



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > Religion and Ratification > Clergy and the Constitution > Concerns Over Clergy Involvement

A Baptist

New York Journal, 30 November 1787

“A Baptist” criticizes an action taken by the Philadelphia Baptist Association at its meeting in New York City from 2 to 5 October. On the last day, the Association (comprising the churches of the Middle States) adopted a circular letter, the bulk of which was concerned with “the important subject of Sanctification.” Most of the first paragraph of the letter, however, was an endorsement of the Constitution.

TO THE *BAPTIST CHURCHES* BELONGING TO THE PHILADELPHIA ASSOCIATION.

It is a fundamental principle upon which our churches are founded that the “kingdom of Christ is not of this world” [John 18:36]. By this is meant not only that the great objects of a christian’s faith and hope, are good things reserved for them in a future state, but also, that christian churches, which are the visible representation of the kingdom of Christ in the world, are not governed by worldly maxims, influenced by worldly hopes or fears, ambitious of worldly power or honours, and that they do not concern themselves, as churches, with worldly policy, or meddle with the government of states, or the politics of them.—The great design of visible churches, is to hold forth the word of life, not only by a public profession of the truth, as it is in Jesus, and by contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, but by rendering obedience to all the laws of Christ, who is alone King and head of his church [Ephesians 5:23]. They are intended by their Lord and Master to be the light of the world, as a city set on an hill which cannot be hid [Matthew 5:14]. It becomes them, therefore, to let their light so shine before men, that others seeing their good works, may glorify their father which is [in] heaven [Matthew 5:16]. It is their duty to exercise benevolence to all men, brotherly love to each other, and to observe the laws of Christ in all things [Romans 12:10–11], and thus to manifest, that they are blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom they ought to shine as lights in the world [Philippians 2:15]. But they have nothing to do as christian societies, with the policy of the kingdoms of this world. The only command given them on this head, is, “To submit themselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” [I Peter 2:13]. As men, connected with civil society, it is lawful for them to exercise the rights of that society; but as christians, united in the fellowship of the gospel, according to the laws of Christ’s house, they are bound to concern themselves only with those things which appertain to the kingdom of heaven.

I was led to these reflections by reading the circular letter of the messengers of the several baptist churches, belonging to the Philadelphia association, met in the city of New-York, in October last.

After congratulating us on the tidings they had receiv'd from different parts, of the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom, they proceed and say, "As also, on the kind interposition of divine providence, visible in that happy union which obtained among the members of the late federal convention, to agree upon and report to the states in this union, a form of a federal government, which promises, on its adoption, to rescue our dear country from that national dishonour, injustice, anarchy, confusion and bloodshed, which have already resulted from the weakness and inefficiency of the present form; and which we have the greatest reason to fear is but the beginning of sorrow, unless the people lay hold on this favourable opportunity offered, to establish an efficient government, which, we hope, may, under God, secure our invaluable rights, both civil and religious; which it will be in the power of the great body of the people, if hereafter found necessary, to controul and amend.["]

I cannot conceive what the association had to do with the new constitution—they were a body composed of messengers from the several churches, to communicate to each other the state of the several congregations, who sent them. To advise on cases and questions which were difficult or doubtful; "to provoke one another, to love and good works" [Hebrews 10:24], and to concert measures to promote and diffuse the knowledge of the great things which concern that kingdom, which cannot be moved. Why then did they undertake to congratulate us on the unanimity which prevailed in an assembly that had been employed in devising a form of civil government for a nation of this world? One would imagine, from the dreadful picture that is drawn of the country in this paragraph, that the churches were just delivered from a severe persecution, similar to the one, which the church at Jerusalem endured at the first establishment of christianity; or resembling that, which the churches suffered in the primitive times, under those bloody tyrants, Nero and Dioclesian:—And that this new constitution was so framed as to secure them against a like calamity in future.

For what circumstance short of this, could induce the messengers, from a number of churches, who had assembled for the express purpose of advising on religious matters; after "congratulating the church on the glorious tidings brought from different parts of the advancement of our Redeemer's cause, as portentous of the speedy accomplishment of the promises made by the Father to Christ the King of Zion:—To add, as also on the kind interposition of Providence, &c.—which promises on its adoption to rescue our dear country from—anarchy, confusion and bloodshed, which have already resulted from the weakness and inefficiency of the present form, and which we have the greatest reason to fear, is but the beginning of sorrows, unless the people lay hold on this favourable opportunity to establish an efficient government."

Had the churches, to which these messengers belonged, been suffering for conscience sake, a language of this kind would have been perfectly proper; but we know of no country in the world, at any period since the first establishment of Christianity, where there has been such perfect liberty of conscience, and such entire freedom in the exercise of religion, as in these States, and under the present existing government. This liberty in religion is secured to the people of every one of the states by their several constitutions, and it is out of the power of their legislatures, should they be weak or wicked enough to attempt it, ever to deprive them of it—For this

inestimable privilege, which so many christians in former days prayed for, but did not enjoy. I do sincerely congratulate all the churches of Christ—For this Christians are bound with fervent hearts, to offer up their thanks to the God of all Grace who hath in this respect, distinguished them from many of their pious forefathers, who were called to suffer for the faith of the Gospel in their estates, and in their persons even unto death.

It is remarkable, that this constitution, which the association recommends, has no clause in it that secures to us this invaluable blessing.—if it should supplant the constitutions of the individual states, as it certainly will, the only security we shall have for the enjoyment of this privilege, will be the grace and favour of the federal legislature.

The Baptists ought seriously to reflect, how feeble a security this will be—if they recollect the sufferings they have endured, both in the eastern and southern parts of the continent, within a few years past, for their adherence to what they believed to be the doctrines of Christ; however improbable it may seem that these sufferings may be revived, yet they ought most ardently to wish, and by all lawful means to endeavor to have the rights of conscience expressly reserved in any government that may be established over this country.

I think it extraordinary, that the association should have recommended this new constitution, not only because it was a subject which they had nothing to do with—but also because, I am well informed, it was never read in the association, and many of the members had never heard or understood the contents. I believe I may venture to affirm with truth, that few, if any of the members had considered the subject with that attention which is necessary, to understand the powers which this government will convey, or the operation they will have in exercise. Indeed when the association sat, sufficient time, and opportunity, had not been given after the publication of the new system, to acquire that knowledge of the subject which is requisite to form a rational judgment on the matter: It requires a good deal of time, study, and attention, to become master of a subject, so complicated in its nature, extending to so many objects, and consisting of so many parts, as this constitution does: Is it not wonderful, that in this situation, they should take it upon them to recommend it? It justifies an observation which has often been made, that when ministers of religion undertake to meddle with politics, they generally conduct weakly or wickedly. The history of mankind confirms the truth of this remark: I had hoped that our Baptist ministers had better understood the nature of their duty, than so improperly, I may say so indecently, to have interfered in a political question, concerning which I am sure very few of them had used the necessary means to obtain proper information. They are generally men of little wor[l]dly knowledge, and in this respect more resemble the primitive ministers of the new testament, than perhaps the ministers of any other denomination of christians. But alas! we find even among them a portion of the same leaven of pride which has worked in the hearts of some of the teachers of christianity ever since the days of the Apostles; some among them are ambitious to figure in the world. It was this class, as I am well informed, that originated this clause at the moment the association were about adjourning: It was agreed to without much debate, contrary to the sentiments of a number of the most serious and prudent members.

As christian churches, as I before observed, I am persuaded you have nothing to do with political questions? your duty in that capacity is, to study the policy of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ—I exhort you therefore brethren, that you keep the ordinances as they have been delivered to you by our Lord and his apostles [1 Corinthians 11:2]—hold fast the form of sound

words, which ye have heard from the oracles of truth, in faith and love, which is in Christ Jesus [2 Timothy 1:13]; take heed that your minds be not corrupted, from the simplicity that is in Christ [2 Corinthians 11:3], that you be not carried about, with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive [Ephesians 4:14]. Search the laws of Christ's house, mark well the orders of it, the coming in and going out thereof, and all the laws and ordinances thereof, to do them; study to do all things whatsoever Christ commands; so shall you be his disciples indeed—walk in love, even as Christ also loved you [Ephesians 5:2]. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things [Philippians 4:8].

As members of civil society you have a right to examine for yourselves, any political question submitted to you, and it is your duty to take pains to understand it and give your sentiments like honest men and lovers of your country—in this view, this new system of government should be examined; but you ought to be careful not to be deluded into an opinion, that it must be adopted, be it ever so imperfect, under an idea, that it can easily be amended by the people, if it should prove, on experiment defective.—This sentiment is suggested by the association; it is an evidence they had not investigated the plan, for it is not founded in truth: before any amendment can be proposed, two thirds of both houses of the federal legislature, or two thirds of those of the several states, must agree to it; and after any amendment is agreed to by a convention of the states, three fourths of the legislatures of the respective states must ratify them before they become valid: if this government is calculated to transfer power from the *many* to the *few*, it is easy to foresee, that those in power will be able to influence one fourth of the legislatures in such manner as to prevent any change in favor of the people.

It is not my design to enter upon a discussion of this system of government, but as a freeman, and a citizen of America, I beg leave to intreat you well to examine and thoroughly to understand it before you give it your assent. And in your investigation enquire,

1st. Whether there is any security provided in it, for liberty of conscience in matters of religion—for the liberty of the press—the trial by jury in matters of property, or a fair and impartial trial by a jury of the vicinage, in matters of a criminal nature.

2d. Whether the representation in the legislature is not so small, as to afford no reasonable ground for the confidence of the people, or security to liberty? and whether there is any security that the people shall retain in their hands, the right of a fair and impartial choice of its members?

3d. Whether the general legislature can exercise the power to lay and collect internal taxes and excises, to organize and govern the militia, and call them out *to execute the laws of the union*, and suppress insurrections, without grievously oppressing the people, and greatly endangering public liberty?

4th. Whether the federal judiciary, will not supplant the courts of the several states—render the obtaining justice extremely burdensome and oppressive, and sacrifice the poor to the avarice and oppression of the rich?

5th. Whether the government will not be intolerably expensive, by increasing the number of officers to be supported by the people—and whether it will not lead to the establishment of a court in America, similar to the venal courts of Europe, where will exist *ambition with idleness—baseness with pride—the thirst of riches without labour—aversion to truth—flattery—treason—*

perfidy—violation of engagements—contempt of civil duties—hope from the magistrates weakness; but above all, the perpetual ridicule of virtue, and the sacred doctrines and precepts of religion.

Finally, Whether in all its parts it has not a manifest tendency to confer the height of power and happiness, on the *few*, and to reduce the *many* to weakness and misery?

To enable you to give just answers to these queries, and a number of others that might be suggested—examine coolly and dispassionately the system itself—keep your minds open to conviction—read the several publications for and against it, and judge for yourselves.

Truth will stand the test of free enquiry; but error shuns fair investigation. That you may be directed, by the father of light, to act in this important matter, as becomes free and virtuous men, is the prayer of A BAPTIST.

New-York, November 26, 1787.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIX: New York [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2003), 331–38.