



Baptists and Religious Liberty in Early Connecticut

Curriculum Unit 80.ch.03
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Introduction

This unit deals with a church-state issue. The experiences of the Baptists in Connecticut shed some light on the development of full religious liberty in our state which was granted to all in the Constitution of 1818.

The main objective of the study is to have the students become aware of the position of the Puritans and how they responded to another group over a period of time. Then they will be able to compare this development of religious freedom and its contemporary manifestations. The unit is designed for grades 7-12 for a duration of seven days to two weeks. However, parts may be used by teachers depending on the class lesson and time available.

In medieval Europe the concept that various religions and churches could grow up side by side and flourish within the same country would have seemed impossible. Throughout Western Christendom before the Reformation, there was but one recognized religion and one acknowledged church. After the Reformation

religion increasingly became individualistic. The great emphasis on the individual's conscience and the necessity of going to the Bible for direction and inspiration was to bloom into greater individual liberty on the Continent and in the New World. The influence of an open Bible was strong both upon the emerging structures of the churches, and the political units in America. Thus, the drive for personal liberty on the one hand and religious conformity on the other produced a very unusual religio-political fabric. ¹

When the universality and unity of the prevailing form of Christianity was broken by the Reformation, the form of religion decided upon and established in each state became the state religion. The transition from the conception of one religion throughout Christendom to that of a religion for each state was a considerable one. Far greater, however, was the change from the situation wherein a national religion was alone professed and tolerated by each country to a condition of society in which all religions were treated equally. ² The tensions brought about by such change were evident in the development of religious liberty in Connecticut and more particularly in the encounter between the Puritans and Baptists in that colony.

The early settlers of Connecticut were Puritans. They lived in an age when religious toleration was not widespread. They did not intend their settlements to be an asylum for all. They regarded it as both their right and duty to protect themselves and their children from all error. Tgis led them to take two positions—uniformity in public worship, and the connection of church and state. The first forbade religious toleration, and the second led to the defense and support of religion by legal means. ³

Baptists and New England Congregationalism

The arrival of Thomas Hooker and his congregation from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 marked the founding of the Connecticut Colony. Their religious conviction served as a unifying force, and much of their daily activity was in some way affected by it. ⁴ It was very difficult to separate civil and ecclesiastical interests. *The Cambridge Platform*, adopted by a synod in 1648 as the constitution of New England Congregationalism, put it clearly:

Church government stands in no opposition to civil government of commonwealths, nor any way intrencheth upon the authority of civil magistrates in their jurisdiction; nor any whit weakeneth their hands in governing, but rather strengtheneth them and furthereth the people in yielding more hearty and conscionable obedience unto them, whatsoever some ill affected persons to the ways of Christ have suggested, to alienate the affections of kings and princes from the ordinances of Christ; as if the kingdom of Christ in his church could not rise and stand, without the falling and weakening of their government, which is also of Christ: wheras the contrary is most true, that they may both stand together and flourish, and the one being helpful unto the other, in their distinct and due administrations. ⁵

The uniqueness of the Puritan settlements, combined with the uncertainties of wilderness life and congregational organization, led to an unusually close association between the spiritual and political authorities. ⁶ It was hoped by the founding fathers that this association would mean a flourishing society. Distrust would lead to the opposite. This relationship was most sensitive, since the power and authority of spiritual and political life were complementary. ⁷ (A discussion of Puritan social attitudes and their relationship to government and law in Connecticut can be found in Unit I of this volume).

At first Baptists were not a coordinated, organized denomination. The Baptist movement was isolated and incidental, as compared to the dominant thrust of Puritanism. Baptist distinctives took hold among people who were already well grounded in the Reformation principle of biblical authority. Believer's baptism and rejection of infant baptism, coupled with an evangelical zeal to reflect a New Testament pattern of church organization, set Baptists apart from Congregationalism.

At first New England Congregationalism was not alarmed by these principles, and healthy discussion was frequently encouraged. However, as further divisions among the Puritans emerged, like Hooker's exodus to the Connecticut Valley, councils were called to clarify doctrine, faith, and order so that there would be civil and ecclesiastical harmony. Councils such as the Cambridge Council (1648) and Boston Council (1680) were significant in that the Puritan ecclesiastical and political patterns were in the process of being developed in "new" England. ⁸ Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Congregational Puritanism's roots were to sink deeper and deeper in the "Canaan" or "New Israel" of the New World.

That which is called the establishment in Connecticut came into being quite naturally because of the religious convictions of the settlers. In the late 1630's, the Puritan churches relied increasingly upon civil authority to safeguard and protect that which they cherished in the spiritual realm. They believed from the very beginning that civil and ecclesiastical cooperation was necessary. A mutual assistance in the context of moderate separateness was their interpretation of an orderly commonwealth.

This is the background of Baptist beginnings in Connecticut. These circumstances must be taken into consideration for a clear understanding of the formation of Baptist groups there and the pressures exerted to discourage their growth. The story of Baptist efforts to attain the complete separation of church and state is only half told if the all-embracing influence of the dominant ministry of Puritan Congregationalism is overlooked. ⁹

The Struggle for Religious Liberty in Connecticut

Some people became Baptists because they found the Congregational system too formal, or lacking in warmth. Also contributing to Baptist growth in Connecticut, was the movement of Baptists from Rhode Island into the eastern and southeastern parts of the state. Rhode Island was the refuge founded by Roger Williams in 1636. There the Baptists welcomed other separatist groups. The relentless sweep of westward emigration brought with it numbers of Baptists from Providence to Westerly and Newport, then into Connecticut. Little is known about the formation of the first Baptist church in Connecticut. However, it seems definite that it was in existence in Groton as early as 1704. ¹⁰

In May 1723, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a law inflicting punishment upon dissenters. For "forming themselves into separate companies in private houses," a fine of twenty shillings was imposed. A person "not being a lawful or allowed minister of the gospel, [and presuming] . . . to profane the holy sacraments by administering or making shew of administering the" would incur a penalty of ten pounds for every offense or whipping not to exceed thirty stripes for each offense. ¹¹ (On the development of legislation bringing about equal treatment of religious sects in Connecticut, see Unit I in this volume). In spite of these threats, significant Baptist work developed in Connecticut throughout the 18th century. From the modest beginning at Groton in 1704, the second Baptist church in Connecticut was organized at New London in 1726.

Three years later a group in Saybrook embraced Baptist sentiments and eventually a church was organized.

In 1731, some Congregationalists in Wallingford became convinced of the error of their former creed. They were baptized by immersion and became united with the Baptist church in New London. By 1760, eight or nine churches were in existence. The rise of Baptist sentiments followed the peak years of the Great Awakening. This revival reached its highest point in Connecticut during the years 1741-1743. Toward the end of the 18th century (1795) there were about 3,500 Baptists and forty ministers in sixty Baptist churches in Connecticut.

Many interesting stories illustrating the dedication of early Baptist believers have been preserved. J. Hammond Trumbull mentioned that a John Bolles (commonly called the Nathaniel of his day) walked some fifteen miles from Hartford to Suffield weekly to attend church. He and others formed the first church in Hartford in 1789, which met in a home. ¹² Later, on March 23, 1790, a church of sixteen members was constituted. Its growth made necessary the construction of its first meetinghouse in 1794. The records actually show that this church was “formed” in 1789 and “constituted” in 1790.

By the time of the adoption of the Federal Constitution, the Baptists exerted themselves more openly in such citadels of Congregationalism as New London, New Haven, and Hartford. Their opposition to the prevailing system in Connecticut continued because the method of taxation forced them to support a ministry that was not of their choosing, civil laws favored the establishment of Congregationalism in spirit and letter, and civil power was used in the administration of church discipline. (See above Unit I)

Being independent and individualistic, the Baptists repeatedly reacted to the well-established interests, not because of animosity, but because their understanding of New Testament Christianity ran counter to what became known as the “Standing Order.”

From the point of view of all dissenters, full religious liberty was distant. As late as 1813, David Benedict wrote:

Some ministers here as well as in Massachusetts are supported from funds, pew rents, etc., but by far the greater part have their living by a direct tax according to the civil lists, which every human being within the parish bounds, whether Jew or Gentile, Infidel or Christian possessed of a rateable poll or taxable property is obliged to pay unless he gives a certificate of his different belief. ¹³

When one considers the concessions and accommodations of the “Standing Order” regarding toleration during the entire 18th century, one might think that the dissenters would be satisfied with the accumulated adjustments. However, it appears that as the Baptists grew in number and influence, so did the petitions for fuller religious liberty. Such petitions were numerous, being presented yearly. Typical appeals were worded, “That for the future there be no religious establishment, and that all Christians of all denominations have full religious liberty.” ¹⁴

The time finally arrived when sectarian and political influences, such as the Federal Constitution of 1789, the demands of religious groups, Jeffersonian democracy, and new political parties brought complete separation of church and state in Connecticut in 1818. ¹⁵ The revised state Constitution read, in part:

No person shall, by law, be compelled to join or support, nor be classed with, or associated to, any congregation, church, or religious association . . . If any person shall choose to separate himself from the society or denomination of Christians to which he may belong, and shall leave a written notice thereof with the clerk of such society, he shall thereupon be no longer liable for any future expenses which may be incurred by said society. ¹⁶

Conclusion

A significant factor in the long history of the development of religious liberty in Connecticut is that it “was not marked, as so often elsewhere, by wild disorder, outrageous oppression, tyranny of classes, civil war or any great retrograde movement.”¹⁷ Following a pattern of stability and reasonableness in government, Connecticut gradually liberalized.

The minutes of the New London Baptist Association meeting held at Saybrook’s Second Baptist Church on October 20 and 21, 1818, clearly expressed the sentiments of Connecticut Baptists at the time. The minutes acknowledged “the kind interference of Divine Providence in favor of Religious Liberty in this State in the removal of those impediments which have so long lay in our way; but God forbid that this liberty should ever be perverted to licentious purposes . . .”¹²

The admonition “God forbid that this liberty should ever be perverted to licentious purposes,” should speak to the 20th century mind as it did to the 19th. The church-state issues of our day such as Bible reading and prayer in the public schools, the “under God” insertion in our Pledge of Allegiance, government support of military chaplains, “In God We Trust” inscriptions on currency, tax exemptions for church properties, holding holiday observances in public schools, all state constitutions making reference to God in their preambles, and aid to parochial schools are certainly destined to be more than mere topics for conversation in the future.

“Stability and reasonableness,” were very much a part of Baptist efforts for religious liberty in the 18th century. *The Records of the Baptist Church in Colebrook Beginning in 1782* (Church Records, 1792) 1-2, read:

Whereas Rufus Babcock of Canaan, see fit to make a visit at Colebrook, by the permission of Providence, and improve in Public among them; the People of the place approving of his Doctrines, and inviting him to improve with them again and so doing from time to time; and he being pleased to Preach among us thought best to propose a Public Conference to Confer together, both Baptist and Congregationals, to see if we could come into some regulations, in order to promote the worship of God in this place; according to our endeavors appointed Saturday November 9th 1793, in the afternoon to meet in Conference for said purpose.

Stability and reasonableness are no less important for 20th century church-state issues. Nothing short of the spirit of “conferring together,” practiced as early as 1793 at Colebrook, can serve as an inspiration to maintain full liberty and promote genuine religion in our day.

OVERVIEW

QUESTIONS TO BE DISCUSSED BY TEACHER WITH CLASS FOR WEEK BEFORE *BAPTISTS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN EARLY CONNECTICUT* IS READ.

1. The extent of the universality and unity of medieval Christianity and its structure.
2. What is meant by state or national church from a European point of view?
3. The impact of Protestantism on politics of Europe.
4. The structure and beliefs of the Church of England.
5. The continuing reform movements in the Church of England emphasizing Puritanism,

Separatism and the place of Scriptures.

6. The differences between Puritanism and Separatism in New England.
7. The motivating factor for Pilgrims and others to settle the New World.
8. The uniqueness of New England compared with other British colonies.
9. The influence of religion in each of the thirteen colonies.
10. The growth of Congregationalism and Baptist churches in Connecticut.

OBJECTIVES

Students who participate in this unit will:

1. Recognize how Puritanism and its world view affected Connecticut society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
2. Become aware of two contending belief patterns in early Connecticut and their interaction with each other.
3. Gain perspective into the growth of Baptists in Connecticut.
4. Study an early conflict in Connecticut and the way it was resolved.

SUGGESTED TEACHING PROCEDURES :

ASK THE CLASS TO DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AFTER READING *BAPTISTS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN EARLY CONNECTICUT* . What Do You Think.

IN WRITING OR ORALLY EACH DAY

1. Do you think religion should be supported by legal means? Why or why not?
2. Give reasons why the Puritans (Congregationalist) felt the Baptists were a threat to their society. Explain.
3. Compare how the Puritans discouraged the Baptists with the way our present society restricts religious groups with unacceptable practices.
4. If Puritanism was the accepted religion in Connecticut and neighboring Rhode Island was the refuge for Baptists and other separatist groups, give reasons why Connecticut Puritans might well suspect the growth of Baptist work here.
5. What does this statement (uttered at the time of the enactment of the Constitution of 1818 and by a Baptist) mean? "God forbid that this liberty should ever be perverted to licentious purposes . . ."

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES :

What Do You Remember ?

Fill in the correct answer :

1. The arrival of Thomas Hooker and his congregation from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 marked the founding of the ____ Colony.
2. The early settlers of Connecticut were _____.
3. The name of the document adopted by a synod in 1648 as the constitution of New England Congregationalism was called _____.
4. Although little is known about the formation of the first Baptist church in Connecticut, it seems definite that it was in existence in Groton as early as the year _____.
5. In what town in Connecticut was the second Baptist church organized in 1726? _____.
6. The rise of Baptist sentiments followed the peak years of what mid-eighteenth century movement? _____.
7. Name the Hartford Baptist man who walked from Hartford to Suffield weekly to attend church. _____.
8. In what year was the first Baptist church organized (in a house) in Hartford? _____.
9. Approximately how many Baptists were there in Connecticut toward the end of the eighteenth century (1795)? _____.
10. In what year did Connecticut grant complete separation of church and state? _____.

True or False (T-F):

- ___ 1. Baptists were the first to settle the Connecticut Colony.
- ___ 2. Rhode Island was a Catholic Colony.
- ___ 3. The *Cambridge Platform* assured the location of Harvard College.
- ___ 4. Thomas Hooker came to Connecticut directly from England.
- ___ 5. Thomas Hooker led his congregation to Connecticut in 1636.
- ___ 6. All religious decisions made by Thomas Hooker and his congregation had to be reviewed by the Archbishop of London, England.
- ___ 7. When differences arose in the Puritan churches, their sole authority was the Bible.
- ___ 8. Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, was a Puritan.
- ___ 9. The first Baptist church to be organized in Connecticut was in New London.
- ___ 10. By 1795 there were 3,500 Baptists and forty ministers in sixty Baptist churches in Connecticut.
- ___ 11. John Bolles walked some fifteen miles from Hartford to Suffield weekly to attend church.
- ___ 12. It was not until 1818 that the first Baptist church was organized in Hartford.
- ___ 13. Complete separation of church and state in Connecticut came in 1918.
- ___ 14. Some people claim that Connecticut followed a pattern of stability and reasonableness in government while gradually liberalizing.
- ___ 15. As Baptists grew in number and influence, so did the petitions for fuller religious liberty.
- ___ 16. The Federal Constitution of 1789 granted to Baptists in Connecticut full religious freedom in their state.
- ___ 17. Both Puritans and Baptists believed their people should seek guidance from the Bible.
- ___ 18. A unifying force in early Connecticut settlements was gold seeking.
- ___ 19. Both Puritans and Baptists in Connecticut were subject to Church of England practices and beliefs.
- ___ 20. Baptists in Connecticut looked upon the enactment of religious liberty in the Constitution of 1818 as a "kind interference of Divine Providence."

Using the Library

Research :

A. List *five* major religions in the world.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

B. Of the five major religions, what *one* dominated Europe during the period of history we are considering in *Baptist and Religious Liberty in Early Connecticut* ?

- 1.

C. What movement in sixteenth century Christianity affected eventually the belief patterns of the English colonies in the New World?

- 1.

D. List the thirteen original states and after each indicate what religious group dominated that particular colony.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.

E. What religious group established Connecticut's first college?

- 1.

F. Name *five* colleges started by the Congregationalists in New England.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

G. Name *five* colleges in Connecticut that were started by churches.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

H. Name the *oldest college* in Rhode Island.

- 1.

I. *Read* the preambles to Connecticut's Constitutions in the last two hundred years and note if there is any reference to God or Divine Providence. Should there be?

J. Religion is a very personal thing to each individual. Do you recognize that a well-rounded understanding of your country's growth must take religion into consideration? Explain.

K. Do your positions on church-state issues reflect your religion or lack of it? (See p. 10, issues)

L. Take a position on each issue and give your reasons. (See p. 10, issues)

Do You Agree? Discuss.

The statements that follow are those of Andre Siegfried in his book *America Comes of Age*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927.

1. The four New England States were built up by Puritan Dissenters from England whose strong personality left an indelible mark on the whole American civilization.
2. So persistent indeed is this influence that even today it is impossible to understand the United States unless one fully appreciates the Puritan spirit.
3. No other country is so difficult to understand or so complex in its moral structure.
4. No one can possibly understand the United States without a profound, almost innate appreciation of their Puritanism, with its self-satisfaction, and its privileged relationship with God.
5. We must go even further, and realize that America is not only Protestant in her religious and social development, but essentially Calvinistic.
6. Born anew through grace, the Calvinist has a mission to carry out; namely to purify the life of the community and to uplift the state.
7. He (Calvinist) cannot admit two separate spheres of action, for he believes that the influence of Christ should dominate every aspect of life.
8. Every American is at heart an evangelist, be he a Wilson, a Bryan, or a Rockefeller. He cannot leave people alone, and he constantly feels the urge to preach.
9. John Calvin, however, united religion and daily life for the first time since the days of the ancients, for, according to his creed, the better the faithful performed their daily task, the more they worked for the glory of God.
10. President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 had printed on the title page of the New Testament that was distributed to the soldiers, "The Bible is the word of God. I request you to read it," and the public did not feel that he had exceeded in the least his role as head of a Christian government.

Footnotes

1. *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline, Adopted in 1648, And the Confession of Faith Adopted in 1680*, (Boston: Perkins and Whipple, 1850, p. 85.
2. Arthur Elliot, *The State and The Church*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1882), pp. 1-2.
3. I.D. Steward, *The History of the Freewill Baptists*, (Dover: Freewill Baptist Printing Establishment, 1862, pp. 2-3.
4. George Leon Walker, *History of the First Church in Hartford* , (Hartford Brown and Gross, 1884), pp. 1-32.
5. *The Cambridge Platform* , p. 83
6. *Ibid* .
7. *Ibid* ., pp. 84-85.
8. *Ibid* . pp. 48-128.
9. See Benjamin Trumbull, *A Complete History of Connecticut, Civil and Ecclesiastical* (New London: H. D. Utley, 1898, vols. I and II.
10. The story of the early Baptist struggles in Connecticut is thoroughly and authoritatively discussed in William G. McLaughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* . Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971. Chapter IV. The achievement of religious toleration in Connecticut is dealt with in Chapters V, VI, VII, and especially XI.
11. Charles J. Hoadly, *Records of the State of Connecticut, Volume V , May 1723* . (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, 1872 pp. 401-02.
12. J. Hammond Trumbull, *The Memorial History of Hartford County , Connecticut, 1633-1844*, (Boston: Edward L. Osgood Publisher, 1866). pp. 400-04.
13. Benedict, p. 532.
14. J. Hammond Trumbull, p. 400.
15. M. Louise Greene, *The Development of Religious Liberty in Connecticut* , (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1905, pp. 1-6.
16. *The Three Constitutions of Connecticut* (Hartford: Printed by order of the Comptroller, 1901, p. 53.
17. Greene, pp. 5-6.
18. *Minutes of the New London Baptist Association, Held at Saybrook 2nd Church October 20th and 21st 1818* New London: Clapp and Francis Printers, 1818), p. 7.

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