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MR. ALBRO'S DISCOURSE

ON THE

FATHERS OF NEW ENGLAND.

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THE FATHERS OF NEW ENGLAND.

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED AT CAMBRIDGE,

DECEMBER 22, 1844.

BY JOHN A. ALBRO,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN CONNECTION WITH
THE SHEPARD SOCIETY.



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CAMBRIDGE, December, 1844.

REV. JOHN A. ALBRO,

Dear Sir, — Having listened with much pleasure to your Discourse on the 22d instant, and esteeming it an honorable tribute to the memory and character of our Pilgrim Fathers, and believing the dissemination of its principles important, we respectfully request that you will allow it to be published.

Your obedient servants,

CHARLES C. LITTLE,
ZELOTES HOSMER,
JACOB H. BATES,
CHARLES W. HOMER,
WILLIAM SAUNDERS.
ASA GRAY.

GENTLEMEN,

The Discourse, which you do me the honor to think may be useful to the public, is at your service; and I commit it to the press with the prayer that He who conducted the Pilgrims to these shores, and sustained them in their labors, may make it instrumental in advancing the work which they made so many sacrifices to commence in New England.

Yours, very respectfully,

JOHN A. ALBRO.

Messrs. C. C. Little, Zelotes Hosmer, J. H. Bates, }
Charles W. Homer, Wm. Saunders, Asa Gray. }

DISCOURSE.

PSALM XLIV. 1—3.

WE HAVE HEARD WITH OUR EARS, O GOD, OUR FATHERS HAVE TOLD US, WHAT WORK THOU DIDST IN THEIR DAYS, IN THE TIMES OF OLD. HOW THOU DIDST DRIVE OUT THE HEATHEN WITH THY HAND, AND PLANTEDST THEM; HOW THOU DIDST AFFLICT THE PEOPLE, AND CAST THEM OUT. FOR THEY GOT NOT THE LAND IN POSSESSION BY THEIR OWN SWORD, NEITHER DID THEIR OWN ARM SAVE THEM; BUT THY RIGHT HAND, AND THINE ARM, AND THE LIGHT OF THY COUNTENANCE, BECAUSE THOU HADST A FAVOR UNTO THEM.

JUST two hundred and twenty-four years ago this day, a ship's company, consisting of about one hundred persons, landed upon these shores, then inhabited only by wandering savages, and commenced the first permanent, civilized settlement in this part of the world. They were soon followed by other and larger companies of similar character, driven from their native country by the same causes, and having in view the same great object. These colonists, among whom the names of Bradford, Winslow, Brewster, Carver, Winthrop, Endicot, Cotton and Shepard, appear conspicuous, were the political and religious fathers of New England.

It is natural that we, who have entered into their labors, and enjoy the fruits of their toil and self-denial, should wish to know something respecting their character, and to understand the great object

of their sacrifices. Nay, it is the solemn duty of all who call themselves by the name of Puritan, to study the history of their fathers with an enlightened zeal. It has been too much the fashion in New England, to represent the Pilgrims in a contemptible or ridiculous light, and to speak of our institutions, both religious and political, as accidental results of ignorance, superstition, and fanaticism. But this is as ungrateful as it is absurd. We ought to know better ; and the time is not far distant when public opinion and feeling will be greatly changed in relation to those men. As new dangers threaten our beloved New England, and principles and practices subversive of our privileges are openly advocated and embraced, we shall instinctively turn to the wisdom of the past, and examine with increasing interest the grounds upon which our liberties and hopes rest ; and all sober, intelligent and thoughtful men, whatever may be their religious opinions or ecclesiastical relations, will see in the Pilgrims, not greedy adventurers nor bewildered fanatics, but men chosen of God, and wonderfully fitted both intellectually and morally for the arduous work of laying the foundation of a great, free, and powerful commonwealth, — men who deserve to be held in everlasting remembrance, and honored at each returning anniversary by the praises of a grateful posterity.

It will not be unsuitable or unprofitable for us to dwell for a few moments this morning upon the character, and principles of those from whom we have received this fair inheritance ; not merely for the sake of celebrating the praises of men, however good or great, but of commemorating the work which

God wrought in their days, and by their agency, and of awakening our gratitude to Him from whom cometh every good and perfect gift.

Our Pilgrim Fathers were Englishmen, and members, originally, of the church of England. They separated from the church in which they were born and educated, abandoned their pleasant homes, and came to this wilderness, not merely to escape from the oppression to which they were subject on account of non-conformity to the requirements of a religious system which they believed to be inconsistent with the purity, freedom, and simplicity of the Gospel; but to erect the tabernacle of God among the heathen, according to the pattern shown them in the mount; to build around the altar and church of God a religious commonwealth which should be governed, not by the blind and capricious will of man, but by the law of Christ; and to propagate the Gospel among the aborigines of this continent, which had never before been visited by the day-spring from on high. Let them be the expositors of their own principles and designs. "We are thankfully to acknowledge," says Gov. Bradford, "the great work of God in the reformation made in our dear native land; in which the tyranny and power of the pope was cast off, and the purity of doctrine in the chief foundations of religion restored: and though she fell short, in some things, of other reformed churches, especially in government, yet not in the truth and power of godliness, but rather to exceed these in such as the Lord raised up and enlightened among them. But herein was the great defect, that this lordly hierarchy was con-

tinued after the pope was cut off, in the same callings and offices, and ruled (in a manner) by the same laws, and had the same power and jurisdiction over the whole nation, without any distinction ; all being compelled, as members of this national church, to submit to the form of worship established, and this government set over them far differing from the liberty of the Gospel and the practice of other reformed churches, who admitted only such into the church, and to partake of the holy things, as manifested repentance, and made public confession of their faith, according to the Scriptures ; and had such a ministry set over them as themselves liked and approved of.*

This, not only our fathers, but many in the church, as Ridley, a bishop and a martyr, complained of. And “ finding the pious ministers urged with subscription, or silenced, and the people greatly vexed with the commissary courts, apparitors and pursuivants, which they bare sundry years with much patience, till they were led by the continuance and increase of these troubles and other means, to search and see further into these things through the light of God’s word ;—how that not only the ceremonies were unlawful, but also the lordly and tyrannical power of the prelates, who contrary to the freedom of the Gospel would load the consciences of men, and by their compulsive power make a profane mixture of divine worship ;—that their offices, courts and canons, were unlawful, being such as have no warrant in the word of God, but were the same which were used in popery and still retained. Upon which

* Bradford’s History of Massachusetts. App. p. 430.

these people shake off this yoke of antichristian bondage, and, as the Lord's free people, join themselves by covenant into a church state, to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavors, whatever it might cost them."*

But their design, as has been said, was not merely to find a spot where they and their posterity might enjoy freedom from what they considered ecclesiastical tyranny; they desired to extend the boundaries of Zion; to make Christ known to the heathen; and to impart to the natives of this country the blessings of a pure Christianity in exchange for the asylum which they sought for themselves. To use their own language, "They hoped the honor of God, of their king and country would be advanced by this settlement without injury to the native inhabitants: they intended to take nothing but what the Indians were willing to dispose of; not to interfere with them except for the maintenance of peace among them, and the propagation of Christianity."

This noble design they attempted to realize by planting CONGREGATIONALISM, which was at once church and state, — a Christian commonwealth, — a church exercising so much temporal power as was necessary to its preservation and perpetuity, — and a state modeled upon the idea, and deriving all its vitality and all its sanctions from the spiritual life of the church. If they erred in thus uniting, or rather identifying the church and state, their descendants and successors have corrected their mistake by separating

* Bradford's History of Massachusetts. App. p. 429.

these two things widely enough. But the church which they here planted, and the political organization which they framed in accordance with their religious ideas, both survive the lapse of time and the changes of the world, and make us acquainted with their view of a free commonwealth, and a truly spiritual church.

Of their political work I do not intend to speak. Respecting the ecclesiastical system which they adopted, a few words will suffice. Congregationalism, — the Congregationalism of our fathers, I mean, — rests professedly, not partly upon the Bible and partly upon the devices of men, like the angel of the apocalypse, who stood with one foot upon the land and the other upon the sea, but directly and solely upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. It recognizes the Redeemer, who gave himself that he might sanctify and cleanse the church by his own blood, and that he might present it unto himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, as the only head, and source of all authority. It calls the ministers of Christ brethren, and forbids them in the name of HIM who is the MASTER of us all, to claim any authority or official preëminence over each other. It secures to the churches the right to elect those who are to rule over them in the Lord; to maintain their own discipline and order; and to seek their own edification and religious welfare in the way pointed out by the word of God. It elevates the Bible above the wisdom of man, and makes all the members, from the least to the greatest, amenable to one tribunal, and responsible to one Lawgiver. It aims to give free

scope to individual piety, without encouraging pride of gifts, and calls into exercise the talents of all for the promotion of the common cause. It guarantees the right of private judgment in matters pertaining to the soul's salvation, — encouraging men to think freely, to act conscientiously, to search the Scriptures carefully, — and sets no limit to the development of Christian character. It presents a plain, scriptural Creed, which all who truly believe the Bible, and look to Christ alone for redemption, can assent to, and a form of government and of worship at once simple, conformable to the spirit of the Gospel, and obviously conducive to personal freedom, edification, and spiritual enjoyment,* It exalts the spiritual above the formal, without denying the use of decent forms; inward worship above external rites; obedience to the law of Christ above conformity to man's devices; and God's truth above all the learning and philosophy of the world. It preaches to all men repentance towards God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as an atoning Saviour, as the great conditions of eternal life; and when it has secured these, it exhorts its converts to worship and serve God according to the dictates of a conscience purged from dead works, and enlightened by the Holy Ghost. It has ever been a powerful ally of civil freedom, intelligence, general education, and true progress. It has infused something of its free spirit into denominations that reject its doctrines, and condemn its order; and those who would limit its influence are often warmed and animated by its fire. It is the

* See Cambridge Platform, 1648, and Confession of faith, 1680.

nursing queen of missions; and in the name of her divine Lord, calls upon all her children to aid in preaching the Gospel to every creature.

Such, briefly, is the ecclesiastical system which the Pilgrims came to this wilderness to establish. And by the grace of God they accomplished their purpose. The congregational churches, founded by the Fathers, have been the glory of the land, the best expositors of religious rights and duties, and the gate of heaven to innumerable heavy laden sinners. And if the time shall ever come when Congregationalism shall be deprived of its strength, and driven from its place among the institutions of our country, a great light will be extinguished, and even those most hostile to it will have reason to mourn.

What, then, was the moral, and religious character of those who conceived and executed a design so vast and so beneficial? None who read the early history of New England can fail to see that the Pilgrim Fathers were extraordinary men; that, viewed as the founders of a church and state, every thing about them bore the stamp of greatness; that they had an energy, boldness, decision, steadfastness of purpose, and clearness of vision, which place them among the world's greatest men and best benefactors.

But the most prominent and shining characteristic of those men was a deep, pure, and vigorous piety. They were eminently holy men. They walked by faith, and not by sight; and under the severest labor, the most disheartening trials, the most cruel sufferings, endured as seeing him who is invisible. They reposed unwavering confidence in God and in the cause which they had espoused. Amidst all the

hardships to which they were continually exposed, — the terrors of famine, the rigor of a New England winter without comfortable dwellings, the wasting sickness which once threatened the very existence of the infant colony, the unprecedented labors and discouragements which they encountered at every step, — they never desponded, and never murmured. They never expressed regret that they had undertaken to rear the tabernacle of God among the savages of the wilderness, nor breathed a wish, like the Israelites of old, to go back to the country from whence they came out. “We are well weaned,” said they, “from the delicate milk of our mother country, and inured to the difficulties of a strange land. We are knit together in a strict sacred bond, to take care of the good of each other and of the whole. It is not with us as with other men, whom small things can discourage, or small discontents cause to wish themselves at home again.” They never doubted that the cause they had undertaken, would prosper in the end, or that God would glorify himself by the permanent establishment of Christianity in this new world. When they were brought apparently to the brink of destruction, and nothing appeared to the eye of sense but a speedy annihilation of all their hopes; when He in whom they had trusted, and for whose glory they had made these immense sacrifices, seemed to frown upon their enterprise, and to disown both them and their work; they never rebelled against his providence, nor questioned his love. Oppressed, afflicted, cast out from the world’s favor and protection, forsaken of man, and apparently of God also for a season, shut in by the merciless sea, and the savage

wilderness, they prayed and sang as aforetime ; and in their deepest distress exclaimed with the clear vision and earnest faith of the Prophet, “ Although the figtree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines ; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat ; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls ; yet we will rejoice in the Lord, we will joy in the God of our salvation.” Truly we may say of them as the apostle speaks of the elders and persecuted saints of old, of whom the world was not worthy, that theirs was a faith which subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire.

The great end of all their labor and sacrifices, was not, as we have seen, personal aggrandisement, but the glory of God. The settlement of New England was designed to secure a place where they and their children might live according to the divine commandments, and where they might be instrumental in extending the knowlege of salvation. This is evident from all that they did. Their government, laws, literary institutions, even the soil from which they gained their daily bread, were consecrated to Christ and the Church. Pure and undefiled religion was all in all with them. For this they went out, like Abraham, from their father’s house, not knowing whither they went ; for this they cheerfully endured all the privations and hardships of the wilderness ; for this they sacrificed every thing dear to them in this life ; for this they labored, and were at any moment ready to die.

They revered the Bible. Probably there never

was a community of professing Christians who bowed with such profound, cheerful, and enlightened submission to the revealed will of God. Their faith in its doctrines was mingled with no doubt or misgiving. Their obedience to its requirements was checked by no fear of consequences. They loved to meditate upon its doctrines and promises. It was infinitely more dear to them than any earthly good. In their wanderings it was their cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. In their afflictions it was their comforter. Its light shone like the shekinah in their temples. Their laws were framed upon its legislation. Its spirit hallowed their affections and their motives. Its wisdom prompted and sanctioned all their works. They left it as the most precious legacy to their children. And to their constant, prayerful, and systematic study of the divine oracles we must ascribe that clear sightedness, that profound wisdom, that lofty patriotism, and that perseverance in well doing, which so preëminently distinguished them.

They regarded the Sabbath as a divine Institution. One reason assigned by the Plymouth colony for their leaving Holland, where they had been kindly received, and where they might have remained, was, we are told, that their children might not be led to adopt the lax notions which prevailed there, even among Christians, in regard to the keeping of the Sabbath. They commenced their great work in this country with the deep conviction that the religion, the morals, and the temporal prosperity of the commonwealth were intimately connected with the right observance of this day. They declared in their laws that the violation of the fourth commandment by a community tends to

the dishonor of God, and to the reproach of religion, renders divine ordinances unprofitable, destroys the power of godliness, is the source of all profaneness and irreligion, and brings down the judgments of God upon the land. And their practice was consistent with their principles. They remembered the Sabbath day to keep it holy. They did every thing in their power to secure a strict observance of it by their children and the population in general. They required by law that the Sabbath should be kept, outwardly at least, by abstinence from all servile labor, unnecessary travelling, and vain recreation; and that all persons should attend public worship on the Lord's day, unless prevented by some reasonable cause. *

For this they have been blamed by some in modern times. A generation has come upon the stage who are disposed to undo all that the Fathers did upon this subject. For many years there has been a growing disregard of the Sabbath. Business and pleasure are allowed to disturb its quiet, to the scandal of religion, and the grief of all Christians. And to fill up the measure of our folly, conventions are held, and newspapers established, and lecturers employed to convince the community that the fourth commandment was never binding upon us, and that to follow the example of the Pilgrims is absurd and oppressive. I wonder what they would have thought of such a meeting as was held not a great while ago in the city of Boston, with reference to the claims of this sacred day. In their gloomiest moments, I am sure, they never dreamed that men claiming this as their native

* General Laws, pp. 132, 133.

land, and calling themselves Christian reformers, would endeavor to destroy an institution which they deemed so essential to our temporal as well as spiritual prosperity. What say you, my hearers, were the Fathers right or wrong upon this subject? Shall we follow their example, or join with those who would blot out the Sabbath, and destroy all the privileges and blessings connected with it.

They highly valued the ordinances of the gospel. They landed upon these shores as a church of Christ; and their main object was to enjoy without molestation the preaching of the word, and the administration of the sacraments, according to their understanding of the Divine will. And as they prosecuted their design of founding here a religious commonwealth, they adopted it as a principle, never to commence a settlement without a pastor to preach the Gospel, and to break unto them the bread of life. One of their first works, after fixing upon the site of a town, was to build a house for the worship of God. Poor and feeble as they were, they seem never to have been too poor or too feeble to find out a place for the Lord,—a habitation for the mighty God of Jacob. The towns in New England, generally, for more than a hundred years after the landing of the Pilgrims, did not average over forty families when they built their first house of worship, and began to enjoy the stated ministrations of the Gospel: and there are accounts of “raisings,” as they are termed, where all the inhabitants of the town could sit together upon the sills of the house. How deeply must they have loved the sanctuary to be inclined to make such efforts and sac-

rifices, as in their weakness and poverty they must have done, in order to enjoy its privileges.

They were men of much prayer, and communion with God. The greatness of their work and of their trials taught them the value of a throne of grace; and they gathered about it, not to perform a ceremony, or to fulfil a duty, but to ask for the strength they needed in their perils and their sufferings. Perhaps there never was a people who sought so constantly, so fervently, so perseveringly, the Divine blessing upon their work. They undertook nothing either of a public or private nature without solemn prayer. They baptized their whole life with the spirit of supplication. It was this that imparted fortitude and courage to their hearts. It was this that bore them triumphantly through their hardships. It was this that gave to their religious character that firmness and transparency which rendered it so remarkable. It was this that crowned their work with success. We may safely say that no company of prayerless men, ever exhibited the character, or performed the works, or enjoyed the Divine peace, that distinguished our Fathers.

They were men of profound wisdom, prudence, and foresight. Many are accustomed to speak of the Pilgrims as people, whose views were bounded by a thorny and unintelligible creed, and whose affections were confined within the limits of a small and peculiar sect. Piety was, doubtless, their most prominent and beautiful characteristic; and they labored with singular devotion for the prosperity of the church, and the diffusion of their religious views. But they were not merely pious and narrow-minded theologians.

Many of them were great men, even in the sense in which that phrase is used by the world. They possessed all the elements of a sublime and illustrious character. They were men of highly cultivated minds. They had much knowledge of the world. Their plans were conceived and executed with great wisdom and prudence. They were far in advance of their age in sound political knowledge. They were public spirited men; who lived not to themselves, but for a remote posterity. England at that time had not many better men, and it would be a grievous wrong to their memory to compare them with the founders of Greece or Rome. That we do not estimate their intellectual character extravagantly, is evident from their works, — from what they accomplished. They have left their image and superscription upon all that we see around us. Here is a desert turned into a fruitful field. Here are institutions, religious, political, and literary, which are adapted to secure and perpetuate the most precious rights of man; — institutions, which, with the light and experience of two centuries we have not changed materially, except for the worse. When did feeble and narrow-minded men ever conceive and execute a work like this? “Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Wherefore by their fruits we may know them.”

That the Pilgrim Fathers understood the importance of general education in relation to the virtue, freedom, and happiness of society, is evident from their early and unwearied efforts to diffuse among the people a sound and healthful literature. The schoolmaster held, in their estimation, a place next the gospel minister; and the school-house, in their settlements, rose

fast by the house of God. To them we owe that system of common school education which extends the benefits of knowledge to all classes, and to every man's door. And as soon as they had provided themselves with dwellings for their families, and erected convenient places for God's worship, while yet poor, and suffering the want of even the common necessities of life, they founded a High School, which soon became a flourishing College, for the advancement of learning, and the thorough education of their posterity; believing that it greatly concerned the welfare of the country that its youth should be acquainted with good literature, and dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when their first pastors were in the dust.*

There was one element in the educational system of the Puritans which distinguished it, and which we must not pass over without remark, and that was religion. Believing that it is "one chief object of Satan to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures," and that it was necessary to the safety of the people that youth should be educated in sound doctrine, as well as in good learning, they took care that all the children of the commonwealth should be taught to read and understand the Bible. They had but little confidence in knowledge without piety; and they sought to perpetuate the privileges and blessings they had suffered so much to secure, by imbuing the minds of their children with the doctrines of the Gospel.

It was with these views and feelings that they caused the Bible and the Catechism to be taught diligently in the college; and required that all instructors of youth

* New England's First Fruits, 1643.

should be sound in the faith, as well as unexceptionable in their morals.* Their deep interest and confidence in catechetical instruction was remarkable, even in an age when that mode of communicating religious truth was far more common than it is now. Every minister was expected to catechize all the children in his congregation frequently, and all parents were required to see that their children were prepared for that exercise. The selectmen of the several towns, also, were required to see that all heads of families catechized their children and domestics in the grounds and principles of religion at least once a week; and if any were unable to do this, they were to cause such children and domestics to learn some short orthodox catechism by heart, that they might be prepared to answer the questions that should be put to them out of the book by their parents, or by the selectmen themselves.†

It is to be greatly lamented that catechetical instruction, which our Fathers felt to be so important in the religious education of the youth of New England, should be so generally laid aside as it is at the present day. To this is unquestionably to be attributed much of the the ignorance, error, and instability which has for a long season been so deplorably manifest among us. Nor will these evils be removed or diminished until this practice is revived, and attended to with as much faithfulness, diligence, and prayer, both in families and in the church, as in the days of the Puritans. It may be replied that we have the Sabbath school, which our Fathers had not. But Sabbath schools, beneficial as they are, should never be permitted to interfere with

* General Laws, p. 136.

† Ibid. p. 26.

parental or ministerial responsibility to the young ; nor be regarded as a substitute for thorough doctrinal and catechetical instruction at home. There is need of both, and they should go hand in hand in the great work of training up the rising generation in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Such was the character of those men who turned the wastes of New England into fruitful fields, and made the wilderness to blossom as the rose.

But it is said they had their errors. It is even so. To err is human. No one will maintain that they never believed anything that was not true, nor did anything that had better not have been done. But in what period of the world, in what nation, shall we find a company of men to whom was committed so great a work, or who have executed the task assigned them, whatever it was, so nobly and so successfully ? What were their errors ? They were intolerant bigots, says one. They were bloody persecutors, says another.

The charge of bigotry is often brought against the Fathers of New England, by those, who of all men have the least right to say anything upon that subject. The words of the Saviour to those who clamored for judgment upon the woman taken in adultery, "Let him that is without this sin among you cast the first stone at her," contain an admonition which these swift witnesses against the Puritans would do well to lay to heart. Moreover we may insist upon the evidence that the Fathers of New England were bigoted at all. What is bigotry ? Bigotry has been defined to be a blind partiality for a particular sect, combined with hatred of all who differ from us. If this

definition be correct, the Pilgrims were no bigots. They were Calvinists indeed; and that they loved their own church with an affection stronger than death, is evident from the hardships they endured, and the personal sacrifices they made to plant it, and to sustain it in this country. But their attachment was not blind or foolish. They knew by experience the value of what they loved, and felt that the most intense affection is cold in comparison with that love wherewith they were loved by Him who died for them.

Nor did they hate any man or sect for differing from them in opinion or practice. When the Massachusetts company were about to sail from Yarmouth, they addressed a letter to the Christians of England which exhibits a most kind, liberal, benevolent, and Christian spirit. "We esteem it an honor," said they, "to call the Church of England, from whence we rise, our dear Mother; and cannot part from our native country, where she specially resideth, without much sadness of heart, and many tears. You are not ignorant that the Spirit of God stirred up the heart of the apostle Paul to make continual mention of Philippi, which was a colony of Rome. Let the same Spirit, we beseech you, put you in mind to pray for us without ceasing, who are weak colony from yourselves, making request for us to God in your prayers. And so far as God shall enable us, we will give Him no rest on your behalf, wishing our heads and hearts may be as fountains of tears for your everlasting welfare, when we shall be in our poor cottages in the wilderness, overshadowed with the spirit of supplication, through the manifold necessities and tribulations which may not altogether unexpectedly, nor, we hope, unprofitably befall

us." What language to use towards a church from which they had received such hard measure ! If they could have hated any denomination of Christians, it would have been the Church of England. But fleeing as they were from fines and imprisonment to a waste howling wilderness, they pour out their prayers and tears for that Mother, who seemed to have closed her heart against some of the worthiest of her children, and made their lives bitter with hard bondage. Even Cotton Mather, who has been thought the straitest and most exclusive of his sect, says that the New England churches, though they were "shy of using any thing in the worship of God, for which they could not see a warrant in the Bible, yet swallowed up the names of Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Anti-pædo Baptist, in that of Christian ; persons of all those persuasions being taken into fellowship, when visible godliness recommended them." * When did bigotry ever use language like this ? What denomination of Christians will now reciprocate this charitable judgment which went forth from the heart of Congregationalism, and which every true son of the Pilgrims is now ready to subscribe with his own hand ?

The other charge referred to is more serious. They fled from persecution, it is said, and as soon as they obtained power, they became the merciless persecutors of all who could not agree with them in opinion and practice.

This has been repeated so often, so confidently, and with such a plausible reference to time, place, and

* Enchantments Encountered, p. 10.

persons, that to many it seems like an incontrovertible fact ; and any attempt to vindicate those much injured men, may be regarded as indicating great ignorance of their characters, or disregard of historical truth. To us, however, this is not clear. After a somewhat careful examination of the history of those troublous times which tried the faith, and patience, and principles of our Fathers, we are unable to find satisfactory evidence that they were ever guilty of persecuting any man, or body of men, on account of their religious opinions. That it was their first great object to establish a church and commonwealth upon principles, which were regarded by many as exclusive ; that they adopted a discipline which was felt by dissenters from their doctrines to be severe ; that they guarded the infant church, which was of all things in this world dearest to their hearts, and which they perilled all their hopes on earth to plant firmly upon this soil, with a jealousy very inconvenient to those who hated it ; and that they were at times severe in the punishment of those who intentionally violated the religious or civil order of the country, no one will deny. But that they were persecutors of good men, in the proper sense of that word, cannot be shown from the undisputed record of their public acts ; and even the jealousy of dissent, and severity of discipline which are complained of, find an ample apology in the circumstances under which they were obliged to act.

What is persecution ? There is much vagueness and confusion of thought in the public mind in relation to this question ; and every man who suffers in mind, body, or estate, from the doings of church or

commonwealth, is called a martyr by the multitude, who do not discriminate between the sentence of a wise and necessary law, and an act of wanton cruelty. We may learn what persecution is from the consolation which the Saviour administers to those who are objects of it. "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for *my sake*." This passage requires us, in all cases, to examine the character and acts of those who suffer, as well as of those against whom the charge of persecution is brought.

The persecutor is a man who hates truth, and good men; who uses his power to harass and distress those who seek only to enjoy inalienable rights, and to do the work which God has assigned them; who endeavors by fines, imprisonment, and death, to suppress the doctrines of the Gospel, and to destroy the liberty with which Christ has made men free. Every act of undue severity, or even injustice, is not persecution. To imprison or hang a man for violating the laws of the state; to excommunicate a heretic from the church; to expel a disturber of the peace from the society which he would subvert, — is not to persecute him. It is an old and sound remark, that it is not the kind or degree of suffering which a man may endure, but the cause which makes a martyr. Men complain that they are objects of relentless persecution, because they are not permitted to promulgate by the tongue and pen any doctrines which they have adopted, or are involved in difficulties

by the violation of the fundamental principles of the government under which they live: as if every opinion of theirs is an eternal truth which all men are bound to reverence, and every action the result of a pure conscience, which it would be a sin against God and humanity to discountenance. But the Saviour promises a blessing only upon those who suffer for *righteousness*' sake. It is not a man's own opinion, but Christ's truth, that is the proper object of persecution. Men cannot be martyrs, except as witnesses for God and his cause.

They must also be good men. "Blessed are ye," says the Saviour, "when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you *falsely*." A man must not give occasion for any one to speak evil of him. "If a man suffer as a Christian," says the apostle, "let him not be ashamed. But let none of you suffer as a *murderer*, or as a *thief*, or as a *busy-body* in *other men's matters*: for what glory is it, if when ye be buffeted for your *faults*, ye shall take it patiently?"* "Having your conversation *honest* among the Gentiles, and having a *good conscience*, that whereas they speak evil of you, as evil doers, they may be ashamed that *falsely* accuse your good conversation in Christ." † If, then, a man professing to be a Christian, acts inconsistently with his profession; if he does not submit to the law of Christ; if he exhibits the spirit of Cain or of Korah, and receives a just recompense for the wrong that he has done, we are not to consider him a martyr, nor feel much compassion

* 1 Peter, iv. 15, 16.

† 1 Peter, ii. 12.

for his sufferings. The act by which he suffers is not persecution, but punishment. It falls not upon righteousness and truth, but upon crime, which the law ought to punish wherever it appears. We should not regard the clamor of such sufferers. Shall men of perverse minds be permitted to plead their religion as an excuse for their evil deeds, and when they suffer as wrong-doers, to complain that they are persecuted? Shall the wolf in sheep's clothing be looked upon as a martyr, because he is driven by force from the fold, or has an iron collar placed about his neck?

It is well also to examine the temper manifested by those who complain that they are persecuted. Our Saviour points out the graces by which his martyrs are adorned; a heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy; a divine patience that complains to none but God; a holy courage that fears nothing but sin; a pure zeal that burns like the fire kindled from heaven upon the altar of sacrifice; above all, a charity that thinketh no evil, that rejoiceth not in iniquity but in the truth, that will pity, and forgive, and bless, and pray for the guilty persecutor, and will not fail even at the stake or upon the cross. With such a temper the blood of the martyr becomes the seed of the church.

Now let us judge our Fathers and their acts of alleged persecution, by these plain Gospel principles. When it is said that they fled from persecution, and as soon as they obtained power, began to persecute all who differed from them in opinion, we should ask

ourselves again, who our Fathers were, — what was their position, — what were the circumstances in which they were called to act, — and who were the objects of their severity.

The Pilgrim Fathers were not, as we have seen, or may easily learn, haters of truth, or of good men. They were not revilers of those who endeavored to keep a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man. They were not enemies of that kingdom of righteousness and peace which Christ came to establish in this world. On the contrary, they were men who feared God, — who submitted with child-like docility to the Law of Christ, — who loved the cause of religion more than father, or mother, or country, — who rejoiced in all the successes of the church, — who blessed God for the partial reformation of the body from which they were at last compelled to separate, — who longed and prayed for the coming of Christ's kingdom in power, — and who could say respecting Zion and her sons, as David said of Jerusalem, "If I forget thee, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth: if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." How could such men harbor the spirit of persecution, or use their power to crush and destroy any faithful servant of Jesus Christ?

They came to this country, as I have said, in order to organize a religious community, according to what they believed the Law of Christ sanctioned and required; to worship God in the forms which they judged most conducive to religious enjoyment and spiritual edification; to train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and to spread

a pure gospel among the benighted tribes that roamed through these forests. In order to realize their object, they abandoned the soil which gave them birth. They left Christendom to build the church of God in its own way. They chose a spot for their purpose, far from the civilized world, — a spot to which no nation could lay a higher claim than their own, founded as it was upon prior occupancy, and actual purchase of the wild tribes that sometimes used it for hunting. They invaded nobody's rights; "they got not the land in possession by their sword," but in a manner that all the world must pronounce just. And they asked of their fellow-men nothing but to be allowed the privilege of carrying out their own principles upon their own soil, and of regulating the affairs of their church and state, according to their views of truth and duty.

And with what spirit and temper did they proceed to execute their great design? First of all, their charter declared expressly, that there should always be liberty of conscience in matters of religion. Then they declared that all the people of God who were orthodox in judgment, and not scandalous in life, should have full liberty to gather themselves into a church estate, provided they did it in a Christian way, observing the rules of Christ revealed in his word, and with the approbation of the magistrates, and of the elders of the neighboring churches; and that every church should freely enjoy all the ordinances of God, according to the rules of the Gospel. And, finally, they announced to the world, that all strangers professing the Christian religion, who should flee to this colony from the tyranny of their oppressors, should be succored accord-

ing to their utmost ability.* These provisions, all must allow, were as liberal as the condition and objects of the colony could possibly permit.

It is true that while they professed to maintain the inviolability of conscience in matters of religion, they regarded those who obstinately promulgated doctrines subversive of the Christian faith, destructive to the souls of men, and dangerous to society, as enemies of the commonwealth; and therefore they passed laws designed to restrain or punish such persons.† They were willing that all persons within their jurisdiction, whether inhabitants or strangers, should enjoy the same law and justice that was general for their colony, in all cases proper to their cognizance, without partiality or delay; ‡ but at the same time they ordered that all who endeavored to destroy or disturb the peace of the churches here established, by openly renouncing or reviling their church estate, or their ministry, or any ordinance dispensed in them, should be punished with fine, imprisonment, or banishment, according to the exigences of the case.||

Under such laws, which they not only had a perfect right to enact, but which were obviously required by the condition of the colony, a few persons who came into the country with no respect for the government, or good-will toward the churches, might have suffered some inconvenience. When they felt themselves bound to oppose publicly the religious order here established, and to disobey the laws of the state, they were compelled to endure the privation of accustomed privileges, or to withdraw from

* General Laws, p. 143. † Ib. p. 39. ‡ Ib. p. 143. || Ib. p. 45.

the jurisdiction ; which they always had perfect liberty to do. Those members of the church of England who had found their way to the colony, were not allowed to observe publicly the forms of that church ; and Thomas Lechford, who thanked God that he “ understood by experience, that there is no such government for Englishmen, or any nation, as a monarchy ; nor for Christians, as by a lawful ministry under godly diocesan bishops, deducing their station and calling from Christ and his apostles, in descent or succession,” complained that he suffered much by reason of not being able to agree to the discipline here established ; being “ kept from the sacrament, and all place of preferment in the commonwealth, and forced to get a living by writing petty things, which scarce found him bread.”*

The Baptists, also, were doubtless subject to inconveniences which must have been somewhat galling. When a Baptist church was gathered in opposition to a law of the colony above referred to, the members were summoned before the magistrates, and forbidden to proceed ; but refusing to obey the law, and persevering in their purpose to organize themselves into a church, some of them were imprisoned for contempt, and some were ordered to depart from the colony. † But this act, it will be observed, however harsh it may seem, had no relation to their opinions upon the subject of baptism, but to their actual violation of the laws. The condition of Baptists, as well as of Episcopalians, was, no doubt, unpleasant, under a government so thoroughly

* Plain Dealing, p. 68, 69. † Bradford's Hist. Mass. p. 68.

congregational ; but we hear of nothing like the persecution of them merely on account of their religious opinions. That the government had a legal right by their charter to establish a church polity which they deemed conformable to the word of God ; to forbid forms of worship which they judged to be unscriptural ; and to insist that if churches were gathered here, they should be organized in accordance with the ecclesiastical system which they had adopted amidst so many trials and hardships, no one can doubt. It might have been injudicious ; it might have been contrary to sound policy ; but it was not persecution. The error of our Fathers, if they were in error upon this point, consisted, says Bradford, in assuming that they had at last discovered the true meaning of revelation, and that it was their duty to allow no deviations from it.* But the historian himself, while he condemns their strict discipline and government in some cases, and their severity towards those who would not conform to their usages, admits that the toleration pleaded for would have been fatal to the design which they had in view. They came to America, he says, under great privations, after long persecutions, to enjoy their own forms of worship, which they believed to be in accordance with the word of God. And had they not been select in receiving new comers, and in rejecting the turbulent and schismatic, their object would have been entirely defeated, and the colony probably broken up.† So that the great question is, whether the end they had in view in coming to this country, was of importance enough to the church and to the world,

* Bradford's History of Massachusetts. p. 50. † Ibid. p. 33.

to be secured by laws which subjected a few dissenters to such privations as have been complained of. Who will say that the unlimited toleration demanded, subversive as it must have been of the great object of our Fathers, would have been better than the New England which they left us as an inheritance ?

But there are cases of greater alleged oppression and persecution, which are often referred to as evidence that the Puritans cherished a bitter and relentless hostility against all who differed from them in opinion. I allude to the banishment of Roger Williams ; the imprisonment, banishment, and capital punishment of the Quakers ; the dispersion of the company at Mount Wollaston ; and the punishment of some others, respecting which I wish to say a few words. I do not refer to the "trial of the witches," because that melancholy excitement does not properly belong to this place.

Of Roger Williams I desire to speak with all suitable respect. He came to Massachusetts a congregational minister of no mean standing, and by his talents and learning soon acquired considerable influence among the people. That he was a lover of freedom, and capable of great usefulness in church and state, will not be denied. It was doubtless very grievous to him that he was obliged to leave the colony at all, especially in the dead of winter, though he was furnished with money, it is said, from Governor Winthrop's purse to defray the expenses of his journey. But it is proper to remark that he was regarded, even by his best friends, as "an eccentric man," greatly "wanting in prudence and stability of character," "very precipitate and passionate," and easily carried

away by "extravagant theories." He professed, in later life, to be a Baptist; but he was not banished for being a Baptist. His opinions in relation to the mode or subjects of baptism, had no influence whatever in drawing down upon him the indignation of the government. He was required to leave the colony because he was a disturber of the public peace, and dangerous to the well-being of the church.

In what way he became obnoxious to the charge of being an enemy of the commonwealth, whom it was necessary to get rid of, will appear by a brief reference to some of the dangerous doctrines which he promulgated in spite of all the kind and friendly efforts which were made to persuade him to desist. He violently opposed the whole civil and ecclesiastical order which he found established here. He denied the validity of the government's title to the soil founded on the royal charter; and, although every foot of land, occupied by the people, had been actually purchased and paid for, maintained that the Indians were the only true proprietors of the country. He denied the right of the civil authority to make laws for the punishment of any breach of the fourth commandment which did not disturb the public peace. He maintained that it was unlawful to administer an oath to an unregenerate man; and that it was wrong even to pray with unconverted people, though they were wife and children. He wrote letters to the churches complaining bitterly of the injustice and oppression of the magistrates, the direct tendency of which was to excite disaffection among the people against the government. He advised his own church at Salem to renounce communion with all the church-

es in the colony, as full of antichrist and corruption. He condemned all who would not join with him in anathematizing the church of England. And in the expression and maintenance of his opinions, he was violent, denunciatory, and abusive. With all his good qualities, he was, by his position, learning, and talents, a dangerous subject of the new government, and a destroyer of the peace of the infant churches: and as it was impossible to convince, satisfy, or reclaim him, he was required to depart out of the jurisdiction as the only means of restoring quiet; a sentence, which, considering the provocation he gave, was remarkably lenient and mild.*

The treatment of the Quakers has often been represented as unreasonable, and unmercifully severe. But who were the Quakers, that their sufferings should awaken a sympathy which cannot be aroused by the afflictions of the Puritans? It cannot be pretended that they suffered for righteousness' sake; for no one who reads their history can discover any religion at all either in their creed or their temper. Unlike the Friends of the present day, they were fanatics of the wildest and most dangerous character, who came to this country for the express purpose of overthrowing, if possible, the existing government. They outrageously reviled both ministers and magistrates; and denounced the judgments of God upon the people if they did not oppose and resist their rulers. They grossly violated the laws of decency and decorum as well as of the state, sometimes rushing into churches on the Sabbath, in a state of

* See Winthrop's Journal, pp. 84, 88.

shameful nudity, and making outcries which were as blasphemous as they were exciting.

Knowing the mischief they had done in England, the Court passed a law that no Quaker should be landed from any ship, or harbored by any person in the colony. But this not being sufficient to prevent them from swarming like "rogues and vagabonds," into the country, other laws were enacted subjecting them to whipping, branding, imprisonment, and banishment. Even these severe modes of punishment were found insufficient to abate the nuisance ; and at length a law was made, subjecting any Quaker, who should return to the colony after having been four times convicted and sent away, to the punishment of death.* Under this law, four, I believe, were sentenced to be hung. One was reprieved upon condition of departing out of the colony. Another refused to save his life in this way, though earnestly exhorted to do so, choosing rather to die, than to submit to the authority of the government, which he had done so much to disturb. Several others were punished less severely ; but all who are now held up as martyrs, suffered as evil doers of the most incorrigible character, whom it would have been madness to permit to go at large among the people. If we should think their punishment too severe, we cannot call it persecution without an unpardonable abuse of language.

Indeed, when we consider the ungovernable malignity, the blasphemous doctrines, and the rebellious conduct of those fanatics, in connexion with the weakness of the colony at that early period, we can hardly say that their punishment was too severe. The Government

* General Laws, p. 60, 71, 62, 63.

was evidently disposed, as they themselves declare, to use as much lenity as was consistent with their safety; and resorted to extreme measures only when they found that mild ones were unavailing.* Even now, when we boast that every man is free to utter any opinions he pleases, there is a limit to the development of fanaticism and infidelity. Blasphemy is punished by our own courts with imprisonment; and all opinions, and practices which violate the peace of society, and become dangerous to the public morals, are suppressed by the strong arm of the law, without subjecting our government to the charge of persecution, except among rogues and vagabonds.

In regard to Gorton, and the "nest of revellers" at Mount Wollaston, as Mr. Adams calls them, a word must suffice. They were the declared enemies of the colony. They had neither religion nor honesty. They neither feared God, nor regarded man. Their conduct was lawless, desperate, and utterly inconsistent with the public safety. They furnished the savages with weapons and "strong water," and endeavored to involve them in war with the whites. "Toleration in those cases, would have been self-murder." In the case of these men, and of many others who suffered under the government of the early Puritans, there was neither persecution, cruelty, nor injustice. They were not, like our Fathers, harassed for *not doing* what the state, according to the Law of Christ, had no right to require, but properly punished for *doing* what both law and gospel alike forbade. They suffered, not for their religious opinions, nor for their

* General Laws, p. 62.

obedience to Christ, but for wilful resistance to a government founded upon the Bible ; not for religion, but for rebellion ; not for truth, but for treason. They resisted the ordinance of God, and received to themselves the damnation which they obstinately incurred.*

But I will vindicate the Puritans no farther. They had their faults, you say. Be it so. The sun has its spots, but nevertheless it fills the world with light. Our Fathers were men ; but what men ! In what country or age of the world can you find their superiors ? In the language of an old writer, " God sifted three kingdoms to obtain wheat for the planting of New England." A divine blessing rested upon their habitations. They finished the work that was given them to do : and we may say with Nicodemus, that none could have done the things which they did, except God were with them. " May the Lord our God be with us, as he was with our Fathers." And that He may not leave us nor forsake us, let us cultivate the ardent and humble piety which characterized the Puritans. Let us enthrone the word of God in our hearts. Let us maintain the ordinances of the Gospel in their purity and simplicity. Let us cherish a spirit of prayer. Let us attend to the thorough religious education of our children. Let us remember that the work of preserving, if not as difficult, is as necessary as that of building up. Let us not forget that we are to transmit this inheritance to our posterity. Our Fathers, through faith and patience are now inheriting the promises. Soon we shall join the congregation of the

* Rom. xiii. 2.

dead, leaving to our children a land consecrated to Christ and the church. May we leave it with the assurance, that it has not been diminished in value in our hands. And may we rise at the last day with our Fathers, whose memory we honor, and whose faith we follow, to join with them, and with all who have come out of great tribulation, in ascribing blessing, and honour, and glory, and power unto Him who sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever.

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