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WINSOME  
CONVICTION

DISAGREEING WITHOUT  
DIVIDING THE CHURCH



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Winsome Conviction* by Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer.  
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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.  
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# HISTORICAL PRELUDE

ROGER WILLIAMS



*It is January of 1636.* A solitary figure trudges through the New England snow as the pale midwinter sunlight is slowly swallowed by the dusk. It is bitter cold already, and it will surely become colder as night descends. The figure is not hurrying home for the night. He has no home. He does not look forward to being greeted by his wife and children because his pregnant wife and two-year-old daughter are trudging through the snow a short distance behind him—doing their best to keep up as he seeks a place to shelter for the night.

Who is this pitiable figure, and what circumstances have led him into this desperate plight? Is he a victim of a natural disaster—a winter storm that destroyed his home? Was his home destroyed by pirates, hostile Indians, or a rampaging criminal band? Is he a criminal who chose exile rather than execution?

The answer is none of these.

The solitary figure is Roger Williams. He and his small family have not been banished for a crime but rather banished for their convictions. They are not risking the snow in the hopes of preserving their lives; they are risking their lives in the hopes of preserving their

consciences. As Williams put it, he was determined to keep his soul undefiled by refusing to “act with a doubting conscience.”<sup>1</sup>

Roger Williams may be best remembered as the founder of Rhode Island (the final destination of his trudge through the frozen woods), but he was also a pioneer of the separation of church and state—something he viewed as necessary to allow people to preserve their consciences intact. He was a man of complex thought, controversial opinions, and deeply held convictions. If he were alive today, he would share many characteristics with conservative evangelicals (or perhaps fundamentalists), particularly in these early years we describe here. He was absolutely committed to the lordship of Christ and expressed that commitment by absolute obedience to God’s Word. He believed in the literal return of Christ and expected it at any time. He was personally committed to evangelizing the indigenous population in the “wilderness,” but he was also convinced that many of the English settlers were also unregenerate and in desperate need of repentance and conversion. He was deeply committed to the purity of the church, wanting membership in the church to be dependent on a clear testimony of faith in Christ, and he was also firmly committed to church discipline, including excommunication for those whose life and practice gave the lie to their profession of faith.

Williams’s Christian beliefs were also his final authority and guiding light when it came to controversial issues like politics. Though he was prone to withdrawal and separation on matters of church polity, he was very much engaged in the broader society and very concerned about civic and political matters. It was not long before this pastor and missionary was serving as the civil governor of the colony that grew up around the settlement he began near what is now Providence, Rhode Island.

Roger Williams has excellent street cred as a Christian of radical commitment. But what is truly interesting is the convictions that emerged from his devoutly held faith. Let us modernize Williams’s positions by setting them within more contemporary controversies

to see what we would think about them. In all likelihood, Roger Williams would have been:

- adamantly opposed to viewing America as a Christian nation. He would have felt that was untrue as a matter of historical fact, but he also would have opposed making this a goal or aspiration as a matter of principle;
- opposed to including the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance;
- opposed to prayer in public schools; and
- opposed to using religious symbols like the cross in public places and swearing in ceremonies for juries or public offices that included the Bible or oaths in God’s name.

So, easy come, easy go when it comes to street cred for many contemporary conservative evangelicals.

What accounts for the radical difference between the political convictions of Roger Williams and so many modern evangelicals? It turns out the difference has almost nothing to do with time and historical context. In fact, John Cotton, the Boston pastor who was instrumental in sending Williams into his bone-chilling exile, would have disagreed with him at every point mentioned above, though he shared almost all of Williams’s confessional beliefs.

Surprised? Confused? We were too when we first read about Roger Williams. Let’s look a little deeper into his beliefs.

Let’s begin by making a theological point that was very important to Roger Williams. For most of New England’s Puritans, “covenant” constituted a sort of canopy under which all of human society operated. Husbands and wives were united in a marriage covenant, local churches organized around covenants which included professions of faith and commitments to holy living, and society itself ultimately stood in a covenant with God as well.<sup>2</sup> For Williams, this covenant canopy was misconceived. Civil society was a mixed society in the sense that it was not all made up of Christians—as was clearly shown by requiring confessions of faith to join a local church. If

society was universally Christian, this would be a pointless exercise. But if society was mixed, how could it stand in a single covenant before God? How could it require certain beliefs for participation in civil society? The fact that civil society was impure and mixed necessitated a division between church and state.

Williams was firmly convinced that the New Testament church is strictly spiritual and entirely distinct from any civil body. In light of this, he made a strong contrast between Israel, which was a political nation, and the church, which is not and never will be. Historian Edwin Gaustad clearly explains: “New England was still hung up on Moses [and] refused to accept that there really is a New Testament, a new covenant, a new dispensation. . . . The New Israel is the Christian community, spiritual alone, not physical. Under the dispensation of the gospel, *nations are not churches*.”<sup>3</sup>

This belief makes Williams’s surprising convictions much easier to understand. For him, neither America nor any other nation could properly lay claim to the term “Christian” in describing itself. Another consequence of being a mixed society is that all public positions and civic responsibilities will be discharged by both Christians and non-Christians. Therefore, oath-taking for civil service (be it on a jury or to hold office) is inappropriate. In effect, it requires a person who does not believe in God to invoke the name of God in an oath. This is a violation of the command not to take God’s name in vain and also of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount regarding oath-taking (Mt 5:33-37). Therefore, it is not a stretch to assume that for Williams, if the Pledge of Allegiance is to be recited by all citizens, it should not invoke God’s name—on the lips of unbelievers, God’s name would be devoid of any spiritual meaning. In fact, this is made explicit in Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s defense of the words “under God” in the Pledge. She finds the phrase is not unconstitutional “because it serves a legitimate secular purpose of solemnizing public occasions, and expressing confidence in the future.”<sup>4</sup> But wouldn’t this mean precisely that God’s name is being used in a sense that is devoid of

any meaningful theological content? Isn't this the very definition of using God's name in vain? Similar thinking would likely forbid teacher-led prayer in public schools since they hire both Christian and non-Christian teachers. How could they sincerely offer prayer in Jesus' name, and why would you want teachers praying in any other name?

Such concerns may also apply to matters like the public display of the cross or other Christian symbols, but at this point, the story gets even more interesting. The English flag of the colonial era contained a red cross which formed its axis. It had been bestowed upon England by the pope some centuries before. To Williams this was another vestige of Christendom—and worse yet it came clothed in explicitly “popish garb.” Therefore, Williams became an ardent supporter of John Endecott, the leader of the Salem congregation, who ordered the crosses cut out of the flags.<sup>5</sup>

This story has a particular resonance for me (Rick). For many years I pastored in Redlands, California, a small town on the far eastern edge of the Los Angeles basin. In 1963, the city created a logo for its stationery, business cards, and government buildings and vehicles. The logo had four quadrants, one of which contained a cross glistening above a steepled church, representing the fact that Redlands was known as a community with an unusually high number of churches. Though commonly called the “city seal,” it was really just a logo. In 2004, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) wrote a letter requesting that the cross be removed on the basis of the separation of church and state. The city council complied with the request and began removing the offending logo. Christians strenuously objected by organizing through various churches, schools, and organizations. I was approached by several other pastors and asked to rally our church to the cause. The Christian legal group known as the Alliance Defense Fund offered to plead the case. Ultimately, a ballot initiative to restore the city seal was rejected by approximately 60 percent of the voters, and the city reverted to its pre-1963 seal.

What would Roger Williams have thought? Interestingly enough, the city initially responded by putting black tape over the offending portion of the logo and even drilling holes in badges of police officers to remove the cross. At the time, I could hardly help but be reminded of Roger Williams and John Endecott cutting the crosses out of the flags of New England. The irony is that in Williams's day the cross removal was being done by the conservative Christians rather than the ACLU.

What should we make of all of this? First, I think Roger Williams serves as a great example of the point we made in the introduction: all Christians do not share the same convictions on all issues. More importantly, we don't have different convictions because some Christians are devout and others are merely nominal in their faith. Roger Williams was far more devout and zealous than most of us who make up evangelical churches today, myself included. (I'm sure I would have come up with some way to salve my conscience and avoid tromping through the snow with my two-year-old and my pregnant wife.) Williams is a great example of devotion, but he is also an ominous warning of the dangers of division. He left in his wake a collection of church splits and divisive tracts with names like *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, and *The Bloody Tenent yet more Bloody by Mr. Cotton's Endeavor to wash it white in the Blood of the Lamb*. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts colony, said that Williams at one point had refused Communion with all save his own wife.<sup>6</sup> John Cotton accused him of rejecting as apostate every church in the New World (as well as the Old).<sup>7</sup>

We have a lot to learn from Roger Williams about personal devotion, but he also serves as a cautionary tale about dividing the body of Christ. We hope his story will whet your appetite and prod you to think more closely about what convictions really are and how we can hold them firmly but without dividing our churches and destroying our friendships.

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