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The Rise and Development of the  
Congregational Polity and Spirit in New England

History Manuscripts, -1907

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## **Lecture Six: The Puritan-Pilgrim Church**

Earl Clement Davis

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## The Pilgrim Church at Plymouth.

We left the Pilgrims in the Mayflower engaged into a Holy polity by the Mayflower Covenant. Of their hardships during the winter, the great difficulty of getting houses built, their sickness, the death of half the brave band, we need not say or speak, for we know that too well for our own ease of conscience, if we should stoop to measure ourselves by the standards of the Mayflower Pilgrims. What courage it took after their long and cold winter for them to sow grain over the spot where the dead lay in order that the swages might not suspect their meanness, and loss. How they stood watching the Mayflower depart for the old tower, 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 sterner 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. Some in the history of

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of New England Theology, who have been on the liberal side have held always that 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 direction in which they were working, you must see that they were the extreme liberals of their time.

Dr. Dexter, 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 defended the Synod of Dort's decision. Of this Synod, John Lathrop Wothe, in his *Life and Death of John of Barneveld*, says, in a Passage which Mr. Dexter quotes, "On the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of April 1619, the covenants were signed by all members of the Synod. Arminians were pronounced heretics, Schismatics

Teachers of false doctrines. They were declared 3  
incapable of filling any clerical, or academical  
post. No more therefore was to teach  
children, lecture to adolescents, or preach to the  
nation, unless a subscriber to the doctrines  
of the unchanged, unchangeable, orthodox  
Church. As the 30 of April, civil 17<sup>th</sup> Nov, 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 inexorably  
bound to the only true religion." Dexter 401.

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

In comparison with that statement I  
want to quote one or two passages from  
men who knew Robinson personally.

Notice particularly this passage in which  
Mr. Dexter quotes, but fails to see the signifi-

course of. John Bastwick, who knew him "at Leyden says, "I can speak thus much in the presence of God, that Martin Robinson of Leyden, the pastor of the Puritan 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 ~~bind~~ them, and imposed upon him the observation of them, that he had never separated from it, or left that Church." Baxter 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. 5

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 knows  
Robinson personally.

In the next place, for the wholesome counsel  
Mr. Robinson gave that part of the church whereby  
he was fostered, 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 fact had afflicted  
it or not he charged us before God, ~~to~~  
and his blessed Angels, to follow him  
no further than he followed Christ.  
And if God should reveal anything to us  
by any other instrument of his, to be or  
wary to receive it, as ever we were  
to receive any truth by his Ministry: For  
he was very confident that <sup>the fact</sup> God 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 gone drawn to go beyond

What Luther saw, for whatever part <sup>7</sup>  
of God's will he had further imparted  
and revealed to Calvin, they will  
rather die than embrace it. And so  
now you see the Calvinists, they stick  
where he left them: A misery much  
to be lamented: For though they were  
fervent 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 receive embrace further  
light, as that they had received.  
Here also he got us in mind of our  
Church Covenant (see vobis) (at least that  
part of it, where by we promise and  
covenant with God and one with another  
to receive whatsoever light or truth



shall be well known to us from his  
written word: but withall exhorted us  
to take heed what we received for truth  
and well to examine ~~it~~ and compare  
it, and weigh it with other scriptures  
of truth, before we received it. For  
he saith, It is not possible the  
Christian world should come so lately  
out of such thick Anti-christian darkness,  
and that full perfection of knowledge  
should break forth at once."

Now it seems to me that Channing  
could not have made a more liberal statement,  
and while Dexter rejects as untrustworthy,  
nevertheless, if Robinson did not say as  
much or 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 ~~to~~ 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. If these  
complications and their results we will  
meet next Sunday. But the point to note  
is this that the spirit of the church was for  
more light in religious life.

And I want to note 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 Rev. G. S. S. S.) Solem, 1629.  
(3) Dochester 1630; First Church, Boston 1630.  
Wolterton, 1630. All these churches are  
now Unitarian.

By the end of 1640. there were 35 churches  
in New England. Two thirds of them  
are <sup>now</sup> Unitarian. The spirit of free inquiry  
unhindered by tradition leads to the position  
we now hold. If the early settlers of  
New England, who brought the spirit, and  
instigated 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 over the  
ground at the time of battle, but

come around soon after, and seem to  
think that they did all the work.

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[V.] The Pilgrim Church at Plymouth

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

No Date<sup>1</sup>

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

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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.

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

Dr. Dexter<sup>2</sup>, 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 decision<sup>3</sup>. Of this Synod, John Lothrop Motley, in his *Life and Death of John of Barneveld* (p. 310) says,

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 30<sup>th</sup> of April and 1<sup>st</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</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. 404.

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



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