

**THE CULMINATION
OF THE PURITAN
THEOCRACY**

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The Culmination of the Puritan Theocracy by Edward A. Horton

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By
Edward A. Horton

J. S. Lockwood
Library Bureau Building, 530 Atlantic Avenue
Boston, 1900

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Bright fund

*With greeting to my friends and former parishioners
of the Second Church, Boston (1649), the First Parish,
Hingham (1635), and the First Congregational Society,
Leominster (1743). These three churches are direct
descendants of the Puritan Theocracy.*

E. A. H.

Boston, January, 1900.

The Culmination of the Puritan Theocracy

We are to enter a crowded and exciting era. The range of our investigation will extend, speaking generally, from 1675 to 1725. In that period we shall find old affairs trembling, new ideas taking courage, religion changing its outward phases, frictions arising in government, and all in all an immense strain put upon the faith of our forefathers in regard to their cherished plans. We shall see the Congregational idea reasserting itself. We shall behold Episcopacy planted once and for all in the Puritan soil. Significant changes will take place at Harvard College. Liberal movements will break out here and there in the midst of bitter opposition. Witches will be hanged. The clergy will assume a less autocratic attitude; and in the midst of all these impressive events we shall see the marvellous structure of the Massachusetts Theocracy go down.

You can understand somewhat how important this period is when I say that four of its years, from 1684 to 1688, have been counted the darkest in New England history. This hasty summary is an index to one fact,— that the beginners of New England had no inertia. Everything was full of life; little more than fifty years had passed since the charter was given them, and during that half century so vigorous had been their effort, so intense their action, and so fulfilling their spirit, that now we suddenly come upon these great changes. One tie bound the varied elements together; that was the love of liberty and the hope of the

true enjoyment of it on these shores. That abiding hope held the conflicting parts, and made it possible for the Commonwealth to emerge from its distractions into healthier and happier conditions.

I add one more prefatory word as a result of my humble investigations. I am prepared to agree fully with Mr. T. W. Higginson that history is an "inexact science," and that facts, like figures, can be made and are made to lie.

Reassertion of the Congregational Idea. — Let us give our attention first to the matters connected with the reassertion of the Congregational idea, which was aroused by efforts on the part of those loving ecclesiasticism to impose binding conditions on the churches. This attempt at religious coercion took form in what is known as "The sixteen proposals," which were proffered by Boston ministers to the various churches for their adoption. No distinct authorship was acknowledged, but it is generally assumed that the Mathers instigated them. The point of the propositions lay in this, that matters commonly permitted to rest in the authority of the separate churches should be taken from them and placed in the hands of certain associations, partly clerical and partly lay, and there the ultimate authority should remain. Against these centralizing propositions a strong protest arose. An essential feature of Congregationalism is, of course, the independency of each church.

As champion of the opposition, Rev. John Wise of Ipswich arose, who has been termed "one of the broadest thinkers and most lucid writers of his time." It has been said of him by such an authority as Mr. John Fiske, that he seems like a forerunner of the liberal divines of the present century. In two books he made such a telling demonstration that the whole affair was dropped. The more important of these two productions was called "A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches." This volume became a text-book of liberty

for our Revolutionary fathers, containing some of the notable expressions that are used in the Declaration of Independence. We cannot allow this fearless defender of the people's rights to pass back into the slumber of the records without a hasty reference to his character. It seems an injustice done by fickle favoritism that he should have become obscured in fame by others less worthy. He was probably the finest prose writer known to our country during the colonial time. Moreover, he had reputation and power when living; a man who, while having the grace of literary expression, possessed also the robust vigor of the athlete. A mighty wrestler came down from Andover to Ipswich one day to try this parson in a bout, and the parson having at last reluctantly consented, soon tossed the blustering hero to the ground. John Wise was always at the front with mental, political, and religious vigor, ready to face tyranny in any form.

He was greatly helped in his advocacy of Congregational liberty by Solomon Stoddard, a graduate of Harvard College, who was a minister at Northampton from 1679 to 1730; a typical man of New England industry, learning, and strong argumentative powers. He was fond of taking up questions in casuistry, dealing with questions such as these: "At what time of the evening does the Sabbath begin?" "Did we do any wrong to the Indians in buying their lands at small prices?" "Is it lawful to wear long hair?" "Is it lawful for men to build their houses at such distances from churches that they and their families cannot attend?" But however pedantic many of his writings seem to have been, in his treatment of the Lord's Supper he was eminently judicious. His position for those times was exceedingly broad. He desired to sweep away many of the petty barriers which had been erected, some of them springing from a great fear that the church membership franchise would be fatally injured by any enlargements.

We must feel grateful to these men, and to the large number who more quietly aided the defence of the Congregational idea, for keeping the life of the churches in line with their original principles; and here it may be profitable to reflect a moment upon the nature of Congregationalism and its historic ways. The first settlers had correct views in this respect, and what we now call errors were greatly due to the same causes that have always attended the development of the idea. In other words, many of the objectionable features sprang from fallible human nature and not from Puritanical methods. The Congregational idea involves two essential features, viz.: first, the free exercise of personal reason; second, the perfect independence of each church. All this was acknowledged and set forth by the founders of the Puritan Commonwealth, but in carrying out this idea there sprung up, naturally, the imposition of outside authority, originating either in the arrogant spirit of special clergymen, or from the desire to centralize and combine, or from the intrusion of political considerations.

Congregationalism is a living polity, keeping touch with everything that appertains to freedom and to progress. You can see to what a degree of rationalism it leads when you recall such a sentence as this from Pastor Robinson, the guiding spirit of the Pilgrims, who said: "The meanest man's reason, especially in matters of faith and obedience to God, is to be preferred to all authority of all other men;" or, as one has written in our own times, "Congregationalism is valuable only as it keeps human reason in close, sensitive, loving contact with the Divine Reason. In constructing houses of refuge for the repose of reason, it is the weakest of all earth's architects, building but booths, always slight, sometimes uncouth, which every wind of Heaven may rock and rend."

The people of New England in the main, whatever mistakes they may have made by way of narrowness, have

never lost sight of their first principles. Better, it seems to me, to cling to those with all the defects attending such a tenacity than to yield those first principles and gain a temporary harmony and satisfaction. All through history and everywhere in the world a student can easily find examples of compromise; but the cases of moral valor and unswerving religious freedom are rare. I repeat, there is nothing peculiar in the history of Congregationalism in New England except that it tells for more on the side of independence and progress than any other history. When we think of our past, may we not approve such a statement as this, which at first seems a little audacious: "Is not greatness always Congregational? Great men rise above all denominational relations, and appeal to the great congregation, to the universal reason. A great man is never great simply as a man of his church. He is great outside and above his church. His constituency is not denominational, is not ecclesiastical, because he guides and serves humanity."

The important matter, then, that was decided in this particular conflict stands before us as a threatened invasion of the independent existence of the churches by ecclesiastical combinations; as a result the Congregational idea became deeper rooted than ever. Fetters were not placed on the consciences of the worshippers. The result set back any new attempts in this direction. It encouraged a spirit of progress in the people at large. It created a wholesomer, freer life in worship and belief.

The Planting of Episcopacy.—The next sign of the times I wish to consider is the planting of Episcopacy. The Pilgrims were Separatists in principle, as we know. The Puritans were Separatists only by geographical isolation, or Nonconformists; but even they had come to be in matter of fact almost as uncompromising with the old mother church as the Plymouth brethren. Nothing was therefore more pestilential than the possibility of the en-