

The Christian and Civil Government (24th)

(The study today continues the history of sufferings of Obadiah Holmes in the struggles religious freedom in the United States of America as it relates to the colony of Massachusetts. It also includes a brief introduction to Isaac Backus.)

We ended our last podcast by saying that one of the reasons for introducing Obadiah Holmes was the connection of Holmes with one of the pastors (or teachers) of the congregation where Holmes, Clarke, and Crandall were taken after their arrest. His name was Thomas Cobbett (spelled sometimes with two “t’s” and sometimes with one). It was further noted by Gaustad that “Cobbet correctly perceived” that “the crux of the dispute between the Baptists and the Puritans, whether in London or in Boston” was the “Baptist views on the limits of civil government, more than any other single doctrine” This was further documented by quoting from the dedicatory epistle to Oliver Cromwell in Cobbett’s book *The Civil Magistrate’s Power*, in 1652. He wrote, “This also (Right Honorable) the rather moved me, as a member of this polity, even in a way of gratitude, to dedicate to your Excellency this apology for civil Christ and governments, why they ought, in their civil, and political way, to restrain and punish abuses and enormities, even in matters of the Lord and of the Church.” To further show the weight of this subject, it was pointed out that Cobbett’s book was reprinted in 2008 by a well known Baptist minister with a foreword written by another well know Baptist minister.

Thomas Cobbett wrote an earlier book in 1648 entitled *A Just Vindication of the Covenant and Church-Estate of Children of Church-Members; As also of their Right unto Baptisme* where it was “[d]irected against John Spilsbury” (a Baptist in England) “among others” in England. *Baptist Piety: The Last Will and Testimony of Obadiah Holmes* by Edwin S. Gaustad, p. 36. When John Clarke published his *Ill Newes From New-England: or A Narative (sic.) of New-England Persecution* in 1652, describing the persecution along with a full account of Holmes, Clarke, and Crandall, Cobbett countered it with *A Brief Answer to a certain Slanderous Pamphlet called Ill News from New-England; or, A Narrative of New-England Persecution* in 1653. He later included it with his earlier book *The Civil Magistrate’s Power*. In *Ill Newes*, nearly twenty pages were devoted to a defense of liberty of conscience. There Holmes, Clarke, and Crandall wrote that no servant of Christ has “any liberty, much less authority, from his Lord to smite his fellow servant, nor yet with outward force or arm of flesh to constrain or restrain his conscience; no, nor yet his outward man for conscience sake or worship of his God, where injury is not offered to the person, name or estate of others. . . .” *Baptist Piety*, p. 39. To show Cobbett’s reply and other issues regarding the subject at hand, we can do no better than by further quoting from Gaustad’s *Baptist Piety*, pp. 39-41.

Cobbet, equally concerned to reply at length on this point, employed logic, scripture, and history to refute the dissenters’ position. And along the way he scored some effective points: for example, Cobet pointed to the contradiction in *Ill Newes*, which on the one hand praised Cromwell and his use of the “sword of steel” against all enemies, while on the other hand it condemned the Bay Colony’s exercise of civil power in religious concerns. On Christ’s parable of the wheat and tares (“Let them grow to the harvest”), the arguments flew from both sided. Cobbet contended that Christ in his exposition of the parable spoke not one whisper to suggest that he requires “Church or Commonwealth officers to let all the children of the wicked, seducers, traitors, seditious, and schismatical persons, blasphemers, professed atheists, etc. [to go] unpunished.

Recognizing that his primary audience was more England than New England, Cobbet innocently inquired what Britain’s situation would be if this pernicious Baptist view prevailed.

How could Cromwell and party “condemn and damn Episcopal Government in the Church and all their trash,” or root out the Book of Common Prayer? The doctrines in *Ill Newes*, if taken seriously, he continued, would even stain “that which has been and is the glory of that religious State throughout the Reformed part of the world.” No, if England (and Cromwell) will look closely, they will see “how nearly our Government here has trodden in their steps, making coercive laws against what they have forbidden by law under civil penalties—albeit the penalties possibly not in every point the same.” ... What we expect from England, he added, is not criticism but encouragement, “to go on and prosper in [our] holy zeal, to vindicate the name, truth, worship and ways of Jesus Christ from all such as would subtilely spoil us of them in whole or part.”

And if Obadiah Holmes, John Spur, John Hazel, and such as that “are to be let alone unrestrained and [un]punished, both civil government and state and churches here would soon be blown and we should become a very chaos.”...

Thus, Obadiah Holmes, a fool for Christ, had his brief moment on the stage of history. But how quickly the lights were dimmed: no biography was ever written, no portrait every printed or statue erected, no church or school ever bore his name. Isaac Backus in his *History* tried to rescue the reputation of Holmes for posterity, as he successfully did that of Roger William; but somehow it did not work. “True and impartial history,” Backus wrote in 1791, “is one of the most difficult services in the world.”

The attention given to Obadiah Holmes and the connection with Thomas Cobbett as provided not only in this podcast but in the previous two messages demonstrates the importance of the place of civil government and its relationship to the congregation of God. We have seen that belief that civil government is be a “nursing father” to the house of God was introduced by the Catholics by Augustine and those associated with him and later adopted by the Protestants during the Reformation. The Protestants in their desire to escape religious persecution in Europe and Great Britain continued to practice this doctrine as they came to the shores of the New World. Down through the centuries of the history of the Christian religion, the only people who did believe and practice religious freedom for all were the Anabaptists of which the Baptists were often identified. And now we find that many people claiming to be Baptist in belief are identifying with the Protestants regarding the place of civil government and seeking to classify themselves with the Reformers who persecuted their forefathers. Eventually, we plan to show that the reason this nation adopted religious freedom in the law of our land—the *Constitution of the United States* with the *Bill of Rights*—was because of the sufferings of the Baptists by the Protestants in the infancy of our nation and the Baptists working with our founding fathers to establish this freedom. This freedom was the pattern for the entire world and this nation along with the world owes to the Baptists a debt of thanks. May the Baptists of today awake to the truth of their heritage and enlighten ourselves to our faith and seek to walk in the footsteps of our forefathers. There is a vast amount of history that needs to be read and studied not only by the adults, but I pray the youth of today will be motivated and inspired to know and continue their heritage. Nevertheless, at the beginning we said that we are limiting our studies to only three of our Baptist forefathers: Obadiah Holmes, Isaac Backus, and John Leland. Now that we have covered Holmes, we will move on to Isaac Backus.

Isaac Backus (1724-1806) was born in Norwich, Connecticut, but lived much of his life as a Baptist in Massachusetts. Here again we can only touch on some of the highlights of his life and his trials and persecutions in his working for religious freedom in America. His *A History of New England With Particular Reference to the Baptist* is an invaluable asset to any library. It was originally in two volumes, but from the “Author’s Preface to Volume III” as found in the second volume indicates that he planned on a third volume. Another book of recent years (published in 1968) that is quite informative is *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754-1789* edited by William G. McLoughlin. These works

alone are over 1,600 pages which we cannot devote to our studies. One work of Backus that is available is the little book entitled *Your Baptist Heritage*. It was published originally in 1844 under the title of *Church History of New England from 1620-1804*. It can be found at the supplied link <https://www.baptist-books.com/products/your-baptist-heritage> for the price of \$8.00.

However, since our time is exhausted for today, the Lord willing, we will continue with his life and influence in securing religious freedom in our country in the next broadcast. Please be mindful of me in your prayers as we continue with this most valuable and essential subject. Farewell.