Roger Williams: Man of the Word

- **Compelling Question**
  - How does your identity affect your decisions?

- **Virtue:** Identity

- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”

- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will understand how Roger Williams’ identity drove him to found a new colony based on religious liberty. They will also learn how they can use their identity to help them make good decisions.

- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze the life of Roger Williams and the founding of Providence.
  - Students will understand how their identity affects their lives and the decisions they make.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of identity to making good decisions.

- **Background**
  - Roger Williams was the son of a merchant tailor in the Smithfield District of London, England. It was a family of some means, as his father left Roger two hundred pounds in his will. He was by no means wealthy, but had a certain level of comfort in his life at a time when few did.
  
  Religion was always important to Roger Williams. He was a diligent Anglican during his youth. He attended services regularly and paid close attention to the teachings of the church. At a young age he regularly would take shorthand notes of the sermons in church. Sir Edward Coke noticed Williams in church taking notes. In 1617 Coke hired Williams, then still a young teen, to take shorthand for him. Impressed with his abilities and piety, Sir Edward arranged for him to attend the Charterhouse School in Surrey, England. This was a college preparatory school for boys of ability whose families could not afford the more prestigious prep schools. After completing his studies at Charterhouse, Williams attended Cambridge College. Upon graduation, he then entered into graduate study to become an Anglican minister. However, after a year and a half of study as a seminarian, Williams dropped out of school. During his studies he had become a Puritan and could not become a part of the existing Anglican Church, which he then came to see as corrupted.

  This public acknowledgement of Puritan views cost him his relationship with Sir Edward, who was a staunch Anglican and Anti-Puritan. Coke had become almost a second father to Williams, so the loss of this relationship cost him both his biggest emotional and financial supporter. It certainly would have been easy to keep his Puritan views to himself and work for change from inside the Anglican Church, preserving the respect and support that meant so much to him. Above all else Williams was loyal to the Word of God, and he chose to become a Puritan whatever the consequences. Williams certainly foresaw the consequences of his actions but since his very identity was shaped by his faith he followed through on his decision.

  Roger Williams left his old life behind, and became a Puritan chaplain to a wealthy family in Essex, England, which had become a hotbed of Puritanism. Williams became a “Separatist”, which was a person who believed the Church of England was so corrupt that the only just course was to break away completely. As was the case throughout his life, Williams was open and honest about what he believed regardless of the consequences. He was a man of the word, and had no fear of man when convinced of the truth in his spiritual beliefs. He wrote and spoke of them clearly, as in the *Bloudy Tenet of Persecution*:

  “It hath been England's sinfull shame to fashion and change their garments and religions with wondrous ease and lightnese, as a higher power, a stronger sword hath prevailed...”

  Roger Williams moved to the American colonies to escape religious persecution and was one of the most remarkable American settlers. He was a minister and a man of the Word of God. His singular focus with which he would identify was to live out God’s will as expressed in the scriptures of the Bible as he understood its meaning. Williams had remarkable achievements in his life, earning the
admiration of many prominent men, as well as the masses. He is best known for the founding of Providence, which would eventually become Rhode Island. This founding was noteworthy for the colony’s religious tolerance and strong wall of separation between church and state.

The history of America, as well as the world, is replete with holy men who sought to work out the will of God on Earth. Many men who sought to enact the will of God did so with an unquestioned certainty, a willingness to denounce the unholy. They have usually been guided by a sure-mindedness that only can come from a belief that they were acting as instruments of an infallible holy spirit. Roger Williams was no such man.

The identity of Williams was unquestionably tied to the Word of God; yet his Christianity never allowed him to forget his own fallibility. His acknowledgment of his own flawed humanity made him a holy man who was willing to listen to others and their needs; a humble man of God who never dismissed the possibility that he could have gotten something wrong. Williams was a man of religion but he was also a man of tolerance. Williams’ struggle to protect the right of conscience was not born out of any uncertainty in the truths he believed but in his conviction that all persons must be free to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Piety
  - Puritan
  - Staunch
  - Anglican
  - Separatist
  - Noteworthy
  - Persecution
  - Singular
  - Scriptures
  - Remarkable
  - Providence
  - Replete
  - Sure-mindedness
  - Infallible
  - Fallibility
  - Ritual
  - Ornament
  - Reformers
  - Purer
  - Uniformity
  - Patent
  - Oath
  - Conventions
  - Banished
  - Legitimate
  - Succession
  - Seeker

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
• **Observation Questions**
  - Who was Roger Williams? What was significant about his life?
  - What was Williams’ purpose?
  - What did Williams do to promote religious liberty?
  - How did Roger Williams promote freedom for himself and others by defending religious liberty?

• **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
Handout A: Roger Williams: Man of the Word

Background

Roger Williams was the son of a merchant tailor in the Smithfield District of London, England. It was a family of some means, as his father left Roger two hundred pounds in his will. He was by no means wealthy, but had a certain level of comfort in his life at a time when few did.

Religion was always important to Roger Williams. He was a diligent Anglican during his youth. He attended services regularly and paid close attention to the teachings of the church. At a young age he regularly would take shorthand notes of the sermons in church. Sir Edward Coke noticed Williams in church taking notes. In 1617 Coke hired Williams, then still a young teen, to take shorthand for him. Impressed with his abilities and piety, Sir Edward arranged for him to attend the Charterhouse School in Surrey, England. This was a college preparatory school for boys of ability whose families could not afford the more prestigious prep schools. After completing his studies at Charterhouse, Williams attended Cambridge College. Upon graduation, he then entered into graduate study to become an Anglican minister. However, after a year and a half of study as a seminarian, Williams dropped out of school. During his studies he had become a Puritan and could not become a part of the existing Anglican Church, which he then came to see as corrupted.

This public acknowledgement of Puritan views cost him his relationship with Sir Edward, who was a staunch Anglican and Anti-Puritan. Coke had become almost a second father to Williams, so the loss of this relationship cost him both his biggest emotional and financial supporter. It certainly would have been easy to keep his Puritan views to himself and work for change from inside the Anglican Church, preserving the respect and support that meant so much to him. Above all else Williams was loyal to the Word of God, and he chose to become a Puritan whatever the consequences. Williams certainly foresaw the consequences of his actions but since his very identity was shaped by his faith he followed through on his decision.

Roger Williams left his old life behind, and became a Puritan chaplain to a wealthy family in Essex, England, which had become a hotbed of Puritanism. Williams became a “Separatist”, which was a person who believed the Church of England was so corrupt that the only just course was to break away completely. As was the case throughout his life, Williams was open and honest about what he believed regardless of the consequences. He was a man of the word, and had no fear of man when convinced of the truth in his spiritual beliefs. He wrote and spoke of them clearly, as in the Bloudy Tenet of Persecution:

“It hath been England’s sinfull shame to fashion and change their garments and religions with wondrous ease and lightnese, as a higher power, a stronger sword hath prevailed...”

Roger Williams moved to the American colonies to escape religious persecution and was one of the most remarkable American settlers. He was a minister and a man of the Word of God. His singular focus with which he would identify was to live out God’s will as expressed in the scriptures of the Bible as he understood its meaning. Williams had remarkable achievements in his life, earning the admiration of many prominent men, as well as the masses. He is best known for the founding of Providence, which would eventually become Rhode Island. This founding was noteworthy for the colony’s religious tolerance and strong wall of separation between church and state.

The history of America, as well as the world, is replete with holy men who sought to work out the will of God on Earth. Many men who sought to enact the will of God did so with an unquestioned certainty, a willingness to denounce the unholy. They have usually been guided by a sure-mindedness that only can come from a belief that they were acting as instruments of an infallible holy spirit. Roger Williams was no such man.

The identity of Williams was unquestionably tied to the Word of God; yet his Christianity never allowed him to forget his own fallibility. His acknowledgment of his own flawed humanity made him a holy man who was willing to listen to others and their needs; a humble man of God who never dismissed the possibility that he could have gotten something wrong. Williams was a man of religion but he was also a man of tolerance. Williams’ struggle to
protect the right of conscience was not born out of any uncertainty in the truths he believed but in his conviction that all persons must be free to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience.

Narrative

In the 1620s, Separatism was a controversial belief to hold, let alone preach, in England where the established Anglican Church wielded great power. Archbishop William Laud harassed the young minister, Roger Williams, who had adopted the Separatist beliefs. Williams was among the reformers who thought that the Church of England was excessively characterized by ritual and ornament left over from its Roman Catholic heritage. He joined forces with the reformers who wanted to simplify church services and recover what they considered a more biblical, purer Christianity. In the fall of 1630, Roger Williams and his new wife Mary decided to flee to America for religious liberty to establish a purer church in the wilderness of the Massachusetts Bay Company. They boarded the Lyon and made the treacherous sea voyage, arriving at Boston on February 5, 1631.

Upon his arrival, Williams was offered a position as an assistant minister at a Puritan church in Boston. For a man who had just traveled the sea and arrived in a new land with a young wife, in the heart of winter, this would seem a lucky break and a great way to begin life anew. However, Roger Williams was never a man who sought comfort or convention. His life was dedicated only to divine truth, and he refused the position because he did not believe the church had adequately separated from the Anglican Church. As a result, Massachusetts leaders branded him a radical. Many of the colonial leaders were wary of a complete separation from the Anglican Church and rejected Williams for his belief.

Williams did take a position as an assistant pastor at a church in nearby Plymouth, where he served until 1633. While there he developed another controversial view—the colonists should attempt to convert Indians to Christianity peacefully. He believed the conversions should be attempted through respect and reason, not violent coercion. He saw support for this belief in the scriptures:

“It becomes not the spirit of the Gospel to convert Aliens to the Faith (such as the Samarians and the unconverted Christians in Crete) with fire and brimstone…” (The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution)

In 1633, Roger Williams moved to Salem, Massachusetts, becoming a minister at a church in 1634. While in Salem, Williams’ views continued to evolve. He started calling for a separation of church and state. He believed that the mixing of the two was corrupting to both church and civil authority,

“An inforsed uniformity of religion throughout a nation of civill state, confounds the Civill and Religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility...” (The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution)

Williams believed that civil authorities should not have the power to punish violations of the Ten Commandments because the government should not interfere with church matters. He also spoke out against the King’s right to own and grant land in the New World. He believed the only just way to gain land was to buy it from the native Indians. This made the colonial leaders especially nervous, as they feared retribution from the crown that could lead to the loss of their patent on the colony. Williams additionally undermined authority by speaking out against an oath to the Commonwealth. He believed an oath was an act of worship and should not be used in non-sacred ways. Roger Williams continued to preach the word of God as he saw it, even as he realized powerful forces were beginning to move against him. To do anything else would have been impossible, his life was driven by the word, not by man’s conventions.

In October 1635 Roger Williams was officially banished from Massachusetts for his views. He originally planned to live with and preach to the local Indians, but when eight families asked to join him, he decided to found a settlement. Williams left Salem in the brutally cold winter weather of January, 1636, to avoid being deported to England. Thirty-two like-minded companions joined Williams for the journey, and they were given shelter by the Indians for the winter. Williams lived out his principles and bought land from Narragansett Chiefs for his new settlement, which he named Providence, in thanks to God. Williams had traded with the Indians, shared the Word
of God with them, and earned their respect in the years since his arrival in New England. Williams said that his purchase of Providence was purchased "by love," as the chiefs would not have sold it to anyone else at any price.

Williams was determined to shape the new colony, which would grow into Rhode Island, according to his religious beliefs. Unlike Massachusetts, there would never be an established church. There was to be religious liberty and freedom of conscience for people of any faith. He would even welcome those whose faiths he did not see as legitimate, such as Quakers, Jews, and Catholics. The authorities of the colony would have power only when it came to "civil things" such as roads. This was a truly significant and unique achievement. This kind of tolerance simply did not exist at that time. He was never afraid of change regardless of how shocking it could be to the established order.

In 1638, he became convinced of a new truth he saw in scripture and became a Baptist (a Christian denomination that focused on conversion and adult baptism). Along with others he founded the first Baptist Church in America in Providence in 1639. However, he left that church within a year, as he felt he could not belong to a church without any proof of succession from Christ’s original apostles. Williams’ spiritual journey would see him eventually become a “Seeker.” The Seekers denied that there was any “true” church and urged people to worship alone, seeing faith as a personal matter.

Roger Williams’ life itself was a spiritual journey. One can really understand Williams as a man of the Bible—it was his identity. His life was dedicated to living out the Word of God as he understood it. He followed where he thought it led regardless of the personal consequences. His vision of a separation of church and state and of a real freedom of conscience were principles he abided by to honor God’s word and they later became the spiritual framework of the Founding of the United States of America.