

The Persecution of Baptists in Massachusetts and Obadiah Holmes

J. M. Cramp's *Baptist History*, 1871

Year after year, more Baptists emigrated from England to Massachusetts, and, as a matter of course, openly avowed their sentiments. "The Anabaptists," says Winthrop, "increased and spread in Massachusetts." Various methods were adopted to annoy them, which so far produced the desired effect that many of them left the country and took refuge among the Dutch in the state of New York. But others remained, who, it would seem, took no pains to conceal their views, naturally concluding that those who had fled from England to gain religious freedom would concede to their fellow-Christians what they sought for themselves. But the New Englanders were very imperfectly instructed in this matter. They still held the Establishment principle, and dreamed that the Jewish theocracy was to be perpetuated in Christian states. An act was passed for the banishment of Baptists. It was easier to banish than to convince them. Here is a copy of the Act:

"Forasmuch as experience hath plentifully and often proved that, since the first rising of the Anabaptists, about one hundred years since, they have been the incendiaries of commonwealths, and the infectors of persons in main matters of religion, and the troublers of churches in all places where they have been, and that they have held the baptizing of infants unlawful, have usually held other errors or heresies therewith, though they have, as other heretics used to do, concealed the same, till they spied out a fit advantage and opportunity to vent them, by way of question or scruple; and whereas divers of this kind have, since our coming into New England, appeared amongst ourselves, some whereof (as others before them) denied the ordinance of magistracy, and the lawfulness of making war, and others the lawfulness of magistrates, and their inspection into any breach of the first table [that is, the first four of the Ten Commandments]; which opinions, if they should be connived at by us, are likely to be increased amongst us, and so must necessarily bring guilt upon us, infection and trouble to the churches, and hazard to the whole commonwealth: it is ordered and agreed, that if any person or persons, within this jurisdiction, shall either openly condemn or oppose the baptizing of infants, or go about secretly to seduce others from the approbation or use thereof, or shall purposely depart the congregation at the ministration of the ordinance, or shall deny the ordinance of magistracy, or the lawful right and authority to make war, or to punish the outward breaches of the first table, and shall appear to the court willfully and obstinately to continue therein, after due time and means of conviction — every such person or persons shall be sentenced to banishment."¹

This act was passed November 13, 1644. That same year Roger Williams had published his immortal book, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of*

¹Benedict, *History Of the Baptists*, (Ed. 1848), p. 370.

Conscience Discussed. It was a bitter pill to John Cotton, the minister, and to the magistrates who were so easy to do his bidding. They gnashed their teeth at Williams, as he passed through Boston on his way from England to Rhode Island, but they durst not bite — they could not even scratch him: their claws were pared: they stood in awe of the men at home. So Williams got safe to his free colony; but "a poor man by the name of Painter" was "tied up and whipt" because he would not have his child sprinkled!

There was a pressure on the Baptists in Massachusetts. They were few and fearful. Can we wonder at it? It was no small trial to be driven beyond the bounds of civilization in those days. We hear but little of them for seven years, and then it is whipping again! William Witter, an aged Baptist, lived at Lynn. The distance, coupled with his infirmities, prevented him from enjoying Christian fellowship with his brethren of the church at Newport to which he belonged. There were other brethren in the same neighborhood. A pastoral visit was resolved on. Dr. John Clark, pastor of the church, accompanied by Obadiah Holmes, a ministering brother, and Crandal, repaired to Lynn for that purpose, and proposed to hold a meeting with the brethren on the Lord's Day. They were assembled, and Dr. Clark had commenced his discourse, when the constables made their appearance, charged to apprehend the intruders, and keep them safely till the next day. They obeyed their orders, and the meeting was broken up. Next day the Puritan magistrates committed them to prison, and, about a fortnight after, the Court of Assistants adjudged Dr. Clark to pay a fine of twenty pounds, Mr. Holmes a fine of thirty pounds, and Mr. Crandal five pounds. Some friends paid Dr. Clark's fine. Mr. Crandal was released on promise to appear the next court day. There was some talk about a disputation on baptism between Dr. Clark and the clergy of Boston, who had intimated a willingness to meet him, but it came to nothing.

Mr. Holmes' fine was the heaviest, most probably on account of the circumstances mentioned in the sentence presently to be quoted. He would not allow the fine to be paid for him, nor would he pay it himself. But he must either pay or be "well whipt." So ran the sentence. It is a curiosity, and should be preserved: —

"The sentence of Obadiah Holmes, of Seaconk, the 31st of the fifth month, 1651.

"Forasmuch as you, Obadiah Holmes, being come into this jurisdiction about the 21st of the fifth month, did meet at one William Witter's house, at Lynn, and did here privately (and at other times), being an excommunicated person, did take upon you to preach and baptize upon the Lord's Day, or other days, and being taken then by the constable, and coming afterward to the assembly at Lynn, did, in disrespect to the ordinance of God and his worship, keep on your hat, the pastor being in prayer, insomuch as you would not give reverence in vailing your hat, till it was forced off your head, to the disturbance of the

congregation, and professing against the institution of the church, as not being according to the gospel of Jesus Christ; and that you, the said Obadiah Holmes, did, upon the day following, meet again at the said William Witter's, in contempt to authority, you being then in the custody of the law, and did there receive the sacrament, being excommunicate, and that you did baptize such as were baptized before, and thereby did necessarily deny the baptism before administered to be baptism, the churches no churches, and also other ordinances and ministers, as if all was a nullity; and did also deny the lawfulness of baptizing of infants; and all this tends to the dishonor of God, the despising the ordinances of God among us, the peace of the churches, and seducing the subjects of this commonwealth from the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and perverting the straight ways of the Lord; the court doth fine you thirty pounds, to be paid, or sufficient sureties that the said sum shall be paid by the first day of the next Court of Assistants, or else to be well whipt; and that you shall remain in prison till it be paid, or security given in for it:

"By the Court,

"INCREASE NORVEL."

The sentence was passed in July. Mr. Holmes was kept in prison till September, when he was publicly whipped, and so barbarously "that in many days, if not some weeks, he could take no rest but as he lay upon his knees and elbows, not being able to suffer any part of his body to touch the bed whereon he lay." His own account of the affair, in a letter addressed to Messrs. Spilsbury, Kiffin and other Baptists in London, is deeply affecting, but too long for transcription here. He tells the brethren how he declined the proffered kindness of his friends, who "came to visit him, desiring him to take the refreshment of wine and other comforts," having resolved "not to drink wine nor strong drink that day, until his punishment was over," lest the world should say "that the strength and comfort of the creature had carried him through;" how he withdrew to his chamber to seek strength from the Lord, and "prayed earnestly that he would be pleased to give him a spirit of courage and boldness, a tongue to speak for him, and strength of body to suffer for his sake, and not to shrink or yield to the strokes, or shed tears, lest the adversaries of the truth should thereupon blaspheme and be hardened, and the weak and feeble-hearted discouraged;" how he attempted at the place of suffering to address the people, but was prevented by the magistrate in attendance; and how graciously he was strengthened to endure the pain. "As the man began to lay the strokes upon my back, I said to the people, 'Though my flesh should fail, and my spirit should fail, yet my God would not fail.' So it pleased the Lord to come in, and to fill my heart and tongue as a vessel full, and with an audible voice I broke forth, praying unto the Lord not to lay this sin to their charge, and telling the people that now I found he did not fail me, and therefore now I should trust him for ever, who failed me not; for in truth, as the strokes fell upon me, I had such

a spiritual manifestation of God's presence, as the like thereof I never had nor felt, nor can with fleshly tongue express; and the outward pain was so removed from me that indeed I am not able to declare it to you; it was so easy to me that I could well bear it, yea, and in a manner felt it not, although it was grievous, as the spectators said, the man striking with all his strength (yea, spitting in his hands three times, as many affirmed) with a three-corded whip, giving me therewith thirty strokes. When he had loosed me from the post, having joyfulness in my heart and cheerfulness in my countenance, as the spectators observed, I told the magistrates, 'You have struck me as with roses,' and said moreover, 'Although the Lord hath made it easy to me, yet I pray God it may not be laid to your charge.' Mr. Holmes then proceeds to state that John Hazel and John Spur, who expressed their sympathy by shaking hands with him after it was over, were sentenced "to pay forty shillings or be whipt;" and that a surgeon who dressed his wounds was inquired after as if he had committed some crime. But "it hath pleased the Father of mercies," he adds, "to dispose of the matter that my bonds and imprisonment have been no hindrance to the gospel, for before my return some submitted to the Lord and were baptized, and divers were put upon the way of inquiry. And now, being advised to make my escape by night, because it was reported there were warrants forth for me, I departed; and the next day after, while I was on my journey, the constable came to search at the house where I had lodged; so I escaped their hands, and was, by the good hand of my heavenly Father, brought home again to my near relations, my wife and eight children, the brethren of our town and Providence having taken pains to meet me four miles in the woods, where we rejoiced together in the Lord."²

"Bonds and imprisonment" awaited all Baptists in New England. They met for worship as they were able, and constantly testified against infant baptism, for which they were harassed by the courts without mercy. . . .

[From J. M. Cramp, *Baptist History From the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Present Time*, 1871, pp. 406-411.]

²Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, II, p. 208-211.