

## Isaac Backus: A Plea Before the Massachusetts Legislature (1774)

*Backus fought for religious freedom all his life. At the time of this plea, December, 1774, he was the pastor at the Middleboro Massachusetts church he discusses in the document. Until 1833, the Congregational Church was, in practice, an established church as powerful as the Anglican Church in the South. Backus understood the jurisdictional argument. His pleas, along with Samuel Stillwell, kept Massachusetts Baptist churches, Connecticut Baptist churches, and Rhode Island Baptist churches from incorporating with those respective states for many years. We need to learn the arguments of this brilliant pastor if we are to carry on this fight against the incorporation of Lordship churches. Not only is the following argument right and true, but it is an argument which all Americans at that time could understand.*

....It seems that the two main rights which all Americans are contending for at this day, are-- Not to be taxed where they are not represented, and--To have their causes tried by unbiased judges. And the Baptist churches in this province as heartily unite with their countrymen in this cause, as any denomination in the land; and are as ready to exert all their abilities to defend it. Yet only because they have thought it to be their duty to claim an equal title to these rights with their neighbors, they have repeatedly been accused of evil attempts against the general welfare of the colony; therefore, we have thought it expedient to lay a brief statement of the case before this assembly....

....to impose religious taxes is as much out of their jurisdiction, [that of the Massachusetts legislature] as it can be for Britain to tax America; yet how much of this has been done in this province. Indeed, many try to elude the force of this reasoning by saying that the taxes which our rulers impose for the support of ministers, are of a civil nature. But it is certain that they call themselves ministers of Christ; and the taxes now referred to are to support them under that name; and they either are such or they deceive the people. If they are Christ's ministers, he has made laws enough to support them; if they are not, where are the rulers who will dare to compel people to maintain men who call themselves Christ's ministers when they are not? Those who ministered about holy things and at God's altar in the Jewish church, partook of and lived upon the things which were freely offered there; Even so hath the Lord ordained that they who preach the Gospel, should live of the Gospel. And such communications are called sacrifices to God more than once in the New Testament....

Must we be blamed for not lying still, and thus let our countrymen trample upon our rights, and deny us that very liberty that they are ready to take up arms to defend for themselves? You profess to exempt us from taxes to your worship, and yet tax us every year. Great complaints have been made about a tax which the British Parliament laid upon paper; but you require a paper tax of us annually.

That which has made the greatest noise is a tax of three pence a pound upon tea; but your law of last June laid a tax of the same sum every year upon the Baptists in each parish, as they would expect to defend themselves against a greater one. And only because the Baptists at Middleboro' have refused to pay that little tax, we hear that the first parish in said town have this fall voted to lay a greater tax upon us. All America are alarmed at the tea tax; though, if they please, they can avoid it by not buying the tea; but we have no such liberty.... But these lines are to let you know, that we are determined not to pay either of them; not only upon your principle of not being taxed where we are not represented, but also because we dare not render that homage to any earthly power, which I and many of my brethren are fully convinced belongs only to God. Here,

therefore, we claim charter rights, liberty of conscience. And if any still deny it to us, they must answer it to Him who has said, 'With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.' If any ask what we would have, we answer: Only allow us freely to enjoy the religious liberty that they do in Boston, and we ask no more.

We remain hearty friends to our country, and ready to do all in our power for its general welfare.

*Backus was a leader in the fight to keep God's true churches unintangled from the state and solely under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He was a pastor (Middleboro Church), a preacher (nearly 1000 sermons a year), an evangelist (rode over 10,000 miles on horseback each year), and a man greatly respected by all.*

*Ben Townsend*