

## **A HISTORY OF THE BAPTISTS** **By Thomas Armitage**

### **THE AMERICAN BAPTISTS**

#### **I. THE COLONIAL PERIOD. PILGRIMS AND PURITANS**

The passage of the Mayflower over the Atlantic was long and rough. Often before its bosom had been torn by keels seeking the golden fleece for kings, but now the kings themselves were on board this frail craft, bringing the golden fleece with them; and the old deep had all that she could do to bear this load of royalty safely over. Stern as she was, the men borne on her waves were sterner. More than a new empire was intrusted to her care, a new freedom. 'What ailed thee, O sea?' When this historic ship came to her moorings, not unlike the vessel tossed on Galilee, she was freighted with principles, convictions, institutions and laws. These should first govern a quarter of the globe here, and then go back to the Old World to effect its regeneration and shape its future. THE PILGRIMS knew not that the King of all men was so signally with them in the bark, and would send them forth as the fishers of Gennesaret were sent, on an errand of revolution. In intellect, conscience and true soul-greatness, these quiet founders of a new nation were highly gifted, so that song and story will send their names down to the end of time on the bead-roll of fame. The monarchs of the earth have already raised their crowns in reverence to their greatness, and they are canonized in the moral forces which impelled and followed them.

Imperial bombast in James I had chuckled over this band of strong-souled ones. He 'had peppered them soundly,' as he loved to boast, and 'harried them' out of his land in the bitterness of their grief; but when their sturdy feet pressed Plymouth Rock they had a conscience void of offense toward Holland, England and God. An invisible hand had guided the helm of the Mayflower to a rock from which, in a wintry storm, a group of simple-hearted heroes, with bare heads, could proclaim a Church without a bishop and a State without a king. Next to their adoration of the Lord of Hosts, their great religious thought at that moment was English Separatism. This thought had bearings in embryo upon the future births of time, in the genesis of such truths as only mature in the throes of ages. The founders of Plymouth were not Puritans, or Non-conformists, but Separatists, who had paid a great price for their freedom, and had come from an independent congregation in Leyden. Their great germinal idea was deep-seated, for their love of liberty had been nourished with the blood of a suffering brotherhood. They ranked with the most advanced thinkers and lovers of the radical principles of their age, and yet, though they were honestly feeling their way to those principles in all their primal simplicity, they had not already attained to their full use. They intended to be as honest and as honorable as the skies above them. History has laid the charge of rigid sternness at their door, but they evidently established their new colony in love to God and man.

Fuller, Collier, and several other old writers show that the Brownists, from whom they sprang, caught their idea of absolute Church independency from the Dutch Baptists. Weingarten makes this strong statement: 'The perfect agreement between the views of Brown and those of the Baptists as far as the nature of a Church is concerned, is certainly proof enough that he borrowed this idea from them; though in his "True Declaration" of 1584 he did not deem it advisable to acknowledge the fact, lest he should receive in addition to all the opprobrious names heaped upon him, that of Anabaptist. In 1571 there were no less than 3,925 Dutchmen in Norwich.' Also Scheffer says: 'That Brown's new ideas concerning the nature of the Church opened to him in the circle of the Dutch Baptists in Norwich. Brandt, in his "Reformation in the Low Countries," shows that when Brown's Church was dissolved by dissensions at Middleburg, in the Netherlands, where the Baptists were very numerous, some of his people fell in with the Baptists.' And Johnson, pastor of the Separatist Church at Amsterdam, wrote, in 1606 that 'divers' of that Church who had been driven from England 'fell into the errors of the Anabaptists, which were too common in those countries.' Bishop Sanderson wrote, in 1681, that Whitgift and Hooker did 'long foresee and declare their fear that if Puritanism should prevail amongst us, it would soon draw in Anabaptism after it. . . .

These good men judged right; they only considered, as prudent men, that Anabaptism had its rise from the same principles the Puritans held, and its growth from the same courses they took, together with the natural tendency of their principles and practices toward it.' He then says that if the ground be taken that the Scriptures are the only rule so as 'nothing might lawfully be done without express warrant, either from some command or example therein contained, the clew thereof, if followed as far as it would lead, would certainly in time carry them as far as the Anabaptists were then gone.'

This clear-minded prelate perfectly understood the logical and legitimate result of Baptist principles, and this result the Plymouth men had readied on the question of Church independency, but they were still learners on the question of full liberty of conscience aside from the will of magistrates.

The permanent landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth began Dec. 20th, 1620 (O. S.), but on the 11th of November they had entered into a solemn 'compact,' thus: 'Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and the honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents, solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and officers, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.' For about a month after founding the settlement their government took something of the patriarchal form, with the governor, John Carver, as the head of the family. Soon seven assistants

were given to him, who in time became his council. In 1623 trial by jury was established in case of trespass between man and man, and of crime. Then laws were passed fixing the age of freemen at twenty-one years, provided, that they were sober, peaceful and orthodox in religion. To secure the last, membership in the Church was made a test of citizenship, and so they fell into the blunder of making their civil and ecclesiastical polity one, a strange combination of iron and clay, intended to be inexorable after the pattern of the ancient Hebrew Commonwealth, although that exact form of government had perished two thousand years before, and long before the Church of Christ with its spiritual laws existed.

They themselves had first tasted the sweets of civil and religious liberty in the Netherlands, under the advanced Christian idea of government for man as such. They had availed themselves of that liberty which Christian patriots, and amongst them the Dutch Baptists, had suffered so much to purchase; and yet they had failed to learn the primary lesson of full liberty of conscience in civil government, as the first right of each man in the State.

Their mistake was inexcusable on the popular plea that this idea was in advance of their age. But for that idea and its practical use they would not have founded Plymouth; for without its shield they could not have found an asylum in Holland, when they were driven from their own home in England. Their liberty in Holland, while; in fact, the greatest possible reality to them, was treated in Plymouth as a mere impractical ideal, when they came to found a 'civil body politic' of their own. And this is rendered the more remarkable from the fact, that they were placed under no chartered religious restriction themselves. When they applied to England for a charter in 1618, Sir John Worsingham asked: 'Who shall make your ministers?' Their representative ('S.B.') answered: 'The power of making [them] was in the Church, to be ordained by the imposition of hands, by the fittest instruments they have; it must be either in the Church or from the pope; and the pope is Anti-christ.' That point was waived, therefore, and Felt says that S.B. 'asked his worship what good news he had for me to write tomorrow' (to Robinson and Brewster). 'He told me good news, for both the king's majesty and the bishops have consented.' The patent which was given them was taken in the name of John Wincob, a Christian gentleman who intended to accompany them, but who failed to do so, hence they could not legally avail themselves of its benefits, and really came without a patent. The petulance of the king would give them none, and they left without his authority, saying: 'If there is a settled purpose to do us wrong, it is easy to break a seal, though it be as broad as a house floor.' Felt says again: 'The Pilgrims are aware that their invalid patent does not privilege them to be located so far north, and grants them "only the general leave of his majesty for the free exercise of the liberty of conscience in the public worship of God."'

In any case, therefore, with the patent or without it, they were left untrammelled in the exercise of their liberty of conscience, both as it 'regards the form of religion which any citizen might choose, and his right to citizenship without any order of

religion, after the Holland pattern. Under their own 'compact' then, they first formed a 'civil body politic,' and then a Church, the colony to be jointly governed by the officers of both. In some aspects of this union the State was rather absorbed into the Church than united to it, but the elders and magistrates were so united that together they enforced the duties both of the first and second tables of the Ten Commandments.

The elders did not always consult the civil functionary in Church matters, but the civil functionary did not act in important public affairs without consulting the elders.

THE PURITANS, who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1628, eight years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, were another people entirely. They had paid a less price for their religious freedom and were less tolerant in spirit; while in regard to the separation of the Church from the State they stood substantially with the Pilgrims. The Plymouth men had separated from the Church of England as a corrupt and fallen body, but the Puritans continued in communion with that Church, although they refused to conform to many of its practices and denounced them warmly; and hence were known as Non-conformists or Puritans. They believed firmly in the union of the Church and State as a political necessity, while the Pilgrims believed in it as a spiritual necessity, and in turn they were denounced by the Puritans as 'schismatics.' While the men of Massachusetts Bay were on shipboard, they sent an address to their friends in England calling the Established Church there their 'dear mother,' from whose bosom they had 'sucked' the hope of salvation. When the Atlantic stretched between them, however, they organized Congregational Churches and established them by law, limiting political suffrage to membership therein, obliging all citizens to pay for their support, coercing all into conformity therewith, forbidding all dissenting Churches, and enforcing these prohibitions and requirements by penalties of disfranchisement, fine, imprisonment, scourging and banishment, the same as in cases of civil crime. All is substantially summed up in this decree, passed May 18, 1631, by the general court: 'No man shall be admitted to the body politic but such as are members of some of the Churches within the limits of the same,' that is, the Colony. The Puritans having equal aversion to the Separatists of Leyden and to the assumptions of the Church of England, they aimed at working out a third way; but when they came to put their theory into practice the logic of events brought them to substantially the Plymouth position, and as the two colonies came to know each other, their prejudices and misunderstandings almost vanished. The agreement, however, between the men of the 'Bay' and those of 'Plymouth' concerning the constitution and polity of a Church was never perfect. The Plymouth Church order, at first, contained a trace of aristocracy in the ruling eldership, but this only continued during the lives of three men: Brewster, chosen in 1609; Cushman, in 1649; and Faunce, 1657.

After that the vital hold of the eldership was broken, the constant tendency being toward a pure democracy, giving to every member an equal voice. The 'Bay' Churches, on the contrary, gravitated toward what was called Barrowism, which placed Church power in the hands of the elders. But in 1648 the Cambridge

platform gave the elders 'the power of office,' defined to be the right of ruling and directing the Church. After that the eldership became the ruling power in the Churches of New England, although this aristocratic tendency was less hearty in the Plymouth colony. The leaders in the Churches generally were from the higher walks of life, and were not prepared to admit the principle of a pure democracy in Church or State. They stood with Milton, Locke and Lightfoot in intelligence and literature, with Cromwell, Hampden and Pym in statesmanship. It is computed that the 21,000 persons who came into New England between 1630-40 brought with them \$500,000--\$2,500,000, which, reckoning money as worth then six times more than it is today, they brought property to the value of \$15,000,000, and with this all the conservatism which wealth implied in those days. The most of this money was brought by the Puritans, as the Pilgrims were very poor. So long as the 'body politic' was one with the Church, their joint polity must be more rigorous and concentrated than the democratic form allowed, and so in a very short time proscription, bigotry and intolerance asserted themselves bravely. Bishop Peck, an admirer of the Puritans, who is ready to excuse their faults whenever he can, is compelled to say: 'It is both curious and lamentable to see the extreme spirit of Protestantism reaching the very proscriptive bigotry of Romanism, and the brave assertion of Puritan rights resulting in the bitter persecuting intolerance of prelacy; and yet historical fidelity compels the admission. We must confess, however reluctantly, that the spirit of proscription and intolerance in New England is exactly identical with the same spirit which we found in Virginia.'

Still it is a pure mockery of historical truth, and an unjust reflection upon the Puritans themselves, to put in the special plea of modern discovery that the Massachusetts Bay Company was a mere business company, a body of 'mercenary adventurers,' as their worst enemies loved to brand them. The charter which they first received of James, and which Charles enlarged, made them a 'body politic,' so far as a colony could be, under which they both asserted and exercised the right of self-government in home affairs for more than half a century. Their charter endowed them with power to make laws, to choose civil officers, to administer allegiance to new citizens, to exact oaths, to support military officers from the public treasury, and to make defensive war, all independent of the crown. Nay, they made some offences capital, which were not capital in England. So thoroughly did they understand these rights and determine to defend them, that in 1634, when England appointed the archbishops and ten members of the Privy Council, with power to call in all patents of the plantations, to make laws, raise tithes for ministers, to remove governors, and inflict punishment even to death, Massachusetts Bay flew to arms, and rightly; too, as a Commonwealth, and not as a business corporation. All the pastors were convened with the civil officers of the colony to answer the question: 'What we ought to do if a general governor shall be sent out of England?' Their unanimous answer was: 'We ought not to accept him, but defend our lawful possessions, if we are able; otherwise to avoid or protract.' And with the spirit, not of traders and mercenaries, but of patriots, they begun to collect arms and ammunition, to drill and discipline their men, and to fortify Castle Island, Charlestown and Dorchester Heights. The General Court forbade the

circulation of farthings, made bullets a legal tender for a farthing each, appointed a military commission, established a strict military discipline, and erected a beacon on 'Beacon Hill,' to alarm the country in case of English invasion. More than this, the Military Commission was empowered 'to do whatever may be further behooveful for the good of this plantation, in case of any war that may befall us.' They also required every male resident of sixteen years and over to take the 'Freeman's Oath,' and intrusted the Commission with the power of the death penalty. A facetious writer may be allowed to say that the Puritans came to this country 'to worship God according to their own consciences, and to prevent other people from worshipping him according to theirs,' and we can pardon his playful way of putting this matter. But it is unpardonable in a grave historian to impose upon his readers, by belittling these grand men, and underrating their virtues by ranking them with those who came here in search of religious liberty for themselves alone. To say that they looked upon their charter only as the title-deed of a grasping community holding their possessions by right of fee simple rather than as their only country which they had sworn to protect, is to do them the grossest wrong. They came for another purpose, of the highest and holiest order that liberty and the love of God could inspire. They sought this land not only as an asylum where they could be free themselves, but as a home for the oppressed who were strangers to them, else why did they enfranchise all refugees who took the oath and make them freemen, too? According to Felt, Styles, and many others, they founded a Christian 'State.'

President Styles well said, in 1783: 'It is certain that civil dominion was but the second motive, religion the primary one, with our ancestors in coming hither and settling this land.

It was not so much their design to establish religion for the benefit of the State, as civil government for the benefit of religion, and as subservient, and even necessary, for the peaceable enjoyment and unmolested exercise of religion--of that religion for which they fled to these ends of the earth.' Their charter under Charles left them on the basis pointed out by Matthew Cradock, governor of the company; July 28th, 1629, namely, with 'the transfer of the government of the plantation to those who shall inhabit there.' as well as with liberty of conscience, so that they could be as liberal as they pleased in religious matters. They neither were nor could be chartered as a purely civil nor as a purely spiritual body, but all that related to the rights of man, body and soul, was claimed and enjoyed by them under their charter.

John Cotton understood that the colony possessed all the rights of a 'body politic,' with its attendant responsibilities. In his reply to Williams, he says: 'By the patent certain select men, as magistrates and freemen, have power to make laws, and the magistrates to execute justice and judgment amongst the people according to such laws. By the patent we have power to erect such a government of the Church as is most agreeable to the word, to the estate of the people, and to the gaining of natives, in God's time, first to civility, and then to Christianity. To this authority

established by this patent. Englishmen do readily submit themselves; and foreign plantations, the French, the Dutch, the Swedish, do willingly transact their negotiations with us, as with a colony established by the royal authority of the State of England.' No fault, therefore, is to be found with the Massachusetts Bay authorities for the punishment of civil and political offenders, even with banishment and death, as in the case of Frost, who was banished for crime in 1632, under the sentence: 'He shall be put to death,' if he returned. In 1633 the same thing was repeated in the case of Stone, this Commonwealth assuming the highest prerogative that any civil power can claim, that over life and death. Twenty distinct cases of banishment from the colony are on record within the first seven years of its settlement, fourteen of them occurring within the first year.

Their wrong lay not in these and similar acts for criminal and political causes, but in that they punished men for religious opinions and practices; under the plea, that to hold and express such opinions was a political offense by their laws, although the charter made no such demand of them; but permitted them, had they chosen, to extend equal religious rights to all the Christian colonists, with those which they exercised themselves. The simple fact is, that they wielded the old justification of persecution used by all persecutors from the days of Jesus down: 'We have a law, and by our law he ought to die,' without once stopping to ask by what right we have such a law. With all their high aims and personal goodness, they repeated the old blunder of law-makers, that those who were not one with them in religious faith should not exercise the rights of men in the body politic, because they must be and were its enemies. There can be but little doubt that with all their high aspirations after civil and religious liberty, the late Dr. Geo. E. Ellis, of Boston, stated then case with what Dr. Dexter pronounces 'admirable accuracy,' thus: 'To assume, as some carelessly do, that when Roger Williams and others asserted the right and safety of liberty of conscience, they announced a novelty that was alarming, because it was a novelty, to the authorities of Massachusetts, is a great error. Our fathers were fully informed as to what it was, what it meant; and they were familiar with such results as it wrought in their day.

They knew it well, and what must come of it; and they did not like it; rather they feared and hated it. They did not mean to live where it was indulged; and in the full exercise of their intelligence and prudence, they resolved not to tolerate it among them. They identified freedom of conscience only with the objectionable and mischievous results which came of it. They might have met all around them in England, in city and country, all sorts of wild, crude, extravagant and fanatical spirits. They had reason to fear that many whimsical and factious persons would come over hither, expecting to find an unsettled state of things, in which they would have the freest range for their eccentricities. They were prepared to stand on the defensive.'

This frank and manly statement of the case is truly historical, because it tells the exact truth; although, perhaps, it never occurred to the men of the Bay, that Elizabeth and James had ranked them and their Plymouth brethren with the 'wild,

crude, extravagant and fanatical spirits' of their realm. Spencer, Bishop of Norwich, had boasted that he would drive every Lollard out of his diocese, or 'Make them hop headless, or fry a fagot;" and what better had the Puritans been treated in English 'city and country?' The barbarous cruelties which had failed to reduce their consciences to submission should have suggested to them at least, as incurables themselves, that it might not be their special and bounden duty as magistrates, to crush out all eccentric religionists who happened to be 'crude,' 'extravagant' and fanatical,' as enemies of good civil government. Whether they were justified in so treating those who asserted the right and safety of liberty of conscience, is hardly an open question now. So far as appears, the first resistance made to the politico-religious law of the colony came from two brothers, John and Samuel Brown, members of the Church of England. In 1629 they set up worship in Salem according to the book of Common Prayer, alleging that the governor and ministers were already 'Separatists, and would be Anabaptists.' Upon the complaint of the ministers and by the authority of the governor they were sent back to England. Endicott says that their conduct in the matter engendered faction and mutiny. The ministers declared that they had 'come away from the Common Prayer and ceremonies,' and 'neither could nor would use them, because they judged the imposition of these things to be sinful corruptions in the worship of God.' The first false step of the Puritans of the Bay compelled them to take the second or retreat; but they now proceeded to narrow all admittance into the Commonwealth by the test of religious belief, a step which opened a struggle for liberty of conscience, lasting for more than two hundred years in Massachusetts.

This statement of the civil and religious status of the two colonies of Plymouth and the Bay seems necessary to a proper understanding of the state of things under which Roger Williams, the great apostle of religious liberty, opened the contest, which compelled these great and good men to take that last step, which now protects every man's conscience in America.

The chosen teacher who was to show these two bands 'the way of the Lord more perfectly,' as usual, at the cost of great suffering, was now brought unexpectedly to their doors. The old record says: 'The ship Lyon, Mr. William Pierce master, arrived at Nantasket; she brought Mr. Williams, a godly minister, with his wife, Mr. Throgmorton, and others with their wives and children, about twenty passengers, and about two hundred tons of goods.'