

Dear all, greetings.

Just before Christmas, I read a book entitled “God, War and Providence” by James Warren. This is the story of Roger Williams, his friendship with the Narragansett Indians who lived in modern-day southern Rhode Island, and their struggle with the Puritans of New England (who were primarily centered around Plymouth and Boston, MA).

The story of Roger Williams is relatively well known. He advocated a separation of church and state, and rejected the Puritans’ concept that they could fuse their Puritan faith with civil government. For this he paid a heavy price, being thrown out of the Boston colony and forced to flee in the dead of winter to modern-day Rhode Island.

Furthermore, he was also a steady champion for the rights of the Narragansett people, and other indigenous peoples. He strove tirelessly as their advocate to advance their own rights against the encroachments of the Puritans. He shared the Gospel with the indigenous peoples, in both word and deed, and identified to a great extent with them and their struggles. He was their advocate, speaking up for them in London, at the UK Parliament, and being a voice for them where they could not be heard of themselves. Throughout his life, his love for the Narragansetts, their culture and way of life, and deep respect for what modern-day writers would call “God’s footprints” in their society, culture and language, drove him to labor tirelessly on their behalf.

When he visited London to advocate for their rights with the Parliament, he published a book entitled “A Key into the Language of America.” This was, from our own perspective, the first culture and worldview study of the modern era. It is a sympathetic, detailed, respectful and optimistic account of the life, language and culture of the Narragansett peoples.

The study has 32 chapters, each of which begins with a 2 column page of Narragansett words and phrases spelled out phonetically, with an accompanying English translation. The early chapters contains basic information on what to do when one meets a Narragansett individual, with basic introductions, eating, forms of address and family life. The middle of the book has chapters that focus on geography and natural history of the Narragansetts’ world. The last third covers Narragansett government, religion, games, trade practices, hunting, death and burial rituals.

His writings make it clear that not only must the English learn about the Narragansetts, but they must also be humble enough to learn from the Narragansetts. His writings resonate with hope and expectation, and were the result of a deep immersion in the language, culture and communities of the Narragansetts. The book stands as a beacon of truth amidst the fog of half-truths, misunderstanding and suspicion that characterized much of the Puritans’ assessments of the indigenous peoples, and it was warmly received in London.

In a sense, we are all called to be like Roger Williams, a modern-day Barnabas. We are called to immerse ourselves in the language, culture and communities of the unreached, and in learning their culture and worldview, to become their champions, not with the UK Parliament, but with the Kingdom of God. We are called to speak up for those who may otherwise have no champion or opportunity to speak for themselves, to advocate for their inclusion in the Kingdom as equal brothers and sisters, and to remind the wider body that while the Body has much to offer, the Body must remain humble enough to learn from God’s footprints in the cultures and lives of the hithertofore unreached.

Roger Williams' culture study is attached. If you have the time to read it, I trust that you will be as blessed as I was. May all our dealings and interactions with our focus people groups be characterized by a similar love for, identification with, and championing of, as was manifest in the relationship between Roger Williams and the Narragansett peoples of New England.

Have a wonderful Sabbath!

Conrad.