

Freedom-loving Baptists should remember Clarke's contributions

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Reflections

September 25, 2002

We freedom-loving Baptists hold up Roger Williams as our all-time all-star. And properly so. But we should not forget the contributions of others, such as John Clarke. True, Williams coined the phrase, "wall of separation" and founded the First Baptist Church in America. But he did not stay a Baptist very long. His contemporary, John Clarke, a physician and lay minister, remained a lifelong Baptist. In 1639 Clarke founded the town of Newport, R.I., and became the pastor of the local Baptist congregation. Clarke traveled with Williams to London to secure a new charter for Rhode Island colony in 1663, which granted permission to continue a "lively experiment" of religious liberty.

Clarke also penned what might be the first Baptist confession in New England. In 1651 Clarke, along with two other Baptists, John Crandall and Obadiah Holmes, traveled to Lynn, Mass., to conduct a worship service (including the Lord's Supper and baptism) in the private home of a blind Baptist named William Witter. That "illegal" act earned them arrest and imprisonment. Their sentence? A fine or public flogging. Clarke managed to pay his fine, but Holmes was "well-whipped" with 30 lashes. So outraged was Clarke by what he called this "tragical story" he published an account of the Lynn persecutions titled "Ill Newes from New-England: Or a Narrative of New-England's Persecution."

In that powerful treatise, Clarke articulated four "conclusions" which summarized the pith of his Baptist convictions. Slightly paraphrased for modern readers, Clarke wrote:

I. Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed Priest, Prophet and King of Saints. Christ is also the Lord of his Church in point of ruling and ordering them with respect to the worship of God (The Lordship of Jesus Christ).

II. Baptism is one of the commandments of Christ and will continue until he comes again. Believers are the proper subjects of baptism. They are to wait for the promise of the Spirit, as with the presence of Christ (Believers' Baptism and the Gathered Church).

III. Every believer ought to improve his talent both in and out of the Congregation (The Ministry of Laity and the Priesthood of Every Believer).

IV. No servant of Jesus has any authority from him to force upon others either the faith or the order of the Gospel of Christ (Religious Freedom and the Rights of Conscience).

Clarke went on to elaborate this final point concerning the rights of conscience: no such believer, or servant of Christ Jesus, has any liberty, much less authority from his Lord, to smite his fellow servant, nor yet with outward force, or arm of flesh, to constrain or

restrain his Conscience, no nor yet his outward man for Conscience sake, or worship of his God, where injury is not offered to the person, name, or estate of others

The astute reader will see in these words about the liberty of conscience the seeds of the modern First Amendment doctrine that government is permitted to burden the exercise of religion only where it has a "compelling state interest." Although no one is permitted, according to Clarke, to "constrain or restrain conscience," regulation of religious conduct (i.e. "his outward man for conscience sake") can be justified only in cases where injury is "offered to the person, name, or estate of others." Clarke understood a principle that five members of the U.S. Supreme Court abjured in their 1990 decision *Employment Division vs. Smith*: government should restrict religious exercise only when such practices threaten the life, safety, or welfare of others and only if it adopts the least restrictive means available to ensure those ends.

Modern Baptists would do well to read and heed their history, including writings such as "Ill Newes." We must also take responsibility for reminding our culture and Supreme Court of these precious principles. If we fail to do so, the signal achievement of John Clarke and the "lively experiment" will not long survive.