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## Baptist History In America – Obadiah Holmes

Obadiah Holmes was a significant figure in the early story of Baptist in America. He among other ancestors sacrificed significantly to uphold the tenants of the Baptist faith. His name is synonymous with the likes of John Bunyan, Thomas Hardcastle, Abraham Cheare and many others who died in prisons, faced public humiliation, persecution and like Holmes, tied to a post and whipped. Church understand its history, challenges, sacrifices, and challenges that serve as the foundation of who we are today. Obadiah Holmes was born in England estimated around 1607. He was married to Katherine Hyde in 1630. Obadiah, while in England experienced a conversion and aligned himself with the Puritans.

Obadiah's conviction fight for his Puritan belief's was significant because it is what led him and his family to migrate to the colonies. At this point in history, the two groups struggled for elevation, the Laudians, and the Puritans. Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud was a key advisor to King Charles I of Great Britain. William Laud was known for being rude and obnoxious, but conversely, he was also spiritual and an academic. Charles' admiration of Laud allowed him to assume authority over the King's religious policies. The goal of these policies was to create division between in the nation and tarnish the popularity of the monarchy.

The focus of the Protestants was on a Church that emphasizes the Word of God and biblical principles. They were against what was considered human-made ceremonies. Archbishop Laud, on the other hand, as leader of the Anglo-Catholics esteemed the ceremonies and rituals of the visible church. In a nutshell, the Laudians stressed the vital role of the clergy in the spiritual life of the Church; the Puritans disliked any attempts at a more hierarchical, organized Church. Although the issues fought at that time may seem innocuous to some today, it went to the heart of the faith of the Puritans, and the Anglicans. For example, a major issue was the position of the communion table.

The Puritans wanted it to remain in the middle of the church emphasizing the democracy of worship; the Laudians wanted it moved to the east end and then railed off from the communion so emphasizing the more sacerdotal, priestly function of the vicar. To the godly, this was nothing short of Popery. The Laudians also tried to introduce stained-glass windows, icons, and new clerical outfits.

William Laud was such a zealot in enforcing Anglican uniformity that he aggressively persecuted nonconformist. The Puritans fell within his target zone which resulted in them migrating to the Americas and Europe. Obadiah Holmes and his family was a part of the groups that fled. Obadiah joined the Great Migration in 1638 and traveled to Boston. Upon his arrival, he eventually settled in Salem and began working in a glass factory. In 1643, he moved to a new community in Rehoboth. He began associating with the Rhode Island Baptist and eventually converted in 1650. Obadiah lived out his Baptist faith with the same fervor as his Puritan. As a result, Obadiah began having problems in the Bay Colony. His way of worshiping and sharing his faith was contrary to ways approved by the Bay Colony clergy and Colonial authorities.

Holmes decided to leave and move his family to the Rhode Island for religious freedoms and a community of like-minded Baptist. At this point in history, the Baptist denomination is not highly

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thought of in the American colonies. Amazingly, the ones that were passing judgment were the Puritans who had experienced the same persecution. The persecution of the Baptist is played out in a significant way on September 5, 1651. Obadiah Holmes along with the Rev. John Clark and another individual conducted a worship service in the home of an elderly and blind man who was known for his strong convictions against the state-church rule and infant baptism.

The trio was arrested and fined for their religious practices. The Rev. John Clarke and John Crandall were released after acquaintances paid their fines. However, Holmes refused to have his fines paid. He believed in religious liberty and contended that he had done nothing wrong. Holmes' actions so enraged the Puritan leadership that the following occurred: Puritan preacher John Cotton denounced Holmes in the gathering of local ministers. Not being able to control his rage, the Rev. John Wilson (pastor of the First Church of Boston) slapped and cursed Holmes, while he was under the protection of the court. Pastor Wilson was also an attending minister during the execution of Mary Dyer in 1660; she was one of the four executed Quakers known as the Boston martyrs. She was hanged for teaching Quakerism in Massachusetts. Because Obadiah refused to pay the fine, On July 31, 1651, a magistrate sentenced Obadiah Holmes to 30 lashes, one for each pound he owed. It is said that Obadiah uttered the following words, "I bless God I am counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus."

The great Baptist, Roger Williams heard about his sentence, and he sent a letter of rebuke to Gov. Endecott for persecuting people for their religious beliefs. Obadiah received his 30 lashes. The accounts report that he was whipped to the point of death. But even in the midst of the whipping, he preached a sermon and debating his beliefs. At the end of the public flogging, Obadiah proclaims, "Ye have beaten me as with roses." The year after this punishment Holmes became a member of the Newport Church. He eventually became their Pastor when John Clark departed to England to secure its charter. The cruel punishment of Obadiah was significant in the decision of King Charles II granting pastor John Clarke permission to write the charter of Rhode Island in 1663, the first document in America granting religious freedom to any who resided there, and the basis for religious freedom in our current U.S. Constitution.

Obadiah remained pastor for 30 years, until his death in 1682. He and his wife Katharine had nine known children, eight of whom survived to adulthood. Obadiah Holmes story is a cautionary tale of the cost of religious freedom.

Today as Baptist in America we have the luxury of worshiping and expressing our faith without fear of being arrested and jailed, whipped or even killed. These religious freedoms should not be ignored or taken for granted. Also, as Obadiah sacrificed willingly for his faith that did not preclude the fight that was stirring within the faith itself.

In 1952, a division in the Newport Church regarding the application of the "Six Principles" derived from Hebrews 6:1-2. Essentially a group in the church felt that the "laying of the hand" to the newly baptized is required for all church members.

This practice had previously been optional. I concur that this was a significant issue. It challenged the Baptist position that Scripture alone is the rule of belief and practice. Secondly, the passage provided a "statement of faith and practiced directly from the Bible." Lastly, the laying on of hands was a symbol of priestly status. "The rite offered an implied egalitarianism in Baptist congregations regarding the roles of clergy and laity." Obadiah Holmes' life, beliefs, and sacrifices are a foundation of our Baptist beliefs today. The freedom of not only Baptist but

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for all to worship and practice their belief in freedom. The Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice, and we accept no creed but the Bible.

Obadiah chose the whipping post rather than to state or imply what he was doing was wrong. Believers baptism, which means that a person made a choice and commitment, infant baptism is not valid. Lastly, "local churches should have freedom under the Lordship of Christ. Obadiah Holmes remained adamant that his worship of Christ should not be under the control of a priest or bishop, or a magistrate or government. He and his Baptist contemporaries in Rhode Island opposed any government interference in religion and vice versa." Obadiah endured persecution throughout his life but never wavered from his beliefs.

In closing, I reflect on, and I admit to struggling with what is more important. The fight for religious freedoms or debating what it means to be a Baptist regarding beliefs and practices. This may not be a fair comparison either. However, Obadiah fought both. It just is concerning that positions may be taken that one is more important than the other and is that valid or undergirding the faith.

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