

ROGER WILLIAMS BAPTISTS

“Study to show yourself approved by God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of God” (2 Timothy 2:15).

As we have had some challenging issues lately with regard to doctrinal and policy issues here at First Baptist Church, I have declared myself to be a “Roger Williams Baptist”, which means – among other things – standing for the historic Baptist principle of “soul freedom.” It appears that there has been some misunderstanding by some in our midst about what that means, or perhaps also some principled disagreement with the concept itself. So let me try and explain.

First, a little history. Roger Williams (1603-83) was the founding pastor of the First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, the original Baptist congregation on American soil. This church has had 375 years of continuous ministry, beginning in 1638. (Their recently retired pastor, Rev. Dan Ivins, was previously pastor of our congregation.) But also, Roger Williams was founder of Providence Colony itself, direct ancestor of the state of Rhode Island. Here’s how that happened.

Williams was one of many early seventeenth century English Christians who came to believe in a separated, “purified” church (hence, the term “Puritans”), which would not be an expression of national or ethnic culture, nor a wing of government – unlike, for example, the Church of England – but would consist of independent congregations comprised of spiritually convicted individuals united in voluntary covenant. It was adherents of this view of the church who composed the original settlers in Plymouth Colony. These “pilgrims” were animated by a vision of constructing a New Jerusalem in this New World, based on puritan principles.

Williams, who had previously taken Holy Orders in the Church of England, arrived with his family in Boston in 1631, and immediately became a teaching minister in the Congregational Church there. However he soon ran afoul of other leadership. Far from being a modern liberal, as an out of context reading of the idea of soul freedom might suggest, he was a rigorous pastor, who believed that members of the Boston church were insufficiently separated from the world. Furthermore, he was opposed to the use of government sanctions to enforce belief (shades of the Church of England!), and he strenuously objected to the colonists’ treating the Native Americans like “Amalekites” or “Canaanites”, and expropriating their lands without compensation. In fact, he dreamed of being a missionary to the Native Americans, and his first published work was *A Key into the Language of America* (1643).

By 1635 Williams had been expelled from Salem, Massachusetts for “sedition and heresy.” In 1636, Williams began a journey in stages from Salem to the head of Narragansett Bay, where Providence Colony was founded on land purchased from the Narragansett Indians, and –

Williams having in the meantime come to accept believer's baptism – he constituted a Baptist Church with a group of "twelve loving friends" who baptized one another.

What does this history have to do with the concept of soul freedom? As Williams explained in his widely read *"The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience"* (1644), no authority – neither civil nor ecclesiastical – has the power or the right to force the conscience of an individual. From the very beginning, Providence Colony, uniquely among the first American colonies, welcomed all – "Christians, Jews, Muselmans, Atheists."

Fast forward to today. Our nation is deeply polarized into "red states" and "blue states", where people associate only with others of like opinion. If anything, the churches of America are even more polarized, into "red churches" and "blue churches", as it were, who don't interact and who hardly speak a common language on questions of faith and biblical interpretation. In my experience until now, First Baptist, Portland has been different. While we are historically and presently basically a conservative, evangelical congregation, we have brothers and sisters among us who love Jesus and seriously search the scriptures, but have quite different convictions about some of the issues confronting us.

How much room is there for difference? I believe without reservation in the objective truth of scripture. And while I believe that our personal and group experience can sometimes yield different insights into scripture, *soul freedom is not exercised in a vacuum*. We are responsible to scripture and we are responsible to the Body of Christ, of which we are members. I would call upon those holding views divergent from the historic convictions of this congregation to respect the conscience of the majority. And I would call upon those on opposite sides of the issues to resist the urge to separate. Separated into ideologically "pure" groups, we will find our lives as individuals and our congregational life vastly less rich.

Dr. David L. Wheeler

First Baptist Church of Portland, June 2014