

The Little-Known History of the Contribution of Freedom of Conscience and Pastor John Clarke to the Freedom of America



Pastor John Clarke in the painting "Portrait of a Clergyman" by Guilliam de Ville c. 1659

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Quotations from King James Version of the Bible

Images from Wikipedia – “John Clarke”

Introduction

100 years before the American War for independence, a Baptist preacher named Dr. John Clarke had already sowed the seeds of freedom. Along with men such as Roger Williams, who established the first Baptist Church in America in the town of Providence, and others like Governor Benedict Arnold, great grandfather of the infamous traitor bearing the same name, Clarke labored in the push for freedom.

Before Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and George Whitfield (1715-1779) were preaching in the Great Awakening, Roger Williams, and John Clarke had been preaching and establishing the first and second Baptist Churches in America, respectfully.¹

While many preachers in the years after John Clarke were able to “live of the Gospel” with their Gospel ministries providing a living income, John Clarke was a faithful bi-vocational pastor. His vocations included, legal clerk, town representative, Lieutenant Governor of the Rhode Island Colony, and a medical doctor who helped heal people, not only in body, but in mind and soul. In his own book *Ill News from New England*, Clarke describes himself on the cover as “The Physician of Rhode Island in America.”²

¹Ingersoll, Julie, *Baptist and Methodist Faiths in America* (New York, NY: Shoreline Publishing Group, 2003.) 20

²Clarke, John. *Ill News From New England*. London: Printed by Henry Hill living in the Fleet-Yard next door, 1652)

Many people will speak about Roger Williams when talking about the early Baptists of America. In many Christian and Baptist history books, the pastor of the second Baptist church to be established on this continent, is not even mentioned.

Since the first and second Baptist Churches in all of America were founded in the Colony of Rhode Island, it is from Rhode Island that the rest of the Baptist Churches began to spring up in the other English colonies. Because Roger Williams declared himself a Baptist for only a few months his historical influence should be less than it is. John Clarke in contrast remained a lifelong Baptist and his influence in Baptist churches must surely be felt for the future generations in Baptist Church life and expansion. Clark is considered “the most important Baptist in seventeenth-century America.”³

Becoming Baptist

Born in October 8, 1609 nearly 90 miles outside London, John’s family and upbringing seems to be Puritan as indicated by the use of the Geneva Bible by his father, Thomas Clarke.⁴

³Williams Sr. Michael E, Shurden, Walter B, *Turning Points in Baptist History* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2008) 23

⁴Sydney, James V. *John Clarke and His Legacies, Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island 1638-1750* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 1999) 3-4

Perhaps with each passing year in England, and during his years of vocational training, Clarke grew and developed into the Baptist faith. Nelson suggests;

“Dr. Clarke, furthermore, was a Baptist. There is no record of his having held any other kind of doctrinal views, and Dr. Bicknell says that “it is reasonable to assume that he was a member of or in fellowship with the Baptist of Holland, who had, as early as 1611, affirmed the right of all men to religious liberty and the duty of obedience to lawful government.”⁵

While there may have been many who held to what we would call Baptist views since the time of the New Testament, and many were Anabaptists (against infant baptism), and there are still others who were protesting the state church from 1577, they may not have been called “Baptist” at this point in history. In England and among the English-speaking people, the “Two primary founders of General Baptists were John Smyth and Thomas Helwys.”⁶

When Thomas Helwys wrote his book, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, in 1612, it sparked the ideology of freedom of conscience. Following this book, *Ill News from New England*, by Pastor John Clarke, written 40 years later, in 1652, the flame of freedom was fanned, and the liberty of conscience is propagated. These ideas became some of the distinctives of

⁵Nelson, Wilbur. *The Ministry of Dr. John Clarke*. (Newport, RI: Published by Wilbur Nelson, 1927) 9-10

⁶McBeth, H. Leon. *The Baptist Heritage* (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition) 21

the Baptist faith. Freedom of Conscience “came to be one of their most celebrated distinctives, the idea of freedom of conscience and religious liberty.”⁷

In his book, *Ill News from New England*, we gain a glimpse of his thinking and convictions. Clarke is strong in his beliefs as he gives his testimony of faith in section two of his confession of faith;

“I testify that baptism, or dipping in water, is one of the commandments of this Lord Jesus Christ. A visible believer, or disciple of Christ Jesus, that is, one that manifests repentance towards God, and faith in Jesus Christ is the only person that is to be baptized, or dipped with that visible baptism, or dipping of Jesus Christ in water. That visible person is to walk in that visible order of His House, and so to wait for His coming the second time in the form of a Lord, and King, with His glorious Kingdom according to promise; and fir his sending down, in the time of His absence, the Holy Ghost, or Holy Spirit of Promise. All this is according to the last will and Testament of that living Lord, whose will is not to be added to, or taken from.”⁸

His book is an effort to inform the reader of the religious persecution beginning to develop in America in the

⁷Williams Sr. Michael E, Shurden, Walter B. *Turning Points in Baptist History* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2008) 23

⁸Clarke, John. *Ill News From New England* (London, Printed by Henry Hill living in the Fleet-Yard next door, 1652) 22

1600's and to make a plea for the government to not interfere with religious matters. He gives practical examples from the fines, imprisonment and persecution he endured in Massachusetts. He also cites the whippings and injustice towards John Crandall and Obadiah Holmes, who also held to Baptist views. He is very convincing, and his passion is clear as he writes. To further understand why he wrote this and what he stood for we must explore his first travels to New England.

New Beginnings

Arrival to New England

When John Clarke's ship comes to the shore of Boston in 1637, there were many religious tensions that were developing, and he jumped right into the fray. The Antinomianism Controversy was in full swing. Antinomianism could be understood to be free grace. Grace to do whatever one wants to do. Those adherents to Antinomianism believed that the grace of God gave a license to do and live however a person wanted to do and live. In other words, no morals. John Clarke believed in God's grace but not to the extent that there were no morals with which to live by. There is a soteriological reason for his involvement with those in the Antinomian Controversy. "He believed that only the Antinomianism genuinely upheld the Protestant conviction

that salvation is by faith alone and the Calvinist conviction that faith is the fruit of God's free award of grace."⁹

This understanding of God's gift of salvation being received by faith alone, and not by our works makes Bible sense to me. Ephesians 2:8-9 declares, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (KJV). Antinomianism could also be refuted with 2 other simply stated verses found in Romans 6:1-2, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (KJV). While John Clarke enjoyed grace, he also knew not to abuse God's grace. Later on, he separates from those who held the Antinomian views and continued to hold a more balanced Bible view of grace.

Dr. Clarke was not a pastor when he arrived in New England and he had not yet gained much influence but when he sided with Anne Hutchinson (who was not a Baptist) and others who followed Antinomianism, he paid a price. His freedom in the Massachusetts Colony was limited right away. His belief in Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion was to be tested early and often in Colonial New England. The main issue that developed was the mode of Baptism and who was authorized to baptize people. Anabaptism was gaining ground in the Colonies as many people adopted a

⁹Sydney, James V. *John Clarke and His Legacies, Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island 1638-1750* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 1999) 7

belief that baptism is for believers only, and that infants are not yet old enough to be believers. Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins write:

Massachusetts became so alarmed at those people against infant baptism that a colonial law was put into effect against the Baptists. “The law banished anyone who questioned infant baptism, proclaimed Christian pacifism, or (like Roger Williams) denied the state’s authority to police religious convictions.”¹⁰

The Second Baptist Church

Once removed from Massachusetts, Dr Clarke sets off to find a place to live outside the Colonies in what is now called Rhode Island. While continuing his medical doctoring and after some time serving the community in the establishment of the town of Portsmouth, he moves to Newport and there becomes a pastor. This church is to be the second Baptist church in all of America. I like how one historian Henry Burrage in 1894 describes the start of the church in Newport; “The church was first gathered by Mr. Clarke about 1644.”¹¹

This significant development of a Baptist church being formed is rooted in the intense convictions and belief of Dr.

¹⁰Kidd, Thomas S., Hankins, Barry. *Baptists in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 11

¹¹Burrage, Henry Sweetser, *A History of the Baptists in New England* (Philadelphia American Baptist Publication Society, 1894) 25

Clarke in Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion. With a Puritan background from his childhood, (Puritans are those who tried to purify the state church from within), Dr Clarke sets out to follow the Bible with liberty and freedom. His growth and development into the Baptist faith becomes more evident each year and Clarke is described by authors Kidd and Hankins as: “A radical Puritan already on his way to becoming a Baptist.” He started a church in Newport “which became Baptist, by 1644.”¹²

Civil Participation

When reflecting on the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the forming of the United States of America being free from the control of the British, one cannot help but trace the thought of liberty and freedom to the ideas purported by Pastor John Clarke nearly 100 years earlier. Historian Edwin Gaustad writes;

“One year after the founding of Portsmouth, at the other end of Aquidneck Island, the town of Newport would appear. The major figure in the first decade or two of Newport’s history was another clergyman, John Clarke. Clarke had left Massachusetts voluntarily, agreeing with Anne Hutchinson that the clergy there gave too much attention to ‘good works’ and not enough to God’s grace. In Newport, Clarke organized

¹²Kidd, Thomas S., Hankins, Barry. *Baptists in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 11

America's second Baptist church. Unlike Williams, Clarke remained a Baptist all of his life, even as he remained a stalwart defender of the rights of Rhode Island against the greedy land grabs of the neighboring colonies."¹³

Clarke was very influential in the local town and colonial government. From 1664 on, John Clarke was involved in the Newport town government as a town deputy. When viewing copies of the original records, one sees his name much of that time listed as being the recording secretary. About 10 years after obtaining the Royal Charter for Rhode Island, Clarke, was chosen as the deputy governor in 1669 and again in 1671. As deputy governor of the Rhode Island Colony, he served alongside Benedict Arnold, the great grandfather of the notorious traitor we know of from the Revolutionary War era. Clarke is a very active man in church and in affairs of the government, however, most of the local and state government records were lost in seawater during the revolutionary war.¹⁴

Clarke was instrumental in the founding of Portsmouth, Rhode Island along with William Coddington, and Anne Hutchinson. This town is located at the northern end of what was known as Aquidneck, Rhode Island. Pastor Roger

¹³Gaustad, S. Edwin, *Roger Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 55-56

¹⁴Sydney, V. James. *John Clarke and His Legacies, Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island 1638-1750*. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) 87

Williams helped negotiate the land purchase from the Indians. Later this island's name changed to "The Island of Rhode Island" in the Spring of 1644.¹⁵ Everett Goodwin records;

"Across Narragansett Bay from Providence lay two other communities that established religious liberty: Portsmouth and Newport. Both were influenced by the leadership of a quite different personality, Dr. John Clarke. Like Williams, Clarke had left London to pursue religious liberty, and like Williams, discovered that the Puritans of Massachusetts were unyielding on points of liberty dear to him. He was driven out of the Massachusetts colony in 1683 and eventually purchased Aquidneck Island from the native people. He renamed it Rhode Island.¹⁶

From Portsmouth, Clarke, due to disagreements about the government, separated from Anne Hutchinson and moving to the southern end of the island along with William Coddington settled there to establish the third town in Rhode Island, Newport. His leadership in Newport and work in the development of this colony are felt to this day. As such, former secretary of State for Rhode Island, John R. Bartlett, declares "Rhode Island owes to John Clarke a monument of

¹⁵Fradin, Dennis B. *The Rhode Island Colony* (USA, Children's Press, 1989) 44-45

¹⁶Goodwin, Everett C. *Down By the Riverside, A Brief History of Baptist Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judsen Press 2002) 16-17

granite and a statue of bronze.”¹⁷ Those are lofty words of appreciation and admiration from a politician about a Baptist pastor.



*Rhode Island Royal Charter
written by John Clarke, 1663*

¹⁷Nelson, Wilbur. *The Ministry of Dr. John Clarke* (Newport, RI: Published by Wilbur Nelson, 1927) 18

The Influence of Beliefs

What one believes has a direct impact on how a person behaves and what he or she may stand for. For John Clarke, his belief in the authority of Scriptures and the leadership of the Holy Spirit to guide a believer unto all truth had a direct relationship to his involvement in church life and government life. The Bible is more critical to the development of the United States and its contribution to liberty and freedom than most people know about. Freedom of Conscience could be understood as to be free, allowed to, or even to be encouraged to live by personal conscience. What a person believes to be right is something that he should be free to follow. Freedom of Religion flows out of the idea of Freedom of Conscience. Citizens are free to choose whatever faith they want to believe. Both of these freedoms, Conscience and Religion, are foundational of what we know in a general way as Freedom in America today. Without the convictions of Pastor Clarke and his passionate pursuit of freedom, not only would the Baptist church and Baptist life be different, but America would be different today as well. Why was Clarke so passionate about these 2 freedoms? Kidd and Hankins suggest;

John Clarke believed in the ministry of the Holy Spirit who put “All believers on the same footing in the church.” His practice in the church setting was that any man is so moved by the spirit of God, could stand up and speak. “To Clarke, ‘prophesying’ meant delivering

brief exhortations on Bible passages for the edification of the church.¹⁸

Novel Ideas

From the church house, a Baptist church at that, the thought of personal freedom springs forth from the ideas of Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion. Instead of religious leaders dictating in Latin and instead of the state forcing specific belief systems, Clarke sought true freedom. True freedom must start in the mind. Having a conscience that is free of guilt because one is doing the right thing is gratifying. Jesus described the idea of freedom this way in John 8:32, “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (KJV).

The ideas and convictions of Clarke were novel to the people in a society that was shaped and molded into conformity with the religious and state leaders working in concert to control the populace. Even King James, who many seem to admire and even revere, was a conformist to the state church and was a man who demanded people to conform to the Anglican Church. He perpetuated religious persecution if one did not go along with the state church and was a harsh persecutor of Anabaptists and others who refused to practice infant baptism. From examining his life, it

¹⁸Kidd, Thomas S., Hankins, Barry. *Baptists in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 10

is easy to conclude that he would have persecuted many Christians today and for certain all Baptists.

Speaking at a conference in 1644;

King James complained of dissenting ministers who prayed for him in civil affairs, “but as for Supreme Governor in all Causes and over all persons (as well Ecclesiastical as Civill), they passe that over with silence.” Clearly the new king would not allow participation of the people in affairs of either church or state, and he announced his intention to act as “Supreme Governor” in religion as well as politics. In an early proclamation concerning the Book of Common Prayer, the king said it “is the chiefest of kingly duties,...to settle affairs of religion.” James was obsessed with the idea of religious uniformity, intensified perhaps by evidence of increasing differences. Much of James's reign was spent in making good his threat to harass and exile those who refused to conform to the Church of England.¹⁹

Baptism By Fire

This mindset of persecuting the non-conformist came across the Atlantic Ocean to colonial America. So intense was the religious persuasions of the state sponsored churches of the day that if you did not agree, you could be fined,

¹⁹McBeth, H. Leon. *The Baptist Heritage* (B&H Publishing Group, Kindle Edition) 100

imprisoned, whipped, and censored. Some would call for the death penalty, but there are no records of anyone dying the death penalty for their faith in North America. John Clarke gives a solid example of staying true to his Bible convictions for Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion in the face of persistent persecution in the Colonies. It is incredible to think that his happened in America. Christians and our society would do well to learn an accurate history of colonial America. Gaustad describes the following events best;

Down in Newport, John Clarke, along with two other members of his Baptist church, responded to the plea of a blind Baptist in Massachusetts to hold a service of worship in his home. Ever since the 1644 law against Baptist, no Baptist church could legally exist within the borders of the Bay Colony. On July 16, 1651, therefore, the three Newporters journeyed to Lynn, Massachusetts, where they preached, prayed, baptized new believers, and served communion- all in the home of the aged Baptist who had invited them.

On July 20, as John Clarke was expounding the gospel, two constables “with their clamorous tongues” interrupted the meeting and arrested the three “Strangers,” as Clarke later described the event. After a week or more in a Boston jail, the three were brought into the court, tried in the morning, and sentenced in the afternoon, “Without,” said Clarke, “producing either accuser, witness jury, law of God or man.” They had been charged with seducing the subjects of this Commonwealth from the truth of the Gospel of Jesus

Christ” and with daring to Baptist those, who as infants, had been baptized before. Clarke demanded the right to be heard on behalf of the three defendants, but his request was denied. All three were fined, with the stipulation that if the fines were not paid they would be “well whipped.”²⁰

Not only were these three Baptists fined, Obadiah Holmes was whipped. He refused to allow others to pay the fine of 30 British Pounds that was issued to him. After about 2 months in jail, “On September 5 he was brought to Boston’s marketplace, tied to a post, and stripped to the waist to receive 30 lashes with a three-pronged whip on his bare back.”²¹ Holmes continued preaching while being whipped and shouted, “I am now come to be baptized in afflictions by your hands.”²²

This persecution was real and very serious. Living in early New England with a passion for freedom, as John Clarke lived with, would be like the common expression “Baptism by fire.” Even the monetary fine of John Clarke, which was less than the other two men were fined was very costly. “Clarke was fined twenty pounds-nearly half a year’s salary.”²³ A half a year salary to pay for the crime of preaching the Bible, teaching Biblical Believers Baptism, and standing for religious

²⁰Gaustad, S. Edwin. *Roger Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 103-104

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Goodwin, Everett. *Down By the Riverside, A Brief History of Baptist Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: C. Judsen Press 2002) 16-17

freedom constituted a high personal price to pay. The price John Clarke and others paid in 1651 is paying dividends in our lives today. Christians and society today are receiving the blessings of his investment in Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion.

Others were watching Pastor Clarke. His example in his time of imprisonment and religious persecution from the Massachusetts civil and religious leaders was such a source of inspiration that many people turned to Jesus in authentic relationship and embraced the Baptist faith. After witnessing the courage of John Clarke and Obadiah Holmes, the first President of Harvard, Henry Dunster, converted to the Baptist faith. When he refused to have his infant child baptized, he was forced out of the presidency of Harvard. He went on to start the First Baptist Church in Boston.²⁴

After spending some time in jail for preaching the Bible in Massachusetts, and seeing his faithful friend, Obadiah Holmes whipped for his faith, John Clarke is finally released after a friend pays his fine. He sets off in a new adventure the following year in securing a Royal Charter for Rhode Island from King Charles 2. Again, the purpose of this trip and the reason of staying in England 12 years to secure this charter is freedom.

“When William Coddington assumed responsibility for the Aquidneck Island, it was Roger Williams and John Clarke who sailed to London, England to fight for the

²⁴Asher, Louis Franklin. *John Clarke (1609-1676) Pioneer in American Medicine, Democratic Ideal, and Champion of Religious Liberty*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing Co.,1997) 64

rights of Rhode Island and to contest William Coddington's control of the land charter."²⁵



*First Baptist Church in Newport, Rhode Island
The (rebuilt) Second Baptist Church founded in America*

Furthering the Freedom Flame

Also, during this time in England, Clarke finished writing and published his book, *All News From New England*. This book would not have been permitted to be published in New England at the time as the church and state authorities had such influences and fear of fines and reprisals abounded. Freedom was not known yet in America. The state even paid for the church to exist with tax money. The state and church

²⁵Gaustad, S. Edwin. *Roger Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 66-67

are very much connected. A book demonstrating the errors and dangers of a state church and the clear examples of religious persecution would not sit well with the authorities while the owners of the printing presses were not interested in standing up against the state church or the civil authorities.²⁶

Some have summarized the convictions of Clarke's Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion into one word: Freedom. Church historian Martin E. Marty coined the term "Baptistification" as historian Walter Shurden writes:

"Baptistification" does not specify a particular Baptist doctrine; it does not speak to a unique Baptist distinctive. Rather it describes the Baptist style of faith. It is a particular posture of faith, a peculiar attitude toward the issues of faith. Baptistification is a spirit that pervades all of the Baptist principles or so-called Baptist distinctives. It is the spirit of FREEDOM.²⁷

The ideology of Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion is found in the highly protective charters that John Clarke helped write. With Bible overtones, his beliefs were woven into each town code, paper written, government

²⁶Kidd, Thomas S., Hankins, Barry. *Baptists in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 11

²⁷Shurden, B. Walter. *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Hewys Publishing Inc., 1993) 2

position held, and church work that he was a part of. Author Everette Goodwin says,

The law codes of these Rhode Island settlements ordered that “none be accounted a delinquent for doctrine, provided that it be not directly repugnant to the government or laws established.” In other words, religious belief was none of the government’s business. Rhode Island’s commitment to personally livery, and especially to freedom of conscience, soon caused the other New England colonies to be wary of the little colony and its inhabitants – “the cesspool of New England” as one colonist described it.²⁸

The influence of John Clarke and the freedoms found in Rhode Island spread to other colonies and eventually the United States. Historian William Grady states, “Inspired by Rhode Island’s spiritual independence, the Quaker leader, William Penn, in 1681 established the colony that bears his name along a similar goal of religious toleration.”²⁹

Conclusion

The influence of John Clarke is found in two primary convictions: Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of

²⁸Goodwin, Everette C. *Down By the Riverside, A Brief History of Baptist Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judsen Press 2002) 16-17

²⁹Grady, William P. *What God Hath Wrought* (Scherverville, IN, Grady Publications. 1996) 90

Religion. Because of this perspective, he was very involved in the shaping of the government in 2 towns and later the Colony of Rhode Island. From giving Rhode Island its name to securing its Royal Charter and its religious protections, he invested in the idea of freedom in each facet of his life.

Truly this man of faith impacted the society of his day and especially the Baptist church. His thirst and drive for Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion have continued to impact the United States to the present day. Yes, the seeds of American Freedom were planted by a Baptist pastor named John Clarke. As Leon McBeth writes:

“The Baptist emphasis upon religious liberty put them in advance of their time. They did what no other group of the time was prepared to do— advocate religious freedom not only for different sorts of Christians but also for those who followed other religions or none.”³⁰

It is highly recommended that we learn Baptist history and discover how influential the Baptist faith has been in the development of the United States. Too many times we take our freedom for granted. May we have similar convictions as Pastor John Clarke, not just freedom for freedom’s sake but Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion. All other freedoms we enjoy stem from these.

³⁰McBeth, H. Leon. *The Baptist Heritage* (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition) 121



*Quotation of John Clarke on the frieze
of the Rhode Island Statehouse in Providence*

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