

JOHN WINTHROP OR ROGER WILLIAMS? (Part-four of a six-part study)

There can be no question that Roger Williams was guilty of “stirring the pot” with not only his personality, but his various and unique viewpoints. He adhered to the principles of Puritanism, but not as an in-house reformer, but a Separatist who believed that the Church of England had been corrupted beyond the point of any hope for repentance and restoration. This did not prove to be a problem at first, since both Winthrop and Williams chose to “separate” themselves from England and cross the Atlantic Ocean, in order to fulfill God’s purpose for each of their lives.

However, his separatist mindset moved him in a direction toward the opposite end of the spectrum occupied by John Winthrop. At the very core of Williams’ theological reasoning was the concept of “religious freedom.” He did not believe that anyone should be coerced into a religious belief contrary to their conscience. That would be the ultimate in hypocrisy, resulting in an ever-worsening corruption.

From that foundational principle, he also developed the idea that the Church and human government should be separate from one another. Having witnessed the practice of various coercive tactics in those early years of the Massachusetts Bay colony, it generated within him a sense of conviction that freedom of religion could only be established and maintained by keeping it separate from the efforts of human government in mandating one form of religion for everyone. He even advanced a groundbreaking analogy, portraying the Church as a garden, separated by a wall from the wilderness of the world, and viewed human government as belonging to that wilderness, rather than having any rightful place in the garden.

This would set the stage for the conflict which would ensue between Roger Williams and the leadership of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Adding to this contentiousness, Williams went so far as to claim that the King of England had no right to confer land grants to these early settlers, since it belonged to the Native Americans who already resided there. Any initial legitimate acquisition of the land would need to be negotiated for a fair purchase price with those tribes.

So, in 1636, the leadership of the colony determined that Williams should be arrested and sent back to England for imprisonment. However, he discovered their intentions and fled south, establishing a settlement which he called “Providence,” due to his belief that the providence of God had led him there. But then, much to the surprise of many, he planted a church in that town which he called “The First Baptist Church of Providence.” How did this die-hard separatist Puritan become a Baptist? His concept of religious liberty eventually developed into the belief that baptism should be voluntary, and not for infants, but for true believers only!

Don’t forget! Part five of this study will be posted on Saturday, September 17