

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[VI.] The Puritan-Pilgrim Church

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We have already traced with considerable care the fortunes of the Plymouth Church, showing as well as possible its form and its spirit. It was 1629 when the Puritans came to Salem, and several events had happened which were likely to prove of disadvantage to the friendly relations of these two churches. As early as 1623, an Episcopal Clergyman came over from England, to whom the authorities at home had given power to control and regulate the religious affairs of the Church in Plymouth. He spent a year among the Pilgrims and decided not to attempt to exercise his authority, but returned home. Also a group of people called the "Adventurers" came and settled in the colony, but held themselves aloof from the Pilgrims. Through efforts of these "Adventurers," who were over-zealous for the religious welfare of the Pilgrims, complaints were secretly sent to London authorities concerning the irreligiousness of the Pilgrims.

As a result, in 1624, John Lyford, as Episcopal Clergyman of Puritan tendencies arrived among them. He came for the purpose of overcoming the free church principles. He was a double-faced, fawning, flattering man of the Church, who, as Bradford says, "made them (the Pilgrims) ashamed he so bowed and cringed before them."<sup>2</sup> But in spite of all his flattery, he and Oldham, one of the Adventurers, were

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> William Bradford, *History of the Plymouth Plantation*, Cambridge: Writer and Potter Print Co., 1898 (originally published in 1651) p. 204. William Bradford (1590-1657) served as Governor of the Plymouth Colony for more than 30 years.

privately plotting to destroy the Pilgrim Government, and bring the colony into conformity with the Church. Of course, the Pilgrims resented it, and an open breach between Lyford and the community took place. This led also to a breach with the Board of Merchant Adventurers at home, and brought the colony into hard financial straits.

The natural result of all these events was that the Pilgrims had no particular respect for the methods taken to overcome their principles of non-conformity. A rather deep-rooted suspicion lurked in their minds in regard to established churches and their representatives.

Now the Company which came over to Salem in 1629 was Puritan, i.e., it believed in reform from within, and was so entirely opposed to the Separatists that they would not at first permit Reverend Ralph Smith, who was seeking passage to Plymouth, to come in their ship, but finally converted. This same Ralph Smith became the first Pastor of the Plymouth Church. Also, to show their opposition to the Separatists, I quote the alleged speech of Higginson, who afterwards became the Pastor of the Salem Church. Cotton Mather, in his *Magnalia* (Bk III, p. 74) says that on leaving England Higginson said,

We will not say as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving of England. Farewell Babylon. Farewell Rome. But we will say Farewell Dear England! Farewell the Church of God in England, and all the Christian Friends there! We do not go to New England as Separatists from the Church of England; though we cannot but separate from the corruptions in it: But we go to practice the positive part of church reformation, and propagate the Gospel in America.<sup>3</sup>

Thus we have two apparently irreconcilable parties on the New England shore, each prejudiced against the other.

The task and privilege of overcoming this opposition and bringing the two churches together fell to the lot of

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<sup>3</sup> Cotton Mather (1663-1728), New England Puritan clergyman and prolific writer. His *Magnalia Christi Americana* was first published in 1702.

Layman Doctor Samuel Fuller. It happened that the first Puritans to arrive in Salem were suffering from scurvy and a fever. Governor Endicott sent to Plymouth for medical aid, and Deacon Fuller responded. Apparently Deacon Fuller was able to overcome their prejudices for within a month after the arrival of the ships that brought the majority of the Salem Company, they united to form a church, and adopted a covenant that is used today in the Unitarian Church at Salem. The Covenant of 1629 is as follows: "We Covenant with the Lord and one with another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth."

Moreover, they re-ordained the men whom they had elected to become their ministers. Both these men, Higginson and Skelton, were ordained in the Church of England before coming over here, and apparently they came as ministers, but after forming the new Church and adopting a Covenant, they elected and ordained these two men as Pastor and Teacher respectively.

In addition to that, "notice was given of their intended proceedings to the Church at New Plymouth, that so they might have their approbation and concurrence, if not their direction and assistance, in a matter of that nature, wherein themselves had been but little before exercised." (Dexter, 416).<sup>4</sup> The Plymouth Church sent Governor Bradford and others as delegates, but they, going "by sea, were hindered by cross winds that they could not be there at the beginning of the day, but they came into the Assembly afterward, and gave them *the right hand of fellowship*, and wishing all prosperity and a blessed success unto such good beginnings."<sup>5</sup>

In practically the same way the Church at Dorchester (1630), Charlestown (1630), Watertown (1630) and others

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *Dexter's The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880, p. 416.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Dexter's The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880, p. 416. Italics in the original.

were organized. "Rathband said in 1644 'that 'Mr. W.' (either Edward Winslow or Roger Williams) an eminent man of the Church at Plimmoth' told him 'that the rest of the churches in New England came at first to them at Plimmoth to crave their direction in Church courses, and made them their pattern.'"<sup>6</sup>

So these early churches were Congregational in form, and apparently shared to a certain extent the Separatist spirit of the Church at Plymouth. But they were made up of Puritans, and under the pressure from people in England, and also under pressure from the influx of people into the colonies who held views somewhat at variance, the people who had come to New England to worship God according to their own conscience, would not permit others to worship God as they wished.

Walker says,

The first really serious question to disturb the peace of our rising churches was that occasioned by the coming of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson to Boston in 1634, Mr. Henry Vane in 1635, and Mrs. Hutchinson's husband's brother-in-law, Reverend John Wheelwright, in 1636. The views of Mrs. Hutchinson, embraced as they were in large degree not only by the two whose names have been associated with hers, but by a majority of the Boston church, were stigmatized by her opponents as "Antinomian;" and certainly laid far too much stress on the believer's confidence in his good estate, rather than visible betterment in his character, as evidence of his acceptance with God. However worthy of respect Mrs. Hutchinson may have been, there can be no doubt that the controversy raised by her came perilously near wrecking the infant colonies; ...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Dexter's The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, Boston: Thomas Todd Congregational House, 1880, p. 418.

<sup>7</sup> Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Hartford, Connecticut: Press of The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., 1893, p. 133. Williston Walker (1860-1922) noted American Church historian.

The result of this disturbance was very far reaching. It led first to the calling of a Synod of the New England churches by the Massachusetts General Court, which met August 30, 1637 at what is now Cambridge. 82 of her opinions were condemned and she and several of her supporters were banished.

Now this action by the Synod shows that by force of circumstances largely, the churches had departed from their original congregational principles.

- (1) It was called by civil government.
- (2) Civil officers kept the peace.
- (3) The Separatist Church of England had become the established Church of New England.
- (4) Propositions to call regular Synods were made.
- (5) A member in the Church differing in any matter not fundamental should not separate themselves. This is one point where the Puritan's influence shows itself very pointedly.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Synod. 1643.

Relative to [the] position taken by the two ministers of Newbury, Parker and Noyes, who were inclined to Presbyterian Principles. The second Synod met at Cambridge in 1643, but apparently with no definite results.

But this was one more step away from pure Congregationalism.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Synod. 1646. Cambridge.

Political disturbances were back of the movement and reflected in New England the political controversies of Old England.

A committee of three was appointed to draft a platform, and present it to the re-assembled Synod. Reverend John Cotton of Boston, Richard Mather of Dorchester, and Ralph Partridge of Duxbury were appointed to prepare a "model of Church Government."

When the Council convened in 1648 the platform was adopted by the Synod as had been drafted by Cotton.

The Westminster Confession was accepted.

The Cambridge Platform, presents many interesting points.

- (1) A flat denial of the cardinal principles of the early Separatists.

- (2) Place and authority of Elders
  - a. Is increased. Tendency away from the power of the congregation.
  - b. Veto power of Elders.
- (3) Tendency was to increase the authority of councils.