

## "North America Owes Its Religious Freedom to the Baptists"

Taken from *The Baptist Almanac*, 1852

The number of baptists in this country, with their relative progress, and rapidly growing power, is one of the most singular facts of the age. As such it may challenge the attention of the philosophical historian and statesman, no less than that of the thoughtful Christian.

If we go back to the settlement of this country, it is not explained by ordinary principles. Not one of all the colonies, not even Rhode Island, was originally planted by baptists; as Virginia was by Episcopalians, Maryland by Catholics, Delaware by Lutherans, Pennsylvania by Quakers, New Jersey and New York by Presbyterians, and all New England by Congregationalists. Nor was their original introduction and spread the result of any energetic missionary system, like that of the methodists. No other body of Christians owes so little as the baptists to emigration from Europe. And then they alone have religiously rejected the entrapping policy of infant baptism—on which all other sects rely for the perpetuity of religion. All the more prominent baptists of that period became such after their arrival in the New World. Roger Williams became a baptist, for example, eight years after his arrival, and three years after his banishment from Massachusetts for his views of liberty of conscience, which were truly thought to "tend to Anabaptistry." When he became convinced of the truth of our views in 1639, there was not a baptist minister in the country to administer the ordinance. The little baptist church formed in Weymouth, Mass., that same year, was broken up by the civil power: by fines, imprisonment, and banishment. Yet the year following, Hanserd Knollys, then first pastor in Dover, N.H., embraced baptist principles, and returning to England, spent a long and glorious life in their defence; dying at last, as Cotton Mather tells us, "a good man, in a good old age." The lady Moody, of Lynn, became a baptist in 1642; and Dr. John Clarke, the founder of the first baptist church in Newport, and one of the ablest and best men of the age, in 1644. Mr. Painter, of Boston, the first to bear our principles to the test of the public whipping-post, embraced them and suffered for them the same year. Obadiah Holmes, the second sufferer for the same cause, in the same cruel manner, in 1651, became a baptist in 1648. President Dunstar, of Cambridge, who was roused to the investigation by the sufferings of Mr. Holmes, became a convert to our principles in 1652—a noble climax to these triumphs of persecuted Truth! It was thirteen years later, before the conversion of Thomas Gould to our sentiments led to the formation of the first baptist church in the city of Boston; where now their relative standing and influence are probably not inferior to those of their orthodox Congregational brethren.

The remark of Cotton Mather in his *Magnalia*, therefore, that "some of the first planters of New England were baptists," needs qualification. It is more exact to say, that some of the first settlers became baptists. And assuredly they were men—and women too—of whom we need not be ashamed. Who can claim among the pilgrims a nobler ancestry than we? Wherever baptists pitched their tent, or rose to power, there in its highest sense Liberty was sacred.

*"Aye, call it holy ground!  
The place where first they trod:*

*They have left unstained what there they found—  
Freedom to worship God!"*

Besides these venerable confessors, whose names are now inspiring watchwords of our history, it illustrates the early tendency of the American mind to our principles, to hear Cotton Mather confess, "that a multitude of holy, watchful, faithful, heavenly people among the first settlers of New England, had scruples as to infant baptism." Were all hearts laid open now, how few conscientious pedo-baptists would be found free from such scruples!" This is not mere conjecture. There are many facts by which hearts are even now revealed—were this the time to tell them.

The history of the Middle, Southern, and Western States might supply other facts illustrative of this point. But we mention only one. The great religious awakening under Whitefield (1740-1770) multiplied converts to baptist principles from Maine to Georgia. Even Whitefield's Agent in his Orphan House at Savannah, Mr. Bedgewood, with several of the Assistants, became baptists in 1758, and Mr. Bedgewood afterwards became a useful baptist minister.

The new impulse given to the spirit of liberty by the revolutionary war, was followed by the rapid spread of baptist principles, particularly in Virginia, where our brethren had suffered severe persecution. Our chief prosperity dates from that era. And two facts are worthy of attention—the ratio of increase has been greatest where they were previously most persecuted—and also where the greatest degree of general activity and culture prevails. These facts are important, as showing that patient suffering, a spirit of self-sacrifice, and the advancement of society in general knowledge, are alike favorable to the prevalence of our principles.

### **The Obstacles Overcome by Baptists**

Let it be remembered that baptist principles have had everything to contend against, even in this country, except God and Truth. On the one hand were the Quakers, denouncing all the visible ordinances of Christ; on the other, every class of Christians, with customs and creeds stereotyped in the Old World, denouncing the baptism of believers only, as re-baptism, as the renunciation of God's covenanted mercies, as the rejection of little ones from the kingdom of heaven here and hereafter. Foul slanders all—but nevertheless fully believed and industriously propagated. The very mode in which the Son of God in the river Jordan "fulfilled all righteousness," was then as now, either stoutly denied, or stigmatized as no example for his followers, as unnecessary, indecent, presumptuous, bigoted, vulgar, murderous, idolatrous! Men of learning, men of power, men of wit, men venerable for wisdom, eloquence, and piety, frowned upon them—warmly opposed, coldly neglected, caustically satirized, or contemptuously pitied them as the dupes of ignorance and fanaticism; while they had only here and there a man qualified by education and acknowledged ability, to repel these assaults, and vindicate dishonoured and discredited truth. Their own children were often overpowered by the number, subtlety, and force of opposing influences, and without conviction, from mere weakness, impatience, pride, and worldliness, went over to the pedo-baptist ranks. No wonder that many pedo-baptists here, thought with Dr. Wall in England, that the baptists would die out in seventy years—or at least cease to spread.

But such men mistook the matter. What they deemed a superficial, transient error, was a deep-rooted, vital, vigorous truth. And in this republic it has at last found a congenial soil. Unaided by

power or policy, or to any considerable extent by emigration, it has leaned on Heaven for support and prospered. At every point of our Union it has penetrated, wrestled with all opposition, and overcome. It has conquered "by the blood of the Lamb and the Word of His Testimony." The only converts of which it boasts are converts not to a form or creed, but to Christ. These it now counts by myriads, only "as God gives to every man;" though its adherents are not less than four or five millions. This almanac will show our present position, our progress in numbers, institutions of learning and benevolent effort, and prospects of advancement towards a still brighter future.

It is not generally known that, next to Rhode Island, New York, under the rule of the Dutch, was an early asylum for the persecuted baptists. The first settlers of the "Empire State," then a small Dutch colony, brought with them from Holland those principles of toleration, which forty years before, (1573) William I., Prince of Orange, the Father of Belgic liberty, and the friend of the baptists, had succeeded in introducing into the constitution of the republic, in spite of the strenuous resistance of the clergy and nobles. Hence, as the puritans, when driven by persecution from England, first sought refuge in Holland, so the persecuted baptists and others in new England, sought refuge in "New Netherlands," now New York. Long Island, from its greater convenience, or supposed security, was the part of New York especially settled by these fugitives from New England puritan intolerance.

The first notice of this sort we have seen, relates to the celebrated Hanserd Knollys, the persecuted pastor of Dover, N.H., in 1641. Just before that good man was recalled to England, it seems, from Backus's History, that he and others like-minded, had already purchased a plantation on Long Island, to which it is presumed they went without him.

From Hoffman's "Pioneers of New York" we learn the following facts. "In 1642 a band of religionists, led on by the Rev. Mr. Doughty, Richard Smith, and others, who had followed the pilgrims from Old England to New England, were compelled to withdraw from the latter country by the persecution they received there, and after making formal application to the authorities of New Netherlands, they had a grant of land assigned to them, endowed with the usual privilege of free manors, free exercise of their religion, powers to plant towns, build churches, nominate magistrates, and administer civil and criminal jurisprudence. Six months later, Throgmorton, who had already been driven with Roger Williams from Massachusetts by the fiery Hugh Peters, procured permission to settle thirty-five families on the lands in Westchester County, now known as Throg's Neck, which the New Netherlanders at that time named Vredeland, or "Land of Peace."— In the same year the Lady Moody, with her minor son Sir Henry, and many followers, fled in a similar manner from New England to the asylum of New Netherlands, and founded the town of Gravezend, (now Gravesend) on Long Island. To which island Thomas Ffarrington, John Townsend, William Lawrence, John F. Ffirman, and others, were compelled, in the next twenty months, to remove with their families from New England, and after accepting a grant of land from the authorities of New Netherlands, enrolled themselves as liege men of that province. The historian De Laet says, in speaking of this period of the history of New Netherlands, "Numbers, nay, whole towns, to escape from the insupportable government of New England, removed to New Netherlands, to enjoy that liberty denied them by their own countrymen." It is worth stating in this connexion, adds Mr. Hoffman, that the Dutch language is at this very day still spoken in many of the localities of Long Island, by some of the descendants of these English emigrants.

How many of the above emigrants were baptists, we have not the means of knowing precisely; but Knollys, Throgmorton, and the Lady Moody it is known were so, and these were the heads of three separate companies. Why Throgmorton should have left Providence for Long Island, is uncertain. It might be from the difficulty mentioned by Roger Williams, as the ground of his appointment, in September of that very year, to go to England for a charter—the "frequent exceptions against Providence men, that we had no authority of civil government."

How wonderful are the ways of God! Roger Williams, as a banished man, was denied the privilege of sailing on that occasion from the port of Boston. Obligated thus, in the spring of 1643 to go to Manhattan, now New York, to find a passage, he came there just in season, by his generous mediation, to put an end to the war then raging between the Indians and the Dutch—in which the famous Mrs. Anne Hutchinson and her family perished, and the dwelling of Lady Moody was assailed.

Of the last named excellent woman, who so mercifully escaped destruction, and of whom it would be gratifying to know more, we have this honourable account from Winthrop's Journal—colored, of course, by the strong prejudice of the age against the baptists. "The Lady Moody, a wise and anciently religious woman, being taken in the error of denying baptism to infants, was dealt withal by many of the elders and others, and admonished by the church of Salem, (whereof she was a member;) but persisting still, and to avoid further trouble, she removed to the Dutch, against the advice of all her friends. Many others, infected with anabaptism, removed thither also." Vol. ii., pp. 123,124.

It thus appears that the "precious seed" of baptist principles was early sown in Long Island; whence, in due time, it has spread over the whole fruitful soil of the "Empire State." In two centuries, more than 800 baptist churches have there sprung up!

### **True Source of Modern Liberty**

C.F. Hoffman, Esq., in his anniversary discourse, delivered at New York, Dec. 6, 1847, thus discriminated between the true and the false claims of the puritans.

"It was a brave spirit, that of old puritanism; and I yield to none in honouring its undaunted antagonism to older forms of despotism over the rights of conscience—but it was not less a despotism!

It was an adventurous spirit, that of old puritanism; and I honour it not less for its self-martyrdom of exile, than for its unflinching grapple with the dogmas of its enemies.

"But I will not recognize its ferocious intolerance in forcing its own dogmas upon quakers and anabaptists in this land, as proving that it offered a true priesthood for the altars of freedom! I will not recognize that its blind uses of power have proved aught to the world in the Science of Liberty—ought save the mental vigour and conscientious hardihood of its stern asserters of narrow doctrine.

And speaking still of puritanism in its political aspect—I will recognize its hard-earned triumphs as marking more than one glorious tide in the moving waters of human freedom—but I will not recognize it as the spirit which first released the waves. I will not recognize it as the compelling power which still teaches deep to call unto deep, until the true knowledge of human rights is wide spread as the ocean, and the voices of true liberty are echoed from every shore." pp.36-40.

Mr. Hoffman has here spoken the truth, though not the whole truth, on a great subject, yet widely understood. The truth is stated but partially, when it is said that the Dutch in 1620 understood liberty better than the English puritans. There is no documentary proof that the baptists of that time understood liberty far better than the Dutch. It is the glory of our church organization that liberty is one of its inseparable principles. This is the cause why all the despots of the Old World, whether in church or state, never could endure it. The well-known maxim, that "tyrants hate those whom they fear," has found its most perfect illustration in the persecutions suffered by the baptists. For infant baptism, that fundamental error that builds up churches by compulsion—what martyr ever died? But for believer's baptism—that great law of Jesus Christ, what myriads in all ages have faced the fiery flame?

More than ten thousand baptists suffered death in the Netherlands alone, from 1566 to 1573, under the ferocious Duke of Alva. (*Ency. Americana, Art. Anabaptists.*) The sufferings of these martyrs of Jesus Christ evidently touched the heart of the Prince of Orange, and stimulated his exertions for the freedom of his country. Even so early as 1565, he had said to the Regent:—

"There are two species of Inquisition. The one is exercised in the name of the Pope, and the other has been long practised by the bishops. The Netherlands have for several years been a school, in which, if we have not been extremely inattentive, we may have learned the folly of persecution. Men do not for nothing forego the advantages of life; much less do they expose themselves to torture and death for nothing. The contempt of death and pain, exhibited by heretics in suffering for religion, is calculated to produce the most powerful effects upon the minds of spectators. It works on their compassion; it excites their admiration of the sufferers; it excites their admiration of the sufferers; and creates in them a suspicion that truth must certainly be found where they observe so much constancy and fortitude." (Jones' Ch. Hist., p. 468, *Phila. Ed.*)

Only eight years afterwards, at the head of the new republic of the Netherlands, William proved the sincerity of these convictions, by securing for the first time in modern history, the legal toleration of the baptists. This noble measure, in 1573, was partly the fruit of pity, partly of policy, and partly of gratitude; they having furnished him pecuniary aid in the bloody struggle with Spain, for the liberty of the Netherlands. Holland thus has the honour of being the first country in the world that gave protection to the persecuted baptists; that protection being extended to entire religious liberty in 1626. No wonder then if "New Netherlands" partook in some degree of the same spirit. No wonder that the baptists are now the most numerous body of Christians in the "Empire State." Even the laurels of learning begin to flourish on their brow.

It appears then that the baptists—by the grace of God ever the fervent friends of universal freedom, and for ages its only friends, champions, and martyrs—taught it to the Dutch, and the Dutch, so far as they received it, afterwards (in 1688) taught it to the English. Slowly, but surely,

has this baptist principle pushed its way through the barriers reared by hereditary pedo-baptist prejudice, until it has pervaded our whole country and is spreading over the globe.

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