

Freedom Fighters: Baptist Defenders of Religious Liberty

Since their earliest days, Baptists have been known as strong, tireless defenders of religious liberty.

Among those who served as freedom fighters are well-known men such as Thomas Helwys, Obadiah Holmes, Isaac Backus and John Leland.

Yet there were other Baptists, whose names are not frequently spoken, whose stories are not often told, who stood firm in their commitment to freedom and often suffered discrimination and persecution as a result.

Among the lesser-known Baptist freedom fighters is Welsh Baptist evangelist Vavasor Powell.

Powell converted to the Baptist faith in 1639 and soon began traveling the countryside of Wales, preaching two or three times per day.

He rarely went a day without preaching and often traveled more than 100 miles in a week to share the good news.

Arrested numerous times during his life, Powell spent a total of 11 years (21 percent of his life) in prison.

During one of his incarcerations, he was kept in isolation for an entire year, and that isolation, along with the stench of a manure heap just outside his window, irreparably harmed his health.

Like Powell, Francis Bampfield was a Baptist preacher who spent considerable time in prison for his beliefs.

During a nine-year incarceration in the Dorchester prison in England, Bampfield organized a church inside the prison walls.

He also preached 16 times a week to people who gathered in the yard outside the prison.

Of that experience, Bampfield wrote, “How much louder and further does my confinement preach than my liberty could, my prison always speaks, even when the pulpit is silent.”

When Baptists arrived in colonial America, they continued the struggle and fight for religious freedom.

Esther White, an elderly widow, was imprisoned in 1752 for not paying ministerial taxes.

She refused to pay the eight-pence owed for the support of the established church’s minister in Raynham, Massachusetts.

White contended she was not a member of that church but instead had joined a Baptist church in nearby Middleborough.

The town leaders of Raynham refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Baptist church, and they sent the sheriff to arrest her.

White's pastor, Isaac Backus, visited her in jail, hoping to assist in gaining her release, but she proclaimed that it was an easy place for her to stay and that she would stay as long as she believed God wanted her there. White spent 13 months in jail.

During the months of her incarceration, her Baptist friends visited her, held prayer services, sang hymns and offered her encouragement and assistance.

Finally, the town leaders became so embarrassed about keeping an older widow incarcerated that they released White and dropped the charges against her.

Martha Kimball had a similar experience to that of White. Kimball wrote to Backus in 1774, telling him of her incarceration:

"In the year 1768, in a very cold night in winter, about nine or ten o'clock in the evening, I was taken prisoner, and carried by the collector in the town where I live from my family, consisting of three small children, in order to be put into jail.

"It being a severe cold night ... I was detained at a tavern in the way to jail some

hours, to pay the sum of four to eight pence ... it being for the ministerial rate. The reason why I refused paying it before was because I was a Baptist, and belonged to the Baptist Society, in Haverhill.”

Following her time in jail, Kimball held worship services in her home, and at one point, the sheriff of the town was sent to the house.

He told Kimball and the others gathered to stop meeting together. Despite this warning, they continued holding services, and Kimball remained a faithful Baptist to the end of her life.

Around the same time as Kimball’s imprisonment, Gowan Pamphlet, an enslaved Baptist in Williamsburg, Virginia, began preaching to both free and enslaved blacks in the area.

Eventually, they founded a church, but the congregation was forced to meet in secret because the local Baptist association had issued a ban against preachers of color.

In 1793, Pamphlet finally gained his freedom, and his church was received into the Dover Baptist Association. By the time of his death, the congregation had approximately 500 members.

These and hundreds of other Baptist freedom fighters treasured, defended and even died for their commitment to religious liberty.

<https://ethicsdaily.com/freedom-fighters-baptist-defenders-of-religious-liberty/> July 30, 2019 Pam Durso

They held fast to the idea that all persons should be free to accept God's offer of salvation and that all persons should be free to worship or not to worship according to the dictates of conscience.

Whether their names are known to us or not, these Baptists shaped our faith tradition, contributed to our denominational value of freedom and often paid a high price for their defense of liberty.

For more stories of early Baptist freedom fighters, see Keith E. Durso's "No Armor for the Back: Baptist Prison Writings, 1600s-1700s" (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007).

Editor's note: This article is part of a series focused on Christians opposing Christian nationalism. It is published in conjunction with the launch of a [BJC](#)-led initiative [ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism.org](#). Previous articles in the series are:

[US Christians Speak Out Against Christian Nationalism](#) | *EthicsDaily.com Staff*

[Threat of Christian Nationalism Has Reached High Tide](#) | *Amanda Tyler*