Rev. Samuel Stillman on Religious Liberty

Religious Freedom: What is it, and why should persons have it? Check BGAV.org/blog each month to see how historic Baptist and other champions of religious freedom have answered these questions. These spotlights are sponsored by the BGAV’s Religious Liberty Committee.

In 1779, Massachusetts convened a convention to draft a constitution for the newly independent state. The Baptists of that state were keenly interested in its proceedings, because they wanted the new constitution to guarantee complete religious freedom, i.e., they wanted it to end the state’s system of having one church established in each town and supported by all taxpayers, except those who managed to obtain an exemption from paying the church tax, which was often quite difficult to do.

Hoping to keep that system and reduce the Baptists’ opposition to it, the legislature invited one of their most distinguished minister, Samuel Stillman, pastor of Boston’s First Baptist Church and one of the founders of Brown University, to deliver a sermon before it. He, however, refused to be mollified and “pulled no punches” in making the case for “equal religious liberty.” Among several eloquently worded passages was the following:

“. . . [A] magistrate . . . should be as a nursing father to the church of Christ, by protecting all the peaceable members of it from injury on account of religion; and by securing to them the uninterrupted enjoyment of equal religious liberty. The authority by which he acts he derives alike from all the people; consequently he should
exercise that authority equally for the benefit of all, without any respect to their different religious principles. They have an undoubted right to demand it.

Union in the state is of absolute necessity to its happiness. This the magistrate will study to promote. And this he may reasonably expect upon the plan proposed, of a just and equal treatment of all the citizens.

For though Christians may contend amongst themselves about their religious differences, they will all unite to promote the good of the community, because it is their interest, so long as they enjoy the blessings of a free and equal administration of government.

On the other hand, if the magistrate destroys the equality of the subjects of the state on account of religion, he violates a fundamental principle of a free government, establishes separate interests in it, and lays a foundation for disaffection to rulers and endless quarrels among the people.”