

2003 ABCUSA Biennial (Richmond, VA) Roger Williams Fellowship Dinner remarks

BIO

Dr. David L. Bartlett offered the RWF Dinner speech at the 2003 ABCUSA Biennial held in Richmond, VA. At the time, he was serving as Lantz Professor of Christian Communication and Associate Dean at Yale Divinity School. He later became Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary (Decatur, GA). A renowned scholar and preacher, Dr. Bartlett was a proud American Baptist and part of a long tradition of involvement by the Bartlett family with Northern/American Baptist denominational service. Dr. Bartlett died October 12, 2017, leaving a rich legacy of his writings, his sermons and those who learned from him throughout his many years of teaching in seminaries and in demand nationally as a guest lecturer.

REMARKS

Forgive a confessional prolegomenon. I first heard of Roger Williams in my childhood when like many others I ran up and down the back stairs at the Roger Williams Inn at Green Lake and swam in the old outdoor pool, long since condemned as a health hazard. In my youth when I formed some vague idea of who Williams was I assumed of course that once a Baptist he was always a Baptist, or why this reverence in which my denomination held him? And I further assumed that he was the kind of Baptist I liked best--open minded, tolerant, rational and irenic. I was quite sure that if there had been a Colgate Rochester Crozer to attend, he would have attended there like my grandfathers, father and uncle, and it was only the accident of history and geography that condemned him to those years at Cambridge University.

When I later discovered that Williams had only briefly been a Baptist before moving on to be a Seeker, I assumed that he had prefigured so many of my contemporary Baptist friends and discouraged by Bible believing Baptists had wandered off to join the 17th century version of the UCC.

Though I did not know it at the time, my reading of Williams was typological. Typology, you will remember, suggests that figures from the past are revived in the present, of course in slightly revised form. For Paul, Adam is the type of Jesus and Abraham is the type of the Christian believer. For Hebrews, the first Joshua whose name in the Greek Old Testament is simply "Jesus" is the type of the second Joshua. Joshua/ Jesus the first and Joshua/Jesus the second corresponded because they did what Moses could not do; they brought the people of God into the true promised land.

Now when I was eighteen I did not know I was interpreting Williams typologically, because I had no idea what typology was. When I was about twenty I was taking a course in American intellectual history and was assigned Perry Miller's book on Williams where I discovered that while I knew nothing about typology, my one time hero Roger Williams knew an enormous

amount about typology.

In fact many of his deepest convictions came, not from reading political philosophy, but from reading Holy Writ. Williams didn't leave the Bible-believing Baptists; he was a Bible-believing Baptist. He just thought that what he believed about the Bible was better than what other Baptists believed about the Bible. In that sense he really was a type, a forerunner of our denomination, just not in the way I had thought.

I went back to Perry Miller and found him so interesting that I went on to Edmund S. Morgan, professor emeritus of history at Yale and to Ola Winslow, formerly of Wellesley, all of whom told me more about Williams than I had known. All of them agreed that our late mentor just loved typology, and all of them inspired me to try to interpret Williams typologically. That is, if we were to draw analogies from Williams' time to our own and use him as a guide to our own thinking, what would we find ourselves thinking about?

I share a few words about Roger Williams as type for American Baptists in our own time, even though we have to admit that he was a Baptist only briefly, on his way somewhere else, passing through.

I.

The first typological word about Williams is a word about typology. Like many other Puritan theologians, and he was one, he believed that Christians should read the history of Israel typologically. Israel points ahead to a future reality. However, Williams parted company from English Puritans like Oliver Cromwell and from New World puritans like John Winslow and John Cotton. Cromwell thought that Israel, God's chosen people, was a type for Puritan England, God's new chosen people. And Winslow and Cotton, as we all remember from our grammar school Thanksgiving pageants, thought that America was the new Israel: a city set on the hill, a light to the nations.

"No!" said Roger Williams. When it comes to government Israel, and I love his word here, Israel was a "none such." It was a type of what was to come but not of any government that was to come because God did not choose any nation or any people as God's own people after Israel. What God chose was a Kingdom yet to come and as signs of that Kingdom God chose the church. But the church was not a geographical or a political or a national reality: it was the band of believers, and all the promises God had given to Israel, God now gave to the church, not to England and not to New England either.

Here were some of the implications of this, and here's where Williams has a word to say for us, though he gets his word straight from the Bible and from reading the New Republic or the New York Times or even the Christian Century.

So arguing with his Puritan friends and opponents, and most of them were both those things to him, arguing with the Puritan leaders, Williams said, that it was wrong for any contemporary

nation or state to think of itself as God's chosen place "to set up," as he said, "a civil and temporal Israel, to bound out new earthly Holy lands of Canaan."

Here were the implications of that: think typologically if you will about, say, the United States in, say, 2003.

When it comes to governments, not one can claim God's special favor. Williams is very clear about that. The chiefs of the Indian nations have as much legitimate claim to political authority as the English governors of Massachusetts or Connecticut. Williams was the first anthropologist of native American life and a frequent mediator between settlers and Indians because he absolutely refused to believe that God's special favor rested on the Christians or the English colonists any more than on any other people.

In like manner also he didn't think Protestant England had God's favor any more than Catholic Spain or Muslim Turkey. God was not in the nation building business. So as we think about how Roger Williams might be a type for church polity let's think first about how he helps us think about international policy.

There was a further implication of this typology, or anti-typology. If Plymouth or Salem or Hartford are not Israel, if only the churches are Israel, the only the churches have the right to enforce the first table of the law. That is, the state should keep its hands off issues of right worship, monotheism versus polytheism, what does and what does not count as idolatry. States can worry about murder and stealing, but not because states replicate Israel, only because states, like Indian tribes and monarchies, have a legitimate concern with keeping order.

There are many matters Williams wanted the magistrates to keep their hands off of. When he writes about the absurdity of the magistrates enforcing, say, the commandment against idolatry, he speaks a word that is as forceful in this century as in his. The idolatry the magistrates thought to stamp out they thought of as Roman Catholic practices, like images and memorized prayers. Not so, said Williams: "The truth is the great Gods of this world are God-belly, God-peace, God-wealth, God-honour, God-pleasure." And (worst of all) "God-land." This land, said Williams, threatens to become as great an idol for us as gold is for the Spaniards.

This brings us to the Roger Williams we think we know and are pretty sure we ought to love. The separation between church and state Roger Williams. And he's there all right, writing really angry pamphlets called "The Bloody Tenet" and "The Bloody Tenet Yet More Bloody" insisting that the magistrates have absolutely no right to establish any particular religion. But this is not because he has foreseen Jefferson or could have abided Thomas Paine. It is because the magistrates who try to set up an official church don't understand scripture. Israel points to godly churches, not to a godly society, and the best way for churches to have a chance of being godly is the magistrates keep hands off.

Roger Williams believed in the priesthood of all believers and in congregational polity and he didn't like bishops and in that he agreed entirely with those clergy and magistrates who banished him from the Massachusetts colonies. What he didn't think was that the magistrates of Plymouth or Salem or New Haven had any right to recognize only congregational churches. Puritan, Baptist or Seeker he was above all always a separatist, which meant: keep your hands off the church. Don't for one minute think that John Winthrop is Moses or John Cotton is Aaron or this rocky little land is Zion.

II.

Now, of course, we think we're beginning to get him. Williams is our mentor in his support of religious toleration, a pre-modern post-modernist, you do it your way and I'll do it my way. And let's not get in each other's way. But that's not it at all. It's all about Bible study. How do you read the Bible?

The way he reads the Bible makes a huge difference in the way we can structure society. Because he reads the Bible typologically the state cannot establish any church.

But the way he reads the Bible also affects the way he deals with people with other beliefs. Roger Williams insisted that Quakers be absolutely free to come and live and worship in Rhode Island, for instance, but that doesn't mean he ever met a Quaker he much liked. He didn't like the Quakers for just the reason many conservative Christians get nervous about more experiential Christians today. Quakers substituted their own inner light for the word of God in Scripture. Toward the end of Williams' life, George Fox, the great thinker of the Society of Friends, came to visit Rhode Island, and Roger challenged him to a debate. The Williams version of the story was that Fox got word that Williams was ready to take him on and skipped town before Williams' friends could deliver the invitational letter. But Fox left defenders behind and there was a debate in which the great apostle of religious freedom said of the Quakers: that they mistook themselves for God (because they believed they had inner light) and that they were "without manners, without courtesy," so that as for meeting a Quaker on the streets or Providence you might as well "meet a horse or a cow." Of the whole community of Quakers he wrote what the Massachusetts puritans might have written of him: "under the pretence of liberty of conscience, about these parts, there come to live all the scum and the runaways of the country."

Williams took on fourteen propositions he attributed to the Quakers. He argued steadily and heatedly each one, got the crowd divided between those who cheered him and those who booed him and sat down exhausted. His sister in law said the best that could be said: "This man hath discharged his conscience."

We have tended to use Roger Williams as a type of the tolerant person who gives the theological "live and let live," makes faith a private matter, and refuses to debate with those

who disagree. It's just religion after all. For Williams faith was the after all and the before all and the above all. It was so important that you'd argue about it till you turned blue in the face of forced your opponent into apoplectic silence. What you would not do is make laws about it.

For Williams "soul liberty" was not about polity or denominational principles; it was about how you honor the Bible, read it right, read it strong.

Allow me an aside. If we want to think about Williams typologically in the current controversies of our denomination, maybe we don't want to concede too quickly that this is all a matter of polity--that issues, say of sexuality, are not issues about theology but about the autonomy of the local church. I have noticed that Presbyterians and Methodists and Episcopalians are all having pretty much the same battle, and in each case people are insisting that it's not about the Bible, it's about Presbyterian polity or Methodist or Episcopalian.

Roger Williams didn't care nearly as much about polity as he did about the Bible. Odd as it seems, he stayed pretty good friends with John Winthrop and John Cotton even after they kicked him out of Massachusetts because they all agreed on the centrality of the Bible, and what made him nervous about Quakers, though of course they had every right to be wrong, was that they were wrong about the centrality of Scripture.

I'm getting old and we've been at this a long time, so let me humbly wonder whether we should confess to the fact that what divides our denomination and many denominations isn't so much how we understand polity as how we understand the Bible. Then let's argue it out; clearly, charitably, but honestly. It may well be that those who oppose welcoming and affirming churches have our polity wrong, and that's an important question. I think they've got God wrong, and that's a crucial question.

III.

But then alas, and briefly, Roger Williams stops preaching and starts meddling. While fulminating against the Quakers on their doctrine of inspiration, amazingly he ends up largely agreeing with them on their doctrine of ministry.

Sort of, anyway.

He believed strongly that the true leaders of the churches had their leadership by apostolic succession, but he thought the last true apostles had died out with the first generation, and that we were still waiting for Christ to return and establish true ministry.

In the meantime of course the individual churches (the only kind of church he knew about) needed leaders; he felt better being called a teacher than a minister.

But he had two complaints about most ministers, too.

For one thing they thought a University degree helped their ministry. Now Williams thought University degrees were just fine; he had one from Cambridge, but he didn't think they much helped ministry. The typological Roger Williams visits us with his thoughts about University

Divinity Schools, biting the very hand that feeds me. "I heartily acknowledge," he writes, "that among all the outwards gifts of God, human learning and the knowledge of languages and good arts are excellent

...yet notwithstanding when it comes to the order of ministry, upon a due survey of their institutions and continual practices compared with the last will and testament of Christ Jesus, they will be found to be none of Christ's."

And not against theological schools alone did he vent his wrath, but against all those who got paid for their ministry: "I am bold to maintain that it is one of the grand designs of the most high to break down the hireling ministry, that trade, faculty, calling and living by preaching."

It all fits in a way, church is not the visible establishment protected by magistrates, buttressed by learning and degrees, managed by those who are paid for their faithfulness. Church is the invisible community of those who are bound to Christ by faith, secure only in him, confident only in him, resting on his promises alone.

Look, I'm not going to resign my job because I've been reading Roger Williams, and neither are you. But typologically, wandering in from a world where he had to wander, not only because he was a seeker, but because what he most needed the world could not give, wandering through typologically, he makes us think about ourselves.

Two final words. In 1635, before his brief sojourn as a Baptist, Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts and Connecticut. He got to pass back through both colonies on his occasional trips to England and on his return, without hindrance, but they could never again be home. In 1935, on the 300th anniversary of his banishment, the Massachusetts Legislature lifted the ban.

Six months after the original ban, when his friend and opponent John Winthrop, who had banished Williams but continued to love him, wrote another of those exasperated letters asking why he didn't just recant and come home, Winthrop asked: "From what spirit, and to what end to you drive?"

And Williams simply wrote: "I ask the way to lost Zion."

Don't we all?

On Williams' brief sojourn as a Baptist on his way to being a "Seeker", see Perry Miller, pp. 156.

Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953).

Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Master Roger Williams: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

Morgan, 93. Quoting Williams, "...the Pattern of the National Church of Israel, was a None-such, unimitable by any Civil State, in all or any of the Nations of the World beside."

See Miller, 38-44; Morgan, 100-104

Morgan, 103.

Morgan, 106.

The full title of the later pamphlet is: "The Bloody Tenet, yet more Bloody: by Mr. Cotton's endeavor to wash it white in the Blood of the Lamb."

Miller, 244.

Winslow, 231.

Winslow, 275.

See Morgan, 49.

Miller, 201. Note, too, that Williams was no slouch as a scholar. During one of his return visits to England he tutored John Milton in Dutch while Milton tutored him in other, unspecified, languages, Winslow, 238.

Miller, 199-200.

Winslow, 142.