

Tomorrow, September 17, 2012, will mark the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution – the oldest and most successfully written national constitution in force. During this time our minds revert back to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and to men like George Washington, James Madison, George Mason, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin. Many living today know little about this most remarkable document that spells out how the government of the world's most powerful nation is supposed to work. Worse still is the ignorance of most modern Baptists as to the role that their forefathers played in the Constitution and the First Amendment.

In order to better enlighten our present generation, we offer the following information taken from Armitage's History of the Baptists, pages 804-809. While this contest was in progress, however, another was waged in regard to the Constitution of the United States, and chiefly through the same agencies. This great civil document was adopted by the Constitutional Convention and submitted for ratification to the several States, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1787, nine States, being needed to ratify the same. Immediately it met with strong opposition from all the States, some, because the only provision on the subject of religion was found in article VI, thus: *"No religious Test shall ever be required, as a Qualification to any office or public Trust under the United States."* Great dissatisfaction prevailed with many of its provisions, and there was serious danger of its rejection for a time. Dissatisfaction with this provision lodged with the Baptists in all the States; but Virginia became their great battlefield.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, 1788, the representatives of all their Churches met, and the minutes of the meeting say: The first Religious Political subject that was taken up was: *"Whether the new Federal Constitution, which had now lately made its appearance in public, made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty; on which it was agreed unanimously that it did not."*

Many of the political and social leaders of Virginia were opposed to the Constitution, and amongst them Patrick Henry, who resisted its adoption in the Virginia Convention, because, it gave no guarantee of religious liberty. Here a pleasant incident may be noticed, in which John Leland figures very honourably. James Madison led the Virginia party which favoured ratification, but was in Philadelphia during the election of delegates to the State Convention, engaged with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton in preparing that memorable series of political papers, written in defense of the Constitution, and known as the "Federalist." When he returned to Virginia, he found that Leland had been nominated in Orange, his own county, against himself, as the delegate in favour of that measure. The opposing candidates soon met at a political meeting, in the presence of most of the voters. Madison mounted a hogshead of tobacco, and for two hours addressed his fellow citizens in a calm, candid and statesmanlike manner, presenting his side of the case. Though he was not eloquent, the people listened with profound respect, and said Leland: *"When he left the hogshead, and my friends called for me, I took it, and went in for Mr. Madison."*

"A noble Christian patriot," remarks Virginia Governor Frederick Briggs; *"that single act, with the motives which prompted it and the consequences which followed it, entitled him to the respect of mankind."* Leland's advocacy of Madison's claim to a seat in the Convention led directly to the adoption of the Constitution by Virginia. Hence Virginia, the ninth was absolutely necessary, and at the moment every thing appeared to turn on the action of Virginia.

New Hampshire, however, approved the instrument five days before Virginia, and New York followed one month later. Up to this time, none of the other States had proposed the full expression of religious liberty in the organic law of the United States; this honour was reserved for Virginia. Madison, at first insisted on its ratification precisely as it was, but was obliged to save it by shifting his position. Patrick Henry submitted a number of amendments, demanding that they be engrafted into the instrument before it received Virginia's sanction. Amongst these was a Bill of Rights, of which the following was the 20<sup>th</sup> section, namely:

*"The religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men have an equal, natural, and inalienable right to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience, and that no particular sect or society ought to be favoured or established by law in preference to others."*

At last Mr. Madison conceded the need of amendments. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 1788, Virginia ratified the great charter, by the narrow majority of eight votes out of 168. From that moment a most exciting controversy arose in other States on the subject of so altering the Federal Constitution as to make it the fundamental law, providing for religious liberty. The Baptists of the whole country aroused themselves and opened a simultaneous movement in that direction. Those of Virginia sent Leland to their brethren in New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and other States to solicit their co-operation, which was granted with but few exceptions.

Patrick Henry became the leader in the next State Legislature and induced that body to memorialize Congress to amend the new Constitution. But fearing that after all Mr. Madison might not heartily sustain that measure, he defeated Madison's election to the United States Senate, and secured the return of Richard Henry Lee and William Grayson, who were pledged to sustain the amendments.

Madison was then elected to the lower house of Congress from his own district, under the pledge that he would sustain them there. At this stage the Baptists consulted with Madison as to what they had better do. He recommended them to address General Washington, the new President of the Republic, on the question. They drew up a formal presentation of the case, drafted, it is said, by Elder Leland, and sent it to General Washington by a special delegation.

This is a synopsis; of what was entitled an *"Address of the Committee of the United Baptist Churches of Virginia ... to the President of the United States of America."* After a full review of the terrible conflicts and sacrifices of the Revolution, they say:

*"The want of efficiency in the confederation, the redundancy of laws, and their partial administration in the States, called aloud for a new arrangement of our systems. The wisdom of the States for that purpose was collected in a grand convention, over which you, sir, had the honour to preside. A national government in all its parts was recommended as the only preservation of the Union, which plan of government is now in actual operation. When the Constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, feared that the liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently secured. Perhaps our jealousies were heightened by the usage we received in Virginia, under the regal government, when mobs, fines, bonds and prisons were our frequent repast. Convinced, on the one hand, that without an effective national government the States would fall into disunion and all the subsequent evils; and, on the other hand, fearing that we should be accessory to some religious oppression, should any one society in the Union predominate over the rest; yet, amidst all these inquietudes of mind, our consolation arose from this consideration – the plan must be good, for it has the signature of a tried, trusty friend, and if religious liberty is rather insecure in the Constitution, the Administration will certainly prevent all oppression, for a WASHINGTON will preside. . . . Should the horrid evils that have been so pestiferous in Asia and Europe, faction, ambition, war, perfidy, fraud and persecution for conscience' sake, ever approach the borders of our happy union, may the name and administration of our beloved President, like the radiant source of day, scatter all those dark clouds from the American hemisphere."*

After gracefully expressing their gratitude for his *"great and unparalleled services,"* and confiding him in prayer to the *"Divine Being,"* the paper is signed: *"By order of the Committee, Samuel Harris, Chairman, and Reuben Ford, Clerk."*

General Washington's reply was addressed *"To the General Committee, representing the United Baptist Churches in Virginia."* After thanking them for their congratulations, and expressing his own gratitude to *"Divine Providence"* for blessing his public services, he proceeds to write thus:

*"If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution framed by the Convention where I had the honor to preside might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general*

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*government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution. For, you doubtless remember, I have often expressed my sentiments that any man, conducting himself as a good citizen and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience. While I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members have been, throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously the firm friends to civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious revolution, I cannot hesitate to believe that they will be the faithful supporters of a free yet efficient general government. Under this pleasing expectation, I rejoice to assure them that they may rely upon my best wishes and endeavours to advance their prosperity, I am, gentlemen, your most obedient servant, George Washington."*

A month after this correspondence James Madison, with the approval of Washington, brought several Constitutional amendments before the House of Representatives, and amongst them moved the adoption of this:

*"Article 1. 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."*

The chief difference between the old Article VI and this amendment lay in the fact that in the first instance Congress was left at liberty to impose religious tests in other cases than those of "office or public trust under the United States," whereas, this amendment removed the power to make any "law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This proposition passed Congress September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1789, and was submitted to the several States for ratification. Eleven of the thirteen States adopted it between November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1789, and December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1791, New Jersey voting on the first of these dates and Virginia on the last. Excepting Connecticut and Massachusetts, did not ratify.

Thus, the contemned, spurned and hated old Baptist doctrine of soul-liberty, for which blood had been shed for centuries, was not only engrafted into the organic law of the United States, but for the first time in the formation of a great nation it was made its chief corner-stone. For the first time on that subject the quiet, pungent old truth asserted its right to immortality as expressed by Scripture:

***"The stone which the builders rejected is become the headstone of the corner."  
(Mk. 12:10; Lk. 20:17)***

I love you, Amen.