepted Baptist views and refused to keep silent on the subject of infant baptism. In 1651, John Clarke, the founder of the Newport Church, was fined for preaching in a home near Boston and his companion, Obadiah Holmes, who was to be Clarke's successor at Newport, was whipped on Boston Common.

Except in Massachusetts, Baptists in none of the American colonies suffered quite as much from persecution by the Established Church of the colony as in Virginia. Approximately a century elapsed after the founding of Jamestown before Baptists gained a foothold in Virginia. Then another three-fourths of a century elapsed before all restrictions were removed. As early as 1643, a law was enacted forbidding anyone to teach or preach publicly or privately who was not a member of the Church of England and did not conform to its form of worship. In 1661 a law was passed forbidding any minister to preach unless he had received ordination from a bishop in England. Every person was compelled to attend church every Sunday under the penalty of fifty pounds of tobacco. In 1662 a statute was enacted imposing a fine of two thousand pounds on all persons who refused their children to a lawful minister to have them baptized. In Chester, Urbana, Culpepper and other places in Virginia you can see the sites where Baptist preachers were imprisoned for preaching without a license. In Culpepper the building of the First

Baptist Church is located on the site of the old jail in which James Ireland, Elijah Craig and other Baptist worthies were imprisoned. In many communities in Virginia, Baptist preachers were denied permission to preach. If and when they preached, anyway, they were fined, beaten and imprisoned. Through it all, they continued to proclaim without fear of what men might be able to do to them the doctrine that all men should be free to accept the gospel for themselves, that God called upon men everywhere as individuals to repent, and that church and state should be separate.

In Virginia the battle for religious liberty was most bitter. For a while Baptists fought alone 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 for religious liberty. Jefferson wrote his famous "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," which finally became law on 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 thought so much of this achievement that he asked that it be engraved on his tombstone where it may be seen today, near his home at Monticello; "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia." He had been Governor of Virginia, Ambassador to France, and President of the United States for two terms, but he did not request these honors to be recorded. Thus Jefferson helped to achieve not only religious liberty, but also intellectual and political freedom.

The people called Baptists made the most significant contribution in the struggle for religious freedom in America. Dr. W. W. Sweet, one of the 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 the gospel of Christ. When they sought to baptize, horses were ridden into the water, and dogs were "baptized" in mockery. The Baptists 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 thought that 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 key one. Patrick Henry of Virginia was bitterly opposed to ratification, while Madison favored it. In the County of Orange, a Baptist preacher,

John Leland, was the candidate against adoption and Madison was the candidate for adoption. 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 everyone, the opposing candidate, Leland, got on the stump and declared himself for Madison, who was then 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, upon entering Congress in 1789 was to offer the First Amendment to the Constitution, namely, "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.

Thomas Jefferson himself declared to a local Baptist minister whose church he was in the habit of attending that "he considered the polity of the Baptist church the only form of pure democracy that then existed in the world, and that it would be the best plan of government for the American Colonies." James Madison left on record the statement that Jefferson said to him that he gathered his ideas for the formulation of the American form of government from the Baptists.

Religious liberty is a distinctive doctrine of the Baptists. Religious liberty means that, so far as human authority is concerned, every man has the inalienable right to choose for himself in religious matters. 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. Our consistent witness to this principle has been our greatest glory.

Religious liberty is the greatest contribution that America has made to civilization. And historic accuracy and justice compels me to say that it was preeminently 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 is injurious to both parties when there is such a union.

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.

We believe that religious liberty is a God-given, ineradicable right, to be recognized and conserved by all human agencies that exercise authority.

We believe that religious liberty is the enjoyment by the individual of the inalienable right to choose his religious affiliations, without coercion from any source whatever.

We believe that religious liberty is the ultimate ground of democratic institutions, and that whenever this liberty is questioned, restricted or denied by any group, political, religious or philosophical, the friends of religious liberty should become greatly concerned.

We believe in the complete separation of Church and State, as set forth in the First Amendment of the Federal Constitution, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

We believe that the recognition and the preservation of religious liberty by civil governments involve the acknowledgment through their constitution, written or unwritten, that religion, or the duty which every man owes to his Creator, does not come within the cognizance of the government.

Let it never be said of Baptists that they are guilty of withholding from others what they desire for themselves, namely, the right to follow the dictates of their own hearts. We would that all the peoples of the world might have and enjoy true religious liberty.