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

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Lecture Six: The Puritan-Pilgrim Church

Earl Clement Davis

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The Pilgrim Church at Olymonth.

We left the Pilgrims in the Tany flomen ngonged into a Frely folitie by the may flower Concenant. Of their hardship during the minter, the great difficulty of getting touser built, their sickness, the death of half the have toud, we need not sign speak, for we know that tor mell por our our ear Lof conscience, if we shall stop to measure ouseher by the standarch of the way fleme Vilgins, What amage it took after their long soch minter for them to sour grain over the spot where the dead lay in order that the soveges night vot surfect their meakness, and loss, How they stoved wortching the long planen defeat for the old tomes, and old England, where if they world but do that which their conscience fubrale, they could live in ease confort and luxery. But there men and women mere made of stein solid stiff, and having fut their hand to the flow they woold not turn bock. now there is no little disfute in regard to the religion and therebycical significance of this buil of feafle. Show in the history of

of Trew Englind Shevlogy, who have been on the liberal side have held always that Plyworth church wor in spirit likerol, but not in form, Un the other hand the conservation feafle time always held that they were strictly, and unquestimoly Colocinistic. This question can only be settled by your fout of rice, of you look to the outwal mechnicol form, you must say they were Coloinistic, If you look to the inwork spirit, and see the direction in which they were worning, you must see that they were the extreme liberals of their Dr. Dexter, who has written at length on this time. subject, and done an untold amount of work in uniting his history, bolds, that they were indud concentive, and substantistes his claim by elaborates quatative from John Robinson's works, and also by the fart that Robinson in a mitter treatise defends the Syrod of Dort's decision, Of this Syrod, John Sothof Wothey in his Sife and Seath of John of Barrow 200 # 9:00 Bamaveld, "soys, in a Porroge which The. Dexter quotes, Un the 23th day of Office 1619, The cours were signed by all members of the Lyvod. Arminiour mere frovonneed heretics, Schirnoties

Teachers of foke doctrines, They mare declared 3 incopable of filling any clericol, a academical fort. no wore themeforth war to teach children, lecture to adolescents, or peach to the mature, nuller a sobserible to the doctrines of the unchanged, unchangeable othoday Church. Use the 30 of Africe, and Many, the netherland anferin and the Heidelberg Cotechism were declared to be infollible. Twelange was to be fourble in either formulary, Schools and fulfits were inexorably bound to the only true religion." Septer 401. Thow, as I see it. Robinson simply defended the bactrices, and vot the spirit of this currie of Sort. he confarison with that statement of want to quote one or two fourages from men who have Robinson fersonally. Thatise farticularly this forsage in which The dexter gurter, but fails to see the signific

come of. John Bastinich, who know him " at Legden soys, "I con speak thus much in the fresence of God, that Master Robins of Leiden, the faiter of the Burnist Church, there told were and others, who are yet living to witherse the truth of what I vou soy, that if he might in langland have sujqued but the likerty of his Ministry there, with are immunity but from the very cerewrites, and that they had not forced him to a sob = scriftin to time them, and impend you live the observation of their that he had never referated from it, or left that church," Sexter grotes that as showing that he was in substantial accord with current offoday. It votice that he left that church

because they had fored him to 5 a sobscription of them". Ia vot that the essential frinciple upon which a tree Church is established, But in addition to they is the evidence of the eclavore Winshow, This enidence Dexter rejects, but it seems to me that this is volvoble testimmy, for Gos. Minshow know Robinson Jessovolky. In the next flace, for the wholesome coursel The. Robinson, gove that fait of the church where the he wor forther, at their defarture from him to begin the great work of flantation in new England, awangst other workame instruction and extentations, he used there expressions or to the some furfore. We we vom see long to fart asunder and the borch kormeth whether even had Robinsony should live to see on faces

again; but whether the ford had affinited " it or vot he changed up before forl, the and his blessed angels, to follow him No further than he followed christ. Und if God stould reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, to be on reachy to receive it, as even me more to receive any truth by his Minchy: For he was very confident that for had yet work that and light yet to hear furth ontof his toly und. He took occasion also misurably to pervaile the state and constition of reformed churches, mbo mere come to a feriod in Religin and would go or further than the instrumente of their reformation ; as for exaple, the outher and, they could vot te gove chawne to goe beyond

what Luther Son, for whotever fait of Goch will be had further imfarted and weold to Colain, they will wither die the embrace it. and so about you see the Columnish, They shick where he left theme : & misery much to be lamented: For though they were frecions shining lights in this times, yet god had vot revealed his where wiel to them; and were they von living, saith here, they would be as reachy and milling to selin embrace forther light, as that they had secured. Here sho he for in mind of on Church Covenant (Scroop) (at boit that fait of it, where by me formine and concurant with for and one with another to receive whitsoever light a light

sholl be worke how to un from his written word; but withall extorted us to toke heed what we received you that and well to exour we it and comfore it, and weigh it with other Scrifties of truth, he fors we received it. For he sailt, It is not fourthe the Churstion worked should come so lotely out of, such thick autichustic dar kneise and that full ferfection of hourselfe should beak forth at once. How it seems to me that Chaming could out tome work a work like of statement. and while Sexter rejects on untrustworthy, nevertheless, if Robinson did vot soy as unch on Thot, It is certainly whit Minslow thought he said, and Winslow wor the won who some

to hew augloch, and helfed stope the 9 destinies of the Phyworth Church. Shot wor the ful of the flyworth church. It was not with the Purities come that any servere strain wer to horget to hear on the Phymouth Church. For seven years, and eight writtes, the Phywomth Church stored alme. Int when the Puritons come to Solew new conflication to acre. and theatened distintance, but mere finally settled in a feacifie une, if the Conflications and their results we will theot acet Sunday but the first to write is this that the spirit of the church wor for worr light in religions life. and I won't to woke the fourt have that this wer the spirit of the early settlers. by the end of the year 1630, there more fine congregational churches in them

Englind, (1) Plyworth, (1606 Surty.) Solem, 1629, (3) Dorchester 1630; First church, Horton 1630. wotertown, 1630. All there churches are von mitarian, By the end of 1640. There were 35 churches in her leglind, two thirds of them and Mitarian. The spirit of free inquiry unbourfered by tradition leads to the forition we row told, If the early settles of new lenglond, who brought the spirit, and instructed the form of self Government, repearent the official of our country, then it follows that the represent the religions attitude of a Reportie like this. The clevelofe ment of other types of Churches referent, the usual influx of featle who are not one the givenel it the time of pattle, but

come around som often, and seen to thick that they chill all the work.

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[V.] The Pilgrim Church at Plymouth

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

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.

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.

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.

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 selfgovernment, 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.