

**Excerpt from *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution,*
in *The Complete Works of Roger Williams***

I was raised in a Southern Baptist church in Louisville, Kentucky. For the pastors, deacons and Sunday School teachers of that congregation, the heart of the Gospel was the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as your “personal Savior”. I don’t recall ever hearing preaching about the Kingdom of God and the church’s mandate to transform society. Though there were giants of Christian Ethics such as XXXXX at the nearby Southern Baptist Seminary, ethics lessons, such as they were, were confined to matters of personal truthfulness, chastity and sobriety. Integration of Louisville public schools came and went without comment from our pulpit, as did the sometimes violent protests against “forced busing” as a tool for achieving racial balance in the schools. Religious and ethical choices were up to the individual, and questions of “the common good” were left to the teacher, the coach or the scoutmaster. Any wrestling I was to do with questions of the Gospel’s liberating power from social, economic and political oppression were years in the future at Yale Divinity School and the Graduate Theological Union, where I first encountered Reinhold Niebuhr, James Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez. But in that church of my youth every twelve year old was, in theory, the Sovereign Lord of their own conscience. And every local congregation, no matter how humble, and no matter how compliant in its use of “standard” Sunday School curriculum and its regular tithing to the SBC “Cooperative Program”, was answerable only to Jesus Christ himself for whom it called as it pastor, how it administered its budget and how it ordered its church program. And no matter how unselfconsciously God and country were interwoven in worship, and how unselfcritically “America” was assumed to be at the center of God’s redemptive plan, there was nary a whiff of the partisan political posturing that has come to characterize the “new” Southern Baptist Convention and the contemporary Religious Right. Indeed, the monthly newsletter of “Protestants and Others United for the Separation of Church and State” (now, “Americans United”) was a staple of the vestibule literature table, funded by a church budget line. Certainly this religious individualism was not an unmixed blessing. It wore blinders against important issues of the day and was largely unaware of the structural and institutional nature of sin in its own bosom

(though it did see something like “structural evil” in dance halls, bars and Godless communism). It had been born from a highly selective reading of scripture mediated by an Enlightenment understanding of human rational autonomy of which the rank and file in the pews were largely unaware. But there was something noble about it. It revered individual acts of conscience in the spirit of Roger Williams’ forthright words in *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*:

I acknowledge that to molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine or practicing worship meerly religious or spirituall, it is to persecute him, and such a person (what ever his doctrine or practice be true or false) suffereth persecution for conscience.¹

It had found its foremost intellectual defender in the great professor and seminary president of the early twentieth century, E.Y. Mullins, who declared in his *Axioms of the Christian Religion*:

¹ Roger Williams, *Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, in *The Complete Works of Roger Williams*, Vol. III (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963) 63.