

BAPTIST PIONEERS IN LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE.*

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Brethren honored and beloved, of many lands and many tongues:—

Coming as I do from a land in which liberty of conscience was embodied by Baptist influence in a civil constitution nearly three hundred years ago, and where for more than a century it has stood embodied through Baptist influence in the federal constitution, and has with very slight exceptions universally prevailed in its most absolute sense: where there are at the present time more than 5,000,000 who have made a personal profession of our faith and have entered into the fellowship of our churches through believers' baptism; from a State in which over 400,000 of the 4,000,000 inhabitants are members of Baptist churches and about a third of the population are Baptist adherents, in which the university of the Baptists, founded when the State was an independent republic, antedates all other higher institutions of learning and numbers among its alumni many of the most eminent citizens in all the walks of life, I feel that I am somewhat at a disadvantage in standing before a gathering of brethren who are still in the midst of the struggle for liberty of conscience and some of whom bear in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus, having endured imprisonment and stripes and the spoiling of their goods as well as poverty, social ostracism, and agony of soul in their efforts to propagate a pure gospel and to secure for all the soul liberty that is so dear to us all. To many of you soul oppression is a horrible reality. To me it is a matter of history and of current report, and only by sympathetic imagination can I appreciate your sufferings or the urgency of the need of concerted effort by the Baptists of the world for liberty of conscience wherever it is still

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wanting. And yet I do profoundly sympathize with all men everywhere, whatever may be their creed, who are denied the priceless boon of being free to worship God as their consciences may dictate and who are put at any disadvantage as men and citizens because of their religious convictions. While we in America are already in full fruition of the liberty for which you are still longing and striving, I am not quite sure that we ought not to envy you the privilege of contending courageously and suffering heroically in a glorious cause in which triumphs are being continually won and in which complete victory seems assured. There are doubtless joys in spending and being spent in a noble cause which those for whom everything has been achieved in a somewhat remote past can never possess; and there are heights of religious experience which those only can attain whose privilege it is to suffer with Christ and for Christ and humanity. As a representative of the great Baptist brotherhood of North America, nay of all America (for I spent twenty of my best years with the Baptists of Canada, and the scattered Baptists of Mexico, Central America and South America, and those of Cuba and Porto Rico are fostered by those of the United States), I bring cordial greeting to the brethren of Europe: English, Welsh, Irish, Scotch, French, Italian, Dutch, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Swiss, Roumanian, Swede, Dane, Norwegian, Lithuanian, Lettish, Bohemian, Polish, Bulgarian, Russian, Esthionian, Finnish,—we greet you all in the name of the Lord Jesus, we wish for you rapid increase in numbers and efficiency in the Lord's service and in every Christian gift and grace; we crave for you that complete liberty of conscience that we have so long enjoyed. The great Baptist brotherhood of America are deeply interested in your work for Christ and humanity and are deeply sympathetic with your struggles and sufferings; and they are ready, I believe, to co-operate with you in all practicable ways for the extension of the Master's kingdom.

Almost every region represented by members of this Congress had in the Middle Ages its struggling groups of evangelical dissenters, who had much in common with us who are here today. Being in a hopeless minority and looking upon

civil government as irretrievably committed to the maintenance of the established form of religion and the persecution of dissent, they denied the possibility of the existence of a real Christian state (if all were true Christians—a thing inconceivable—there would be no need of civil government), denied the possibility of a Christian man exercising magistracy or sitting in judgment, declared oaths, warfare, and capital punishment absolutely opposed to the spirit of Christianity, and supposed that the only thing possible for true Christians was to live their Christian lives and do their Christian work, and to be ready to offer passive resistance even unto death to any efforts to force them to violate their conscience. Naturally they laid chief stress on the direct teaching and example of the Lord Jesus, whose kingdom he declares to be not of this world, who forbade oaths, refused to exercise judgment in secular matters, prohibited retaliation even to the extent of advising invitation to the repetition of the injury suffered, and who declared himself to be meek and lowly; and they found little use for the Old Testament which had been preempted by their mighty opponents as an arsenal for the justification of union of church and state, theocratic government, the persecution and destruction of dissenting forms of religion, warfare, retaliation, and vengeance. They believed with all their hearts in absolute liberty of conscience for themselves and for all; but the opposing forces were so overwhelming and the possibility of winning the great ungodly masses with the firmly entrenched privileged classes, seemed so remote that they were utterly hopeless of securing their rights by the use of human means, and only when aroused to fanaticism did they suppose themselves prompted by God's Spirit to smite the ungodly with the sword of Gideon, and to become thus God's instruments for the setting up of the kingdom of God on earth.

The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were similarly disqualified for carrying into effect their exalted ideas of the spirituality of religion and the separation of church and state. As a persecuted minority they were not in a position effectually to influence the civil governments of the time and their disposition to hold themselves aloof from all the functions of civil

government caused them to be regarded as dangerous enemies of the state no less than of the state-church. The nearest approach to our own position is to be found in Balthasar Hubmaier, born near Augsburg about 1480, educated at Freiburg and Ingolstadt under the patronage of John Eck, doctor of theology and university preacher at Ingolstadt, cathedral preacher in Regensburg, leader of the reformation in Waldshut (1521-26), where he adopted antipedobaptist views. In 1524 during a temporary banishment from Waldshut he wrote in Schaffhausen his tract on "Heretics and Their Burners." He declares that they are heretics who perversely misinterpret the Scriptures. The inquisitors are the greatest of all heretics in that they, against Christ's teaching and example, condemn heretics to the fire, and before the time of the harvest uproot the wheat together with the tares. For Christ did not come in order that he might butcher, murder, burn, but that those who live may live more abundantly. One should pray and hope for repentance as long as the man lives in this world. But a Turk or a heretic is not convinced with sword or fire, but with patience and crying; and so with patience we await the judgment of God. If we should proceed otherwise God would treat our sword as stubble and the burning fire as an object of derision. For each Christian has indeed a sword against the godless, which is the word of God, but not a sword against evil-doers. The worldly power fittingly and rightly puts to death evil-doers who inflict bodily injury upon the defenseless, but the enemy of God may injure no one unless one wills not otherwise and forsakes the Gospel, as Christ has clearly shown, saying: "Fear not them that kill the body." He declares that the godless who can injure neither body nor soul "are rather useful since God in his wisdom can draw good out of evil, for faith which flows forth from gospel sources lives only in conflicts and is so much the greater the more violent the conflicts are. . . . If now to destroy a heretic is so great a crime, how much greater then will it be to burn to ashes without convicting them or trying them with the truth the true preachers of the word of God. . . . Now it is manifest to everyone, even to the blind, that the law for the burning of

heretics is an invention of the devil." This learned, godly man, when, stripped of his possessions and wasted by sickness, he escaped from the Austrians who had besieged Waldhut on his account and took refuge at Zurich, was thrown, at the instance of Zwingli, into a foul and crowded prison and tortured into a temporary withdrawal of his statements against infant baptism. Making his way to Nikolsburg in Moravia he won to his views the lords of Lichtenstein who had vast landed possessions and who supplied him with a printing press for the publication of his books, and so fostered his work that within a few weeks several thousand antipedobaptists had been gathered into a great church, two bishops and several evangelical preachers converted to his views, and several other noblemen had begun to take a friendly interest in his cause. He seems at one time to have hoped that Moravia would come to be a refuge for the persecuted and a basis for the widespread proclamation of liberty of conscience and a pure gospel. But the Austrian authorities seized him in 1528 and he fell a victim to the burners of heretics against whom he had inveighed. Except in his failure to realize the importance of immersion as believers' baptism, Hubmaier comes very near measuring up to the modern Baptist standard.

My second representative pioneer of liberty of conscience and hero of the faith shall be John Smyth, a very common name but a very uncommon man. A graduate of the University of Cambridge and until 1606 a minister of the established church, he organized about the beginning of that year a Separatist congregation at Gainsborough, which, early in 1607, removed to Amsterdam in order to enjoy a measure of liberty of conscience denied them at home. He soon came into controversy with the brethren of the separation who had preceded him in settling in Amsterdam on a number of matters that seem to us of minor importance, objecting to the use of translated Scriptures in time of prophesying and of psalm singing, to the "triformed presbytery (pastors, teachers, and rulers), and insisting upon a "separation from them that are without" in "contributing to the church treasury." He had reached a position of remarkable scrupulosity which demanded clear Scripture authority for

every religious act, and he had made the impression upon his contemporaries that he was restless and unstable. About the beginning of 1609 it was borne in upon him with irresistible force that, if the Church of England was apostate (as all the Separatist brethren professed to believe) its ordinances were invalid. Moreover he had discovered that the baptism of infants is wholly without Scriptural precept or example, and that it is a distinct perversion of an ordinance of Christ. With him and his congregation conviction meant prompt action. They repudiated their baptism and Smyth his ordination, dissolved their church as having been constituted of unbaptized persons and resolved to introduce believers' baptism anew and to reorganize a church of baptized believers. Smyth seems to have taken the initiative and to have administered upon himself what he regarded as baptism and then to have administered the rite to his followers. Unfortunately they do not seem to have reached the conviction that immersion alone is baptism. Smyth soon repented of his act in introducing believers' baptism independently, having become convinced that he should have sought it at the hands of the Mennonites with whom he was in almost entire agreement. Several of his brethren defended the new introduction of baptism, and led by Helwys and Murton, excommunicated Smyth and those that with him sought the fellowship of the Mennonites. Helwys, Murton, and those that held with them returned to England in 1611, having become convinced that duty required them to brave persecution at home in efforts to preach a pure gospel and establish true churches. Smyth and his party applied for membership in a Mennonite church, which was not readily accorded, and Smyth died in 1612 before final action had been taken.

In an elaborate confession of faith drawn up by Smyth in 1611 we have the following noble declaration on liberty of conscience: "That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion or doctrine, but to leave Christian religion free to every man's conscience. . . . That if the magistrate will follow Christ and be his

disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ: he must love his enemies and not kill them, he must pray for them and not punish them, he must feed them and give them drink, not imprison them, banish them, dismember them, and spoil their goods." Going to law before civil magistrates, marriage with unbelievers, and the taking of oaths are declared to be forbidden to Christians.

Smyth's position was less in accord with the modern Baptist and more in accord with the mediæval than was Hubmaier's. The Helwys-Murton party that returned to England and planted congregations out of which grew the General Baptists gradually worked itself free from the mediæval quietistic conception that made effective efforts for liberty of conscience impracticable and published a series of tracts on liberty of conscience that approximated our present conceptions of religious liberty and equality.

From the first of these "Religion's Peace: or A Plea for Liberty of Conscience," presented to King James in 1614, and attributed in the edition of 1646 to Leonard Busher, citizen of London, I present some extracts. Unfortunately little or nothing is known of Busher save that he was in 1614 a citizen of London and that he addressed this apology to the king and had it printed. The preface is an appeal to the king against the persecuting bishops who are evidently regarded as chiefly to blame for the violation of consciences. Referring to the fact that Jews and Christians are tolerated by the Mohammedan Turkish emperor, and that all those of the three religions live peaceably together, he remarks: "How much more ought Christians to tolerate Christians, whereas the Turks do tolerate them. Shall we be less merciful than the Turks? Or shall we learn the Turks to persecute Christians? It is not only unmerciful but unnatural and abominable; yea, monstrous for one Christian to vex and destroy another for difference and questions of religion. And though tares have overgrown the wheat, yet Christ will have them let alone till harvest, lest while you go about to pluck up the tares, you pluck up the wheat with them; as your predecessors have done, who thought they had gathered up the tares and burned them, but you see now that

they have burned the wheat instead of the tares. . . . there is such a quantity of wheat plucked up, and such a multitude of tares left behind, that the wheat that remains cannot yet appear in any right visible congregation."

The body of the Plea consists of certain reasons against persecution. These are numbered up to "seventeenth" and are really very comprehensive. The reasons in brief are: That Christ did not command persecution for difference of judgment in matters of religion; That he did command persuasion by his word and Spirit; That where persecution prevails the true ambassadors of the Lord Jesus are burned, banished and hanged instead of being permitted to deliver their Lord's message; That where forcing of conscience prevails it cannot be said that we have the liberty of the gospel in our land; That Christ came into the world to save sinners, not to destroy them; That the forcing of consciences is an offense to the Jews and others who are without and prevents their ever being converted; That it makes it necessary for native and foreign believers of the apostolic faith to depart the land and thus deprives the country of its faithfullest subjects and friends to its great impoverishing and weakening; That persecution causes much dissembling on the part of the less courageous and prevents the king and state from having trustworthy officials; That the effort to secure uniformity in religion makes a Babel of the church, for religious convictions are not changed by forced conformity; That true Christians are always a minority and false Christians a majority, hence the former are sure to be the victims of forced uniformity; That persecution of those that preach and teach Christ hinders the liberty of the gospel and encourages Jews, Turks, and pagans to persecute Christian teachers and preachers; but malefactors, willing liars, false accusers, false allegers and quoters of the Scriptures or other men's writings may rightly and justly be punished; That to force the conscience is a greater sin than to force the bodies of women and maids against their will and in doing so bishops play the antichrist; That the burning, banishing, hanging, and imprisoning of men and women by Protestants justifies papal persecutions as these do Turkish and pagan; That persecutions cause Christian men and women

to make shipwreck of faith and good conscience and send quick to the devil real heretics; That bishops and ministers who persuade the king and parliament to burn, banish, hang, and imprison, for difference of religion, are bloodsuckers and man-slayers. "Therefore persecution for difference in religion is a monstrous and cruel beast, that destroyeth both prince and people, hindereth the gospel of Christ, and scattereth his disciples that witness and profess his name. But permission of conscience in difference of religion, saveth both prince and people; for it is a meek and gentle lamb, which not only furthereth and advanceth the gospel, but also fostereth and cherisheth those that profess it." Again, what could more adequately express the Baptist position than the following: "And it is well worthy of consideration, that as in the time of the Old Testament, the Lord would not have his offerings by constraint, but of every man who gave his offering freely; so now in the time of the gospel, he will not have people constrained, but as many as receive the word gladly, they are to be added to the church by baptism. And therefore Christ commanded his disciples to teach all nations and baptize them; that is to preach the word of salvation to every creature of all sorts of nations, that are worthy and willing to receive it. And such as shall willingly and gladly receive it, he hath commanded to be baptized in the water; that is, dipped for dead in the water."

This noble and important plea for liberty of conscience was followed in 1615 by "Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned" . . . to which is added, *An Humble Supplication to the King's Majesty*; wherein . . . is proved, 1. That the learned usually err and resist the truth. 2. That persecution is against the law of Jesus Christ. 3. Against the profession and practice of famous princes. 4. Condemned by ancient and later writers. 5. Freedom in religion not hurtful to any commonwealth, and it depriveth not kings of any power given them by God." This also is a noteworthy work, yet it adds little to Busher's argument. But it contains a very interesting justification of the separation and of the insistence of the author's party on believers' baptism. The Supplication was first printed in 1620 and like Busher's work was addressed to King James.

Both were almost certainly written by John Murton, who returned to England with Thomas Helwys in 1611 or 1612 and who shares with Helwys the honor of being a founder of the General Baptist cause in England. Resolved, as they were, to die for their faith rather than flee from persecution, they did not hesitate to challenge the crown itself to a careful consideration of the evils of persecution and the advantages that would come to king and people from allowing the pure gospel to be preached and from giving such freedom as would make possible even the dissemination of error. The most striking feature of the Supplication is the author's attempt to weaken the argument constantly adduced by the advocates of persecution from Augustine onward from the precept and example of the Old Testament without impugning the authority of the sacred oracles. Another striking feature of this apology is the refutation of the argument adduced in favor of persecution from Peter's pronouncing the death sentence upon Ananias and Sapphira, Paul's denunciation of Elymas the sorcerer, and Paul's direction to deliver the Corinthian offender to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. It is claimed that the judgment in each case came from direct divine inspiration and the execution was divine and not human.

It seems highly probable that Roger Williams became acquainted with these remarkable pleas for liberty of conscience some time before he left England (beginning of 1631), where he refused gains and preferments in universities, city, country, and court to keep his soul undefiled and not to act with a doubting conscience, to settle in New England, where he hoped for toleration at the hands of those who like himself had left the home land in order to enjoy freedom of conscience. Moreover he had strong hopes of being able to aid in shaping the new community in such a way as to make it a place of refuge for oppressed consciences. He had already reached the conviction that separation from the apostate church of England must be absolute, and when, on his arrival in Boston, he was invited to serve the Puritan congregation there, he "durst not officiate to it," because it was an "unseparated church." He was prompted to declare that the magistrate may not punish

any "breach of the first table," as idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, false worship, blasphemy, etc., and he had created the impression that his head was full of crotchets and that he was pretty sure to be a disturbing element wherever his influence should be brought to bear. The Boston men prevented his settlement at Salem, but were unable to persuade the Plymouth community of his unfitness for spiritual leadership. Having labored for two years in the Plymouth settlement with the approval of the governor and of the community, differences arose because of his disposition to vent and impose upon others "divers of his own singular opinions." He was reluctantly dismissed to Salem, where a large number of brethren still earnestly desired his services and where in defiance of the Boston authorities he was elected pastor. Here he came into the sharpest conflict with the Massachusetts authorities. Almost from the beginning he had found fault with the charter of the company, which recognized the authority of King James as a Christian sovereign to dispose of the lands of the American natives and he had insisted upon the return of the charter with explanations that involved disloyalty to the king. He had objected to the citizens' oath of allegiance to the Massachusetts government, on the ground that oaths ought not to be administered to the unregenerate, being an act of religious worship, and that only Christ has a right to have his office established by oath. In his objection to the citizens' oath he had found so much support that the measure had to be abandoned. The fact is that he had reached convictions regarding the spirituality of religion and the evil of any sort of secular interference in matters of religion so strong that he was constantly coming in conflict with the theocratic government of Massachusetts, and he was so reckless and uncompromising in applying his principles that he soon became impossible as a citizen and was banished. In the midst of winter, having just recovered from severe illness, he betook himself to his Indian friends, whose language he had learned with a view to doing them good; and in the early spring of 1636 he formed at Providence, whither he had been followed by a few faithful friends, a settlement in which liberty of conscience was made funda-

mental. His efforts in America and in England to secure charters and privileges for what came to be known as Rhode Island, where for America and the world it was to be demonstrated that religious liberty does not mean anarchy, but is highly promotive of civil order, of Christian charity and brotherhood, of wholesome selfrespect and respect for the honest convictions of others, and of a hearty co-operation in every good cause, were so important as to entitle him to be regarded as one of the greatest of earth's benefactors.

As a result of correspondence with John Cotton, chief minister of Boston, who had had much to do with Williams's banishment and who in a long letter had sought to justify Massachusetts intolerance, Williams published in London (1643) an elaborate answer to Cotton's letter. The next year he published in London "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience," which was by far the ablest and most complete defense of the principle of absolute liberty of conscience that had appeared in any age or any language. This was followed a few years later by his answer to Cotton's rejoinder entitled "The Bloody Tenet yet more Bloody, by Mr. Cotton's endeavor to wash it white in the blood of the Lamb; of whose precious blood spilt in the blood of his servants and of the blood of millions spilt in former and later wars for conscience sake, that most bloody tenet of persecution for cause of conscience upon a second trial is found more apparently and more notoriously guilty," London, 1652.

A few quotations must suffice to show the quality of Williams's polemics against persecution. Almost every imaginable phase of the subject is handled with a master's skill. Apt historical illustration, Scripture quotation, sarcasm, irony, and every device of expert polemicist are at his command. The following paragraph sets forth his matured conception of the relation of civil government to religion: The civil magistrate either respecteth that religion and worship which his conscience is persuaded is true, and upon which he ventures his soul, or else that and those which he is persuaded are false. Concerning the first, if that which the magistrate believeth to be true be true, I say he owes a threefold duty unto it: First, approba-

tion and countenance, a reverent esteem and honorable testimony, . . . with a tender respect for truth and the professors of it. Secondly, personal submission of his own soul to the power of the Lord Jesus in the spiritual government and kingdom. Thirdly, protection of such true professors of Christ, whether apart or met together, as also of their estates, from violence and injury. . . . If it be a false religion (unto which the civil magistrate doth not dare adjoin, yet) he owes: First, permission (for approbation he owes not to that which is evil) . . . Secondly, he owes protection to the persons of his subjects (though of a false worship), that no injury be offered either to the persons or goods of any." His horror of persecution is well expressed in the following: He speaks of "that body-killing, soul-killing, and state-killing doctrine of not permitting but persecuting all other consciences and ways of worship but his own in the civil state, and so, consequently, in the whole world, if the power and empire were in his (Cotton's) hand." Again: "Soul yokes, soul oppression, plunderings, ravishings, etc., are of a crimson and deepest dye, and I believe the chief of England's sins, unstopping the vials of England's present sorrows." "Only two things I shall humbly suggest . . . as the greatest causes, fountains, and tap-roots of all the indignation of the Most High against the state and country: First, that the whole nations and generations of men have been forced (though unregenerate and unrepentant) to pretend and assume the name of Christ Jesus, which only belongs, according to the institution of the Lord Jesus, to truly regenerate and repenting souls. Secondly, that all others dissenting from them, whether Jews or Gentiles, their countrymen especially (for strangers have a liberty), have not been permitted civil cohabitation in this world with them, but have been distressed and persecuted by them." Here is a fine bit of biting sarcasm: "Are the armories of the true King Solomon, Christ Jesus, disarmed? Are there no spiritual swords girt upon the thighs of these valiant ones that guard his heavenly bed, except the sword of steel to be run for from the cutler's shop? Is the religion of Jesus Christ so poor and so weak and so feeble grown, so cowardly and base, that neither the soldiers nor commanders in

Christ's army have any courage or skill to withstand sufficiently in all points a false teacher, a false prophet, a spiritual cheator or deceiver?" He thus expresses succinctly his view: "This tenet of the magistrate's keeping the church from apostatising, by practicing civil force upon the consciences of men, is so far from preserving religion pure that it is a mighty bulwark or barricade to keep out all true religion; yea, and all godly magistrates for [from] ever coming into the world."

As a founder of a state no less than an advocate of civil and religious liberty, Roger Williams deserves the everlasting gratitude of all mankind, and as Baptists we glory in the fact that the first state ever founded on the principle of absolute liberty of conscience was founded by the man who about two years later (1638 or 1639) founded the first Baptist church in America, and though he became dissatisfied with the authority for introducing baptism anew after the mediæval apostasy and assumed the position of a seeker, he continued to the end of his long life an advocate of fundamental Baptist principles. By his personal influence exerted alike in England and America, no less than by his widely circulated writings, he convinced multitudes of the evils of intolerance and the practicability of religious liberty.

A noble coadjutor of Williams was John Clarke, one of the founders of Rhode Island, the founder of the Newport Baptist church, a life-long and consistent Baptist. As preacher, physician, and statesman, he exerted a mighty influence in America and in England in favor of civil and religious liberty and was instrumental in procuring from the government of Charles II. a charter (1663) which provides that "no person . . . shall be anywise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any difference of opinion in matters of religion which do not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony; but that all and every person and persons may, from time to time, and at all times hereafter, freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences in matters of religious concernments." In his "Ill News from New England; or, A Narrative of New England's Persecution," published in London in 1652, Clarke gave an account

of cruel persecution suffered by himself and some Baptist brethren on a visit to Massachusetts, and advanced with clearness and vigor the usual arguments in favor of liberty of conscience.

Williams and Clarke both spent much of their time in England during the Cromwellian reign and exerted through their writings and their personal intercourse with leading statesmen and divines a mighty influence in favor of liberty of conscience as against toleration, which most of the Congregationalists and Puritans thought sufficient. Milton, a Baptist in principle, if not a member of a Baptist church, wrote strongly in favor of freedom of the press and the toleration of all forms of Christianity except Roman Catholicism. Like most Englishmen of his time he regarded Romanism as so fundamentally opposed to the principle of religious liberty and so unscrupulous in the use of means for the overthrow of evangelical religion, that no state could afford to give free scope to its propaganda. In England from the Revolution onward, while never losing sight of the principle of absolute liberty of conscience, Baptists in co-operation with other dissenters directed their efforts chiefly toward the abolition of such obnoxious measures as the Corporation and Test Acts.

In New England the Act of Toleration (1689) was ignored and Baptists were for more than a century later obliged to offer passive resistance to the efforts to force them to pay for the support of the churches of the standing order. The Warren Association was formed in 1767, partly as a means of securing co-operative effort to secure religious equality for Baptists and for all. From 1772 onward Isaac Backus, the Baptist historian, became recognized champion of the New England Baptists in their struggle for liberty of conscience and he published much in this interest. He had the co-operation of James Manning, Hezekiah Smith, John Gano, and other leaders; but then came the War of Independence in which the New England standing order and New England political leaders were in complete agreement in making independence of Britain the great issue, and in regarding the agitation of Baptists for redress of grievances as inopportune, if not unpatriotic. Absolute religious equality was not secured in Connecticut until 1820, nor in Massachusetts until 1833.

In Virginia also Baptists were still suffering sorely because of the special privileges of the established Episcopal Church and the very restricted toleration accorded to dissenters. The Separate or New Light Baptists, an outgrowth of the Great Awakening, were too zealous to limit their activity to licensed places and persons as the law required, and in the face of bitter persecution, involving heavy fines, imprisonment, distraint of goods, etc., their numbers had multiplied. The Baptists were in the forefront of the War of Independence and the clergy of the Established Church and their loyal members were strongly British in their sympathies. Perceiving their advantage, Baptists began in 1775 to agitate their grievances and to petition the General Assembly for the abolition of the church establishment and the protection of all religious societies in the peaceable enjoyment of their own religious principles and modes of worship. Jeremiah Walker, John Williams, and George Roberts were appointed by the General Association to carry its wishes into effect. In 1776 Baptists, in co-operation with others, secured the suspension of the payment of the salaries of the clergy. A little later they were able to defeat a general assessment measure in accordance with which a tax for the support of religion was to be collected from all, but distributed among the denominations, each man's taxes going to the support of his own church. In 1779 Baptists secured from the legislature for themselves and other dissenters the recognition of their right to celebrate marriages. A General Committee was constituted by the General Association to look after all the political grievances of the denomination. Reuben Ford and John Leland with rare statesmanship and courage conducted the Baptist campaign for the complete disestablishment of the Episcopal Church, and they had the co-operation at last of the free-thinking statesmen Jefferson and Madison. They secured in 1786 the repeal of the incorporation act that constituted the title of the Episcopal to consider itself the state church. In 1799, in co-operation with others, they completed the conflict for religious equality by securing the confiscation of the landed endowments of the Episcopal Church. The representatives of the Baptists kept close watch over the drafting and

adoption of the United States Constitution. When the first copies appeared in Virginia in 1788 John Leland addressed to George Washington a noble letter in which he expressed the fear of his brethren "that the liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently guarded," and pointed out what seemed to Baptists an imperative need. Washington replied with the utmost courtesy and appreciation and promised to use his influence for further safeguarding religious liberty, should the Constitution be found to be defective. Article I. of the amended Constitution reads: "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 the redress of grievances." The wisdom of this provision has been amply demonstrated by one hundred and twenty years of history. I doubt if a single individual among our 80,000,000 could be found who would wish to have any restriction placed upon the profession or propagation of religion. Even Roman Catholics in America glory in our liberty of conscience, whether it be with perfect sincerity and without mental reservation it is not for me to say.

It is not within my province to show how the example of the United States of America has helped forward the cause of religious liberty throughout the world. But I greatly rejoice over all that has been achieved in Europe, Asia, and Africa for liberty of conscience, and I hope to live long enough to see the last vestige of religious oppression swept away from every civilized land in the world.