

**THE HISTORY OF THE OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN
BOSTON: IN FOUR SERMONS, DELIVERED MAY
9 AND 16, 1830, BEING THE FIRST AND SECOND
SABBATHS AFTER THE COMPLETION OF A
CENTURY FROM THE FIRST OCCUPANCY OF
THE PRESENT MEETING HOUSE**

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The History of the Old South Church in Boston: In Four Sermons, Delivered May 9 and 16, 1830, Being the First and Second Sabbaths after the Completion of a Century from the First Occupancy of the Present Meeting House by Benjamin B. Wisner

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BENJAMIN B. WISNER

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THE

HISTORY

OF THE

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON,

IN FOUR SERMONS,

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AFTER THE

Completion of a Century

FROM THE

FIRST OCCUPANCY OF THE PRESENT MEETING HOUSE.

BY **BENJAMIN B. WISNER,**

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

BOSTON:

CROCKER & BREWSTER, 47, WASHINGTON STREET.

1830.

SERMON I.

HAGGAI ii, 3.

WHO IS LEFT AMONG YOU THAT SAW THIS HOUSE IN HER FIRST GLORY?

THE sabbaths of a century have been numbered, since the House in which we are assembled was first occupied for public worship. Religious services were attended in it for the first time on the 26th of April 1730; a century from which date, allowing for the difference of style,^a (1) was completed on the 7th of the present month.

Few are left among us who saw this House in its first glory.^b The edifice which preceded it as the place of religious worship of this society, was removed before any of its present members were born. Since the formation of this church, five generations have passed away. We must recur to the records left us by our fathers to learn, the history of the erection of this venerable edifice, the circumstances of the origin of this church, and the dealings of God with this religious society during the hundred and sixty years of its existence. Such a retrospect will, doubtless, be interesting to this congregation; it will be conformable to the general custom in the New England churches on occasions like the present, and it may be useful to us and our children.

The church now called the Old South Church in Boston, was the third Congregational church gathered in this town.^c

(a) The figures in Parenthesis refer to the notes at the end of the sermons.

(b) Some are still living who recollect its appearance before the changes made in 1775 and 1783, to be hereafter described.

(c) The First Baptist was the third church established in Boston: it was constituted May 20, 1665. See Historical Sketch of the First Baptist Church in Boston, in two discourses by the Rev. James M. Winchell.

Like too many other churches of Christ, it originated in bitter contentions among those who are bound, by their profession, as well as by the precept of heaven, to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The contentions referred to were not local, or of sudden production; but originated in the first ecclesiastical institutions of the country, and were spread through the whole of New England.

Our Puritan ancestors were, as a body, men of rare excellencies, of whom the world was not worthy. In their views of civil and religious liberty, they were far in advance of their age. But they had not discovered that radical principle of free institutions, the separation of church and state. These were as really, though in a radically different form, united in their early institutions, as in those from the tyrannical application of which they had fled in the mother country. (2) This was a material error; and led, in the very beginning, to the adoption of various regulations of pernicious tendency. Among those the most prominent was, "an order," made in 1631, at the second General Court held after the commencement of the colony of Massachusetts Bay, "that, for the time to come, none should be admitted to the freedom of the body politic, but such as were church members." And the tenure of the church membership, and of the enjoyment of any church privilege, was, at that time, that of the New Testament, viz. satisfactory evidence of regeneration.⁴ "This most extraordinary law," says Hutchinson, was in fact "continued in force until the dissolution of the" charter "government;" though it was "repealed in appearance after the restoration of king Charles the second."⁵ It occasioned discontent from the beginning; for there were, from the first settlement, a considerable number of persons not church members; who were, of course, excluded from all civil offices, and from having any voice in elections, and yet were subject to taxation and the various burdens of public service. (3) The number of these gradually increased, partly by emigration, but chiefly by the growing up of children of the first settlers who did not become church members. They soon began to complain of their unjust burdens and re-

(4) That this is the tenure prescribed by the Scriptures see proved in President Edwards' Inquiry concerning the qualifications requisite to Full Communion; Works, Vol. 4, New York, 1830. The position Edwards attempted to establish in this Inquiry was, "That none ought to be admitted to the communion and privileges of members of the visible church of Christ in complete standing, but such as are, in profession and in the eye of the church's Christian judgment, godly or gracious persons." The Rev. Messrs. Thomas Prins, John Webb, Thomas Fowcok, and Matier Byles, then ministers of Boston, in a preface to the Inquiry say, "The doctrine here maintained by our dear and reverend brother was brought over hither by the pious and judicious fathers of this country from the Puritans in England, and held by them and their successors in our churches above three score years without dissension."

(5) Hutchinson's History of Massachusetts, i. 26. Boston, 1764. After the repeal in 1684, "the minister was to certify that the candidates for freedom were of orthodox principles and of good lives and conversations." This requirement rendered the repeal rather in appearance than a reality.

restrictions. By a portion of them it was also felt to be a grievance, that they were denied access to the Lord's Supper and baptism for their children, which privileges they had enjoyed in the established and less scriptural churches of Europe.

At length, in 1646, the subjects of these restrictions, throughout the colony, made a vigorous effort to obtain relief.^f They petitioned the General Court, "that civil liberty and freedom might be forthwith granted to all truly English; and that all members of the Church of England or Scotland, not scandalous, might be admitted to the privileges of the churches of New England; or, if these civil and religious liberties were refused, that they might be freed from the heavy taxes imposed upon them, and from the impresses made of them or their children or servants in war:" adding, that, "if they failed of redress here, they should be under the necessity of making application to England, to the honorable houses of Parliament; who, they hoped, would take their sad condition into consideration." "The Court, and great part of the country, were much offended at this petition." The request was refused. The papers of those who had made it were seized, including the memorial they had prepared to send to England; and, upon their refusing to acknowledge their offence in using, as was alleged, "contemptuous and seditious expressions" in their petition, they "were fined, some in larger, some in lesser sums, two or three of the magistrates dissenting."^g

The aggrieved now took a different method to obtain redress;—or rather, new zeal for obtaining it was now applied in a direction in which an influence had been secretly working in their favor for some time. An opinion began to prevail, that all baptized persons, not scandalous in life and formally excommunicated, ought to be considered members of the church, in all respects except the right of partaking of the Lord's Supper, for which evidence of regeneration was still generally held to be a requisite qualification. (4) The proposal of so great an innovation on the principles and practices of the first settlers, as would be expected, was met by a decided opposition; and a contest arose, which occasioned great agitation in all the New England colonies, especially in Connecticut and Massachusetts. At length, in 1657, the Court of Massachusetts advised to a general Council; and sent letters to the other Courts signifying their opinion. The General Court of Connecticut acceded to the proposal, and appointed four delegates to the proposed Council.^h These, with delegates from Massachusetts, convened at

(f) Those similarly situated in the Plymouth colony made a like effort at the same time.

(g) See Hutchinson's History, i. 145—149.

(h) The New Haven colony formally refused, and remonstrated against the proposed Council.

Boston, in June, 1657. The questions submitted to this Council were seventeen in number,¹ most of them relating to baptism and church membership. On this subject their determination was, in substance, that all baptized persons ought to be considered members of the church, under its discipline; and to be admitted to all its privileges, except a participation of the communion. (5)

"The decisions of this Council," it is stated in the history of these proceedings, "do not appear to have had any influence to reconcile, but rather to inflame the churches. A number of ministers, and the churches pretty generally, viewed" their determination "as a great innovation, and entirely inconsistent with the principles on which the churches of New England were originally founded, and with the principles of Congregationalism."

In 1662, another and more efficient effort was made to put an end to these difficulties. "The General Court of Massachusetts appointed a Synod of all the ministers of that colony, to deliberate and decide on" two questions; of which the most deeply interesting was, "*Who are the subjects of baptism?*"^k This Synod met at Boston, in September, 1662. Though its members were all of Massachusetts, their proceedings affected the other colonies.

Their answer to the question concerning baptism, which, as they viewed it, involved that of church membership, "was substantially the same with that given by the Council in 1657." (6) They "were not unanimous, however: several learned and pious men protested against their determination relative to baptism. The Rev. Charles Chauncey president of Harvard College, Mr. Increase Mather "of Boston," Mr. Mather, of Northampton, and others, were warmly in the opposition." President Chauncey and Mr. Increase Mather published against the decision of the Synod,^l and so did the Rev. JOHN DAVENPORT, then minister of New Haven, whom the author of the *Magnalia* styles "the greatest of the anti synodists."^m

Nor could the churches agree in their practice; some being for receiving the determinations of the Synod, and others for rejecting them. There were great divisions and contentions in the *church of Boston* upon this head. The major part was for the Synod, and proceeded "to practice upon its recommendations;

(i) The questions proposed were seventeen; others were discussed, making the whole number twenty-one. The answers were afterwards printed in London, under the title of *A Disputation concerning church members and their children.*

(k) This, the author of the *Magnalia*, says, was "the grand question." The other was, "Whether, according to the word of God, there ought to be a consecration of churches?" The Synod's answer to this question was in the affirmative. The consecration of churches was adopted in Connecticut in 1706, but was never adopted in Massachusetts.

(l) Increase Mather afterwards changed his opinion, and published two treatises in favor of the result of the Synod.

(m) Book 5, p. 82. Respecting the citations and proceedings in relation to baptism and church membership, consult Trumbull's *Hist. of Connecticut*, l. 227-313. Hutchinson's *Hist. of Massachusetts*, l. 225, 224. Mather's *Magnalia*, Book 5, Part 3.

but a considerable number of the brethren were dissatisfied." ^a The minority were, however, restrained from any steps leading to a division, by the influence of their pastor, the Rev. John Wilson, who had been a member of the Synod, and acted with the majority. This venerated man died in 1667; and the church of Boston was left vacant for the first time.

"On the death of Mr. Wilson," says the historian of the First Church, "the church seem to have had no idea of supplying his place by a young man, or a man who had not been educated in England." ^b The only person at that time in the country in whom were united the qualifications they desired in a pastor, was Mr. Davenport of New Haven, then seventy years of age. ^c It was proposed to extend to him a call. This proposal, no doubt originated with those who were dissatisfied with the resolutions of the late Synod, and the consequent proceedings of the church. As was to have been expected, it met with a warm opposition. To settle Mr. Davenport, it was urged, would be virtually to declare against the decisions of the Synod, and reverse the consequent proceedings of the church. (7) The result however, was, that, the party which had been the minority in relation to the question about the Synod, became the majority; ^d and on the 24th of September, 1667, "the major part of the church by far," voted a call to Mr. Davenport, and appointed a committee to convey letters to him and to his church. ^e Mr. Davenport thought it his duty to accept this call, and soon removed to Boston.

The church in New Haven were extremely reluctant to part with their beloved pastor; and replied to the letter sent them that 'they saw no cause, nor call of God, to resign their reverend pastor to the church in Boston, by an immediate act of theirs, therefore, not by a formal dismission under their hands; yet, as he could not be persuaded to remain with them, they would not further oppose his removal.' This reply furnished additional occasion for dissatisfaction on the part of the opposition in the Boston church. The ruling elder communicated to the church only a part of the letter; that part, doubtless, which seemed most favorable to Mr. Davenport's removal. This was complained of as disingenuous; and the part communicated, it was contended, was not a regular dismission. All objections were, however, overruled by the majority; and Mr. Davenport was installed pastor over the Boston church. (8)

(a) Neale's History of New England, 1. 354, 355.

(b) P. 110.

(c) He was among the most eminent of the first ministers of New England.

(d) Cotton Mather says, "The church, for the supply of the vacancy upon the death of their former more synodical ministers, applying themselves unto Mr. John Davenport, the greatest of the antisyndicalists, the interests of the synod came to be laid aside therein on that occasion."

(e) Records of the First Church, p. 31.

The dissatisfied brethren, to the number of twenty eight, with one member of the church in Charlestown,* in all twenty-nine, including some of the most respectable persons in the colony, now proceeded to take measures to form themselves into a new church. With this view they made application for a dismission from the old church; which was refused. (9) They next called "a Council of other churches in the neighborhood;"[†] in conformity with whose advice they proceeded, at two meetings held at Charlestown on the 12th, and 16th of May,[‡] 1669, to organize themselves into a distinct church, under the denomination of "the Third Church in Boston;" adopting a covenant which, besides what is usual in such instruments, contained the following clause, which the subsequent history of the church has rendered worthy of particular notice, "And for the furtherance of this blessed fellowship with God in Christ and one with another—we do likewise promise to endeavor to establish among ourselves, and convey down to our posterity, all the holy truths and ordinances of the Gospel, committed to the churches, in faith and observance, opposing to the utmost of our church power whatsoever is diverse therefrom or contrary thereunto." (10)

About the same time seventeen ministers, (probably those who had composed the Council, which sanctioned the formation of the new church) publicly testified their disapprobation of the conduct of the majority of the old church.[§] To this testimony the old church published a reply. And a flame was kindled which spread through the colony. The dispute between the two churches ran "so high, that there was imprisoning of parties, and great disturbances."[¶] "Two parties," says Hutchinson,[‡] "were produced, not in the other churches only, but in the state also." And "the whole people of God throughout the colony," says the author of the *Magnalia*[‡] "were too much distinguished into such as favored the old church, and such as favored

(*) This was the Rev. Thomas Thatcher, whose dismission from the church in Charlestown is preserved among the papers of the Old South Church, is dated "15. 10. 69" i. e. 15th December, 1669.

(†) *Magnalia*, Book 5, p. 82. The "lesser part" of the First Church, "carefully and exactly following the advice of Councils fetched from other churches in the neighborhood, set up another church." This may imply that they had the advice and assistance of more than one council.

(‡) Being the 20th and 26th of May, N. S.

(§) Hutchinson (l. 270) gives the names of these ministers as follows. "John Allen, John Higginson, John Ward, John Wilson, Edmund Bowne, Samuel Whiting senr., Thomas Cobbet, John Sherman, Samuel Phillips, Thomas Shepard, Increase Mather, Samuel Torrey, Zachary Symmes, John Brocks, Edward Buckley, Samuel Whiting, Junior, John Hale:"—several of them among the most eminent ministers then in the colony, as will be seen by consulting Eliot's or Allen's Biographical Dictionary, or Farmer's Genealogical Register.

(¶) Letter from Edward Randolph to the Bishop of London, dated Boston May 29, 1669. "There was a great difference between the old church and the members of the new church about baptism and their members joining in full communion with either church. This was so high that there was imprisoning of parties and great disturbances." Hutchinson's Collection of original papers &c. p. 532. The imprisoning was, probably, of the members of the new church, for not attending the authorized worship and setting up a church assembly without permission from the magistrates.

(*) l. 270.

(†) Book 5, p. 83.