

The Baptists: Distressed and Distressing Conscience

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In a Rhode Island deed dated 1661, Roger Williams reflected on his decision to purchase land from the Narragansett Indians and establish Providence in 1638. Williams wrote: “I desired it might be for a shelter for persons distressed for conscience. I then considering the condition of divers of my distressed countrymen, I communicated my said purchase unto my loving friends [whom he names] who then desired to take shelter here with me.” Of this action, 19th century historian Edward Underhill commented: “This worthy conception of [Williams’] noble mind was realized, and he lived to see a settled community formed wherein liberty of conscience was a primary and fundamental law.”¹

“A shelter for persons distressed for conscience,” of all the statements that capture the essence of religious liberty, that one grips me the most — words so haunting that they find their way in to various essays and articles I’ve written over the years. Whatever else we Baptists can claim or disown in our history, we have been, are and will be at our best when we offer “shelter for persons distressed of conscience” even if we don’t agree among ourselves what the specific issues of conscience may be. And before we go any further, let’s say that at least for today

we're not going to quibble over whether Roger Williams' ideas on religious liberty can represent Baptist ideals because he did not remain a Baptist very long.

Denying Williams a part in Baptist commitments to religious liberty would be like saying that John Calvin can't influence certain Baptists because he wasn't one; or that Martin Luther can't inform us on the priesthood of all believers since he wasn't a Baptist. Or whether Jesus ... Well you get the point. (For whatever it is worth, we know that Luther and Calvin were not immersed but Roger Williams and Jesus were!)

And what do we mean by conscience? This may surprise you, but today I'm satisfied with the definition that Williams' nemesis Puritan preacher and establishmentarian John Cotton gave when they started their famous debate that became the source for *The Bloody Tenent*. Cotton noted, "Now, by persecution for cause of conscience, I conceive you mean, either for professing some point of doctrine which you believe in conscience to be the truth, or for practicing some work which in conscience you believe to be a religious duty."² Do you follow? For Cotton and apparently for Williams, conscience involves internal commitment to truth and external action or duty demanded by truth. But here the two Puritan divines parted company (as do many in our culture to this day). John Cotton wrote: "It is not lawful to persecute any for conscience' sake rightly informed; for in persecuting such, Christ himself is persecuted in them." However, he insisted that "for an erroneous and blind conscience, (even in fundamental and weighty points) it is not lawful to persecute any, till after admonition once or twice"³

Conscience based on falsehood as determined by the orthodox majority was a sin against God and had to be dealt with punitively.

Roger Williams, on the other hand, understood that God alone was judge of conscience. In words still relevant to cases of state-privileged religion, Williams wrote: "All civil states, with their officers of justice, their respective constitutions and administrations, are proved essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors or defenders of the spiritual, or Christian, state and worship."⁴ The radical role of conscience, Williams believed, was at the heart of Christian identity. He declared:

It is the will and command of God that since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God.⁵

So heretics, non-Christian and "anti-Christian" were free to exercise conscience, as Dr. John Clarke, Williams' Baptist co-founder of Rhode Island wrote, because "every man being such as shall appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and must give an account of himself to God, and therefore ought to be fully persuaded in his own mind, for what he undertake. ..."⁶

Yet for Williams, some acts of conscience were not appropriate. He wrote: that “the blood of so many hundred thousand souls of protestants and papists, spilt in the wars of present and former ages, for their respective consciences, is not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.”⁷

Baptist commitment to conscience is inseparable, I believe, from a commitment to uncoerced faith in Jesus Christ, a pre-Enlightenment insight born of a Believers’ Church, described no more clearly than in the classic 1611 Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam, which states:

That the church off CHRIST is a company off faithful people 1 Cor.1.2 Eph.1.1 separated fro[m] the world by the word & Spirit off GOD. 2 Cor.6.17. being k[n]it vnto the LORD, &one Vnto another, by Baptisme. 1 Cor. 12.13. Vpon their owne confessio[n] of the faith. Act.8.37. and sinnes. Mat.3.6.8

In this seminal statement, the Baptists built on a growing concern among some English Puritans that a profession of faith was required of everyone who would claim membership in Christ’s church. Yet the Baptists went beyond the separatist and non-separatist Puritans by making such profession normative from the beginning of their movement, by rejecting governmentally enforced infant baptism in favor of believer’s baptism, and by insisting that faith cannot be

coerced on heretic or atheist by any ecclesial or governmental hierarchy or tribunal. They formed such a church and then did something else very Baptist, they split.

As they knocked on the door of the Mennonites, John Smyth's schismatic group wrote their own confession bridging Anabaptist and Baptist ideas including an amazing statement on religious freedom and uncoerced faith — a clause that William L. Lumpkin called an "important landmark," representing "the first confession of faith of modern times to demand freedom of conscience and separation of church and state."⁹ It asserts:

That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience, and to handle only civil transgressions (Rom. xii), injuries and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery, theft, etc., for Christ only is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience. (James iv.12).¹⁰

From the beginning, the Baptist concept of a Believer's Church provided a theological foundation that shaped issues of uncoerced faith, freedom of conscience, dissent, and Christian responses to the state. Faith is required for baptism and church membership; such faith must be uncoerced; conscience shapes the response to faith and God alone is judge of conscience, therefore all

official state or ecclesial efforts to compel faith must be resisted for conscience' sake. And since states and churches often succumb to coercion, dissent is inevitable. That's us, from the beginning.

Baptists, some at least, have been distressed for conscience since Roger Williams' views got him exiled by the godly New England Puritans and led him to found Providence and with it the first Baptist church in America. Yet there are also times when Baptists have distressed the consciences of those around them, challenging their culture even when they knew they would never gain the majority. Today, let us consider doing the same, reaffirm our Christian/Baptist identity as persons distressed and distressing of conscience. Today, I am grateful to the BJC for permitting me to raise issues plaguing my conscience that I hope will distress ours.

—First, let's celebrate religious pluralism, after all we helped invent it. Such pluralism does not mean a nebulous religious syncretism without particularity, that we have to make all religions "fit" in common affirmation. It means that everyone has voice and the freedom to choose or reject religious identity — that is the heart of a free conscience. Thus in the pluralistic environment religious groups have the freedom to be as welcoming or as obnoxious as their convictions compel them. And their would-be constituency is free to run to or run away from them as they choose. Indeed, faith communities are often forced to accept irreconcilable differences and schism for conscience's sake.

—Second, pluralism was relatively easy for Protestants until now. Early Baptists affirmed pluralism and conscience as a distinct, sometimes persecuted minority in America. As religious liberty became more normative, they discovered something else. One, that Americans to this day and in spite of the First Amendment, tend to grant religious liberty grudgingly (just ask Baptists, Quakers, Shakers, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Roman Catholics, Jews and Muslims); and Two, once Protestantism gained privilege in American religious life, talk of religious liberty became less dangerous for Baptists as they became part of the religiously privileged class. Liberal and conservative alike could use the rhetoric of religious liberty generously since they owned much of the culture, particularly in the South and Southwest. But something happened in our generation. The pluralism that Baptists anticipated and defended, often much earlier than most American Protestant groups, has prevailed. Cities and towns large and small are now populated by multiple religious groups, including many non-Christians, each claiming a place at religio-political table. These days, our consciences are sometimes distressed because we are experiencing the death rattle of Protestant privilege in American culture, especially in the South/Southwest. This loss of religious hegemony forces us to ask: What will become of our commitment to religious liberty now?

—Third, let us learn to replace culture-privilege with culture-witness. We do not claim religious rights at the expense of other’s conscience but demand voice, the right to declare our views publicly and privately in ways that take dialogue and

differences seriously. Disagree vehemently on the basis of conscience; but burn no one, implicitly or explicitly. Defend and live into the heritage of religious freedom with humility, tempering the advocacy of church/state separation with the confession that some among us retain certain ministerial tax exemptions, the last gasp of fourth century Constantinianism in a democratic culture. That alone should give us pause in being too self-righteous about “separation of church and state.” Being a Baptist remains a messy business.

—Fourth, let us rediscover the power of conscience and the possibility of dissent. In a society where individualism is rampant, churches need to take communal responsibility for distinguishing Christian conscience from destructive fanaticism or political meanness. At the same time, faith communities themselves often require the prophetic voice of the lone individual, even when it is painful and divisive. For example, as we celebrate the concern of Roman Catholics for religious liberty after years of waiting on them to claim it, some of us might insist that for conscience’ sake, and in the name of religious freedom, we revisit posting an American ambassador to the Vatican, or offering government-funded vouchers to parochial schools. Conscience cuts both ways, we dissenters might gently but firmly remind the bishops. Conscience calls us to distinguish religious freedom from religious privilege, implicitly and explicitly. We may not win on those issues but we can be Protest-ant and Baptist about them.

—Fifth, let us struggle (and it is a struggle) to distinguish between freedom of conscience in church/state matters and freedom of dialogue and debate inside

the Baptist house. In my own town, I was struck this year by the fact that in multiple political debates—deity specific prayer at government meetings, Christian flags at military monuments, and constitutional marriage amendments, Christians in general and Baptists in particular seldom found ways to talk about their differences outside sound bites in the public media. Right now I've put a personal moratorium on using the term Body of Christ too readily so deep are the divisions and the silence between supposed brothers and sisters in Christ. At the same time, when our consciences are "pricked" across the political spectrum, we need not be silent, hoping to talk to, not just at, those with whom we differ. Roger Williams and John Cotton did it in 17th century New England, but only because Williams was "sheltered" in free Rhode Island. I wish we'd try harder.

—Finally, amid all the distress, in good conscience let's consider this, in the year of our Lord 2012 a Republican, former Mormon missionary, and a Democrat, nurtured in an African American Liberationist congregation, are running against each other for President of the United States. That situation appears to bear out Roger Williams' radical 1644 assertion that "true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of divers and contrary consciences, either Jew or Gentile."¹¹ He won, didn't he? At least for now.

Endnotes:

1. Edward Bean Underhill, Introduction, in Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience Discussed* (London: J. Haddon, 1848), xxv.
2. Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 19.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, 2.
6. John Clarke, III *Newes from New England*, in H. Leon McBeth, *Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 92.
7. Ibid, 1.
8. *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland, 1611*, in William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, editors, *Baptist Confessions of Faith Second Revised Edition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 111.
9. William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith Second Revised Edition*, 115.
10. "Propositions and Conclusions concerning True Christian Religion, containing a Confession of Faith of certain English people, living at Amsterdam", 1612, in Lumpkin and Leonard, editors, *Baptist Confessions of Faith Second Revised Edition*, 128.

11. Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, 2.