

Voices: Roger Williams: Dangers of an unpredictable past

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A Russian Baptist once quipped that Russia is a country with an unpredictable past. His words serve as a reminder that people in power have used history to boost their authority. Dictators sift through history to find support for their propaganda.

History always has been a useful tool for people with political ambitions. It is perhaps the most tempting sin of historians to bend the narrative for selfish reasons. As Texas Baptists, we can guard against the manipulation of history by making sure we know our own story. We should recite it when we gather and teach our children about the Baptist tradition.

Friction with the church

For centuries, Baptists proudly have celebrated the role we played in the fight for religious liberty in Colonial America. Baptists resisted the authority of a state church in Massachusetts and found a champion for their cause in a man named Roger Williams—the founder of the first Baptist church in the New World.

Roger Williams was born in London and studied at Cambridge. In 1627, he accepted a comfortable position as an Anglican minister on a private estate in England. After a time, Williams began to question the beliefs of the Church of England and, by 1629, had decided his views no longer fit the Anglican tradition.

The Anglicans, according to Williams and other Puritans, had not completed the process of the Reformation. Their practices still had too much in common with the Catholic faith, and they needed to be completely purified of the old faith.

The following year, Williams set sail with his family and settled in Boston. The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony warmly welcomed this young college graduate and offered him the pastorate of First Church, Boston. It seemed to be a comfortable landing for the idealistic Williams, but he rejected the offer.

The Boston Puritans remained too closely connected to their Anglican roots to suit Williams. He insisted on complete and total separation from the Church of England. Conflict increased between Williams and the Puritan leaders to the point they tossed him out of the colony in the dead of winter.

Points of tension

What were these tensions that caused the colonial leaders to banish Roger Williams? He offended the Boston establishment when he rejected their offer to pastor the church, but he continued to offend them with his criticism of the “New England Way.”

In 1635, Williams was brought before the Boston Court and cited with several teachings the court found dangerous. It troubled the court that Williams insisted the Massachusetts Bay Colony should pay Native Americans for the land the colony occupied.

Williams served as a missionary to nearby tribes. He preached among them and published a *Key to Native American Languages*. The colony leaders benefited from Williams’ language skills when they needed him to negotiate treaties, but they rejected his demands to reimburse the native peoples for their land.

Another point of tension between Williams and the Puritan leaders related to the power of the government. It upset the Boston court when Williams protested the “Freeman’s Oath.” Every settler was required to swear a religious oath of loyalty to government officials.

Williams perceived these oaths to be state-sponsored prayers. Prayer is outside government control. These views were rooted in Williams’ understanding of the Ten Commandments. There are two distinct tables of the law. The first half governs the relationship between people and God. The second half regulates human relationships. Humans should make laws only to enforce the second table of the law.

Limits of government

Williams believed the government had every right to control outward behavior—bodies and goods. You can and should pass laws that protect people from harm. Governments should not force people to worship or pray, however.

The first table of the law is outside of human jurisdiction. There is a limit to the power of government. It cannot enter the realm of the human heart. God alone is the judge of the soul. Baptists later would refer to this idea as “soul liberty.”

Neither a government nor a king nor a priest can impose religious beliefs upon people. Jesus *alone* is Lord.

“God’s people, since the coming of the King of Israel, the Lord Jesus, have openly and constantly professed that no civil magistrate, no king, nor Caesar, have any power over the souls or consciences in the matters of God and the crown of Jesus,” Williams wrote (*Bloudy Tenent*, 41).

All government can do is force people to *pretend* to believe. It only can

create hypocrites.

Williams struggled mightily to cling to truth, to keep his own conscience clear before the Lord. It horrified him to think a political power could force him to betray the deepest convictions of his soul.

He used strong, violent language to express his outrage: "Conscience ought not to be violated or forced," Williams stressed, and he called this violation of conscience "spiritual rape" (*Bloudy Tenent*, 110-11).

Separation of church and state

Williams also was unbending in his demands for separation of church and state. The melding of church and state pollutes both church and state. He insisted the spiritual realm and civic realm cannot be blended because their methods, weapons and goals are distinct. This unholy union "mingles Sheep and Goats together" and is contrary to the spirit of the Lord Jesus.

He pointed out that the early church was separate from the state: "The church of Christ in Ephesus, which were God's people, converted and called out from the worship of that city unto Christianity, or worship of God in Christ, was distinct from both" (*Bloudy Tenent*, 39-40).

The Puritan colonial leaders could not wrap their minds around this concept of religious liberty. They were appalled by any suggestion the church should have no relationship with the state. John Cotton scoffed that Roger Williams had "windmills in his head."

They banished Williams from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, forcing him to seek shelter with the native peoples who lived along the Narragansett Bay. It was not an easy sojourn.

"I was unmercifully driven from my chamber to a winter's flight," wrote Williams. "I was sorely tossed for one fourteen weeks in a bitter winter

season, not knowing what bread and bed did mean ... exposed to a winter's miseries in a howling wilderness of frost and snow" (Quoted in Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 129).

Establishing religious liberty

In the summer of 1636, Roger Williams and several friends established the beginnings of a new colony called Providence Plantations. The group drew up a compact that would form the basis of Rhode Island—the first experiment in a government dedicated to religious liberty and the separation of church and state in history.

Three years later, Williams and the colonists at Providence established a Baptist church—the first Baptist church in America. Although he did not remain a Baptist very long, Williams was deeply influenced by Baptist ideas and he, in turn, shaped Baptists.

Williams wrote more than any other Baptist of the 17th century. These writings formed the foundation for Baptist belief and informed the Baptist fight for religious freedom during the American Revolution. His famous work, *The Bloudy Tenent*, includes Baptist writings on religious liberty from England and resonates with their demands for religious freedom.

Remember our history

Some might ask: Should Christians always follow our historical roots blindly? Of course, not. We must interrogate our past and hold it up to the light of the gospel. We should examine the past through our current understanding of what is true, noble, right, pure and admirable. We may critique the past, but we do not change the story.

Our Baptist commitment to religious liberty and the separation of church

and state remains consistent with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 2002, I attended a seminar led by the distinguished American religious historian Edwin Gaustad. Gaustad was commenting on our reading of *The Bloudy Tenent* and several other works by Roger Williams.

Our final topic was: “Why is Roger Williams significant for Baptists?” Gaustad made some of the observations I have stated above. Williams wrote more than any other Baptist. He influenced generations of Baptists.

Then Gaustad concluded: “Well, [Roger Williams] didn’t write carefully or beautifully, and he wasn’t very well organized. But Roger Williams is important because he was *right*. He was right *early*. ... He was trying to turn the western world on its ear.”

Roger Williams was *right*. For generations, Baptists have agreed Roger Williams was right about religious liberty. Roger Williams was right about separation of church and state.

Baptists have worked tirelessly for nearly four centuries to bring religious freedom and separation of church and state to every corner of the globe, so all people can have the freedom to respond freely to the love of Jesus. We should question the motives of those who want to rewrite our history now. We should be deeply alarmed by the dangers of an unpredictable past.

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