FREEDOM STORIES

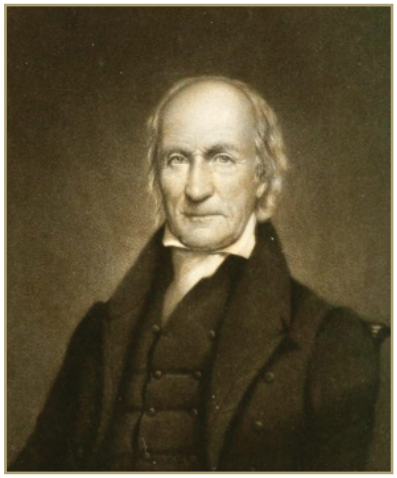
John Leland

February 1, 1756

Freedom of Religion, Not Freedom From Religion

Historical Spotlight

Born February 1, 1756, in Grafton, Massachusetts, John Leland was a Baptist preacher whose influence on American history far outweighed his public profile. Raised in a deeply religious environment and shaped by the First Great Awakening, Leland became convinced that Christianity must be freely chosen to remain faithful to the teachings of Christ. Scripture formed the center of his worldview, especially the belief that God alone is Lord of the conscience. From this conviction came his lifelong opposition to any state control of the church, not because he was indifferent to faith, but because he believed government power corrupts true religion.



Leland believed the government had no jurisdiction over the soul. He argued from both the Bible and reason that faith coerced by law is no faith at all. For Leland, the Gospel advanced best through persuasion, preaching, and personal conviction - not legislation. His sermons and writings gave voice to many Baptists and other dissenters who believed religious freedom was not a political convenience, but a God-given right.

Leland's most lasting impact came through his influence on the American founding. In Virginia, he and other Baptist leaders withheld political support from James Madison until clear protections for religious liberty were promised. Madison listened, and that dialogue directly shaped what became the First Amendment. Though Leland never held office, his insistence on explicit guarantees ensured that freedom of religion would be written into the nation's constitutional foundation.

John Leland's legacy is a powerful reminder that strong Christian faith and religious liberty are not enemies, but allies. He believed the Church flourishes when it is free from state control, and that truth does not need force to prevail.

Why it Matters Today

John Leland's life reminds us that religious freedom is not merely a political right but a moral and spiritual principle rooted in conscience and faith. His insistence that true Christianity thrives only when freely chosen challenges us to uphold both personal conviction and the rights of others, showing that faith and liberty can strengthen each other rather than conflict.

Engraving by T. Doney, 1845,
based on a painting by A.B. Moore

"Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has to do with the principles of mathematics."
- John Leland from his book, The Rights of Conscience Inalienable,
and Therefore Religious Opinions Not Cognizable by Law