

**A DISCOURSE ON THE
CAMBRIDGE CHURCH-
GATHERING IN 1636;**

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A discourse on the Cambridge church-gathering in 1636; by William Newell

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WILLIAM NEWELL

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DISCOURSE.

"WE HAVE HEARD WITH OUR EARS, O GOD, OUR FATHERS HAVE TOLD US, WHAT WORKS THOU DIDST IN THEIR DAYS, IN THE TIMES OF OLD. HOW THOU DIDST DRIVE OUT THE HEATHEN WITH THY HAND, AND PLANTEDST THEM. FOR THEY GOT NOT THE LAND IN POSSESSION BY THEIR OWN SWORD, NEITHER DID THEIR OWN ARM SAVE THEM; SET THY RIGHT HAND, AND THINE ARM, AND THE LIGHT OF THY COUNTENANCE, BECAUSE THOU HADST A FAVOR UNTO THEM." — Psalm clix. 1-3.

On a Monday morning, towards the close of the early and severe winter of 1635-36, "The New Towne," or "Newtown," as this village was then called,* presented an unusual aspect. Instead of the

* Two years after this (in May, 1638) its name was changed by the General Court to Cambridge, in prophetic compliment to the newly established College, and in grateful remembrance of the place in Old England where many of the magistrates and ministers of the Massachusetts Colony had received their education. It was at that place, also, that an agreement to remove with their families to New England, on condition of the transfer of the charter and government of the Colony to this country, was drawn up and subscribed by Saltonstall, Dudley, Johnson, Winthrop, Nowell, and others, in August, 1629. See it in Hutchinson's Coll., p. 25. That agreement determined the destinies of America, and involved consequences which will finally encircle the world.

ordinary stir and business of the day, there was a Sabbath-like quiet and gravity in the looks and movements of the people. There were signs of preparation for some special solemnity. The signal for a public gathering was heard; and, as the inhabitants issued from their dwellings and passed with sedate step through the streets, others of less familiar countenance, who had spent the Sabbath with them that they might be here in season, or who had just arrived from the neighbourhood, were seen mingling with them as they went. Gathering from all quarters came the fathers of the infant church and commonwealth of Massachusetts, to sanction by their presence the solemn act which was about to be performed in the first rude temple, which had been erected a few years before a little way from the spot on which we are now assembled to the worship of the one living and true God. From Boston, from Charlestown, from Wimsisnet, from Roxbury, from Dorchester, from Watertown, from Medford, from Concord, and the towns which were within convenient travelling distance, the "messengers" of the invited churches, and others drawn thither by curiosity and religious interest, were seen wending their way, as they then best could, over new rough roads, or across the open fields and over the ice-bridged rivers and streams, to the humble Puritan sanctuary. In the midst of the newly-risen dwellings which had sprung up as by magic under the diligent hands of the Christian adventurers who first planted the town, on the rising ground just above

the marshes, and in the principal street,* leading down to the river, — which bore, as it still bears, the name of their king,† — stood the House of Prayer. A plain, roughly finished edifice it was, but as precious in the sight of God as the marble and gilded cathedral; another expressive testimonial of the spirit which had led the Pilgrims into the Transatlantic wilderness, and which, wherever they went, like Abraham in his journeyings, builded its altars to the Lord. Whether its church-going bell still woke the echoes of Cambridge, we have no record to tell us; though some time in the course of the year, as we

* Then Water Street; now called Dunster Street, after President Dunster, whose house, as it is believed to be, is still standing there, — the only surviving contemporary of the first church. The church stood on the west side of the street, near the place where it is intersected by Mount Auburn Street, and on the south side of that street, upon land at present owned by Dr. T. W. Harris, Librarian of the University. The spot is now vacant.

† So named by Captain John Smith, renowned for his bravery, enterprise, and romantic adventures, both in the Old World and the New; one of the first voyagers to New England (which also owes its name to him), who, by his writings and personal efforts, did more, perhaps, than any other single individual to direct the attention of men of character and property towards it, and to interest them in its early settlement. In his voyage hither, in 1614, he made a map of the coast, and called it New England. "But malicious minds," he says, "amongst Sailors and others, drowned that name with the echo of *Nesconcut*, *Canaday*, and *Pemquid*; till at my humble sute, our most gracious King *Charles*, then Prince of *Wales*, was pleased to confirme it by that title and did change the barbarous names of their principall Harbours and habitations for such English that posterity may say King *Charles* was their Godfather." In another place, he says, — "I tooke the fairest reach in this Bay for a river, whereupon I called it *Charles River*, after the name of our Royall King *Charles*." *Mass. Histor. Coll.*, 3d Series, Vol. III., pp. 30, 34. See also Hillard's *Life of Smith*, in *Sparks's Biography*, 1st Series, Vol. II.

learn from an incidental mention of the fact by one of our quaint New England historians* of that day, the dull, heavy sound of the beaten drum, converted for the time from the heathen service of battle and war into a herald of the assemblies of the Prince of Peace, announced the hour of gathering to the people. The little church was soon filled to overflowing. The day, perhaps, was one of the mild and bright days which February often mingles with its snows and storms; and even if it were not, our hardy sires who had left their pleasant homes in Old England for the "stern and rockbound coast" of the New, who had deliberately exchanged their dear native soil for the uncertainties and discomforts of a colony in a heathen and savage land, who had traversed the wide, weltering sea for the privilege of worshipping God in purity and freedom, — men who made their religion the sun and centre of their being, — were not to be daunted by a little cold or a little damp in the performance of its duties; and though our modern safeguards against snow and wet were unknown to their pilgrim feet, though neither stove nor furnace — those innovations of modern church-comfort — softened the chilly air, or dissolved the curling breaths that rose thickly upward in the sanctuary, they never thought of complaining, much less of staying at home. And as for distance from church, miles to them seemed little more than as many furlongs now to their descendants.

* Johnson, in his *Wonder-working Providence*, Chap. XLIII., speaks of a drum as being used here in 1636 "to call men to meeting."

"I have heard," says Cotton Mather, in his biography of John Norton, the highly esteemed successor of Cotton in the ministry of the First Church in Boston, "I have heard of a godly man in Ipswich, who, after Mr. Norton's going to Boston, would ordinarily travel on foot from Ipswich to Boston, which is about thirty miles, for nothing but the weekly lecture there; and he would profess that it was worth a great journey to be partaker in one of Mr. Norton's prayers." Thirty miles on foot to hear a Thursday lecture! And now I will venture to say that half of our people, even in the very neighbourhood of the metropolis, are ignorant that such a lecture still exists; — have never heard of it, or, if they have, have forgotten it, — and that nineteen twentieths of them have never attended it in their lives. It has become what the present successor of Cotton and Norton has so aptly called it, "the shade of the past." Such are the changes which take place from generation to generation. I do not imagine, however, that such instances as that which Mather has reported were at all common. But it is an indication of the state of feeling and of society among our ancestors, of which this was but an exaggerated specimen. They loved the house of God. They prized its privileges. They were religiously jealous of its honor; and nothing would have more shocked the devout public opinion of that day than absence without good cause from their Sabbath assemblies. It would have been death to a man's character and influence among them.

Attendance upon public worship, however, was with them a matter not only of fashion and decorum, sometimes enforced by civil authority, but of individual conscience and inclination. They hungered and thirsted after religious instruction. They sat patiently through services which to their descendants of this day would seem of insufferable length. They looked up to the pulpit, then at the height of its glory and influence, for their weekly supply of thought and spiritual nutriment. Preaching was to them a necessary of life. The various causes which in after generations have contributed to lower its authority, and to render it less exclusively the source of moral and religious instruction, had not yet begun to operate. The Congregational clergy — “the Elders,” as they were called — were in fact the rulers as well as teachers of the young Christian commonwealth. In all important questions of a civil, as well as of a religious nature, they were formally consulted, and their opinion had great weight. “In early times they were generally present in the courts.” A discourse at the Thursday lecture or at a public fast, by Mr. Cotton or Mr. Hooker, more than once settled a growing difficulty, or turned the scale in favor of some disputed measure. The people mingled with reverence for the men much of the old reverence for their office, and listened to their words with an attention and deference second only to that which is accorded by the Catholic to his priest. What the altered tastes and habits of thought of the present age would hardly tolerate, they listened to not