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Isaac Backus Speech: Massachusetts Convention 4 February 1788

I have said very little in this honourable Convention; but I now beg leave to offer a few thoughts upon some points in the Constitution proposed to us. And I shall begin with the exclusion of any religious test. Many appear to be much concerned about it, but nothing is more evident, both in reason, and in the holy scriptures, than that religion is ever a matter between God and individuals; and therefore no man or men can impose any religious test, without invading the essential prerogatives of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ministers first assumed this power under the Christian name; and then Constantine approved of the practice, when he adopted the profession of Christianity, as an engine of state-policy.¹ And let the history of all nations be searched, from that day to this, and it will appear that the imposing of religious tests hath been the greatest engine of tyranny in the world. And I rejoice to see so many gentlemen who are now giving in the rights of conscience, in this great and important matter. Some serious minds discover a concern lest, if all religious tests should be excluded, the Congress would hereafter establish Popery, or some other tyrannical way of worship. But it is most certain, that no such way of worship can be established, without any religious test.

Much, sir, hath been said, about the importation of slaves into this country. I believe that, according to my capacity, no man abhors that wicked practice more than I do, and would gladly make use of all lawful means, towards the abolishing of slavery in all parts of the land.—But let us consider where we are, and what we are doing. In the articles of confederation, no provision was made to hinder the importation of slaves into any of these States; but a door is now opened, hereafter to do it; and each State is at liberty now to abolish slavery as soon as they please. And let us remember our former connection with Great-Britain, from whom many in our land think we ought not to have revolted: How did they carry on the slave-trade! I know that the Bishop of Gloucester [William Warburton], in an annual sermon in London, in February, 1766, endeavoured to justify their tyrannical claims of power over us, by casting the reproach of the slave-trade upon the Americans. But at the close of the war, the Bishop of Chester [Beilby Porteus], in an annual sermon, in February, 1783, ingenuously owned, that their nation is the most deeply involved in the guilt of that trade, of any nation in the world; and also, that they have treated their slaves in the West-Indies, worse than the French or Spaniards have done theirs.—Thus slavery grows more and more odious through the world;—and, as an honourable gentleman said some days ago, “Though we cannot say, that slavery is struck with an apoplexy, yet we may hope it will die with a consumption.” And a main source, sir, of that iniquity, hath been an abuse of the covenant of circumcision, which gave the seed of Abraham to destroy the inhabitants of

Canaan, and to take their houses, vineyards, and all their estates as their own; and also to buy and hold others as servants. And as christian privileges are much greater than those of the Hebrews were, many have imagined that they had a right to seize upon the lands of the heathen, and to destroy or enslave them as far as they could extend their power. And from thence the mystery of iniquity carried many into the practice of making *merchandise of slaves and souls of men*. But all ought to remember, that when God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his seed, he let him know that they were not to take possession of that land, until the *iniquity of the Amorites was full*; and then they did it under the immediate direction of heaven; and they were as real executors of the judgment of God upon those heathens, as any person ever was an executor of a criminal justly condemned. And in doing it they were not allowed to invade the lands of the Edomites, who sprang from Esau, who was not only of the seed of Abraham, but was born at the same birth with Israel; and yet they were not of that church. Neither were Israel allowed to invade the lands of the Moabites, or of the children of Ammon, who were of the seed of Lot.

And no officer in Israel had any legislative power, but such as were immediately inspired. Even David, the man after God's own heart, had no legislative power, but only as he was inspired from above; and he is expressly called a *Prophet* in the New Testament. And we are to remember that Abraham and his seed, for four hundred years, had no warrant to admit any strangers into that church, but by buying of him as a servant, with money. And it was a great privilege to be bought, and adopted into a religious family for seven years, and then to have their freedom. And that covenant was expressly repealed in various parts of the New-Testament; and particularly in the first epistle to the Corinthians, wherein it is said, *Ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. And again, circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. Ye are bought with a price, be not ye the servants of men*. Thus the gospel sets all men upon a level; very contrary to the declaration of an honourable gentleman in this house [William Phillips] "That the Bible was contrived for the advantage of a particular order of men."

Another great advantage, sir, in the Constitution before us, is its excluding all titles of nobility, or hereditary succession of power; which hath been a main engine of tyranny in foreign countries. But the American revolution was built upon the principle, that all men are born with an equal right to liberty and property, and that officers have no right to any power but what is fairly given them by the consent of the people. And in the Constitution now proposed to us, a power is reserved to the people, constitutionally to reduce every officer again to a private station; and what a guard is this against their invasion of others rights, or abusing of their power! Such a door is now opened, for the establishing of righteous government, and for securing equal liberty, as never was before opened to any people upon earth.

1. Around 322 Constantine, now sole emperor, established Christianity as a state religion and used it to unify the Empire.

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