

Cotton Mather

Earl Clement Davis

Pittsfield, MA

No Date

In the person of Cotton Mather we find the man who at once represents the highest aspiration of the Theocracy, and also its downfall. Could we but study the life of his father, Increase Mather, and his grandfather, John Cotton, or his paternal grandfather, Richard Mather, we could trace with considerable accuracy the development of the Theocracy, and its final {???) effort to retain the position of influence it once held.

Cotton Mather was born Feb. 12, 1662-3. He was a very precocious youth, and responded very readily to the influence of his early life. Late in his own life he wrote for his son, Samuel, some account of his early life.

I desire to {???) unto the very end of my life, the early {???) of Original Sin, which appeared at the very beginning of it. Indeed your grandfather, tho' he was a wise and strict parent, would from the observation of some dispositions in me, comfort himself with an opinion of my being Sanctified by the Holy Spirit of God in my very infancy. But he knew not how vile I was, he saw not the instances of my going astray, even while I was yet an infant. However, there were some good things in my childhood, in which I wish my child may do better than I. I began to pray, even when I began to speak. I learned myself to write before my going to school for it. I used secret prayer, not confining myself to Forms in it; and yet I composed Forms of prayer for my schoolmates (I suppose when I was about seven or eight years old), and obliged them to pray. Before I could write sermons in the public assemblies, I commonly wrote what I remembered when I came home. I rebuked my playmates for their wicked words and ways; and sometimes I suffered from them, the persecution

of not only Scoffs but blows also, for my Rebukes. ([Barrett] Wendell's *Cotton Mather*, p. 33)

His {???) consciousness of sin, and original sin at that, is shown in the following lamentation of the sins of his youth.

Of the manifold sins which then I was guilty of, none so sticks upon me as that, being very young, I was whittling on the Sabbath day, and for fear of being seen, I did it behind the door. A great reproach of God! A specimen of that Atheism that I brought into the world with me. (Wendell's *C.M.*, p. 81)

The supreme conceit of the man, and his most apparent self-consciousness appear in the following passage written for his son:

One special fault of my childhood (against which I would have you, my son, be cautioned) was idleness. And one thing that occasioned me very much idle time, was the distance of my Father's Habitation from the School; which caused him out of compassion for my tender and weakly constitution to keep me at home in the Winter. However I then much employed myself in Church History, and when summer had arrived I so plied my business, that through the blessing of God upon my endeavors, at the age of a little more than eleven years I had composed many Latin exercises, both in prose and verse, and could speak Latin so readily, that I could write notes of sermons of the English preacher in it. I had conversed with Cato, {???, {???, Sully, Ovid, and Virgil. I had made epistles and themes; presenting my first theme to my Master, without his requiring or expecting as yet any such thing of me; whereupon he complimented me "Tandahilis Diligentia tua." I had gone through a great part of the New Testament in Greek. I had read considerably in Socrates and Homer and I had made some entrance in my Hebrew grammar. And I think before I came to fourteen, I composed Hebrew exercises and ran thro' the other sciences that

academical students ordinarily fall upon.  
(Wendell, p. 81)

Such was Cotton Mather's estimate of his own power as a youth. At the age of 12 he entered Harvard, and graduated in due time. At commencement President Oakes in presenting the members of the class said,

The next is named Cotton Mather. How notable a name! I am wrong my friend; I should rather have said what a notable name. I will say nothing of his reverend father, the most watchful of guardians, the most distinguished Fellow of the College; I dare not praise him here to his very face. But if this youth brings back into being the piety, the learning, the elegant accomplishment, the sound sense, the prudence and gravity of his very reverend grandfathers, John Cotton and Richard Mather, he may be said to have done his highest duty. Nor is my hope small that in this youth, Cotton and Mather shall in fact as well as in name join together and once more appear in life. (Sibley III 6. 7. Cited in Wendell, p. 38.)

In 1681 he was called to assist his father as pastor of the Second Church of Boston, the largest, and perhaps the most influential Church in New England. This came after he had studied medicine, thinking that he was not designed for the ministry on account of an impediment in his speech. On May 13<sup>th</sup> 1685 he was ordained. On May 4<sup>th</sup> prior to his ordination the following is recorded in his Diary, a passage that throws considerable light on his character:

I renounce all the varieties and cursed Idols and Evil Courses of this world. I engage that I will ever have the Great God my best Good, my Last End, and my Only Lord. That I will ever be rendering of acknowledgements unto the Lord Jesus Christ in all the relations which he bears unto me. That I will ever be studying what is my duty in these things; and wherein I find myself to fall short, I will ever make it my grief, my shame and for pardon to take myself unto the blood of the everlasting Covenant. Now I humbly imploring the grace of the Mediator, to be

sufficient for me, I do as a further Solemnity,  
here unto subscribe my name with both Hand and  
Heart.

One more quotation from his diary together with what  
appears later will give a fair idea of the man. At this  
time of his life, age 23, his record of his day's work is  
as follows:

Read Exodus, etc.; Prayed; Examined the Children;  
read Descartes; read Commentators, etc;  
breakfasted; prepared sermon; took part in family  
prayers; heard pupils recite; read Salman on  
medicine; dined; visited many friends; read  
various books; prepared sermon; heard pupils  
recite; meditated etc.; prayed; supped; prepared  
sermon; took part in family prayer. (Wendell 54.)

Thus we see him at the beginning of his ministry.  
Educated, a great reader and worker, conceited, consecrated  
to his work, and as will appear later, a man who clung with  
tremendous tenacity to the old Theocracy, even while he saw  
it crumbling beneath his very hands.

There are several events which we have already spoken of  
that Cotton Mather is involved in.

- (1) The annulment of the Charter took his Father,  
Increase, to England and left him at home to take  
charge of the work of the Church. This annulment was  
the first great blow to the Theocracy, and the  
modified Charter that Increase Mather was able to  
rescue from the Home Government was but a vestige of  
what they wanted. But out of the wreck they  
attempted to regain their control by securing  
through their influence of the political world the  
appointment of Sir Wm Phipps as Colonial Governor.  
This availed them nothing.
- (2) The second blow at the Mathers came in their  
relations with the witchcraft persecutions. Cotton  
Mather was the leader of all the persecutions of  
1692-3, and the reaction of the people against it  
lost him much of his influence. Especially one man,  
Robert Calef, published a book which puts the  
Mathers in rather undesirable situations. S{???}'s  
Diary describes the situation of one of the

executions. "A very great number of spectators present. Mr. Cotton Mather was there. All of them said they were innocent. Mr. Mather said they all died by righteous sentence." (Wendell, 101). Perhaps the following written at a time when he was accused of witchcraft by a demented young woman. He feared the loss of his influence should these rumors be accepted. He writes, "I was put upon ... agonies, and singular ... efforts of soul, in the Resignation of my name unto the Lord; content that if he had no further Service for my name, it would be torn to pieces. ... But I cried unto the Lord as for Deliverance of my name from the {??} of Hell, so for the deliverance of the young woman whom the power of Hell had seized upon. And behold ... the possessed person ... was Delivered ... on the very same day, and poor Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ was Defeated." (Wendell, 120). The witchcraft persecution brought him much trouble and cost him great loss of power.

- (3) The founding of the Brattle Street Church in Cambridge in 1698 under the leadership of Brattle and Leverett, who represented the Liberal or popular movement that was gaining headway, was the third terrible blow to the Mathers. Concerning this, Cotton Mather writes, "A company of headstrong men in the town, the chief of whom are full of malignity to the holy ways of our churches have built in the town another meetinghouse." (Wendell, 142). In January of 1699-1700, he writes, "I see Satan beginning a terrible stroke unto the churches of New England, and the Innovators that have set up a new Church in Boston (a New one indeed!) have made a day of Temptation among us. The men are Ignorant, Arrogant, Obstinate and full of malice and slander, and they fill the land with lies, in the misrepresentations whereof I am a very singular sufferer. Wherefor I set apart this day again for prayer in my study to cry mightily unto God." (Wendell, 43). The organization of this church was an outward sign of what was going on throughout New England. The old was passing away, and the new was coming into power.

- (4) The fourth event which marked the dawn of new things in New England likewise fell heavily upon the Mathers. Harvard College had been founded for the purpose of preparing men for the ministry in the Orthodox Theocracy. Already signs were not wanting to show that the heresies were finding their way into Harvard. Increase Mather had been President of Harvard for years, having been chosen in 1681, but declined, and accepted the second offer in 1685. He still retained his pastorate over the Second Church, and could not be prevailed upon to take up his residence in Cambridge, but finally after many efforts he moved to Cambridge. Sept 2<sup>nd</sup> 1700 he began his work as he called it, "of {???" to 40 or 50 children." This was in reality a surrender to the new spirit. It was a bitter pill, and he remained there just a month and a few days. The fight of the Theocracy was most over. Oct 17<sup>th</sup> 1700, Increase Mather, on plea of ill health, returned from Cambridge, and expressed a desire by letter that another President be chosen. Harvard College, the last stronghold of the Puritan, passed into other hands. The Mathers had to bear the burden, and it is not an idle thought to imagine that Cotton Mather had cherished the idea of becoming its President.
- (5) But such men take defeat with poor grace. In 1705 the Mathers formulated and sent out for approval a document known as 16 proposals, which was a grasp at a passing straw in their efforts to reestablish the influence of the clergy, and maintain the Theocracy. These were defeated and dealt with very severely, and their defeat marks the final victory over the Theocracy. The reply to these proposals was made by John Wise, whom we will take up next Sunday.

Arrogant in a certain sense, superstitious almost beyond comprehension, a man whose prospects in life were bright at the outset, Cotton Mather commands our sympathy and respect for his strict adherence to what he stood for. No amount of defeat, no amount of private sorrow, could shake the firmness and persistence of the last of the Puritans.