

The Christian and Civil Government (21th)

(The study today begins with the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America as it relates to the colony of Massachusetts.)

We left our last podcast saying that we plan to show some of the historic details of the struggles and persecutions of Baptists in the new land and their influence in securing religious freedom as outlined in the *Constitution of the United States*. These examples will not be exhaustive. This should be obvious. Also I would like to say again that the exhaustive labors of Roger Williams (with the invaluable help of John Clarke) and the founding of the colony of Rhode Island established true religious freedom cannot be overestimated. However, due to the general knowledge and popularity of this truth, our attention will be devoted to some of the other colonies and their struggles for religious freedom. Likewise they will not necessarily be presented in a chronological order. Though Virginia was the first colony, we will look firstly at Massachusetts.

It is without question that the people on the *Mayflower* believed that the civil government had the power to regulate and enforce religious beliefs by law. In part, the *Mayflower Compact* reads as follows: “Having undertaken for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together in a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini 1620.” Note that it reads “...for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith ... do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together in a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.” Twenty years later, in 1641, Nathaniel Ward, a minister, compiled the Massachusetts Body of Liberties and Article 94, Section 3 stated, “If any man shall Blaspheme the name of god, the father, Sonne or Holie ghost, with direct, expresse, presumptuous or high handed blasphemie, or shall curse god in the like manner, he shall be put to death.” However, in 1780, the first *Constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* was drawn up by John Adams. Article 2 stated, “It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe. And no subject shall be hurt, molested, or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience; or for his religious profession or sentiments; provided he doth not disturb the public peace, or obstruct others in their religious worship.” As we know, in 1791, the First Amendment to the *Constitution of the United States of America* was passed declaring, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” And yet, in 1917, Article 46, Section 1, of the Massachusetts’ Constitution was ratified and adopted which stated, “No law shall be passed prohibiting the free exercise of religion.” While a law for the exercise of freedom of religion was not established in Massachusetts until 1917, this was not done

for almost 300 years after the *Mayflower Compact* and some 137 years after the first constitution of Massachusetts and 126 years after the *Constitution of the United States*. Nevertheless, religion fines are still written into the *Constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*. The General Laws for Massachusetts, Part IV, Title I, Chapter 272, Section 36, reads as follows: “Whoever wilfully blasphemeth the holy name of God by denying, cursing or contumeliously reproaching God, his creation, government or final judging of the world, or by cursing or contumeliously reproaching Jesus Christ or the Holy Ghost, or by cursing or contumeliously reproaching or exposing to contempt and ridicule, the holy word of God contained in the holy scriptures shall be punished by imprisonment in jail for not more than one year or by a fine of not more than three hundred dollars, and may also be bound to good behavior.” (See the supplied link for more details: [https://blog.mass.gov/masslawlib/legal-history/massachusetts-declaration-of-rights-article-](https://blog.mass.gov/masslawlib/legal-history/massachusetts-declaration-of-rights-article-2/#:~:text=Massachusetts%20Constitution%2C%20Articles%20of%20Amendment,the%20free%20exercise%20of%20religion.%E2%80%9D)

[2/#:~:text=Massachusetts%20Constitution%2C%20Articles%20of%20Amendment,the%20free%20exercise%20of%20religion.%E2%80%9D](https://blog.mass.gov/masslawlib/legal-history/massachusetts-declaration-of-rights-article-2/#:~:text=Massachusetts%20Constitution%2C%20Articles%20of%20Amendment,the%20free%20exercise%20of%20religion.%E2%80%9D).) Obviously, the God under consideration is Jehovah or the God of the Bible because Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost or Spirit are also mentioned. It is likely that other states have such laws on their books that are left over from the early days of their establishment. Further research, not only with Massachusetts but other colonies as well, will show that the liberty of religious worship was at first limited to the “Christian” religion. And while John Adams was liberal in this religious liberty somewhat in 1780, he did not share this view in his earlier days.

A wealth of information can be supplied to show the persecution of the Baptists, and others, in the early days of Massachusetts and the struggle for religious freedom. However, we will limit our study of the colony to three men—Obadiah Holmes and Isaac Backus and John Leland. However, the influence of Leland will also be seen as we study other states.

Bypassing a massive amount of interesting information regarding the life of Obadiah Holmes (1607-1682) and the historical setting of the colony of Massachusetts and the surrounding colonies, we will try to give a snapshot of Holmes and his life. For a fuller history surrounding the life of Holmes I would recommend the book entitled *Baptist Piety: The Last Will and Testimony of Obadiah Holmes* by Edwin S. Gaustad.

It may be asked what is the importance of looking into the life of an obscure Baptist preacher that lived in the 1600’s and the connection with our subject at hand and modern day Baptist regarding reformation doctrine? Much in every way and, the Lord willing, we will show this in future studies because we are approaching near the end of our time for today.

“On July 16, 1651, John Clarke, John Crandall, and Obadiah Holmes journeyed from Newport [Rhode Island] into Massachusetts, coming to the town of Lynn on the ninetheeth of that month. ... The purpose of the visit ... was to bring spiritual comfort and communion to one William Witter, a blind and aged fellow Baptist who had invited the three to come to his home. ... On Sunday, July 20, as Clarke began to expound upon the temptations to error all around and upon ‘that word of promise made to those that keep the word of His patience,’ two constables entered the house. ‘With their clamorous tongues’ they interrupted Clarke’s discourse, ‘telling us that they were come with authority from the Magistrate to apprehend us.’ Clarke asked to see the authority for so rude an intrusion, ‘whereupon they plucked forth their warrant’ and read it.” *Baptist Piety*, pp. 22-23. (I am quoting from Gaustad’s work, but fuller details are found in John Clarke’s *Ill Newes From New-England: or A Narative (sic.) of New-England Persecution*, written in 1652. Clarke wrote to England seeking help from parliament concerning persecution in the new world. The opening sentence in “The Epistle Dedicatory” reads as follows: “To the Right Honorable the House of Parliament, and Council of State for the Commonwealth of England, The author humbly craves of that mighty Counsellor, that Price of peace, a large donation of the spirit of Consell, and of the spirit of courage, with a suitable and happy success for the *Peace, Liberty*, and enlargement of these three *Nations*.” {From my photocopy from microfilm of *Ill Newes*, which I assume may still be obtained from Xerox-University Microfilm, Ann Arbor, Michigan. There are copies on the

web and reprints from books of this work, as well. A pdf file of this work may be found at this link: http://elbourne.org/baptist/ofbl_docs/john%20clarke's%20i11%20news%20final.pdf }

While Clarke was giving a narrative of the persecution that was going on in New England in his *III Newes*, Gaustad pointed out from a Puritan work by one of their ministers at that time the primary issue was that of the place of civil government regarding its role in religion. Referring to a work by Thomas Cobbet, Gaustad wrote the following: “This, Cobbet correctly perceived, was the crux of the dispute between the Baptists and the Puritans, whether in London or in Boston. Baptist views on the limit of civil government, more than their views on baptism or church order or human learning or any other single doctrine, was their most distinguishing as well as their most disturbing tenet to the Puritan majority.” *Baptist Piety*, p. 37.

We plan to give more information about Thomas Cobbet (or Cobbett) in a future broadcast; however, our time up for today. May God bless you, and farewell.