

Colonial Baptists used Bible to rally support for revolution

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BELTON—From the days surrounding the American Revolution, Baptists used religious arguments to make political points and political arguments to make religious points, historian James P. Byrd, associate dean at Vanderbilt Divinity School, told a conference at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

At the same time Baptists argued for separation of church and state, they did not hesitate to preach on political topics or embrace patriotic causes with religious fervor, Byrd said, addressing an Oct. 12-13 conference on “Baptists and the Shaping of American Culture.”

James Byrd

In a sense, Baptists reflected their culture. Neither Thomas Jefferson nor Benjamin Franklin accepted orthodox Christian teachings, but both used biblical language in public statements. Even Thomas Paine, a deist rationalist, cited Old Testament Scripture in his widely distributed pamphlet, “Common Sense.”

“Thomas Paine realized ‘Common Sense’ had to make biblical sense” to an 18th century audience, Byrd noted.

Similarly, Baptist preachers such as Isaac Backus and Samuel Stillman applied biblical texts and theological arguments to calls for civil and religious liberty—even preaching on secular topics as specific as repeal of the Stamp Act of 1765.

In a widely reprinted 1772 sermon at Second Baptist Church in Boston, John Allen argued on scriptural grounds the colonists needed to throw off

the yoke of the monarchy and declare themselves an independent nation.

“Baptists saw themselves as the patriots of all patriots,” Byrd said.

Once the colonists declared their independence and the American Revolutionary War began, Baptists rallied support from their pulpits and served as military chaplains, he noted. Many preachers of the period cited Jeremiah 48:10 in their sermons: “Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully, and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood.”

As commander of the Continental Army and first president of the United States, George Washington spoke highly of Baptists “because Baptists supported the revolution,” Byrd said.

Baptists returned the favor. Washington spoke rarely of Christianity other than in veiled references to Divine Providence or in support of Christianity’s utilitarian value in promoting good behavior, Byrd noted. But Richard Furman, a Baptist leader from Charleston, S.C., compared Washington to Moses and Joshua, extolling him as “God’s gift to America.”

“Similarly, John Leland the Baptist defender of separation of church and state saw the deist Thomas Jefferson as God’s gift and as his hero, hailing him as an apostle of liberty,” Byrd said.

The tendency to “deify deistic figures” such as Jefferson and Franklin whose words still are “quoted very much like Scripture” remains even in the 21st century, he observed.

“The Founders never go away,” Byrd said. “There seems to be an American obsession with the Founders. It’s as if we periodically have to check in with Benjamin Franklin or ask, ‘What would Thomas Jefferson think?’”