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Roger Williams: Founder of First Baptist Church in America

(Fourth in a series of articles on influential Baptists in our 400 year history)

Roger Williams was born in England in 1603, one generation removed from the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in his country. He was educated at Pembroke College, Oxford and received Anglican ordination after his graduation in 1627. By 1629 he had become a Puritan Separatist, meaning he became an advocate for separating from the Church of England (the Anglican Church) because it needed to be purified. He and his wife Mary (born 1609) sailed to Boston, Massachusetts in 1631 so he could begin serving a congregation as a Puritan Separatist leader/pastor. The Puritans were the dominant religious body in Boston, separating from the control of the Anglican church, but demanding a similar control over all in their region.

Williams had a quick mind, argumentative spirit, and some crazy ideas that weren't well-received by the colonial leaders of Massachusetts. One such idea was the land the colonists were settling didn't belong to them. It belonged to the Native Americans who should be properly compensated for the acquisition. Well, you can see if such radical thinking were to catch favor with the people the entire enterprise of colonization would be put in jeopardy. How are you to conquer a land if you have to pay people for their displacement? A second crazy idea Williams promoted was that the civil magistrate's power extended only to civil matters. In other words, the king did not have power over the conscience and spiritual opinions of the citizens. Williams declared that God alone was judge of the conscience and the king had no authority to enforce religious decisions. Furthermore, there was no such thing as a Christian nation, only Christian people who should be able to practice their faith free of government intrusion or coercion.

In 17th century Massachusetts those were the kinds of ideas that got you run out of town. If it were not for the friendship of the Narragansett Indians we might never have heard of him. He bought land from them and established a community that was opened to people of any, all, or no religious opinions. He called the place "Providence." This land of religious liberty for all soon became the colony of Rhode Island. It was here that Roger Williams established the first Baptist church in America in 1638. Today Brown University of the Ivy League is the offspring of the ideas courageously proclaimed by Roger Williams and the early Baptists. It was the Baptist answer to Congregationalist Yale and Harvard, Presbyterian Princeton, and Episcopalian Penn and Columbia. At the time, it was the only one that welcomed students of all religious persuasions following the influence of Williams.

Although Williams didn't remain a Baptist for long, he was the clearest voice in the 17th century for the cause of religious liberty. His influence shaped Baptists to follow, as well as American patriarchs such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who became the political voices for creating a nation that deemed religious liberty as a fundamental human right.