

Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit

I. The Church at Scrooby

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No Date¹

It has only been within a comparatively short time that we have been able to go back of 1620 when the Pilgrim Church landed at Plymouth, and find any exhaustive material on the history of the rise and growth of the 1st Church of Plymouth (now Unitarian). We have been somewhat inclined to accept [the] flower of the plant, but not to trace out the roots and discover the soil in which they found nourishment.

The principles upon which the Protestant Reformation took its rise were two. First, "free inquiry, as opposed to the absolute authority of the Church," and 2nd "universal priesthood of all believing men as opposed to that of a clerical caste of priests."² Now it is evident that the lights of the Reformation and their followers did not see how far these principles would lead them, or else they feared the results of them, for no sooner had they denied the authority of the Church of Rome, upon the basis of these two principles, than they substituted the authority of the Bible and denied the right of free inquiry, and universal priesthood, and shut themselves up within the shell of the Protestant Churches.

¹ Earl C. Davis wrote a good number of manuscripts concerning the history of the church. All are hand-written dating them before 1907—so Pittsfield or Harvard. Some, including this one, are pretty clearly part of a series provided to a congregation—so probably Pittsfield.

² An extremely rare footnote is found here in this manuscript with "John Brown, p. 16." On the foot of the page. The reference is to John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895. The author, John Brown (1830-1922) was minister of the Bunyan Meeting in Bedford, England, and his historical works are still in print.

But the principles of free inquiry and universal priesthood, once asserted with such vigor as to produce the Reformation could not be recalled, and there runs a thread of a movement from the Reformation on down to the time when the Pilgrims left England for Holland, and the Puritans began their migrations to the New World, to establish here a republic where, comparatively free from tradition and government repression, these principles could work their way out. The history of this movement is the subject of these lessons,³ and its "terminus ad quem" is indicated by recognizing the fact that these two principles, the principle of free inquiry and the principle of universal priesthood, are the very principles upon which the Unitarian churches are based.

In tracing out the rise and spread of this movement, it seems best to begin at Scrooby, and find out what we can about that church, and then to go back of that and discover what we can about the period from the Reformation to 1600, and having accomplished that to take up once more the fortunes of the Scrooby Church, as it fled to Amsterdam and to Leyden, and thence to Plymouth.

The village of Scrooby, where [the] Plymouth Church was founded, is situated 146 miles north of London in Nottinghamshire, near Lincoln and York. During the latter half of the sixteenth century there seems to have been a considerable influence of Puritan clergy in this section.

Bradford in his *History of the Plymouth Plantation*, distinctly traces the rise of the Scrooby Church, of which he himself was one of the foremost members, to the religious influence exercised by the Puritan clergy. He tell us that it was "by travail and diligence of godly and zealous preachers and God's blessing on their labors, as in some other places of the land, so in the north parts, many became enlightened by

³ Earl Davis' use of "these lessons" suggests that these manuscripts, together focused on the "Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit" were intended for, and delivered to, a congregation. Hence they most likely date from 1905-06, Pittsfield.

the Word of God, and had their ignorance and sins discovered unto them, and began by His grace to reform their lives, and make conscience of their ways."⁴

One of these men was Richard Clyfton, rector of a church 6 miles south of Scrooby, and who was exiled in 1603, is worthy of mention. Wm. Bradford used to walk from Austerfield nine miles on Sunday morning to hear him preach. Bradford says of him, "He was a grave and fatherly old man when he first came to Holland, having a great white beard; and pity it is that such a reverend old man should be forced to leave his country and at those years to go into exile. But it was his lot, and he bore it patiently."⁵

Also there was another man, Richard Bernard, although he had not the courage or tenacity of these brave men, yet he must have had an influence. An example of his attitude is in this sentence in which he pleads for prison reform: "If there should be means to set them on work they might get somewhat for food and raiment. They might so prevent the miserable fruits of sloth; their minds would be employed, their bodies be preserved in health, and not pine away. ... Enforced labor," he says, "would, he thinks, terrify loose vagrants, lazy wanderers, and the idle route from turning thieves." The prison is now, he says, "a very picture of Hell and (more is the pity), as the case now stands, is no less than a preparation thereto."⁶ "Whereas if prisoners were treated as he suggests they would on their release 'become through God's mercy more profitable members of the Common-Weale afterwards; whereas now they become twice more the children of Belial than they were before.'"⁷

⁴ John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p.76.

⁵ Bradford is quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 77.

⁶ Bernard is quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, pp. 81-2.

⁷ John Brown, quoting Bernard, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 82.

That sounds like Channing,⁸ in spirit, if not in form, finding the divine amid the dregs of society.

This suggest the atmosphere about Scrooby in which Brewster, Bradford and others were reared. Not much of a suggestion of smug Protestantism about it. It was the spirit of free inquiry at work. But the canons of 1603, which Clyfton would not sign, and went into exile. Bernard did sign and became a most ardent conformist. But this spirit of free inquiry began to take form, and in 1602, a Separatist Church was formed in Gainsborough, near Scrooby. It is very probable that this movement was not entirely to the disliking of the Lord of the Manor of Gainsborough at the time, who seems to have come from a family whose name had been colored by the taint of non-conformity. Perhaps he fostered the movement.

John Smyth, of Christ's College Cambridge, was pastor of this new Church at Gainsborough. He, too, went into exile for non-conformity, and became a physician at Amsterdam. For four years William Bradford and William Brewster and others from Scrooby walked from ten to twelve miles on Sunday morning to hear John Smyth preach, and to join in the service of the Separatist Church at Gainsborough, until at length "these people became two distinct bodies or churches, and in regard to distance of place did congregate severally for they were of sundry towns and villages." (Brown, p. 92). Thus in 1606 the Church at Scrooby was organized, and met "ordinarily at Wm. Brewster's house on the Lord's day, ... and with great love he entertained them when they came, making provision for them, to his great charge."⁹

Apparently Richard Clyfton became pastor of this Church at Scrooby, but there appears some problems of dates. However there was associated with him one John Robinson, who became paster, and followed the Church to Amsterdam and

⁸ William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century.

⁹ John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, pp. 97.

then to Leyden. He was a great man, and his influence, in the Scrooby Church and his wider influence through his books, has made him a great and dominating figure in Congregational history. He was born probably about 1575 in Lincolnshire. Entered Corpus Christi College in Cambridge in 1592. It is interesting to note that almost all of these men came from Cambridge, while the men who in the 19th century again took up the liberalizing movement in England came from Oxford.

On leaving college, Robinson took up the work of a minister in Norfolk, but he could not conform to the Anglican Church, so he was suspended, and becoming finally a Separatist, he entered the work as pastor of a Congregational Church at Norwich. But fines and imprisonments soon drove him from Norwich, and he came to Scrooby, and became pastor of Scrooby.

But his life here was no less disturbed than it had been at Norwich. The entire body of Separatists at Scrooby were so persecuted by fines, imprisonment, and other means available, that it soon became evident that some radical line of action must be carried out. Accordingly in the fall of 1607, they determined to leave their native country for Amsterdam, whither the Gainsborough people had already gone. But in carrying out this plan, they by no means found the way easy. They could not remain at home without becoming conformists, and they could not leave without a license, which they could not hope to get.

But finally they chartered a vessel, and made ready, disposing of what property they might, and taking with them what seemed needful. Their plans were fully matured, when they discovered that the captain of the vessel had played them false, and betrayed them into the hands of the Gov't. Their goods were confiscated, and their money taken from [them] and they were arrested and held in the town of Boston. Now it happened that this Boston was a hotbed of Puritanism, and so they fared rather better than could be expected. In fact, from this same Boston came the Puritans after whom our Boston is named.

Just what happened to these people at the hands of the court is not known, for all the records of that particular year are destroyed.

In the following spring a second attempt to escape was made. A Dutch vessel was chartered, and they were to meet it near Hull, and then to transfer their goods from the river boat to the vessel. But again misfortune was with them. While they were in the midst of transferring their goods from their boat which had become stranded on the flats at low tide, a troop of horsemen came down upon them, and captured the women and children. The captain of the ship became frightened and hoisted sail carrying off the men. After fourteen days of storm and wind, the men were landed at Amsterdam.

The women and children were a burden to the Government, and finally they were released, and made their way to Holland. So in the year 1608, the Scrooby Church of the Pilgrims, believing in the principles of free inquiry and universal priesthood, came at length to Holland where they sojourned for a time.