

ROGER WILLIAMS

and Freedom of Religion (1603-1683)

by Dr. Catherine Millard

“We The People”

From this grant I infer that the Sovereign, original, and foundation of civil power lies in the people...And if so, that a people may erect and establish what form of Government seems to them most meet for their civil condition: It is evident that such Governments as are by them erected and established, have no more power, nor for no longer time, than the civil power or people consenting and agreeing shall betrust them with. This is clear not only in reason, but in the experience of all Commonweales, where the people are not deprived of their natural freedom by the power of Tyrants.

Roger Becomes an Outcast for Preaching the Gospel

Roger Williams was born in Wales in 1603. After graduating from Oxford, he ministered through the Church of England, but, upon return to the Word of God, and preaching the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, he was labeled “a Puritan” and became an outcast of the established Anglican Church.

America – “the Haven for Persecuted Christians”

Embarking on a ship for America, considered “the haven for persecuted Christians,” he and his wife Mary arrived on February 5, 1631 in this country. Two months later, he became a teaching elder of the Church at Salem. Being, once again, offensive to the Governor and Assistants of Massachusetts Bay, he left for Plymouth, and assisted Reverend Ralph Smith of the church there. His preaching on Freedom of Religion and Biblical Truth caused some of his parishioners to be offended. He thus returned to Salem, settling there with his family. Roger Williams gained the reputation, both in America and England of “a godly man and a zealous preacher.” However, historians relate that the government of Massachusetts viewed him with jealousy from the moment he set foot in the colony. He boldly preached against violation of the Indians’ rights, through the land patent, which the King of England had placed in the hands of that government. He also preached that the magistrate had no right “to deal in matters of conscience and religion.”

Roger Banished from Massachusetts Bay

As a result of these activities, he was banished from Massachusetts Bay in the Fall of 1635. He was ordered to leave the colony, the time being extended to Spring, 1636. However, “the people being much taken with the apprehension of his godliness,” in January following, the Governor and Assistants sent an officer to take him to a ship bound for England. Roger thus moved to Rehoboth, prior to the officer’s arrival.

Persecuted in Rehoboth, he Finds Providence Settlement in 1636

Governor Winslow of Plymouth next informed him that he was within the jurisdiction of the Plymouth patent. He thus crossed the river and founded Providence settlement in 1636, after which he joined the Baptists. Three years later, in March, 1639, Williams was baptized by Ezekiel Halliman at Providence.



After the original marble statue in the U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C. (Recently moved from its place of prominence in the Main Rotunda - to a corridor inaccessible to the public). Illustrator: Maxwell Edgar. From, *Great American Statesmen and Heroes*, © 1995 by Catherine Millard.

Roger Williams Represents the Colonies in England, Obtaining a Charter

In 1643, Roger Williams returned to England, representing the colonies of Providence, Rhode Island and Warwick; in order to seek a Charter of Incorporation. He finally procured one. It was signed on March 14, 1644, by the Earl of Warwick, who was both Governor and Admiral of the English Plantations.

Williams Excels in Languages, a God-given Talent

Williams had received meager funds to help him secure a new Charter for the colonies. He was obliged to labor to earn his living as well as to oversee the affairs of the colonies. He taught languages – a talent in which he excelled. He had mastered Greek, Latin, French and Dutch. Among his pupils was John Milton, then Secretary of the Council of State, who was in dire need of understanding the Dutch language,

his country being at war with Holland. Williams’ letter to John Winthrop in July, 1654, gives insight into his teaching profession:

It hath pleased the Lord to call me for some time and with some persons, to practise the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French and Dutch. The secretary of the Council, Mr. Milton, for my Dutch I read him, read me many more languages. Grammar rules begin to be esteemed a tyranny. I taught two young gentlemen, a Parliament man’s sons, as we teach our children English by words, phrases, constant talk, etc.

Roger Williams’ Dependence Upon God

Williams’ dependence upon God is evidenced by this moving letter he wrote from England:

My dear friends, though it pleased God himself, by many favors to encourage me, yet please you to remember, that no man can stay here as I do, having a present employment there, without much self-denial, which I beseech God for more, and for you also, that no private respects, or gains, or

quarrels, may cause you to neglect the public and common safety, peace and liberties. I beseech the eternal God to be seen amongst you; so prays your most faithful and affectionate friend and servant,
Roger Williams

P.S. My love to all my Indian friends.

His Christian Character Traits

Roger Williams was a man of moral excellence and integrity. He stood firmly upon his convictions, performed his duty at all costs and never allowed tyranny or praise to divert him from his biblical convictions. One fact speaks clearly in favor of his Christianity. After being banished from Massachusetts Bay, he was an injured, persecuted man. However, he made the best of every opportunity to befriend and expose the neighboring Indian tribes to the life-saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, never harboring revenge. He continually performed acts of kindness to his persecutors, helping the poor and miserable, and offering an asylum to the persecuted. Williams' life was consistently conformed to his duty to God and man, gaining for himself the reputation of "the undaunted champion of Religious Freedom."

The Hireling Ministry Explained

One of his discourses is hereunder excerpted, in order to better understand this great American statesman's mindset and convictions. It is entitled "The Hireling Ministry," an exposure of the corruptions of clergy paid to perform church offices, in contrast to voluntary trust, obedience, faith and service to Jesus Christ, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and prayer:

...First, where God hath been pleased to bring in one soul to Himself by the Hireling Ministry, many more have been brought home by the voluntary and more single preachings of some, whether public or private, by the endeavors of private Christians, by the reading of the Holy Scriptures, by godly example, by afflictions, etc., hence woeful experience hath made it evident, that many excellent men (in their persons, and the graces of God's spirit) have labored a score of years, and more in an Hireling way, without the birth of one child to God; while others singly out of love to Christ Jesus, have despised bargains and hire, and been more abundantly blessed with merciful success and fruitfulness. Hence sure it is that there have been, are many excellent prophets and witnesses of Christ Jesus, who never entered (as they say) into the Ministry, to wit, Lawyers, Physicians, Soldiers, Tradesmen, and others of higher, and lower rank, who by God's Holy Spirit (breathing on their meditations on the Holy Scriptures, and other private helps) have attained, and much improved, an excellent spirit of knowledge, and utterance in the Holy Things of Jesus Christ, which spirit they ought to cherish, and further to improve to the praise of Christ...

Thirdly, it is the duty of all that are in authority, and of all that are able, to countenance, encourage and supply such true volunteers as give and devote themselves to the service and Ministry of Christ Jesus in any kind: although it be also the duty and will be the practice of such whom the Spirit of God sends upon any work of Christ's, rather to work as Paul did, among the Corinthians, and Thessalonians, that the work and service of their Lord and Master should not be neglected...

Williams' Outreach to the Indians – "A Key into the Language of America"

Leaving an indelible mark on posterity, Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* was composed in 1643 on his voyage to America. This work presents the character of the Indians in a new and favorable light, admirably calculated to facilitate communication with them, necessary to peaceful cohabitation. Of this famous work, Williams writes:

To my dear and well-beloved friends and countrymen, in Old and New England: I present you with a Key; I have not heard of the like, yet framed, since it pleased God to bring that mighty Continent of America to light; others of my countrymen, have often and excellently, and lately written of the country (and none that I know beyond the goodness and worth of it). This Key, respects the native language of it, and happily may unlock some rarities concerning the natives themselves, not yet discovered... There is a mixture of this language North and South, from the place of my abode, about six hundred miles; yet within the 200 miles (aforementioned) their Dialects do exceedingly differ; yet not so, but (within that compass) a man may by this help, converse with thousands of natives all over the country: and by such converse it may please the Father of Mercies to spread civility (and in His own most holy season) Christianity; for one candle will light ten thousand, and it may please God to bless a little leaven to season the mighty lump of those peoples and territories...

Roger's Indian Translation of God's Account of Creation in Genesis, First Book of the Bible

Ever focused upon bringing the Word of God to lost souls, Williams prefaces his translation of the Genesis account of Creation. It is hereunder excerpted:

...I shall propose some proper expressions concerning the Creation of the world, and man's estate, and in particular theirs also, which from myself many hundreds of times, great numbers of them have heard with great delight, and great convictions: which who knows (in God's Holy season) may rise to the exalting of the Lord Jesus Christ in their conversion and salvation?...

Friend, I will aske you a Question.
Speak on.
What thinke you?
Who made the Heavens?
The Earth, the Sea.
The World.

Some will answer Tatta, I cannot tell, some will answer Manitowock, the Gods.

How many Gods bee there?
Many, great many.
Friend, not so.
There is onely one God.
You are mistaken.
You are out of the way.

A phrase which much pleaseth them, being proper for their wandering in the woods, and similitudes greatly please them.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION, continued

I will tell you, presently.
I will tell you newes.
One Onely God made the Heavens, &c.
Five thousand years agoe, and upwards.
He alone made all things.
Out of nothing.
In six days He made all things.
The first day Hee made the Light.
The second day Hee made the Firmament.
The third day Hee made the Earth and Sea.
The fourth day He made the Sun and the Moon.
Two great Lights.
And all the Starres.
The fifth day Hee made all the fowle.
In the Ayre or Heavens
And all the Fish in the Sea.
The sixth day Hee made all the Beasts
Of the Field
Last of all He made one Man.
Of red Earth.
And call'd him Adam, or red Earth.
And the afterward, while
Adam or red Earth slept.
God tooke a rib from Adam, or red Earth.
And of that rib He made One woman.
And brought her to Adam...

Roger's Poem on Salvation, Through Christ Jesus

His Key into the Language of America finishes with a heart-rending poem, prefaced with this eternal Truth, as found in the Bible.

O, how terrible is the look the speedy and serious thought of death to all the sons of men? Thrice happy those who are dead and risen with the Son of God, for they are past from death to life, and shall not see death (a heavenly sweet paradox or riddle), as the Son of God hath promised them.

More particular:
The Indians say their bodies die,
Their souls they do not die;
Worse are then Indians such, as hold the soul's mortality
Our hopeless body rots, say they,
Is gone eternally,
English hope better, yet some's hope
Proves endless misery
Two worlds of men shall rise and stand
'Fore Christ's most dreadful bar;
Indians and English naked too,
That now most gallant are.
True Christ most Glorious then shall make
New Earth, and Heavens new,
False Christs, false Christians then shall quake,
O blessed then the true.

and those that walke in lies) should be let alone in the world, and not plucked up until the harvest, which is the end of the world, Matt. 13.30.38.&c.

Roger Williams – Man of Prayer

A magnificent prayer to Almighty God concludes his masterful translation of their Indian language:

Now, to the most High and most Holy, Immortal, Invisible, and the only Wise God, who alone is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, the First and the Last, who Was, and Is, and is to Come; from Whom, and to Whom are all things; by Whose gracious assistance and wonderful supportment in so many varieties of hardship and outward miseries,...be Honor, Glory, Power, Riches, Wisdom, Goodness and Dominion ascribed by all His in Jesus Christ to Eternity, Amen.

Finis.

Williams' Love for the Indians

This American hero shows his deep love of the Indians in his statement that "God was pleased to give me a painful, patient Spirit to lodge with them, in their filthy smoky holes (even while I lived in Plymouth and Salem) to gain their tongue."

Roger Williams' Greatest Work –

The Bloody Tenent, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience

Williams' 1644 work: *The Bloody Tenent, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience*, was published in 1644 by Gregory Dexter. It was written in answer to Cotton's work upholding the right and enforcing the duty of the civil magistrate to regulate the doctrines of the church. This able Christian apologist prefaces his case as follows:

Whether Persecution for cause of Conscience be not against the Doctrine of Jesus Christ the King of Kings. The Scriptures and reasons are these.

Because Christ commandeth that the tares and wheat (which some understand are those that walke in the truth,

The same commandeth Matth. 15.14. that they that are blinde (as some interpret, led on in false religion, and are offended with him for teaching true religion) should be let alone, referring their punishment unto their falling into the ditch.

Againe, Luke 9.55.56. Hee reproveth his disciples who would have had fire come downe from heaven and devour those Samaritans who would not receive Him, in these words: Ye know not what manner of Spirit ye are of, for the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives but to save them...All civill states with their officers of justice in their respective constitutions and administrations are proved essentially civill and therefore not Judges, Governours or Defendours of the spirituall or Christian state and worship...

The above work encapsulates Williams' stance for freedom of religion, being the first great American Christian statesman to preach and advocate, *Separation of Church from Interference by the State*.

Chosen as Rhode Island's Greatest Hero in the U.S. Capitol's Hall of Fame

This man of God died in April, 1683, at Providence, and was buried in his family burial ground, with every testimony of respect that the colony could manifest. He was father of six children: Mary, Freeborn, Providence, Mercy, Daniel and Joseph. Roger Williams finds his place in America's Hall of Fame, having been chosen by the citizens of Rhode Island to represent them as their greatest hero in the United State Capitol.

(Excerpted from, *Great American Statesmen and Heroes* © copyright 1995 by Catherine Millard).