

A VISIT FROM JOHN CLARKE, OBADIAH HOLMES,  
AND JOHN CRANDALL  
Galatians 5: 1, 13-14  
A Dialogue Sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens, David Goff,  
and Mark Hecox  
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TOM

Pardon me for seeming a bit nervous. The last time I preached in Massachusetts I was interrupted in the middle of my sermon and taken off to prison. Do you not have anyone watching out for the magistrates? Well, I will tell you more about that experience later, but as most of you do not know me, let me introduce myself. [*Tom freezes.*]

*[David and Mark enter—center stage]*

DAVID

Let us do the honors! His name is John Clarke. Dr. John Clarke. And when I say %Doctor,+I really mean it. He is a Doctor of Medicine, a Doctor of Laws, and a Doctor of Divinity. A doctor three times over! And he is our pastor. My name is Obadiah Holmes, and we are dear friends of John Clarke.

MARK

Yes, and we the deacons at the First Baptist Church of Newport, Rhode Island. My name is John Crandall, and have we got a story to tell you! But first, let me tell you more about my friend and pastor, John Clarke. It was a cold November day in 1637 when his ship arrived in the Boston harbor from old England. He was in the 29<sup>th</sup> year of his life, newly married to his wife Elizabeth, and excited about starting a new life. As you can see, he is tall- over six feet, he towered over the rest of us!

DAVID

Yes, and he was educated, too. A graduate of the University of Leyden in Holland, he had already spent several years working as a physician in London, and he was also trained in law and the ministry.

TOM

Speaking of ministry, perhaps I should resume my sermon. Obadiah and John are indeed my deacons and my best friends. I want to tell you how I came to know them, and to do that I must tell you what I found when my wife and I arrived in Boston in 1637. What we found was a town of about 1,000 people. Unfortunately, they were embroiled in a bitter theological controversy. You must understand that all citizens were

required to attend the Puritan church, and the authority of the clergy was enormous.

No sooner had we arrived than we heard of the furor over a woman named Anne Hutchinson, who had the gall to question the sermons of John Wilson, the pastor of the church in Boston. Not only did she raise questions about his sermons, she actually held weekly meetings in her home to discuss his sermon from the previous Sunday! The Hutchinson home was located across the street from the home of Governor John Winthrop, and ardent supporter of the pastor! So every Wednesday night the governor would see about 200 people filing into the Hutchinson house to listen to Anne evaluate and criticize the pastor's Sunday sermon!

### MARK

To be blunt about it, John Clarke was sympathetic with Anne Hutchinson. He knew deep down that the Puritans did not come to America because they wanted true religious freedom. They came because they wanted to set up religion in this country the way they thought religion should be conducted! Now the Puritans charged Anne Hutchinson with 29 counts of heresy! The result of the trial was that Anne Hutchinson was banished from the colony.

## DAVID

Our friend and pastor, John Clarke, happened to agree with Anne Hutchinson. He had become a Baptist in Holland while he was in the University, and he had experienced the sweet taste of religious freedom. He was not about to go back to religious slavery- to the Puritan clergy or to anyone else! So John Clarke and his wife Elizabeth were also banished from the colony.

## TOM

Where would we settle? We thought of moving north to join some friends in Exeter, now in New Hampshire. Our friend John Wheelwright had founded that town the year before after being banished himself by the Puritan divines. But instead, we decided to go south- perhaps to Long Island. On the way we stopped at Providence Plantations to visit with Roger Williams, who received us warmly. He had a good idea: he suggested that we purchase the island of Aquidneck from the Indians. This we did, and we renamed it Rhode Island. We established the towns of Newport and Portsmouth.

Thus began my long friendship with Roger Williams. But I must tell you that although he was a passionate believer in freedom of religion, we were opposites in almost every other way. Roger could never make up his

mind about what he really believed. Sometimes I think he knew more about what he was against than what he was for! He did found the Baptist church in Providence in 1638, the very year we visited with him. But at most he remained a Baptist for three or four months. Soon he rejected his Baptist views, saying that the Baptists were close, but there has got to be something better. So he spent the rest of his life as a self-styled Seeker. he was always seeking for the truth.

### DAVID

On the other hand, John Clarke was a more settled person. He became the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Newport, and he was content to call himself a Baptist for the rest of his life. While he was a pastor, he was also a lawyer, and he helped make Rhode Island a place of complete religious freedom. We became the first colony to accept Jews. the first Jewish synagogue in America was built just down the street from the Baptist church. We welcomed Quakers. the oldest Quaker meetinghouse in America is in Newport. We became the first colony to give people freedom of conscience in religious matters. And it worked!

### MARK

Of course, the members of Parliament back in London had a hard time believing that complete religious freedom would work. This is where

John Clarke's legal training really came in handy. He actually wrote the charter of Rhode Island himself, and it was signed by King Charles II in 1663. You can still see that charter behind glass at the state house in Providence. Later, Thomas Jefferson would use it as one of his models when he was writing the Declaration of Independence.

### TOM

Yes, my legal training was helpful, as was my medical training. But more than anything else, I was a minister of the gospel. And that is where I want to tell you OUR story: I mean the story about John Crandall, Obadiah Holmes, and me. It happened in the summer of 1651. We received a letter from our old friend William Witter. Mr. Witter had grown old and had gone blind. He was actually a member of our church in Newport, but he was living in Lynn, MA. He wrote to ask if we could come to see him and administer communion one more time before he died. I called in my deacons: %Obadiah, John, will you go with me?+

### DAVID

Of course, we agreed, even though we all knew of the danger. It was against the law in Massachusetts to hold any kind of religious service that was not authorized by the Puritan clergy. It was a dangerous thing for us to do. But on August 19, 1651, the three of us rode quietly into Lynn to visit

our friend Mr. Witter. We thought we would hold a quiet communion service in his home, with just a few of his family members present. That way we could worship in secret, and then we could ride back to Newport.

### MARK

Ahh, wishful thinking! Word had spread that we were coming. There were a lot of secret Baptists living in the area, and they all crowded into Mr. Witter's home for the worship service. We knew we were in trouble. There is no way the authorities would not hear about this! And sure enough, just as Dr. Clarke was in the middle of his sermon, we heard the sound of horses galloping up to the house. The constables rudely interrupted our worship service with a warrant for our arrest. They held all three of us in the local alehouse, and later that day they compelled us to attend worship at the Puritan church. As a protest, we all insisted on wearing our hats while the congregation was at prayer.

### TOM

The constables took us to Boston and put us on trial. We were all found guilty and sentenced to pay stiff fines OR receive 30 lashes. For some reason, John Crandall was released on the promise that he would return to a later session of court.

MARK

That's true, but I never returned to court!

TOM

As I was saying, John was released, but Obadiah and I refused to pay our fines. Our consciences would not allow it. On the day we were taken to the whipping posts, Obadiah seemed more calm than I. When I was tied to the post located behind the old State House in Boston, for some reason at the last minute someone paid my fine. To this day I have no idea who paid it, but the magistrate told me that an anonymous donor said that he was unwilling to see a reverend divine in such a situation.

That left Obadiah at the whipping post. Before the sentence was carried out, his friends offered him alcohol, thinking it might ease his pain. He refused it. Instead, he prayed for God's strength. He spoke these words to the assembled crowd:

DAVID

Although my flesh should fail, and my spirit should fail, yet my God will not fail.

TOM

With that, the whipping began. The man wielded a three-pronged whip, and with each blow he spit on his hands. When finally the torment

was ended and Obadiah was released, bruised and bleeding, we had to hold him up as he addressed the magistrates who had sentenced him with these words:

DAVID

You have struck me as with roses.+

MARK

We tell you our story today to remind you of the high price people have paid for freedom of conscience and the freedom to worship as we please.

On Friday, America celebrated again the signing of the Declaration of Independence. As you continue to celebrate, remember us and the price we paid for merely attempting to hold a worship service in Lynn, MA. And remember that the struggle for freedom of conscience and the separation of religion from the control of the state is constant.

TOM

And there is one footnote to this story. Obadiah would succeed me as pastor of the Baptist church in Newport. He and his wife Kathryn would have eight children. One of their granddaughters, Hannah Salter, would marry a man by the name of Mordecai Lincoln, and they in turn would be remembered as the great grandparents of President Abraham Lincoln.