

# Voices: The story of Baptists and religious liberty

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For more than 200 years, Baptists in America and Southern Baptists in particular proudly have repeated the stories of our fight for religious freedom.

Baptists in Colonial America started as a persecuted minority. We were outsiders who experienced oppression at the hands of powerful Christian rulers.

When Baptists repeated this story, we aligned ourselves with those who are marginalized, powerless and oppressed. Like the people of Israel, we are reminded we once were persecuted, and God redeemed us.

We are to remember God's mercy and not abuse our influence. In our own story, we are bound to the vulnerable, the marginalized and the oppressed.

Is your congregation still telling this Baptist story?

## Baptist story in New England

Do you know about a Baptist named Obadiah Holmes, who was publicly whipped for worshipping with his Baptist community instead of the Puritan church? You can read his story in *Baptist Piety: The Last Will and Testament of Obadiah Holmes*.

Do you know about Roger Williams, who was thrown out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for challenging the authority of the Christian rulers? Williams insisted faith had to be free in order to be genuine. He scandalized his Puritan neighbors by insisting when a government forced

faith on its people it was committing spiritual rape.

Williams was thrown out into the wilderness and survived through the hospitality of the Narragansett Indians. He later secured a charter for Rhode Island rooted in the principle of religious liberty and established the first Baptist church in America.

You can read Williams' views in *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* or read his full biography in *The Challenges of Roger Williams* by James P. Byrd.

Do you tell the stories of Thomas Gold, a wealthy wagon maker in Boston who refused to have his infant daughter baptized? When he asked his Puritan ministers to let him pray about the topic and think about it more, they refused.

Gold was thrown into prison over and over again by the Christian leaders of Boston. He insisted he should be free to exercise his faith without interference from the government. After years of harassment, he finally was given his freedom. He helped establish the first Baptist church in Boston.

Gold's story is one of many in the excellent two-volume history *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* by William McLoughlin. You also could look at McLoughlin's *Soul Liberty: The Baptists' Struggle in New England, 1630-1833*.

## **Baptist story in Virginia**

Did you know by the time of the American Revolution more than 50 percent of the Baptist preachers in Virginia had been imprisoned by their Christian colonial government for preaching the gospel without proper authorization?

The Anglican rulers in Virginia did not approve of Baptists. So, they

imprisoned them, harassed them and imposed religious taxes on them.

Marriages performed by Baptist ministers in Baptist churches were not considered legal or valid. Children of Baptist marriages were considered illegitimate, and they were not allowed to inherit family property.

Baptismal services at the riverside often were disrupted by men on horseback. Some ministers were held under the water to insult and terrorize them.

In one case, a hornet's nest was tossed into a Baptist service, and the doors were barred, trapping men, women and children inside.

As you can imagine, these Colonial Baptists were deeply suspicious of Christian governments and despised the religious conformity forced upon them. You can read more about Virginia Baptists in *Wellspring of Liberty* by John A. Ragosta.

## **Baptist influence on freedom**

Baptist ministers like John Leland and Isaac Backus fought for the right to worship freely and openly.

Baptists petitioned Thomas Jefferson to demand religious freedom, not just for themselves, but for all people. Jefferson took up the Baptist cause and enshrined the principle of religious liberty into the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

When the newly formed U.S. Constitution failed to offer protections for religious liberty, Baptists again raised the alarm. They pledged their political support for James Madison in return for a promise of a Bill of Rights. Madison delivered.

Americans can thank the Baptists, more than any other group, for their

unwavering commitment to the principle of separation of church and state.

Isaac Backus narrated the Baptist struggle for religious liberty in the first history of the Baptists in America in 1844.

Historians outside the Baptist family also gave the Baptists credit for our commitment to religious liberty.

In 1898, Leonard Woolsey Bacon wrote: “The active labor in this cause was mainly done by the Baptists. It is to their consistency and constancy in the warfare against the privileges of the powerful ‘standing order’ of New England, and the moribund establishments of the South, that we are chiefly indebted for the final triumph in this country of that principle of the separation of Church and State which is one of the largest contributions of the New World to civilization and to the church universal” (*A History of American Christianity*).

As long as Baptists keep telling this story of religious liberty, we will remember Baptists experienced oppression and violence at the hands of a Christian state. We will remain suspicious of those who tell us good things will happen when Christians control the government. Baptists know better.

Our Baptist ancestors were absolutely convinced the church of Jesus Christ did not need the support of the state to carry out its mission. Early Baptists were fully aware when the church attempts to build its power using the authority of the state, it is building a house on sinking sand.

We told our Baptist story for generations because it is powerful. We told our children this story because it is true. What story is your church telling?

*Carol Crawford Holcomb is a professor of church history and Baptist studies in University of Mary Hardin-Baylor’s College of Christian Studies. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author and millions of Baptists.*