

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[VII.] The Forces Without the Theocracy

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In order to clearly understand the movement of forces which resulted in the downfall of the New England Theocracy, which we have seen developed so soon after the churches in New England became at all numerous, we must consider three general tendencies that were running along, side-by-side.

The three Synods culminating in the adoption of the Cambridge Platform and the Westminster Confession in 1648 mark the results of the effort on the part of the Church, and especially the clergy, to maintain a pure untainted Theocratic state in New England. There were three considerations, one from within the Church, and two without, that began to undermine the Theocracy as soon as it was established. These are, 1st the question of Church membership centering about the idea of Baptism and communion; (2) The question of suffrage; (3) The treatment of heretics.

The life that the Puritans had led, the struggles that they had been through, the consciousness of the deep appeal of the religious life to them, had impressed upon their minds the conviction of the absolute necessity of regeneration in a man's life as a visible evidence of his election, and the *sine qua non* for his admission to the pure church. None were admitted to the adult membership who could not relate some instances of the transforming

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.

operation of God in their own lives. Only such could become members in full standing, and partake of the Lord's supper.

But there was an exception made to this. Children of Regenerate Church members were regarded as Church members and accorded the preliminary right of Baptism. Their defense for this action rested in this, that "The constitutive element in the church was the covenant, and this covenant, like that made with the House of Israel by God, was held to include not only the covenanting adult but his children." (Walker, p. 246).² The Baptism thus administered to children of regenerate parents was not a sacrament, i.e., it did not make them members, but it was administered as confirmation of their membership which already existed by virtue of the pact that they were children of regenerate parents.

But children who were thus members of the church by inheritance, could not enter into full adult membership unless, when the time came, they could affirm that they were conscious of regeneration. The result was that many in the church were excluded from becoming full members because they could not point to a particular moment in their lives as a moment of Regeneration. The growth of this class gave rise to what is known as the "Halfway Covenant Problem," which vexed the churches for the next 50 years. The fact is [that] their theories wouldn't work, and the defenders of the Theocracy were forced to compromise in order to meet the facts of the case. An illustration of how the plan worked is seen in the following case. As early as 1534 a Godly grandfather, a member apparently of the Dorchester Church, whose son and daughter could claim no regenerative work of God, desired Baptism for his grandchild. He sought advice of the Boston Church, and after public debate upon the point the following letter was written by Cotton, and the Elders of the Boston Church:

Though the child be unclean where both parents are pagans and infidels, yet we may not account such parents for pagan and infidels, who are

² Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Hartford, Connecticut: Press of The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., 1893, p. 246. Williston Walker (1860-1922) noted American Church historian.

themselves Baptized, and profess their belief of the fundamental articles of the Christian Faith, and live without notorious scandalous crime, though they give not clear evidence of their regenerate estate, nor are convinced of the necessity of Church Covenant. ... We do therefore profess it to be the judgement of our (Boston) Church that the grandfather, a member of the Church, may claim the privilege of Baptism to his grandchild through his next seed, the parents of the child be not received themselves into Church Covenant. (Cited by Walker, p. 251).³

This was the beginning of the problem. The ideas expressed in this letter in 1634 became more and more commonly held. John Fiske says,

In Massachusetts after 1650 the opinion rapidly gained ground that all baptized persons of upright and decorous lives ought to be considered, for practical purposes, as members of the Church, and therefore entitled to the exercise of political rights, even though unqualified for participation in the Lord's supper." (New Eng. 251).⁴

This theory of church membership, based on what at the time was stigmatized as the "Halfway Covenant," aroused very keen opposition. In 1657, less than ten years after the final session of Synod from 1646-48, the first formal step was taken in an attempt to restore to the Laymen their rights and privileges. A council was called in Boston which affirmed the principle of the Halfway Covenant. But the question was deemed of such importance that a general Synod was called 5 years later in 1662. The result of this Synod was to confirm the council of 1657, and approve the principle of the Halfway Covenant. But the Synod showed some congregational spirit for they did not attempt in any

³ Quote provided in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Hartford, Connecticut: Press of The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., 1893, p. 251.

⁴ John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England or The Puritan Theocracy in its Relations to Civil and Religious Liberty*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1889, p. 251. John Fiske (1842-1901) was an American philosopher and historian.

way to enforce their decision as the Cambridge Platform would seem to think they had a right to do. The question was left to the churches without further interference, and the Halfway Covenant view, though a popular and growing theory, long went with disapproval among the brethren of many congregations. Fifty years after the Synod there were still opposing churches in Massachusetts. It was especially the source of great trouble in the 1st Church in Boston, which resulted in a split in the Church. Those who supported the Halfway Covenant views organized themselves in 1669 into a new society under the title "Third Church in Boston." This liberal branch or outgrowth is now called the "Old South Church."

Side-by-side with this movement for a broader and more liberal attitude in regard to church membership that was going on within the church, was a similar movement going without, which was also working toward the overthrow of the Theocracy.

In 1631, as a measure of protection against the encroachments of the Episcopal and other religious people not in harmony with the Puritan Church, "It was decided that 'no man shall be admitted to the freedom of this body politic, but such as are members of some of the churches within the limits of the same.'" (Fiske, 109). This was a practical identification of the Church and the State, one of the grounds of the Puritan movement in England. This provision was by no means unanimously approved. In 1643, out of 15,000 inhabitants only 1,800 were voters. In 1646, the petition to extend the suffrage was presented to the General Court. The petitioners asked,

that their civil disabilities might be removed, and that all members of the churches of England and Scotland might be admitted to communion with the New England churches. If this could not be granted they prayed to be released from all civil burdens. Should the court refuse to entertain their complaint, they would be obliged to bring their case before Parliament. (Fiske, 175).

This petition was the occasion for the Synod of 1646-8, and the Cambridge Platform was the answer. The New England Theocracy or nothing. But the acceptance of the Halfway Covenant relieved the situation somewhat. But according to

Hutchinson⁵ only one grown man in five was a church member, qualified to vote or hold office.

The annulment of the Massachusetts Charter in 1684 by the King, and the arrival of Governor Andros as Colonial Governor in 1686 brought these contentions to a crisis, and in 1691 the religious qualifications for suffrage were removed and New England passed into a new stage of its history.

The third movement was within the church and did not a little to arouse the popular mind against the theocratic clergy, and bring about its downfall. This was the treatment of heretics. We have seen how the presence of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson and others had been a factor in developing the theocracy, and their expulsion from the community had been brought about. The coming of the Quakers was the next step. In 1657 and 1658 these matters came to a crisis. "The four confederated colonies all proceeded to pass laws banishing Quakers, and making it a penal offence for shipmasters to bring them to New England."⁶ John Fiske says, "One might almost say that it was not the people of Massachusetts after all that shed the blood of the Quakers; it was Endicott and the Clergy." (Fiske 187). I quote now John Fiske's graphic description of the execution on Boston Common:

In September, 1659, William Robinson, Marmaduke Stevenson, and Mary Dyer, who had come to Boston expressly to defy the cruel law, were banished. Mrs. Dyer was a lady of good family, wife of the secretary of Rhode Island. She had been an intimate friend of Mrs. Hutchinson. While she went home to her husband, Stevenson and Robinson went only to Salem and then faced about and came back to Boston. Mrs. Dyer also returned. All three felt themselves under divine command to

⁵ Earl Davis very likely refers to Thomas Hutchinson (1711-1780) who served as Governor of the Massachusetts Colony from 1771-74. Hutchinson was a historian who wrote a three-volume *History of the Provinces of Massachusetts Bay*, 1774.

⁶ John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England or The Puritan Theocracy in its Relations to Civil and Religious Liberty*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1889, p. 186.

resist and defy the persecutors. On the 27th of October they were led to the gallows on Boston Common, under escort of a hundred soldiers. Many people had begun to cry shame on such proceedings, and it was thought necessary to take precautions against a tumult. The victims tried to address the crowd, but their voices were drowned by the beating of drums. While the Rev. John Wilson railed and scoffed at them from the foot of the gallows the two brave men were hanged. The halter had been placed upon Mrs. Dyer when her son, who had come in all haste from Rhode Island, obtained her reprieve on his promise to take her away. The bodies of the two men were denied Christian burial and thrown uncovered into a pit. All the efforts of husband and son were unable to keep Mrs. Dyer at home. In the following spring she returned to Boston and on the first day of June was again taken to the gallows. At the last moment she was offered freedom if she would only promise to go away and stay, but she refused. "In obedience to the will of the Lord I came," said she, "and in his will I abide faithful unto death." And so she died. (Fiske, 188-9).

But one more victim of this intolerance of the New England Theocracy. In 1661 Wm. Leddra was similarly dealt with. About this same time Wenlock Christison was condemned to death by Governor Endicott, but the popular feeling was so strongly against the action that the decree was never carried into execution.

Charles II issued a Decree of Toleration, known in New England history as the "King's Missive," ordering the officials in New England to suspend proceedings against the Quakers, and if any were then in prison, to send them to England for trial. To send anyone to England for trial was too much for any New Englander to do, so all the Quaker prisoners were released. This was a decisive victory for the Quakers, and a blow at the Theocracy.

In the witchcraft persecutions in the 1690s we find the final effort of the Theocracy to sit in judgement and

condemn heretics. The popular feeling against this final attempt of the Theocracy became so great that it had not a little to do with its downfall.

There are two men of great interest in this movement. One of them represents the Theocracy, and the other represents the Liberal movement. Cotton Mather is the last of the old theocratic ministers and John Wise may be regarded as the first of the new generation that was coming into power.⁷

⁷ Cotton Mather (1663-1728) and John Wise (1652-1725) were both New England preachers. Earl Davis has written short individual pieces about each of these men, which can be found in his historical writings.