THE PUBLIC WHIPPING OF OBADIAH HOLMES

BAPTIST HISTORY AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

1651

"YE HAVE BEATEN ME AS WITH ROSES"

A PRESERVED EDITION

The Public Whipping of Obadiah Holmes

Obadiah Holmes was born in Reddish, England, near Manchester in the year 1606. He worked on his father's farm as a boy in an England that mostly practiced Puritanism. At this time, England was under the rule of King James I. In his teen years Holmes saw England returned to rigid Anglicanism as Charles I took the crown. Charles appointed William Laud as bishop of London. Laud then became the Archbishop of Canterbury, or religious head of the Church of England. Laud began to persecute Baptists, Puritans, and other dissidents. He beat and imprisoned many. This activity resulted in many Englishmen sailing for New England in hope of religious liberty. These were mostly Puritans with some Baptists. Holmes was married to Catherine Hyde in 1630. He accepted Christ in 1638 and sailed that same year to New England.

The Holmes family settled in Salem; but after much conflict with the religionists there, he moved to Seekonk (Massachusetts Bay Colony). It was here that Holmes began to resist the false teaching of the standing order church. He was tormented inside with question like- "Was baptism legitimate for infants?" and, "What if you were baptized, but not a believer?" Then, amazingly, Obadiah Holmes, with no prior religious training, started a "Separate" Congregational church. This courageous act shook up the "standing order" and Holmes was totally ostracized. Later, in 1649, Dr. Clarke came to town. Under his preaching, Holmes got assurance of his salvation, realized he was a Baptist, and was baptized by Clarke. Before we examine the beating of Obadiah Holmes, we need to realize that he and Dr. John Clarke, as well as others, were marked men by the standing order.

In 1651, Obadiah Holmes was found to be a member in good standing at the first Baptist church on American soil, founded and pastored by John Clarke at Newport, Rhode Island. In the summer of 1651, the Newport church received from the aged William Witter a request of visitation, so that he might hear the Word of God. Witter was a man of conviction himself. A strong Baptist, Witter was more than willing to speak out against the state-church and infant, non-Baptist baptism.

Here are just a few of the statements Witter made when dragged into court over the issue of baptism:

"The baptism of infants is sinful."

"Infant baptism is the badge of the whore."

"They who stay whiles a child is baptized do worship the devil."

(Salem court records, 1644 and 1645)

Witter was a member of the First Baptist Church in Newport, Rhode Island. Being up in years now and blind, he was not able to travel to what was not only the nearest Baptist church, the First Baptist Church, but one of the only organized Baptist churches on American soil. So, upon

Witter's request for a pastoral visit Pastor John Clarke, active layman John Crandall, and preacher Obadiah Holmes started out for Lynn, Massachusetts. After navigating to the mainland and then walking for two days, the men completed the eighty-mile trip. They arrived at Witter's home on Saturday night, July 19, 1651. They enjoyed a time of fellowship and prayer, and stayed at Witter's home that night, intending to have church services on the Lord's Day. News in Lynn spread fast, and a warrant for the arrest of the strangers was delivered to the constable.

Holmes and company began their service the next morning, and after four or five visitors came, the constables burst in to break it up. The three men were taken into custody. The same day, the men were forced to attend an afternoon service in the standing order Congregational church. This Puritan run, state-church was the approved church of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is amazing how quickly those who fled religious persecution in England became the persecutors of the Baptists! Upon entering the meeting house, the three bowed and saluted the assembly and sat down, refusing to remove their hats, thus showing their contempt for religion. The constable was commanded to knock off their hats, which he did so promptly. Clarke attempted to preach and was silenced. They were then taken to prison.

On Tuesday, July 2, 1651, Holmes, Clarke, and Crandall were taken to Boston, so that they might appear before their adversaries. They were committed to jail and on July 31 they were tried in court. After an animated courtroom frenzy in which Clarke showed what an articulate defender of Baptist doctrine he was, the judge agreed with the prosecutor, Puritan preacher John Cotton, that this heresy (Anabaptism) was worthy of death. There really was no trial, just a reading of the Allegations and a commencement with their sentencing. Clarke was fined twenty pounds or be "well whipt;" Holmes, thirty pounds or be "well whipt;" and Crandall, five pounds or be "well whipt." Money was raised to pay the fines. Crandall was released from the fine. Clarke and Holmes refused permission for their fines to be paid, not willing to admit guilt, knowing the dreaded whipping post was the alternative.

As Clarke was led to the whipping post, a friend pressed money into the hands of the Puritan official accompanying the party, and Clarke was released. But Holmes stated, "Agreeing to the payment of my fine would constitute admission of wrongdoing." Holmes was led to the post and stripped to the waist. While being stripped, Obadiah Holmes preached a sermon to the on-looking crowd, exhorting them to stay faithful to their beliefs. Obadiah Holmes' sentence was ten stripes less than the maximum of forty lashes, which was considered a death sentence. Holmes' sentence was the same as that of rapists. Many in the gathering crowd cried out in protest. At least thirteen individuals were arrested for calling for the punishment to stop. The beating was an attempt to kill Holmes. Holmes later stated that the flogger used a whip with three hard leather lashes. The man stopped three times to spit on his hands, and applied the whip with all his might. Each of the thirty strokes cut three gashes through the skin, for a total of ninety slices through the flesh. Holmes gave this account of his beating:

"As the man began to lay the strokes upon my back, I said to the people, though my flesh should fail, yet God will not fail: so it pleased the Lord to come in, and fill my heart and tongue as a vessel full, and with audible voice I break forth, praying the Lord not to lay this sin to their

charge, and telling the people I found He did not fail me, and therefore now I should trust Him forever who failed me not: for in truth, as the strokes fell upon me, I had such a spiritual manifestation of God's presence as I never had before and the outward pain was so removed from me, that I could well bear it, yea, and in a manner
felt it not, although it was grievous."

The unbroken spirit of Holmes and the Baptists of New England was exemplified in the statement Holmes made to the magistrates as he was released from the post. He boldly stated, "Ye have beaten me as with roses." This cruel beating did not stop the Baptists, but rather emboldened them.

The Effects of Holmes' beating:

John Spur, an on-looker, later testified that, being moved powerfully by the faith of Holmes, he was born-again at the beating. John Spur and John Hazel helped Holmes from the bloody post and were imprisoned. The aged Hazel later died and never returned to Newport, suffering from complications relating to his imprisonment.

John Clarke, Holmes' pastor, being proficient in law, medicine, and theology, upon the beating of Holmes wrote a book, "Ill Newes from New England" (1652). In it, Dr. Clarke presented his philosophy of government. He pushed for government not to interfere with man's conscience on religious matters. Valentine Wightman, on February 10, 1702, married Susannah Holmes, granddaughter to Brother Obadiah Holmes and great-granddaughter of Roger Williams (who was called, "The Apostle of Freedom of Conscience"). Later in 1712, Wightman left Rhode Island, won converts, and started the First Baptist Church of New York City. Holmes has a godly offspring.

Wightman won Wait Palmer to Christ. Palmer, then pastoring in North Stonington, immersed Shubal Stearns, who became the "Father of the Separate Baptists." Shubal Stearns deserves more credit than anyone else for the explosion of the Gospel in the South, which became known as the Bible-Belt. Shubal Stearns started the Sandy Creek Baptist Church, which in two generations birthed thousands of churches.

Henry Dunster, president of Cambridge (now Harvard) University, stirred by Holmes' beating, stood against infant baptism and was forced to resign his position at Cambridge in 1657. Dunster spread Baptist beliefs loudly and influenced Cambridge and neighboring Charlestown until the first Baptist church of Massachusetts Bay Proper was established. Thomas Gould, influenced by Dunster, became a warrior for religious freedom. Bulldozing through the courts, his efforts aided in the establishment of the first Baptist church in Boston.

After his scourging, Holmes journeyed back to the freedom of Newport. For twenty days and nights, he could sleep only by lying on his stomach or propped upon his knees and elbows. Many sleepless nights reminded him of that day on the Boston square when the blood ran down his back and into his shoes. After Clarke, Holmes pastored the church in Newport.

One might ask, “What’s the point?” Baptists today sit unmolested, undisturbed, worshipping Jesus Christ, practicing Baptist baptism, tithing to our own churches of our own free will, and preaching with complete liberty granted to us because of courageous acts like the refusal of Holmes and others to admit to the charge that being a Bible-believing Baptist is a sin. Illegal search and seizure laws are on the books today in a big part because the framers of the Constitution took note of what happened at Witter’s home and the homes of others throughout the colonial history.

Learning from History- We and our children owe a great debt of gratitude to our forefathers. We owe it to our children to give them these inspiring facts of history. We owe it to our God to stand for Him in our generation like Obadiah Holmes and the New England Baptists did!

THE PUBLIC WHIPPING OF OBADIAH HOLMES

In 1651, Baptist preacher Obadiah Holmes traveled with John Clarke and John Crandall to minister to an elderly believer in Massachusetts. Their worship service led to arrest, imprisonment, fines, and the threat of public whipping.

Holmes refused to permit payment of his fine because doing so would admit wrongdoing. He endured thirty lashes, later declaring to the magistrates, “Ye have beaten me as with roses.”

This article recounts Holmes’s courage, the persecution of early Baptists, and the lasting influence of their stand for liberty of conscience and freedom of worship in America.

This preserved edition presents the original article without alteration.

BAPTIST HISTORY ARTICLE

PRESERVED EDITION