

BAPTIST HERITAGE

Isaac Backus*Michael E. Williams, Sr.—Fort Worth, TX**Isaac Backus*

Baptists were few in number in colonial America. Strongest in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania due to the freedoms available there, in most places but especially in New England, Baptists were a despised lot. Fortunately for Baptists in America, they benefited more from the Great Awakening than any other denomination. Among their converts from New England Congregationalism in 1751 was a young New Light Congregationalist minister named Isaac Backus. In the next fifty years, no other single Baptist exerted a greater influence upon Baptist and American life than did he.

Prompted by the continued persecution of Baptists in New England, Backus was at the forefront of the movement to establish the Warren Association in New England to aid local Baptist churches. Subsequently, he led in the establishment of a Grievance Committee that was responsible for lobbying for religious freedom and separation of church and state, first in New England, and later throughout the colonies. Building upon the growing sentiments favoring liberty and independence from Britain, Backus argued that the same principles that guided the American Revolution promoted the need for religious liberty. While Backus did not live to see the full separation of church and state in New England, the seeds he planted later bore fruit in the Constitution of the United States and the first amendment. He might rightly be called “the greatest Baptist spokesman for religious liberty in America.”

Isaac Backus also was important as a historian of Baptists in colonial America and as a pastor-theologian. His accounts of his travels on behalf of the Warren Association and his evangelistic work, and his historical accounts of Baptists in colonial and the early United States serve as essential records for Baptist history. He exerted considerable influence in developing an evan-



gical Calvinism that balanced some of the more extreme forms of Separate Baptist life in colonial America. Backus's greatest contribution may well have been how he brought Baptists into the mainstream of American religious life. Stanley Grenz writes of Backus that “For Baptist history, his most significant contribution lies in his ability to transform an outcast, sectarian group on the fringe . . . into an accepted and respected member of the American religious community.”

This contribution, together with his fight for religious liberty and separation of church and state, make Isaac Backus one of the most important Baptists in American history.



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