

Allison Hager

I grew up Baptist. Maybe you did too. For me, it wasn't until I took Baptist Polity in my first semester of divinity school that I learned being Baptist isn't all about shame. There are actually things to be proud of. In the 18th Century in America and Britain Baptists fought the established state church. Shortly after the American Revolution, when America was trying to figure out what it was, it was Baptists like Isaac Backus and John Leland that advocated for a separation between church and state. Before this, there was an established state church. The taxes of all people, even those, like the Baptists, who chose to attend another church for theological reasons, went to support that church. They were arrested and imprisoned for not paying taxes as part of their protest against the established church. They were flogged in the streets for their dissent, but they persisted and lobbied anyone who would listen. They fought for religious freedom for all people, not only for themselves. John Leland said in 1791

"Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics." Leland continued, "Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing."

Perhaps he might have thought about more than just men, but the important part is there. People should not be compelled to worship a specific God in a specific way by the government. They should worship a God of their choosing or choose not to at all. John Leland was a Baptist minister. He was born in Massachusetts, and was transplanted to the town of Orange, Virginia, outside of Charlottesville. He influenced Thomas Jefferson and James Madison on church-state issues, his influence led to the adoption of the first amendment.