

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Roger Williams: Free in Conscience

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Introduction

The author hoped to gain a one-branch sort of understanding of how the Baptists “came to America” through the study of early Baptists like Roger Williams only to see that the entry point of the Baptists into America had many, many points of entry from motherland Europe.¹

Although many sources are conflicting about the origin of Baptists in America, one such seed of the Baptist faith can be found at the feet of Roger Williams. He fled England for the Massachusetts Bay Colony before being forced to flee again.² He was leaving the persecution of Archbishop Laud of the Church of England.³ He was, perhaps, the foremost respecter of the Native American people—protecting them from the land-hungry of his own race.⁴ If he could not have freedom here in the colonies from the oppression of the Church of England, he was contented with resigning himself to the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church in “Rome or Spain.”⁵ Indeed the spirit of Roger Williams in relation to the free-church can be summed up as: “The state had no responsibility for the church beyond its duty to free it.”⁶ Furthermore, if the church wanted to rule, let them do so in the next age.⁷

¹ Clifton E. Olmstead, *Religion in America- Past and Present* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 29.

² Julia Mitchell Corbett, *Religion in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 52.

³ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists- 3rd Edition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2000), 202.

⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 68.

⁵ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 97.

⁶ Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 70.

⁷ Simpson, 74.

Survey of His life

Raised during the reign of James I, Williams would have understood the tyranny of state-church-ism. He was born on the year of the Tutor to Stuart regime change and would have been 22 years old at the death of King James I of Scotland/VI of England.⁸ There were some he had the chance to observe—at least from a distance—which separated from the Church of England for refuge in Holland. These he would eventually meet in Plymouth Colony.⁹

At the age of 27, Roger and his wife sailed with 20 others aboard the ship *Lyon* for two months prior to landing off the coast of Boston¹⁰ where he was heartily welcomed by the governor, and shortly thereafter invited to be the resident minister at the “Congregational” church in Boston.¹¹ However, he turned it down to go 15 miles north and serve a church in Salem where—because of those who were upset at his snubbing of the Boston post—he was denied official installment as their “pastor.” Eventually, he would move 45 miles south to Plymouth Colony where he found the Separatists from Holland where he served for two years before disagreements of some type prodded him back to Salem.¹² In those two years, he and his wife had their first child (a son) and he was able to work on some theological issues and develop relationships with the Indians.¹³

In Salem, not only did he finally receive the official post of the church’s pastor,¹⁴ he became a deeper sympathizer with the Native Americans and their plight against the King and his supposed right to usurp land that belonged to somebody else.¹⁵ Other things like “swearing by God” for an unbeliever meant virtually nothing so Williams saw no need to constrain people to do so.¹⁶ He actually saw this as a breaking of the 3rd Commandment to “not take God’s name in vain.”¹⁷ Furthermore, both his chiding of the church leaders in Boston for not standing against the King’s land lust and for their own wresting of religious liberty earned him a exiling—even at the approval of his supposed friend, Governor John Winthrop.¹⁸ The winter of 1636 brought him 14 weeks of wandering and 40 miles of displacement to some land he purchased from Indians where he intended to settle.¹⁹ From there, he and a fellow Protestant Pastor and student of Cambridge, John Cotton of Boston, tangled through correspondence.²⁰ Meanwhile, developments did not cease in Providence where Roger Williams divided the land into parcels—his being the same size as others’.²¹

Ecclesiastically, things began to develop as well. A church was to be formed that did not assume membership by anybody who simply had natural birth into some sort of location or boundary. Rather, membership would be voluntarily for those who confessed personal faith in Christ.²² A journey to Lynn, Massachusetts would solidify the notion that being around zealous Anglicans would prove that religious freedom was not a reality there. John Clarke and Obadiah Holmes were arrested with the latter not accepting

⁸ Gaustad, 2.

⁹ Gaustad, 4.

¹⁰ Gaustad, 5.

¹¹ Gaustad, 6.

¹² Gaustad, 7.

¹³ Gaustad, 24.

¹⁴ Gaustad, 11.

¹⁵ Gaustad, 9.

¹⁶ Gaustad, 10.

¹⁷ Gaustad, 18.

¹⁸ Gaustad, 26.

¹⁹ Gaustad, 14.

²⁰ Gaustad, 16.

²¹ Gaustad, 50.

²² Gaustad, 52.

monetary deliverance but rather receiving a public punishment for holding non-authorized services for a Baptist in that town. The year is 1651 and Baptists were being flogged by Protestants.²³

Then there was the struggle for land ownership and the deliberations of England for a Royal Charter (discussed in sections below). It was not until the early 1660's when this was accomplished and the daily toils of political and pastoral life found commonness amidst their life's work—sacrificing for those who would come behind them. This, of course did not stop those who had benefited from the struggles of people like Williams and Clarke from hoarding their own goods when being required to support such an effort. After giving a greater part of his life to securing Providence a “public trust for religious refugees,” he died a frustrated man by those founding families (1st and 2nd generation) that would profit from settling families.²⁴

Positive and Negative Influence on American Christianity

Religious Freedom

Contrary to the Puritans who fled England to secure freedom of religion only for themselves, Williams' efforts for religious freedom secured the right to worship God in one's conscience even for those of other faiths. For instance, Pennsylvania was the only other colony known for populations of Catholics.²⁵ His discontent with England was coupled with his discontent with England's church. He fled Archbishop Laud in England only to find the same spirit of persecution in Boston—a location whose church he decline to lead because of this spirit of bigotry.²⁶

Williams' views of separation of church and state are perhaps even less pronounced than his view of “Separation of the Testaments.” The reason he felt such freedom in denouncing King James' securing and redistribution of land—as well as his debunking of the Anglican Church's “conquering Canaan” ideals was because he understood the historically salient point of Joshua's conquest. It was not for today. The people of God were to be conscience-led, volunteer worshipers who subdued through spiritual means.²⁷

Harper and Schmidt give almost five full pages of their work (listed below) to Roger Williams. America's debt to Williams began with his rejection in Boston in 1631. He was a Puritan minister. He did not see his views compatible with the Church of England as expressed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.²⁸ He felt them to be a quite unholy group. His biggest problem with the Anglican Church was that it may as well have been called “the Church of the Crown.” He was a dissenter from the beginning, and for that reason chose to stand rather than bow to the potential payoff in the spirit of Moses before him.²⁹ It was not just that this church reeked of England. Rather, it reeked of Theocracy (as mentioned elsewhere as a respect of the differences of the Testaments). He thought the theocracy was “pulling God and Christ and Spirit out of Heaven, and subjecting them unto natural, sinful, inconstant men.”³⁰ Moreover, he was not willing to say that legal constraint to conversion was conversion at all—rather, he said it was “subversion of souls,” and could not be counted as regeneration, and was actually nothing more than a replacement of “false religions.”³¹

²³ Gaustad, 103-104.

²⁴ Simpson, 59.

²⁵ Corbett, 79.

²⁶ William P. Grady. *What Hath God Wrought!* (Schererville, IN: Grady Pub, 1996), 76.

²⁷ Olmsted, 30.

²⁸ Gaustad, Edwin & Leigh Schmidt. *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today- revised edition* (New York: Harper One, 2002), 68.

²⁹ Olmsted, 30.

³⁰ David Chidester. *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: Harper One, 2000), 395.

³¹ Gaustad, 41.

Baptist Fortification (Baptism's Mode and Volunteer, Congregational Government)

Williams will be forever noted as the “First Baptist of America.” Along with his Baptist church—of which he forsook months later in search of purer religion—John Clark began a Baptist Church in Newport on the Aquidneck Island.³²

Three years after his founding of Rhode Island Colony, he was baptized by a former member of his Salem church, Ezekiel Holliman.³³ It is interesting to note that, although, Williams did baptize 11 people following his baptism, this mode may not have actually been confirmed as “immersion.” Even more amazing is that it took him a mere four months to weary of the Baptist congregation for which he receives such fame.³⁴ Grady feels it was because of his conscience of being baptized by the man whom he would immediately baptize himself (Holliman). In other words, he was disillusioned at the conundrum of his baptism and left the pastorate.³⁵

Corbett is careful to point out that Williams’ ecclesiastical ideals did not begin in church—rather they began with the founding of the Rhode Island colony.³⁶ Williams was furthermore instrumental in the ideas of separation of church from state.³⁷ Williams believed the church was made of God’s elect and that those “unelected” and “elected” alike must therefore make a community together and belonged, by default, to the God-ordained institution of the state.³⁸ Even Thomas Jefferson acknowledged Williams’ separation of the “wilderness world” from the “garden of the church.”³⁹ It must be noted that the context of both Williams’ efforts and the retrospective Constitutional writers brings an understanding that the church’s protection from the state was just as important as the state’s protection from the church’s lordship.

Of course, there are those history re-writers who see the conviction of what today’s Baptists would call “soul liberty” as pluralism or liberalism. Morison says, “Williams stoutly maintained what everyone else in his day considered a monstrous heresy: that, for aught anyone knew, the Indians’ religion was equally acceptable to God with Christianity.”⁴⁰ One would certainly understand this is an apparent belief of Williams’ and that is all. The fact is, Williams knew that a spiritual institution like the church of God did not need to rest “under the shadow of the arm of flesh.”⁴¹ America is indebted to the likes of Roger Williams:

Democratic America should be eternally grateful to the Baptists of colonial New England and Virginia, for it was, in part at least, their struggle for religious liberty which culminated victoriously in the omission of any religious tests or restrictions when the Constitution of the United States was being framed.⁴²

His drive to “right the wrongs” of the Church of England was perhaps most notable in his desire for the separation of state power from the church “except to maintain a peaceable social order”. It was his desire to preserve “soul liberty”—not civil liberty that drove him to England of at his own expense.⁴³ Wanting liberty

³² Gaustad, 55-56.

³³ Torbet, 202.

³⁴ Olmsted, 31.

³⁵ Grady, 89; Grady fails to mention that Williams left more than the pastorate; he left the Baptist church.

³⁶ Corbett, 52.

³⁷ The author hesitates to use such terminology but trusts the reader to understand that this speaks—not of a supposed constitutionally-based agenda to eradicate religion from government, but rather a constitutional protection of the church from the state.

³⁸ Bainton, 127.

³⁹ Grady, 172.

⁴⁰ Morison, 68.

⁴¹ Leonard Verduin. *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren: The Dissent and Nonconformity Series- Number 14* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 185.

⁴² Torbet, 520.

⁴³ Simpson, 57.

from the crown was not nearly as important as having liberty to worship God within the dictates of one's own conscience. Providence would be a refuge for all who sought to be governed by their peaceable consciences. He also bought land from Indians and organized a separate church.⁴⁴ Others were not sold out on the "soul liberty" idea as they felt that man—left to himself—would choose against God and religion would consequently "fold" without the civil authority's heavy hand supporting it.⁴⁵ Williams, on the other hand, knew firsthand what it was like for a nation to go from Catholic to non-Catholic in a single year—and back again.⁴⁶ If the state could change so quickly, why would anybody think that droves of men's consciences could be thus easily swayed?

Twenty-eight years later, King Charles II granted a charter to Rhode Island colony which made religious freedom a matter of law,⁴⁷ and Williams continued his stalwart guarantee of religious freedom for all—even those which did not agree with his religion.⁴⁸ This is not the same as "toleration." For "toleration" implied that some earthly power still had the authority to expunge certain ideologies but "graciously" withheld its impulses.⁴⁹ Roger Williams' relatively immediate affects were to set precedent for others like William Penn to follow suite⁵⁰ and to inspire ideals as those found in the Constitution of the United States—to include the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.

Ethical Christianity and Evangelism: "Loving One's Neighbor as Themselves"

Williams was disconcerted over the treatment of the Native Americans by England's monarchy, and the Anglican Church's silence in the matter was even more unsettling. They did not barter or pay for the land—they did not even acknowledge that ownership from another party had existed.⁵¹ Williams would soon be immortalized with other names as Eliot, Brainerd, and Edwards as the foremost laborers among the Native Americans.⁵² While the more than 150 years between them does not seem to guarantee their connection, it seems reasonable that the reason Baptist state missionary societies of the early 1800's felt they were not the first to reach out to Indian populations was because of the trailblazers of whom they could aspire such as Williams.⁵³

Along with the reproachful conduct of the church in its virtue and its treatment of Native Americans, the Puritans also mistreated those who had different beliefs. That is, they desired religious liberty for themselves alone.⁵⁴ Williams tried to work within this context. He even worked as an assistant of sorts at the church in Salem,⁵⁵ but then found apparent refuge with Governor Bradford in Plymouth, where he served for two years among the pilgrims until his return to the Salem church following the death of their pastor.⁵⁶

Ultimately his defense of the godless (those who breached the "first table") who peaceably maintained their lack of piety was disallowed by the General Court of the church (despite the appeals of his own congregation)⁵⁷

⁴⁴ Gaustad & Schmidt, 68.

⁴⁵ Gaustad, 87.

⁴⁶ Gaustad, 91.

⁴⁷ Corbett, 14.

⁴⁸ Gaustad & Schmidt, 68.

⁴⁹ Gaustad, 95.

⁵⁰ Gaustad & Schmidt, 84.

⁵¹ Gaustad & Schmidt, 65.

⁵² Bainton, 139.

⁵³ Torbet, 528.

⁵⁴ Gaustad & Schmidt, 65.

⁵⁵ Olmstead, 30.

⁵⁶ Grady, 76.

⁵⁷ Grady, 76.

and in 1635, he was exiled⁵⁸ to what would be Rhode Island for being “dangerous” where he later established Providence by “building an altar”⁵⁹ much like his “father in the faith, Abraham” had done at Bethel. This was an acceptable alternative to the English who were trying to send him back to motherland. Williams escaped and evaded the harsh winter with a small group⁶⁰ before stumbling into an Indian settlement near the mouth of the Moshassuck River⁶¹ some 14 weeks later—as settlement, it appears, of the same Indian peoples he had served from Plymouth.⁶² Many are not aware that, along with his settling among Indians in Rhode Island, Williams worked for two years from Plymouth with the Narragansett Indians prior to his work in Salem.⁶³ Lest one should think Williams was above the pain of being banished, it should be noted he corresponded with Governor Winthrop—albeit disgruntled: In fact, his period of life following banishment from Massachusetts Bay can be summed up with “Abstract yourself with a holy violence from the Dung Heap of this Earth.”⁶⁴

Williams the Politician

While this “experiment” of Rhode Island was a haven for those who sought for religious liberty, it was also a place which appeared to be shelter for the “antinomians” of the land—those who did not wish to have law.⁶⁵ Moreover, there were those in the land who realized that they were sacrificing “security for ‘soul liberty’” and were wondering if this may be something which sounded good in theory only—necessitating a more orthodox government.⁶⁶ Had it not been for Williams’ ability to build bridges with people like noted Puritan Oliver Cromwell, Rhode Island would have arguably never existed.⁶⁷ After the swindler Coddington was named the owner of Aquidneck Island by the Council of State in London,⁶⁸ Williams and Clarke sailed for London where Williams spent approximately two years wrestling with the war-occupied English attempting to gain their attention in this matter of restoring the whole of Rhode Island to Roger Williams.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the residents of Rhode Island had not delivered as promised on their pledge of salary, and Williams’ family suffered. Thankfully, they collectively acknowledged their error and publically apologized to him.⁷⁰ John Clarke had apparently stayed in England for another 10 years to lobby for the Royal Charter of Rhode Island, and a tax was levied on the colony to pay their share.

34 years after the banishment, Williams seemed to be understanding of the issue at hand when it came to the Indians’ reticence of English immigration. After all, the English were moving further west all the time and the Indians were without any real consolidated leadership. Williams became the negotiator with the leader of the Indians from whom he purchased his land in Plymouth Colony. This leader was known as “King Philip”, and was leader of the Wampanoags around Plymouth.⁷¹ After this chief was murdered, Williams contended for the death of the offenders to the son of his former friend and current governor of Connecticut, John Winthrop, Jr.⁷²

⁵⁸ Gaustad, 126; This action was formally rescinded in 1936 by the state of Massachusetts. More than that, it was an apology in the form of a legislative bill.

⁵⁹ Grady, 78.

⁶⁰ Grady, 77.

⁶¹ Grady, 78.

⁶² Olmstead, 30.

⁶³ Olmstead, 30.

⁶⁴ Chidester, 396.

⁶⁵ Simpson, 52.

⁶⁶ Simpson, 53.

⁶⁷ Gaustad, 58.

⁶⁸ Gaustad, 64.

⁶⁹ Gaustad, 68.

⁷⁰ Gaustad, 68.

⁷¹ Gaustad, 42.

⁷² Gaustad, 43.

Further negotiations took place for about five more years before Williams gave up on the ability to work civilly with the Indians even to the point of fleeing Rhode Island mainland and placing his “seal”, as it were, upon armed conflict with the Indians in a letter to Governor Winthrop, Jr.⁷³ Much of Rhode Island was burned up and destroyed. It must be stressed: before this happened others followed in the footsteps of Williams—either cognitively or not—and they found asylum which Williams did not have originally.⁷⁴

Williams the Author

Williams’ first and most popular books concerned Indians. It was called *A Key into the Language of America*, and it was published in 1643—some seven years after his banishment.⁷⁵ This would have been a total of nine years that he spent around the Native American people. The subtitle showed that this was a particular study of the Indians’ “Customs, Manners, and Worships” at their various circumstances, and it was intended that this would instruct the pompous English superiorists. Furthermore, this writing gave an overview of the affect of missions thus far as well as an assessment of future potential conversion of these peoples. Shortly thereafter, he wrote what is supposed to be a preemptive rebuttal to the Church of England entitled “Christening Make Not Christians.”⁷⁶

It was shown that tracts could be created for a relatively inexpensive cost. Many times, preachers as Williams would combat one another through these tracts as Williams did with the “Friends” founder, George Foxe.⁷⁷ In 1644, Williams was troubled at England’s likelihood of relapsing into imperial church ideals and Scotland’s wearisome Presbyterianism. He wanted to “give a nudge to history,”—writing a 35-page booklet/tract called *Queries of Highest Consideration*.⁷⁸ He had procured the help of John Milton who also wrote against this blight of England—the overtly Old Testament-minded authority.

Later, in response to troubling fads from John Cotton in Boston, Williams wrote a 435 page *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience. A Conference Between Truth and Peace* which argued against the “sacred character of government.”⁷⁹ After years of hardship—financial and social—he wrote his wife a book called *Experiments of Spiritual Life & Health* which emphasized the eternal aspect of eternally-significant work and sacrifice.⁸⁰

Overall Evaluation of Williams

It is the opinion of this author that Williams did, in fact, get some things wrong. How far should one take this whole “government by the people” idea? Williams seemed to have selective reading with certain verses like 1 Peter 2:17. He seemed to have the erroneous ideal that government received its authority from the people⁸¹ rather than having equally high esteem for that institution as much as the other two of marriage and the church. Of course it is not easy to correct a man who lived almost 400 years ago and took great personal loss to give Americans the freedom they enjoy today, but doubtless many people who transplanted to Rhode Island were

⁷³ Gaustad, 44-45.

⁷⁴ Gaustad, 55; People like Anne Hutchinson and her followers were able to flee there and buy land with Williams’ help.

⁷⁵ Gaustad, 29.

⁷⁶ Gaustad, 40.

⁷⁷ Roland H. Bainton. *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilization- Volume II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 99; He wrote this tract describing how he had uncovered the truth about Fox and it was entitled “George Foxe digg’d out of his burrows.” Foxe’s retort was entitled “A New England Firebrand Quenched.”

⁷⁸ Gaustad, 75.

⁷⁹ Gaustad, *Williams*, 77.

⁸⁰ Gaustad, 108

⁸¹ Gaustad, *Williams*, 77.

rogues and off scouring who simply did not like authority. The greatest influence in the thinking of Roger Williams was a Baptist in England by name of Samuel Howe.⁸²

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⁸² Grady, 79.