

JOHN LELAND
A Dramatic Monologue
Randy Hyde

My, what a beautiful edifice you have here! It is my understanding that there are some wonderful structures in Virginia as well, but when I roamed the countryside of that most humble commonwealth, the churches were not so large or ornate. In those days, that's the way the Baptists preferred it.

Oh, allow me to introduce myself. My name is John Leland. I was born in 1754, in Massachusetts, to a Presbyterian father. Truth be told, I'm not altogether sure what Mother was when it came to denominational loyalty. If you have to put a descriptor to her faith, I would suppose she might be called a Separatist. Of one thing I am sure: she was strong-minded. I guess it really is true that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. By the way, we will speak more of trees later.

By the time I felt the calling to be a minister of the gospel, pressure was being placed on people like me in Massachusetts. Pressure from the civil authorities. They wanted us all to be of like mind, and if anyone tended to object to such uniformity, things could become difficult in a hurry. So, I moved to Virginia where toleration was somewhat better.

I say "somewhat" because there were times when I was thrown in jail and beaten for my beliefs. And what were those beliefs, you ask? Soul freedom, the right for every person to believe as he or she feels led. I almost started to add, "according to the leadership of God's Spirit." But I stopped myself, and do you know why? Because religious freedom must provide for those who refuse to believe at all! There cannot be freedom *of* religion, or *for* religion, if there is not freedom *from* religion as well. Convictions cannot be mandated by civil law! Try preaching that in 18th century Massachusetts or even Virginia and you can get into a lot of trouble. Believe me, I know that to be true from personal experience.

May I share just a couple of stories with you?

While still in Massachusetts, the people of Cheshire made a huge ball of cheese and wanted to present it as a gift to President Jefferson. I was the one appointed to take the cheese to Washington D.C. and make the presentation. Along the way I preached and all the way back I preached. While in the brand-new nation's capitol, the president asked me to preach before Congress, which I did

gladly. I do not know if anything I said influenced Mr. Jefferson, since he had some rather strange ideas when it came to scripture. But I do think he heard what I said about religious liberty because later, in a letter to some Baptists in Virginia, he referred to the "wall of separation" between church and state. If you've heard that expression, you can attribute it to Mr. Jefferson, if you wish. But if you would like to know where he got the idea, well... I don't want to brag.

There is a humorous aspect to this story. Because I was accompanied by this large, large piece of cheese, I became known as the Mammoth Priest. I must confess I enjoyed that very much.

The second story is a bit more dramatic. It took place shortly after we had won our independence from Britain. We were being governed by the Articles of Confederation, which were proving not to be sufficient for such a massive undertaking. A new constitution was drawn up, based largely on the Virginia Plan, by which the commonwealth of Virginia was being governed. James Madison was the author. This new constitution required that nine of the thirteen colonies (or states as they were starting to be called) ratify the document. Rhode Island and my commonwealth of Virginia refused. Why? There was no provision for religious liberty!

I was one of the leaders of the movement against ratification of this document, and planned to run as a representative from Virginia to ensure it would not pass. James Madison heard of my intent. Imagine... there was a strong possibility that Mr. Madison might not even be elected to the ratification committee for the document he himself had authored. But he knew it was quite possible, because... well, I don't want to brag, but I did have the ear of many a Baptist in Virginia, and if we could get enough of them to vote we could have our way.

I will never forget that afternoon. There was a knock on my door and when I went to answer it, a messenger stood before me. He had in his hand an invitation from James Madison. Would I meet with him to discuss this issue? Of course. I have always been open to honest discussion. I signed the invitation, signifying that I would be present at the appointed place and time.

Mr. Madison chose a spot under a tree in an orchard; appropriate, since the meeting took place in Orchard County, Virginia. I like that. Mr. Madison had a sense of humor. We talked for quite some time, and he listened carefully as I outlined my objections to the newly-proposed constitution. I told him that unless

the document included an amendment to provide for religious liberty, I would continue to oppose it, and so would the Baptists in his home colony. We Baptists may not have agreed always with one another on some issues, but there was no variance on this one. Soul liberty or no liberty. You can't have one without the other!

After listening to my concerns, Mr. Madison ó bless his good heart ó made me a proposal. If he guaranteed that he would propose such an amendment guaranteeing freedom of religious expression, would I back down from running against him for the ratification committee? Of course! My goal was not to be politically involved this process. My sole purpose was to see that our new and fledgling nation would allow for religious freedom, regardless of one's personal convictions. If our constitution would provide for such things, I would heartily endorse it. And if Mr. Madison could get that done, I would just as gladly support him for the office.

James Madison, true Virginia gentleman that he was, did exactly that. And that is why the very first amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America reads thusly:

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.

Now, I don't want to brag, but can you see the important role Baptists have played in shaping religious freedom in our land? We have worked hard for this privilege, and we must continue in our vigilance to see that if there is freedom for Baptists, there must be freedom for all. Will you help preserve this freedom? Pray that wisdom will prevail, fairness will rule, and people of conscience will continue to hold forth the principal of religious freedom.

Would you like a piece of cheese?