

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[V.] The Pilgrim Church at Plymouth

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No Date¹

We left the Pilgrims in the Mayflower organized into a body politic by the Mayflower Covenant. Of their hardship during the winter, the great difficulty of getting houses built, their sickness, and the death of half [of] the brave band, we need not speak, for we know that too well for our own ease of conscience, if we should stop to measure ourselves by the standards of the Mayflower Pilgrims. What courage it took after their long sad winter for them to sow grain over the spot where the dead lay in order that the savages might not suspect their weakness and loss. How they stood watching the Mayflower depart for the old homes and old England, where, if they would but do that which their conscience forbade, they could live in ease, comfort and luxury. But these men and women were made of stern solid stuff, and having put their hand to the plow, they would not turn back.

Now there is no little dispute in regard to the religious and theological significance of this band of people. Those in the history of New England theology, who have been on the liberal side have held always that [the] Plymouth Church was in spirit liberal, but not in form. On the other hand, the conservative people have always held that they were strictly and unquestionably Calvinistic. This question can only be settled by your point of view. If you look to the outward mechanical form, you must say they were Calvinistic. If you look to the inward spirit, and see the

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.

direction in which they were moving, you must see that they were the extreme liberals of their time.

Dr. Dexter², who has written at length on this subject, and done an untold amount of work in writing his history, holds that they were indeed conservative, and substantiates his claim by elaborate quotations from John Robinson's works, and also by the fact that Robinson, in a written treatise, defends the Synod of Dort's decision³. Of this Synod, John Lothrop Motley, in his *Life and Death of John of Barneveld* (p. 310) says,

On the 23rd day of April 1619, the canons were signed by all members of the Synod. Arminians were pronounced heretics, schismatics, teachers of false doctrines. They were declared incapable of filling any clerical, or academical post. No man thenceforth was to teach children, lecture to adolescents, or preach to the mature, unless a subscriber to the doctrines of the unchanged, unchangeable, orthodox Church. On the 30th of April and 1st of May, the Netherland Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism were declared to be infallible. No change was to be possible in either formulary, Schools and pulpits were inexorable bound to the only true religion. (Dexter 401).⁴

Now, as I see it, Robinson simply defended the Doctrines, and not the spirit of this Council of Dort.

² Henry Martyn Dexter (1821-1890) was an American Congregational clergyman and author of many books on Congregationalism and its history, including *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880.

³ The Synod of Dort, also known as the Synod of Dordrecht, was an international Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church held in 1618-1619 to settle a divisive controversy prompted by Arminianism, which, among other things, questioned Calvinism's stance on "election," i.e., the fact that God pre-selected all and only the people elected to Heaven.

⁴ Earl Davis is providing the quotation from Motley's *Life and Death of John of Barneveld* as quoted in Dexter's *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880, p. 401.

In comparison with that statement, I want to quote one or two passages from men who knew Robinson personally. Notice particularly this passage which Mr. Dexter quotes, but fails to see the significance of. John Bastwick, who knew him at Leyden says,

I can speak thus much in the presence of God, that Master Robinson of Leyden, the Pastor of the Brownist Church, there, told me and others who are yet living to witness the truth of what I now say: that if he might in England have enjoyed but the liberty of his Ministry there, with an immunity but from the very Ceremonies; and that they had not forced him to a Subscription to them, and imposed upon him the observation of them: that he had never separated from it, and left that Church.⁵

Dexter quotes that as showing that he was in substantial accord with current orthodoxy. But notice that he left that Church because they had "forced him to a subscription of them." Is not that the essential principle upon which a Free Church is established?

But in addition to this, is the evidence of Gov. Edward Winslow. This evidence Dexter rejects, but it seems to me that this is valuable testimony, for Gov. Winslow knew Robinson personally.

In the next place, for the wholesome counsel Mr. Robinson gave that part of the church whereof he was Pastor, at their departure from him to begin the great work of plantation in New England, amongst other wholesome instructions and exhortations, he used these expressions, or to the same purpose; We are now ere long to part asunder and the Lord knoweth whether ever he (Robinson) should live to see our faces again: but whether the Lord had appointed it or not, he charged us before God and his blessed Angels to follow him no further than he followed Christ. And if God should reveal anything to us by any

⁵ Quoted in *Dexter's The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880, p. 397.

other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his Ministry: For he was very confident that the Lord had yet more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word. He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of reformed churches, who were come to a period in Religion and would go no further than the instruments of their Reformation: As for example, the Lutherans, they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw, for whatever part of God's will he had further imparted and revealed to Calvin, they would rather die than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the Calvinists, they stick where he left them: A misery much to be lamented; For though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them: And were they now living, saith he, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Here also he put us in mind of our Church-Covenant (Scrooby) (at least that part of it) whereby we promise and covenant with God and one with another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written Word. But withall exhorted us to take heed what we received for truth, and well to examine and compare, and weigh it with other Scriptures of truth, before we received it; For, saith he, It is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick Antichristian darkness, and that full perfection of knowledge should brake forth at once.⁶

Now it seems to me that Channing⁷ could not have made a more liberal statement, and while Dexter rejects as untrustworthy, nevertheless, if Robinson did not say as

⁶ Quoted in *Dexter's The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880, p. 404.

⁷ William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century.

much as that, it is certainly what Winslow thought he said, and Winslow was the man who came to New England and helped shape the destinies of the Plymouth Church.

That was the spirit of the Plymouth Church.

It was not until the Puritans came that any severe strain was brought to bear on the Plymouth Church. For seven years and eight months, the Plymouth Church stood alone. But when the Puritans came to Salem, new complications arose and threatened disturbance, but were finally settled in a peaceful manner. Of those complications and their results we will treat next Sunday. But the point to notice in this, that the spirit of the Church was for more light in religious life.

And I want to make the point here that this was the spirit of the early settlers. By the end of the year 1630, there were five congregational churches in New England, (1) Plymouth (1606, Scrooby); (2) Salem, 1629; (3) Dorchester, 1630; (4) First Church, Boston, 1630; (5) Watertown, 1630. All these churches are now Unitarian.

By the end of 1640, there were 35 churches in New England. Two-thirds of them are now Unitarian. The spirit of free inquiry unhampered by tradition leads to the position we now hold. If the early settlers of New England, who brought the spirit, and instituted the form of self-government, represent the spirit of our country, then it follows that they represent the religious attitude of a Republic like this. The development of other types of churches represent the usual influx of people who are not on the ground at the time of battle, but come around soon after, and seem to think that they did all the work.