

The Christian and Civil Government (22th)

(The study today continues looking into some of the history of the struggles for religious freedom in the United States of America as it relates to the colony of Massachusetts and the life of Obadiah Holmes.)

In our last podcast we noted that the people who came to America on the *Mayflower* drew up a compact before landing on shore. Most of those who came here were Puritans that had fled England years before and moved to Holland to worship God according to the liberty of their conscience. These same people came to our shores seeking religious freedom and with the view of establishing religious freedom in the new land. However, there were other people on the *Mayflower* that were of another nature and when it was realized that the charter obtained by the Pilgrims from England did not apply to the area of Cape Cod where they providentially found themselves concluded that ““These people have no charter for a settlement at Cape Cod, and without a charter they have no authority over us. We will, therefore, when we come ashore use our own liberty.”” *The Mayflower Pilgrims*, Edmund Janes Carpenter, p. 80. Carpenter further wrote that “Brewster and Carver, Bradford and Winslow, and Standish, mighty with the sword, were equal to this emergency. Upon the lid of Standish’s chest ... they drew up and signed that immortal Compact of government, by which this company ‘solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and of one another,’ did ‘covenant and combine’ themselves ‘together into a civill body politick.”” *Ibid*. Here we see that in their desire to escape the intolerance of liberty of conscience in England, in seeking to remove the influence of civil government, and at the same time desiring to honor God in establishing a society agreeable to His will, they in effect created what they hoped to avoid. Their “civil body politic” was created “for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith.” Before we judge them too severely, allow me to ask, “What would you do under the same circumstances?” In other words, if you found yourself gathered together with a group of likeminded believers and desired to move to some remote location to live together, what compact or order of government would you create for the peace and security of the whole? If you merely wanted to function as a congregation of the Lord then the form of government is established in the Holy Scriptures for that, but congregational government only applies to the membership, I Corinthians 5:11-13. However, when a group of individual people or citizens that is composed of believers and non-believers, or a group of professed believers of different faiths, seeks to form a civil government it is more complicated. What law can be established to secure the liberty and rights for all? In my opinion, I cannot think of a better one than that of Article 1 of *The Bill of Rights* of the *Constitution of the United States*: “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 to peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” And as we shall see, if the Lord wills, in future broadcasts, that this article is largely the results of our Baptist forefathers. However, it must never be forgotten that we live in a fallen and sinful world and ultimately no civil government will stand when the people are unwilling to abide by the law of the land. Furthermore, for the Christian believer, he knows that ultimately all kingdoms and governments will fall and the only kingdom that will abide forever is the kingdom of God and Caesar has no authority over it or the congregation of the Lord which resides within God’s kingdom. And while we live in this fallen world, we must ever be mindful that the house of God is not of civil government, and yet, the individual member of the congregation is a citizen of the community (town, city, county, state, and nation) and must assess before the Lord his place in civil government for the benefit of each citizen in a just and equitable way. He may or may not take an active part, but whatever position he takes it must be that which he determines by a prayerful studying of the Holy Scriptures and a diligent seeking the face of

God. Indeed, much, much more could be said regarding this matter, but we should return to the subject that we concluded in our previous podcast.

We ended that podcast with John Clarke, John Crandall, and Obadiah Holmes being arrested on the Lord's Day, in the home of William Witter, a blind man living in the town of Lynn, Massachusetts. They were first taken to Anchor Tavern, the local ale-house, to be kept to appear before the local magistrate the next day. Since it was the Lord's Day, it was suggested that they be taken to the Puritan (Congregational) meeting house since worship services were going on there. The ministers were Samuel Whiting and Thomas Cobbett. While being marched to the Puritan worship, Clarke told the constable that if they were forced to attend their "meeting, we shall declare our dissent from you both by word and gesture." *Baptist Piety*, p. 24. Upon entering the meeting house, they removed their hats and sat down where they were directed, and then put their hats back on. At this Robert Bridges, the local magistrate, instructed the constable to "pluck off" their hats. After the conclusion of the worship service (composed of prayer, singing, and preaching) Clarke stood up to explain why they returned their hats to their heads. He said they did not object to *what* was preached, but they (that is, Clarke, Crandall, and Holmes) were strangers and did not know what the congregation believed and did not know their practice they could not endorse the congregation. At this point the magistrate commanded Clarke to be silent. Then they were taken back to the ale-house and were "watched over that night, as Theeves and Robbers." *Ill Newes*, pp. 3-4. For more history regarding the trial, we will give the following from Gaustad's *Baptist Piety*, pp. 24-27.

In the morning, after a brief appearance before Robert Bridges in Lynn, the itinerant evangelists were sent to Boston for trial.

The charge to the keeper of the Boston prison was that he take custody of "the bodies of John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes, and John Crandall and them to keep until the next County Court to be held at Boston, that they may then and there answer to such complaints as may be alleged against them." This mittimus, or court order for commitment to prison, indicated essentially four complaints against the "strangers." They had offended by a) conducting a private worship service at the same time as the town's public worship; b) "offensively disturbing" the public meeting in Lynn; c) more seriously, "seducing and drawing aside [of] others after their erroneous judgment and practices"; and d) "neglecting or refusing to give in sufficient security for their appearance" at the next meeting of the county court.

After the Rhode Island Baptists had spent a week or so in Boston's prison, the day of trial came. The trial itself was so swiftly consummated that the accused hardly knew it was done. We were examined in the morning, wrote Clarke, and sentenced in the afternoon — sentenced "without producing either accuser, witness, jury, law of God or man. ..." In the sentencing, particular emphasis were placed upon the "seducing of others" and notably upon the "re-baptizing" of others. But, insisted the three accused, they were not "re-baptizers," since the baptism which they administered was the only real baptism, infant baptism being no valid ordinance at all. This brand of apologetics only threw the Court into a paroxysm of fury. ...

The same essential charges were levelled [*sic.*] against all three men, all of whom fell under the clear proscription of the 1645 law against Anabaptists. The penalty which that law, with equal clarity, provided was banishment. But what sort of punishment is it to "banish" persons who already live in another jurisdiction? Obviously, some other manner of rebuke had to be meted out, whether the law made provision for it or not. Clarke, clearly the spokesman and leader of the group, was fined £20; Crandall, as a tag-along and largely silent companion, was fined only £5. But Obadiah Holmes, already under the cloud of excommunication from the church in Rehoboth, received the largest fine: £30. All the fines provided for a hard alternative: to be paid in full or else the culprit was to be "well whipped." Until the fines were paid or satisfaction otherwise received, all three were to remain in jail...

After another week or ten days in prison, Clarke was released (August 11, 1651) when friends paid his £20 fine. ... So only Holmes remained in prison, adamantly refusing to pay his fine or to let others pay it for him. The court's explicit alternative awaited him — to be “well whipped.”

I regret interrupting the historical setting in the life of Obadiah Holmes and the religious persecution by the civil authorities in the early days of this country. However, our time is up for today and we will continue this narrative in our next podcast. Farewell.