

The Christian and Civil Government (23rd)

(The study today continues the history of sufferings of Obadiah Holmes in the struggles religious freedom in the United States of America as it relates to the colony of Massachusetts.)

In the previous podcast, we interrupted our quoting from Edwin S. Gaustad's book entitled *The Last Will and Testimony of Obadiah Holmes* regarding the arrest and trial of Holmes along with John Clarke and John Crandall. (Also, further details can be found in John Clarke's *Ill Newes From New-England: or A Narative (sic.) of New-England Persecution.*) We ended with Holmes still in jail and waiting to be "well whipped" for being involved in religious worship in a private home in Lynn, Massachusetts. At this time we will continue from where we stopped in our last podcast.

Holmes recounted his ordeal in a letter to fellow British Baptists John Spilsbury and William Kiffin "and the rest that steadfastly in the order of the gospel which was once delivered unto the saints by Jesus Christ." While still before the Boston Court in July, Holmes had apparently aroused a special antipathy in John Wilson, pastor of Boston's first church. When he heard his sentence pronounced, Holmes responded that he blessed God that he was "counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus, whereupon John Wilson ... struck me before the judgment seat and cursed me saying, "The curse of God or Jesus go with thee."

The amount of Holmes' fine together with the intensity of animosity he aroused (though Thomas Cobbet vigorously denied that Wilson had stuck him) placed this prisoner in a singular category. He felt even more singular when, after the middle of August, he languished in prison all alone, "deprived of my two loving friends." It was then, wrote Holmes, that "the Adversary stepped in, took hold on my spirit and troubled me for the space of an hour..." But the spirit of the Comforter drove the Tempter away: it pleased God "to stand at my right hand." During that time when Holmes was alone, from mid-August until September 5, Tempter and Comforter wrestled for his soul. Other friends came to pay the fine, "yet I durst not accept deliverance in such a way." On the morning appointed for his whipping, more friends appeared to offer him some wine "and other comforts, but my resolution was not to drink wine nor strong drink until my punishment were over," lest the world say that he was sustained by anything other than the spirit of God.

Then Holmes asked his friends to leave him for a time so that "I might communicate with my God, commit myself to him, and beg strength from him." But even in this final hour the Tempter had not yet surrendered. First, said Satan, think of your reputation, your birth, your breeding, your wife, children, and friends. Swiftly, the sweet answer came: "Tis for the Lord, I must not deny Him before the sons of men." Aha, replied Satan, that is just the point: "Is it for Him and Him alone? is it not rather for thy own or some other's sake? ... is it not pride and self at the bottom?" This, Holmes conceded, was a strong temptation indeed; therefore, "I made diligent search after the matter....After a while there was even as it had been a voice from heaven in my very soul, bearing witness with my conscience, that it was not for any man's cast or sake in this world, but for my Lord's case and sake and for Him alone...."

Still Satan pressed on: Consider the weakness of the flesh, the strokes of the whip, the pain, the blood....Holmes prayed for courage, for strength "not to shrink or yield to the strokes, or shed tears...." And at length the answer came: Just as you have already surrendered your soul to Me, now surrender your body. "And so I addressed myself in a comely a manner as I could, having such a Lord and Master to serve in this business." The jailer arrived to find a prisoner utterly calm and composed, and "even cheerfulness did come upon me." Holmes was taken outside to the

market place, there to await the arrival of the governor. A few moments of awkward silence followed when the Governor did not appear. Finally, Magistrate Increase Nowell told the “executioner” to proceed with his task. Holmes asked permission to speak.

After some dialogue with Holmes and the magistrate, and Holmes not being allowed to speak, the executioner was told to “Do your office!” While Holmes’ clothes were being “stripped from him,” he said, “I am now come to be baptized in afflictions by your hands, that so I may have further fellowship with my Lord. [I] am not ashamed of His sufferings, for by His stripes am I healed.” Continuing quoting from *Baptist Piety*, (from pages 27-29.) we give the following:

As the strokes began to fall, Holmes prayed once more and in truth, he later wrote, I never “had such a spiritual manifestation of God’s presence.” And though the executioner spat upon his hands, and laid the three-corded whip “with all his strength” thirty times across the prisoner’s bare back, yet “in a manner [I] felt it not.” When the whipping was finished and Holmes was untied from the post, he turned to the magistrates and said, “You have struck me as with roses.”

From out of the crowd of spectators, two came forward to offer their sympathy to Obadiah Holmes — John Spur and John Hazel. Both men were promptly arrested and jailed.

While it is tempting to continue quoting Gaustad about what all happened to Spur and Hazel, I will forbear. I trust I have not already wearied the listener by quoting this much, but I believe it profitable not only to know what happened to Holmes, but also to hear of the spiritual struggles he endured lest one would think that God will keep Satan totally away during such trials and tribulations. It is true that the Lord will uphold and sustain His people during such times, it is equally true that the sufferer is in the waters and in the fire (cf. Isaiah 43:2), and that he will likely have such spiritual struggles with the affliction. Hopefully, this will be beneficial for God’s children as we are nigh approaching, I believe, persecutions much like that of Obadiah Holmes and others down through the centuries and in the early days of the founding of this country. The Protestant doctrine as applied by the Reformers and their followers will always end this way when followed to the logical conclusion. As Gaustad wrote, “A government led by Oliver Cromwell looked askance at the persecution of a sect whose members held positions of prominence both in Cromwell’s army and in Cromwell’s official family.” *Baptist Piety*, p. 33. It should be noted that the beating that Holmes received was so severe that for weeks he could only sleep while on his knees and elbows.

Another important reason for introducing Obadiah Holmes at this time is the connection with one of the pastors (or teachers) of the congregation where Holmes, Clarke, and Crandall were taken after their arrest. His name was Thomas Cobbett (spelled sometimes with two “t’s” and sometimes with one) and he was mentioned in previous podcasts. As pointed out earlier, Gaustad noted that “Cobbet correctly perceived” that “the crux of the dispute between the Baptists and the Puritans, whether in London or in Boston” was the “Baptist views on the limits of civil government, more than any other single doctrine . . .” Before Cobbett received a copy of Clarke’s *Ill Newes*, he was putting the finishing touches to his book *The Civil Magistrate’s Power* (first published 1652/3). In his dedicatory epistle to Oliver Cromwell, Cobbett wrote, “This also (Right Honorable) the rather moved me, as a member of this polity, even in a way of gratitude, to dedicate to your Excellency this apology for civil Christ and governments, why they ought, in their civil, and political way, to restrain and punish abuses and enormities, even in matters of the Lord and of the Church.” This book of Cobbett’s was reprinted in 2008 by a well known Baptist minister with a foreword written by another well know Baptist minister. In the forward he said that Cobbet “lays down the scriptural ordination as well as the scriptural limitation of government.”

As a side note, if you are wondering why I am not labeling these men it is because I have a high regard for them (though one is now deceased) and it is not my intention to cause ill intent with these

podcasts. My issue is with the principle and not the people. After reading the reprint, I did discuss the book with the printer and he assured me that he did not agree with Cobbett's views regarding civil government having the right to interfere with the house of God in religious matters. Also, I want to reaffirm that often there is a fine line of distinction regarding this subject, but it is one that definitely needs to be drawn and maintained for the overall peace and prosperity of society.

I regret that our time is exhausted for today, but you can see that the Protestant view of civil government is influencing and changing the direction among Baptists today. The Lord willing we will discuss this more in our next podcast. May the Lord give us wisdom and understanding as we weigh this important matter in light of the encroaching restrictions that civil government is seeking to impose on religion today. It is essential that if we do suffer that we suffer righteously as a Christian (cf. I Peter 4:12-16). We need to know the difference in standing for a political reason or for the cause of Christ. Farewell.