The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648

By Henry Wilder Foote

The Platform of Church Discipline framed by the Synod in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1648, and known in history as "The Cambridge Platform," was a document issued on behalf of the little group of New England churches which the colonists had "gathered" since the settlement at Plymouth in 1620, at Salem in 1628, and at Boston in 1630. The purpose of the Synod was, on the one hand, to protect the churches from interference by unfriendly authorities in England and, on the other, to formulate for them a common church polity based on Scripture. The points at issue may seem too remote to be of any interest today, yet the Cambridge Platform laid down certain vital principles which have had so profound an influence in the development of American thought, political as well as religious, that it is well worth while to take note of them in this year which marks its three-hundredth anniversary.

The Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony brought with them the germinal seeds of thought which came to fruition in the Platform, although at the time of their emigration they certainly did not foresee with any clearness the course of action which they would be led to pursue. With perhaps a few exceptions, they had not belonged to any of the feeble and scattered groups of Independents in England, whose views were based on the writings of Henry Barrowe, published about 1590, for which the author had been most unjustly executed in 1593. Still less did the Puritans agree with the Separatists, of whom the most famous today were the group which had escaped to Holland and had thence emigrated to Plymouth. The Puritans when they left England did so as members of the Church of England, although of that party within the church unwilling to conform to what they considered "corruptions" in its form of worship and of government.

Two well-known utterances at the time of sailing illustrate their attitude. The first is found in the account of the Reverend Francis

1 This paper was read at the March, 1948, meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
Higginson's farewell to England. When the ship on which he had sailed from the Isle of Wight on May 1, 1629, passed Land's End, he called the passengers together on the poop of the ship and told them, 'We will not say, as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving of England, 'Farewell Babylon, farewell Rome,' but we will say, 'Farewell dear England, farewell the church of God in England, and all the Christian friends there!' We do not go to New England as Separatists from the Church of England, tho we cannot but separate from the corruptions in it; but we go to practise the positive part of church reformation and propagate the gospel in America.' And when, after their arrival in Salem, Higginson and his colleague, Samuel Skelton, were questioned by John Endecott, they replied "that they were neither Separatists nor Anabaptists, that they were not separating from the Church of England, or from the ordinances of God therein, but only from the corruptions and disorders which had sprung up in that church of recent years."

The second, and more authentic and adequate, statement is The Humble Request, written on board the Arbella at Yarmouth and signed by John Winthrop and six other leading men of his company on April 7, 1630, the eve of their sailing. It was sent up to London and printed after their departure. Its authorship has been traditionally ascribed to the Reverend John White, of Dorchester, England, who did not himself come to this country, but the presumption is strong that it was drafted by the Reverend George Phillips, one of the signers, who served as chaplain on the Arbella and became the first minister of Watertown, Massachusetts.¹

The Humble Request is a moving plea for understanding and spiritual fellowship, addressed to those in England who were disposed to criticize the motives and intentions of the emigrants. It said,

... we desire you would be pleased to take notice of the principals, and body of our company, as those who esteeme it our honour, to call the Church of England, from whence wee rise, our deare Mother, and cannot part from our native Country, where she specially resideth, without much sadnes of heart, and many teares in our eyes, ever acknowledging that such hope and part as wee have obtained in the common salvation, we have received in her bosome, and suckt it from her breasts: wee leave it not therefore, as loathing that milk wherewith we were nourished there, but blessing God for the parentage and education, as members of the same body shall always rejoice in her good, and

unfainedly grieve for any sorrow that shall ever betide her, and while we have breath, sincerely desire and indeavour the continuance & abundance of her welfare. . . . It is an usuall and laudable exercise of your charity to commend to the prayers of your Congregations the necessities and straights of your private neighbours; Doe the like for a Church springing out of your owne bowels. . . . You are not ignorant that the Spirit of God stirred up the Apostle Paul to make continuall mention of the Church of Philippi (which was a Colonie from Rome) let the same Spirit, we beseech you, put you in mind, that are the Lords remembrancers, to pray for us without ceasing (who are a weake Colony from yourselves) making continuall request for us to God in all your prayers . . . when wee shall be in our poore Cottages in the wildernesse, overshadowed with the spirit of supplication, through the manifold necessities and tribulations which may not altogether unexpectedly, nor, we hope, unprofitably befall us.¹

That some in England responded to The Humble Request with sympathy and understanding is, perhaps, indicated by the noted lines,

Religion stands on tiptoe in our land,
Ready to pass to the American strand,
in one of the poems by George Herbert, who settled in Bemerton in the same month in which the Arbella sailed, and into whose hands a copy of The Humble Request might easily have come.²

These quotations illustrate the attitude of the earliest Puritan emigrants toward the Church of England. No doubt they intended the churches which they were to establish in the wilderness to represent a purified form of the Church of England whose “corruptions” they had left behind, yet they would also be new and independent organizations, like those gathered by the Apostle Paul, and would be framed on the pattern found in Scripture, the only authority which they recognized. Being outside England, these churches would not be subject to Episcopal control or to patronage, for neither of which was any warrant to be found in the primitive church. Each local church would be a complete and autonomous unit, subject only to “the mind of Christ” as revealed to the “saints” who made up its membership.

¹ The Humble Request of his Maiesties loyall Subjects, the Governour and the Company late gone for New e-England . . . (London, 1630), 3-10.
² George Herbert, The Temple, Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations (London, 1850): “The Church Militant,” 207. When, after Herbert’s death in 1633, his poems were submitted to be licensed for publication, the Vice-Chancellor demanded the excision of these two lines, but finally let them pass, saying that he knew that Herbert “was a Divine Poet, but I hope the World will not take him for an inspired Prophet.” Isaac Walton, “The life of Mr. George Herbert,” in The Remains of that Sweet Singer of the Temple, George Herbert (London, 1836).
This conception of what constitutes a true church was based on their interpretation of the New Testament. Though it owed something to the writings of Henry Barrowe, it perhaps had taken no very definite shape in their minds before their arrival in Massachusetts Bay. Hubbard says of them, "Concerning the way and manner of their first covenanting together, and entering into church fellowship one with another, it doth not appear that these were, like those of New Plymouth, aforehand moulded into any order, or form of church government; but [they] were honest minded men, studious of reformation, that only had disliked some things in the discipline and ceremonies of the Church of England, but were not precisely fixed upon any particular order or form of government, but, like *rasa tabula*, fit to receive any impression that could be delineated out of the Word of God, or vouched to be according to the pattern in the Mount, as they judged." 1 But as soon as they landed they were confronted with the practical necessity of setting up an organized church with an acceptable minister in each new settlement. In the urgency of their situation, remote from England and free from ecclesiastical control, they threw into the discard the traditional patterns of church order which had prevailed for so many centuries in Europe and used their freedom to frame a new one.

Their course was influenced in quite unforeseen ways by the example of Plymouth. The Pilgrims represented the extreme left wing of English Puritanism. They believed that Church and State were separate realms, that the civil ruler had no authority over spiritual affairs. They held "that every true visible church is a company of people called and separated from the world by the Word of God, and joyned together by voluntarie profession of the Faith of Christ," and "that every church hath power . . . to chuse and take unto themselves meet and sufficient persons in the offices and Functions of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons . . . and that no Anti-Christian Hierarchie . . . of Popes, Archbishops, Lord-Bishops . . . nor any such like [should] be set over the Spouse and Church of Christ." Seeing that it was impossible to hope for such reforms as these within the Church of England, they had separated themselves from it.

Now the Puritan group who settled at Salem in 1628 had brought

with them from their homes not only their repugnance to Separatism but their distrust of Plymouth, against whose religious and economic radicalism they had been warned. On their arrival, however, they soon found the Pilgrims to be helpful and sympathetic neighbors, who, though few in numbers and weak in resources, had successfully overcome the difficulties of settling in the wilderness. Friendship between them speedily sprang up, so that these two colonies, which might have been at swords' points, finally blended under civil rule, and developed New England Congregationalism.

This reconciliation was primarily the work of one man, Samuel Fuller, a clothmaker of London, who had been ordained deacon in the church at Leyden as early as 1611. He studied medicine, very likely at the University there. He came over in the Mayflower and was of great service as physician and surgeon of the little colony. He was a tenderhearted, devout man, evidently much beloved. In the winter of 1628–1629 the newly landed colonists at Salem were severely stricken with scurvy brought on by the unwholesome salt meat which was their principal diet. In his distress Governor John Endecott wrote to William Bradford at Plymouth for aid, and Dr. Samuel Fuller was sent to tend the sick. His ministering care and wisdom benefited more than the bodies of the afflicted Puritans, for he seems effectually to have cured them of their prejudice regarding Plymouth. In May, 1629, Endecott wrote again to Bradford a letter which, as Bradford says, "shows the beginning of their acquaintance." But it shows also a marked change in the attitude of the Puritans. Their sufferings had called forth the charity of the broad-minded Pilgrim, whose own experiences of the first winters at Plymouth had made him a wise and trustworthy counsellor. Many a night, after the last patient had been bled, the Pilgrim doctor must have talked with Endecott before the fire while the northeast wind drifted the snow about the cabins at Salem. The Puritans melted before the glow of his loving service. By day this good Samaritan had bound up the strangers' wounds, and at night he found that their differences had faded away with the misconception and prejudice of which they were born. The winter's acquaintance brought new light to Endecott, who wrote to Bradford:
RIGHT WORTHY SIR:

It is a thing not usuall, that servants to one master and of the same household should be strangers; I assure you I desire it not, nay, to speake more plainly, I cannot be so to you. Gods people are all marked with one and the same marke, and sealed with one and the same seale, and have for the maine, one and the same harte, guided by one and the same spirite of truth; and wher this is, ther can be no discorde, nay, here must needs be sweete harmonie. . . . I acknowledge my selfe much bound to you for your kind love and care in sending Mr. Fuller among us, and rejoysce much that I am by him satisfied touching your judgments of the outward forme of Gods worshepe. It is, as far as I can yet gather, no other than is warrented by the evidence of truth, and the same which I have professed and maintained ever since the Lord in mercie revealed him selfe unto me; being far from the commone reporte that hath been spread of you touching that perticuler. . . . I shall not neede at this time to be tedious unto you, for, God willing, I propose to see your face shortly. In the mean time, I humbly take my leave of you, commiting you to the Lords blessed protection, and rest,

Your assured loving friend,

Jo: ENDECOTT.

Thus in a few short weeks, the kindly service of the Plymouth doctor laid a firm basis of Christian charity upon which the two colonies could happily unite:

The seed which Fuller sowed took root immediately, and when in August of the same year Higginson and Skelton were ordained over the Salem Church, delegates from Plymouth arrived in time to give the right hand of fellowship. Already the Salem Church had adopted what were practically Separatist principles. As the Puritans founded new settlements at Boston and Charlestown and Watertown, they organized their churches on the Salem model, and from 1629 on the subtle but strong influence of little Plymouth largely molded the Puritan church order.

Like the Pilgrims, the Puritans held that any group of people living in the same community and agreeing to walk together in seeking to do the will of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, constituted a true church. No authorization by Pope or prelate or synod was necessary. All but one or two of the ministers who came to New England with the first migration were graduates of Cambridge University, and Cambridge had long been a center for the party seeking a more thoroughgoing reformation of the Church of England, the party thiere first nicknamed "Puritans." Thomas Cartwright, who had

1 William Bradford, History of Plymouth Plantation (Boston, 1912), 11, 90–92.

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been appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1570, had not long after been silenced for publicly maintaining, among other advanced ideas, “that ministers ought not to be created by the sole authority of the bishop, but to be openly and fairly chosen by the people.” It is not surprising, therefore, that the New England clergy held that each congregation alone had the right to choose and ordain its own minister. The bond which united a congregation was a simple covenant which the members signed. It was not a creed, which was unnecessary, for practically all English Protestants at that period were Calvinists. Nevertheless the adoption of a covenant, which was only an agreement to unite in a common purpose, rather than a creed as the basis for church membership, was a significant step since it did not bind the members to a fixed, unchanging form of belief, but gave room for at least minor differences, and in practice opened the way for changing ideas with the passing decades.

The conviction of the Puritans that the right to call and to ordain a minister belonged to the church members, confronted them with a problem as soon as their new churches were gathered. All the ministers who had come with them from England had been duly ordained in the Church of England. The question arose whether that ordination was valid in the new world or whether re-ordination was required before they took charge of their new parishes. That depended on the conception of authority which ordination conferred. The doctrine of the priesthood which the Church of England had inherited from the Church of Rome taught that ordination conferred a mystical and indelible character on the priest which for ever set him apart from the rest of mankind and qualified him to serve in his priestly capacity wherever occasion called. But this was one of the “corruptions” which the Puritans sought to leave behind them. They disliked the implications of the word “priest,” and used the word “minister” instead. They had come to believe in the representative character of the ministry, that a minister should be ordained only to serve the congregation which had called him, and that he held ministerial status only in that parish while he served it. They compared the ordination of a minister over a parish to the solemn installation of a civil magistrate in office.

This doctrine seemed to require the emigrant ministers to re-

nounce the ordination which they had previously received in the Church of England, which most, if not all of them were reluctant to do. They met this dilemma with a compromise. On August 27, 1630, when the Reverend John Wilson was chosen “teacher” of the newly organized First Church in Boston, Governor Winthrop wrote, “We, of the congregation . . . used imposition of hands, but with this protestation by all, that it was only as a sign of election and confirmation, not of any intent that Mr. Wilson should renounce his ministry he received in England.” This solution of their problem, which seems to have been followed in the case of other ministers in a similar situation, was analogous to the later Congregational practice of installing in a parish a minister who had previously been ordained as the minister of another church.

The gathering of an autonomous church in each new settlement, united by a convenant which all the members signed, and free to elect and ordain a minister of its own choosing, was the first practical step to meet the immediate need of their situation, but the Puritans as yet lacked a well-formulated doctrine of church order by which their proceedings could be defended against critics here in New England or in the mother country. It was the need of such formulation which led to the writing of the Cambridge Platform only eighteen years after the landing in Boston. The political pressures exerted from England made such action urgent, but it is interesting to note the way in which the thought of the colonists moved toward that result.

The Reverend John Cotton is rightly regarded as the chief exponent of what soon came to be called “the New England way,” especially in his most important treatise, The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven (1645), in which he carefully described the procedure followed by the New England churches, defending it at every point with Scripture references. But the Reverend George Phillips, who, as already noted, presumably wrote The Humble Request, had reached Boston three years ahead of Cotton and had already advocated and put into practice the fundamental principles which Cotton later set forth in detail. William Hubbard, in his General History of New England, wrote of him, “It is said that Mr. Phillips of Watertown was, at the first, more acquainted with the way of church discipline, since owned by Congregational churches; but being then

1 John Winthrop, The History of New England from 1630 to 1649 (Boston, 1853), 1, 36-39.
without any to stand by him, (for wo to him that is alone,) he met with much opposition from some of the magistrates, till the time that Mr. Cotton came into the country, who, by his teaching and practice, did by degrees mould all their church administrations into the very same form which Mr. Phillips labored to have introduced into the churches before.” ¹ And Cotton Mather, in his eulogistic but rather inadequate sketch of Phillips, notes that “Mr. Phillips, being better acquainted with the True Church-Discipline [he means the Congregational polity], than most of the Ministers that came with him into the Country, their [i.e. the Watertown congregation’s] Proceedings about the gathering and ordering of their Church, were Methodical enough, though not made in all things a Pattern for all the rest.” ²

As indicated by these writers, certain episodes in Phillips' ministry at Watertown, while not important in themselves, are significant as illustrating how one of the most independent and broad-minded ministers in the colony was seeking to give effect to the new form of church order. Phillips' pastorate over the Watertown congregation began with the signing of the church covenant, which he presumably had drafted, at Charlestown, on July 30, 1630, before the settlement at Watertown was actually started, and lasted until his death in July, 1644. The covenant was an unusually long one, beginning with a recital of the circumstances in which they had come hither, and ending with “a sure covenant with the Lord our God, and before him with one another . . . to renounce all idolatry and superstition, . . . to give ourselves wholly unto the Lord Jesus, to do him Faithful Service, obeying and keeping all his Statutes, Commands and Ordinances, in all matters concerning our Reformation; and in the Carriage of . . . one towards another, as he hath prescribed in his Holy Word. Furthermore swearing to cleave unto that alone, and the true sense and meaning thereof to the utmost of our Power, as unto the most clear Light and infallible Rule, and all-sufficient Canon, in all things that concern us in this our way.”

Not six months later Phillips and Richard Brown, his teaching elder, stirred up so hot a controversy by publicly stating that they regarded “the churches of Rome as true churches,” that the following July (1631) Governor Winthrop, Deputy-Governor Dudley,

¹ Collections, v, 186.
² Cotton Mather, Magnalia . . . (London, 1702), Book III, 82.
Mr. Nowell, and the elders of the Boston church went out to Watertown to take part in an all-day debate on the subject before many of the two congregations. In view of the fact that the nearest Roman Catholics were the French in Quebec and the Spaniards in Florida the matter under debate seems a trifle academic, but the assembly took it seriously and voted that Phillips was in error.

The following December the Watertown church was again in turmoil about the fitness for his position of Richard Brown, the teaching elder, and "a man of very violent spirit." At the request of both parties, Winthrop, Dudley, and Nowell again went to Watertown, where the governor told the assembled congregation that he and his associates might proceed either as magistrates, whose assistance had been asked, or as members of a neighboring congregation, called upon for advice. Whereupon Phillips asked them to take part as members of a neighboring congregation only. Clearly he wished to establish no precedent for interference by civil magistrates with the right of the church to pass upon the fitness of its ministers.

Two other minor episodes illustrate the logical extreme to which Phillips carried his doctrine of the autonomy of each local church. When the church at Newtowne (Cambridge) was gathered in February, 1636, and settled Thomas Shepard as minister, the neighboring churches were invited "to send their elders and messengers [delegates] to assist; and all did so except Watertown, where Master Phillips insisted that every church was competent to act alone." ¹ And when in December, 1640, the Reverend John Knowles was ordained as Phillips' co-pastor Governor Winthrop recorded the event in his Journal as follows:

The church of Watertown ordained Mr. Knolles, a godly man and a prime scholar, pastor, and so they had now two pastors and no teacher, differing from the practice of the other churches, as also they did in their privacy, not giving notice thereof to the neighboring churches, nor to the magistrates, as the common practice was.²

These episodes in a single parish, petty enough in themselves, have historical value as illustrating the theory of church order which one of the earliest advocates of New England Congregationalism was seeking to establish—the complete autonomy of each church as a distinct ecclesiastical body; the relationship to other churches

¹ S. E. Morison, Builders of the Bay Colony (Boston, 1930), 112.
limited to friendly counsel and advice; the representative character of the ministry; and the freedom of the church from control by civil magistrates, so far as church matters were concerned. Phillips published nothing in his lifetime, but in 1645, after his death, a pamphlet written by him in answer to an attack was printed in London under the title *A Reply to the Confutation of some grounds for Infant Baptism; as also concerning the form of a church*, in which he set forth his views. This pamphlet is now extremely rare and is almost unknown to scholars except for quotations from it by other contemporary writers. The opinions expressed were essentially the same as those stated by his more famous contemporaries, John Cotton in his *The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven*, and Thomas Hooker in *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline* (1648).

Such was the movement of thought among the leading colonists, but its definitive formulation might have been long postponed had they not been spurred to action by the threat of interference from England, where many looked with strong disapproval upon the independent spirit of the New England churches. "Independency," it was said, "shelters a herd of heresies." It also seemed dangerously democratic, and the English authorities rightly feared lest complete independence in the churches might foster increased independence in political action. The Long Parliament had abolished Episcopacy in 1642 and established Presbyterianism in England and now threatened to extend its control to the New England churches. But most of the New England colonists were as strongly opposed to Presbyterianism with its authoritative hierarchy as to Episcopacy. It is perhaps unlikely that the members of the Cambridge Synod which met from 1646 to 1648 were acquainted with John Milton's sonnet "On the New Forcers of Conscience" written in 1646, in which he, as an Independent, bitterly attacked those who sought to Presbyterianize England, but the pregnant line with which he closed the sonnet:

"New presbyter is but old priest writ large,"

exactly expressed their own views.

Two formal inquiries about the polity of the New England churches had been received to which it seemed necessary that a more authoritative reply should be made than that of a single individual, even though he had John Cotton's standing. The second of these inquiries had come from the Commission on Plantations, appointed
in 1643 by Parliament, then controlled by the Presbyterians, to supervise the Colonies, with authority to remove “subordinate governors, counsellors, commanders, officers & agents.” The inquiry asked for information as to nine positions, and answers to thirty-two questions. The necessity for a very careful reply was obvious. Cotton Mather, writing half a century later, put it very mildly when he said that the time had come when it was “convenient, [that] the Churches of New-England should have a System of their Discipline, extracted from the Word of God, and exhibited unto them, with a more effectual, acknowledged and established Recommendation: And nothing but a Council was proper to compose the System.” 1 It was this need, made urgent by the impending threat of Presbyterianism, which led the General Court in May, 1646, to invite a Synod to meet in the College in Cambridge and to prepare a confession of faith and a defence of the Congregational polity which would satisfy the critics that the New England churches had not embarked on a dangerous course. Out of deference to public opinion that the civil authority had no control over the action of the churches, the General Court merely “desired” them to send their elders and “messengers” to the Synod.

“The College in Cambridge” was selected as the meeting place for two obvious reasons: first, because of its relatively central location, and, second, because it was the only building then standing in New England large enough to house the Synod, and it was available during college vacation periods. It was a plain, three story structure of timber, which could shelter about forty persons. John Winthrop in his Journal records that the Synod “sat in the College and had their diet there after the manner of the scholars’ commons but somewhat better, yet so ordered that it came not above sixpence the meal for a person.” But “the [General] Court thought it convenient that order be given to the auditor to send twelve gallons of sack and six gallons of white wine as a small testimony of the Court’s respect, to the Assembly in Cambridge.” Evidently our Puritan ancestors had something of Sir John Falstaff’s appreciation of sack, which we call sherry.

The Synod got off to a slow start in September, 1646. The minister from Concord was absent, because of illness. The minister from Hingham did not come, because he inclined to Presbyterianism. Bos-

1 Mather, Magnalia, Book v, 21.
ton and Salem held back for a time, apparently fearing that the
Synod might assume undue control, but presently yielded. The
churches in the other three New England colonies—Plymouth, New
Haven, and Connecticut (that is, Windsor and Hartford in the Con­
nnecticut Valley)—which had already (1643) formed a loose con­
 federation with the Bay Colony, were invited to take part on a basis
of equality, and did so.¹ Seldom has so small a body of Christians as
were the New England colonists been represented by a clerical body
of such fine quality for intelligence and character, nor by one charged
with a weightier or more delicate task of safeguarding the religious
and civil liberty of the community. John Higginson and William
Hubbard, looking back, in a period of decline in church life half a
century later, to the outstanding men whom they had known in their
youth, could write of them with pardonable exaggeration,

We that saw the Persons, who from Four Famous Colonies, Assembled in
the Synod, that agreed on our Platform of Church-Discipline, cannot forget
their excellent Character. They were Men of Great Renown in the Nation,
from whence the Laudian Persecution Exiled them; Their Learning, their
Holiness, their Gravity; struck all men that knew them with Admiration. They
were Timothies in their Houses, Chrysostomes in their Pulpits, Augustines
in their Disputations. The Prayers, the Studies, the Humble Enquiries,
with which they sought after the mind of God, were as likely to prosper as any
mens in Earth. And the Sufferings wherein they were Confessors for the Name
and the Truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, add unto the Arguments which would
persuade us, that our Gracious Lord would Reward & Honour them, with
Communicating much of His truth unto them.²

¹The Synod apparently kept no record of the elders and messengers attending its ses­
sions, nor of its proceedings, aside from the completed Platform, and no surviving
diaries or letters report its day-by-day discussions. The earliest, but very inadequate
account of the Synod is found in Cotton Mather's Magnalia, fifty years later. By 1648 at
least fifty churches had been gathered in the four Colonies. The newest ones, however,
were still small and weak, and in places so remote that to reach Cambridge required a
long and arduous journey. It is probable that few of them were represented. In various
sources the following ministers are mentioned as having attended one or more, and
some of them all three sessions of the Synod: John Allin, Dedham; Thomas Cobbett,
Lynn; John Cotton, Béston; Richard Mather, Dorchester; Edward Norris, Salem; John
Norton, Ipswich; Ralph Partridge, Duxbury; Ezekiel Rogers, Rowley; Thomas Shepard,
Cambridge; Samuel Stone, Hartford; and William Thomson, Braintree. It will be
observed that all of them, except Stone, of Hartford, were ministers of churches within
a day's ride to Cambridge. The names of only two “messengers” are recorded. Deacon
Edward Stebbins, of Hartford, accompanied his minister to the first session (G. L.
Walker, History of the First Church in Hartford: 1632–1883 (Hartford, 1884), 113–
115), and Governor Bradford, of Plymouth, is reported to have attended the second
session.

²John Higginson and William Hubbard, A Testimony, to the Order of the Gospel, in
the Churches of New-England (Boston, 1701), 4–5.
For about a fortnight the Synod discussed the problems before it, then asked John Cotton of Boston, Richard Mather of Dorchester, and Ralph Partridge of Duxbury each "to draw up a scriptural model of church government," and adjourned to meet again on June 8, 1647. This second meeting, at which Governor Bradford, of Plymouth, was a "messenger," sat but ten days and dispersed because of a widespread epidemic of illness of which many persons died, among them the Reverend Thomas Hooker of Hartford and Governor Winthrop's wife. The Synod reassembled in the College on August 15, 1648, for its third and final session, and in ten days finished its labors. On the opening day, while Mr. Allin of Dedham was preaching a learned and godly sermon, a snake wriggled along the floor where some of the Elders sat behind the preacher. Reverend William Thomson of Braintree put his foot on it and killed it, and the incident was interpreted as a happy omen of the way in which the Synod would overthrow Satan.

Of the three drafts for a platform which were submitted that of Richard Mather found most favor, and was accepted in substance. In the two and a quarter years since the invitation to meet had been issued by the General Court the political situation had been greatly eased. Cromwell, himself an Independent, had dismissed the Parliament dominated by Presbyterians. His army now controlled the Commonwealth, and the danger to the New England churches was lessened. The Westminster Confession had been published, and copies had reached the colonies. Since it gave authoritative expression to the theology accepted by the New England churches it relieved them of the necessity of formulating a confession of their own, and offered them a welcome opportunity to point out their unity with their English brethren in "matters of faith." In their Préface to the Platform they wrote,

This Synod having perused, & considered (with much gladness of heart, & thankfulness to God) the confession of faith published of late by the Reverend Assembly in England, doe judge it to be very holy, orthodox, & judicious in all matters of faith: & doe therefore freely & fully consent therunto, for the substance therof. Only in those things which have respect to church government & discipline, . . . agreed upon by this present assembly . . . but in meekness of wisdom, as wee walk along with them, & follow them, as they follow Christ: so where wee conceiv a different apprehension of the mind of Christ (as it falleth out in some few points touching church-order) wee still reserve due reverence to them (whom wee judge to be, through Christ, the glorious lights
of both nations:) & only crave leave (as in spirit wee are bound) to follow the Lamb withersoever he goeth.

When we recall that the whole controversy with the English authorities who had sought to Presbyterianize the New England churches had been over the question of church order, and not at all on matters of doctrine, it is obvious that the Synod was very tactfully playing up the points of agreement with the Westminster Assembly, and minimizing the points of difference, without surrendering an inch. Never was a declaration of independence couched in more irenic phrases, but it was none the less a declaration of independence.

The Synod proceeded to formulate carefully a system of church discipline which should regularize the polity of the New England churches, fortifying every step with texts from Scripture. The result was "a terse, clear, and well-balanced summary of the general system which had been already outlined in the treatises of the New England Elders; . . . Portions of it strongly resembled the exact language of one or other" of them.¹

The Synod disapproved of the term "Independent" as applied to their churches, because in England it was loosely used to cover what John Cotton called those "corrupt sects and heresies which showed themselves under the vast title of Independency," and used the term "Congregational" instead, saying, "A Congregational-church is by the institution of Christ a part of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God, & the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus." (Chapter II, 6.)

Church officers were to be freely elected by the church members, since "the choyce of such Church-officers belongeth not to the civil-magistrates, as such, or diocesan-bishops, or patrones," (Chapter IX [VIII], 9) and "Ordination wee account nothing else, but the solemn putting of a man into the place & office in the Church wherunto he had right before by election, being like the installing of a magistrate in the common wealth. Ordination therefore is not to go before, but to follow election." (Chapter IX, 2.) The Synod did not push the theory of the complete autonomy of each local church so

¹ Henry Martyn Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years* . . . (New York, 1880), 438.
far as George Phillips had done, for they saw the necessity of counsel and cooperation, saying, "Wee judge it much conducing to the well-being, & communion of churches, that where it may conveniently be done, neighbour-churches be advised withall & their help made use of. ..." (Chapter IX [viii], 8) and again, "Although Churches be distinct, & therfore may not be confounded one with another: & equall, & therfore have not dominion one over another: yet all the churches ought to preserve Church-communion one with another, because they are all united unto Christ. ..." (Chapter xv, 1.) Therefore the Synod recommended consultation, and admonition when needed. Magistrates might call a Synod, but "the constituting of a Synod, is a church act," yet even the Synod is "not to exercise Church-censures in way of discipline, nor any other act of church-authority" (Chapter xvi, 3-4) beyond recommending non-communion with an offending church.

The Synod did not, however, make a clear-cut separation between church and state. They took as a matter of course the support of the churches by local taxation, though from the beginning it was the cause of some dissatisfaction and dissent. But it was the method of church support in Protestant Europe, with which they had been familiar in England, where, of course, it is still the source of revenue for the maintenance of the Established Church. Although they stated, "It is not in the powr of Magistrates to compell their subjects to become church-members, & to partake at the Lords table. ... As it is unlawfull for church-officers to meddle with the sword of the Magistrate, so is it unlawfull for the Magistrate to meddle with the work proper to church-officers," (Chapter xvii, 4-5) nevertheless, they went on, "Idolatry, Blasphemy, Heresy, venting corrupt & pernicious opinions, that destroy the foundation, open contempt of the word preached, prophanation of the Lords day, disturbing peaceable administration & exercise of the worship & holy things of God, & the like, are to be restrayned, & punished by civil authority. If any church one or more shall grow schismaticall, rending it self from the communion of other churches, or shall walke incorrigibly or obstinately in any corrupt way of their own, contrary to the rule of the word; in such case the Magistrate is to put forth his coercive power, as the matter shall require." (Chapter xvii, 8-9.) Parts of this passage sound like echoes of the Antinomian controversy through which Boston had recently passed, but some of the offences listed are still subject to the civil law.
Such, very briefly, are the main points of church discipline formulated in seventeen chapters by the Cambridge Synod. Cotton Mather records the tradition that the Synod "broke up, with singing the *Song of Moses and the Lamb*, in the fifteenth Chapter of the *Revelation*. Adding another sacred *Song* from the nineteenth Chapter of that Book; which is to be foundmetrically paraphrased in the *New-England Psalm-Book*," but that book was not printed until 1651 and the Bay Psalm-Book of 1640 did not include those songs. The Platform was printed the next year and in October, 1649, was "presented to the Churches and General Court for their consideration and acceptance in the Lord." The Court judged "it meet to commend it to the judicious and pious consideration of the severall churches within this jurisdiction." The churches debated "some particulars in the said draught," but in October, 1651, the Court voted "to give their testimony to the said booke of discipline, that for the substance thereof, it is that wee have practiced and doe believe."

The Cambridge Platform was, in truth, a remarkable document. Individuals, from Henry Barrowe in England, more than half a century earlier, to John Cotton and Thomas Hooker here in New England just before the Synod met, had stated the principles involved, but the Platform was the earliest methodical and adequate formulation of the Congregational polity to be set forth by a council speaking with at least local authority. And it was a new church order which it established, a type of church government unrecognized by the Christian world since the days of the primitive church. Although some of the Synod's recommendations were soon outgrown and fell into disuse, the Platform served the Congregational churches of the country for two hundred years. Its principle of the autonomy of the local church is practiced not only by the churches descended from the Orthodox and the Unitarian wings of New England Congregationalism, but was adopted by the Baptists, the Universalists, the Disciples of Christ, and other groups, so that today nearly half of the whole number of American Protestants belong to churches which are congregational in polity.

Many people today think of the New England Puritans as bigoted and intolerant, and Sir Richard Saltonstall after his return to England wrote his friends here a noble letter rebuking them for some of their limitations in this respect. But others in England accused them of great laxity of toleration. Thus Robert Baillie, a ve-
hement Scottish Presbyterian propagandist, wrote of them, "Many of them preach, and some print, a libertie of conscience, at least the great equitie of a tolleration for all religions; that every man should be permitted, without any feare so much as of discountenance from the magistrate, to professe publicklie his conscience, were he never so erroneous, and also live according thereunto, if he trouble not the publick peace by any seditious or wicked practise." 1 We are likely to forget that the idea of religious liberty was, at that period, novel, and to most people seemed dangerous, and that the whole weight of the Laudian policy in the Church of England under Charles I, and of the Presbyterian Parliament in the earlier years of the Cromwellian era, was used to enforce conformity to every detail laid down by church authorities.

By contrast, the Cambridge Platform contained the hidden seed of toleration for differing interpretations of the gospel. Henry Ainsworth, an able Hebrew scholar and one of the Separatist group in Holland, whose writings were well known to the colonists, in his *Annotations to the Bible* (1612–1623) had "boldly laid down the fundamental principle that the Bible means what it says, and that what it says is to be determined by those simple laws of interpretation which apply to any other book—by getting, first of all, at the exact meaning of its Hebrew and Greek words, through the study of their etymological sense, and the careful noting of their use in Rabbinic and other writings, and, above all, by the comparison of Scripture with Scripture." 2 In this Ainsworth was a forerunner of modern Biblical scholarship and a protagonist of the use of reason in the interpretation of the Bible. In their Preface to the Cambridge Platform the Synod had followed his lead insofar as they had maintained their right to their own "apprehension of the mind of Christ" derived from their reasoned interpretation of Scripture. Those who followed them could not, in the long run, refuse the same right to others.

It is frequently observed that the form of church order and the type of civil government in any given region and period influence each other and tend to fall into similar patterns. Thus the papacy by the sixth century had taken on something of the form of the Roman Empire which it survived; the priestly hierarchy of the Middle Ages had its secular counterpart in the feudal system; and following the

1 Quoted in Dexter, *Congregationalism*, 461.  
2 Dexter, *Congregationalism*, 345.
Reformation the generally accepted policy *cuius regio eius religio*—
the religion of the ruler is the religion of the state—inevitably re-
sulted in similarity of structure and method between the secular gov-
ernment and the established order of the church. In accordance with
this social law it was inevitable that the formulation and practice of
the Congregational polity in the New England churches should have
its effect in developing a like spirit of political independence. The
autonomous local church went hand in hand with the self-governing
town meeting. Indeed, it was the same group of men, in the same
meetinghouse, who sat first to deal with church matters and then
with the secular business of the town. If autonomy in church matters
was the right of each local congregation it was also the right of the
town meeting in civil affairs. The right of each church to elect and
ordain its own officers implied the right of the community to elect
the civil magistrates, with the voters the ultimate source of author-
ity. Consultation between the churches in a loosely federated system
to promote unity and protect common interests found its civic paral-
lel in the General Court. The Platform’s careful restriction of the
power of any Synod, lest it should assume autocratic control, was
intended to ensure local self-government in church matters, but be-
hind it lay the fear of interference from England in civil affairs.
The Puritans understood quite clearly that their Congregational
order was the first line of defence, and that if it went down under
Presbyterian or Episcopal control from the mother country, a large
measure of the semi-independence which they had enjoyed under the
charter would soon be taken from them. They had had the foresight
to bring their charter with them, and to secure the election to office
of only such persons as had agreed to emigrate to the Colony, in or-
der to avoid the necessity of frequent reference to persons in Eng-
land for authority to take action here, and they had no intention of
giving up the measure of freedom thus achieved.

The Puritans have often been criticized for their limitation to
(male) church members of the right to vote for civil magistrates.
That limitation was from the beginning a cause of dissatisfaction on
the part of some who were excluded, and eventually had to be
abandoned. It was based, however, upon a defensible theory. The
Massachusetts Bay Company was not an independent political en-
tity but a private corporation chartered by the Crown to settle and
develop a small area of the American wilderness, and the Company
had the undoubted right to determine the qualifications of persons admitted to voting membership. The desire to establish a community controlled by the form of religion in which they believed had been a dominant motive in its formation. Persons who preferred other forms were free to go elsewhere on the American continent. Accordingly the General Court voted in May, 1631, "to the end the body of commons may be preserved of honest and good men, it was likewise ordered and agreed that for the time to come noe man shalbe admitted to the freedome of this body politicke, but such as are members of some of the churches within the lymitts of the same." We must remember also that, although voices were beginning to be heard advocating "popular government," democracy, as we understand it, was still far in the future. John Cotton, writing as late as 1634, took a position inconsistent with his later advocacy of the Congregational polity when he wrote that democracy was not ordained of God as "a fitt government eyther for church or common wealth. If the people be the governors, who shall be governed?"¹

In England the right to vote, then and much later, was based on social rank and property qualifications. The Puritans were in advance of their time when they disregarded these standards in favor of giving the vote to "honest and good men," regardless of their social or economic status. Church membership was the most obvious method for determining who were "honest and good," and also for establishing a theocracy—the reign of God in the commonwealth—since church members were pledged to live according to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. In a sense it was also a test of intelligence, because applicants for church membership were required to make a public statement of faith satisfactory to the Elders, although women were permitted to do so in writing. But the average of education among the colonists was, for the times, rather high, and the Platform sought to guard against too rigid requirements, stating that "the weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church. . . . Such charity & tenderness is to be used, as the weakest christian if sincere, may not be excluded, nor discouraged. Severity of examination is to be avoyded." (Chapter xi, 3.) The loss of a number of early church records makes it impossible to compute the exact number of mem-

¹ John Cotton, Questions and Answers upon Church Government (printed 1636), quoted in Dexter, Congregationalism, 354.
bers who became enfranchised freemen in the early days of the Colony, but the common estimate that not more than one man in seven or eight was a voter is probably a good deal too low. It is more likely that one man in three or four was a freeman. Even if the lower figure be accepted, however, it compares favorably with the situation in England, where, as late as the American Revolution, only one man in ten could vote. The system inevitably broke down, but it was a noble experiment which eventually opened the way for a more widespread suffrage. As early as 1687 John Wise, of Ipswich, published a defence of the New England church polity in which he maintained that “Democracy is Christ’s government in Church and in State.” His treatise was reprinted in 1772 as still appropriate to the times.1 On the other hand, as late as the end of the eighteenth century the Federalists were still clinging to the earlier standards when they advocated a suffrage limited to “the wise and good.”

As the generations passed, pulpit and pew were educated in the principles of self-government, implicit if not always fully expressed in the Cambridge Platform, which came to political fruition in the American Revolution a hundred and thirty years later. As Miller says, in his Origins of the American Revolution, “The New England clergy had been preaching for generations the doctrines which after 1765 became the tenets of colonial patriotism.”2 But the Cambridge Platform was the seed-bed from which those doctrines had sprouted. Jonathan Mayhew was but speaking with the voice of the Cambridge Synod when, in the political crisis of the next century, he preached those sermons in the West Church in Boston which have been called “the morning gun to the Revolution,” in which he had defended disobedience to commands which were contrary to God’s laws and had said, “The people know for what end they set up and maintain their governors, and they are the proper judges when they execute their trust as they ought to do it.”3 It is no wonder that the royal governors of Massachusetts found the Congregational churches among the chief obstacles to their maintenance of royal prerogatives, or that St. James’s Chronicle in England, in its issue of September 29, 1774, could give the warning, “If

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1 The Pulpit of the American Revolution, John Wingate Thornton, Editor (Boston, 1860), xxii.
2 John C. Miller, Origins of the American Revolution (Boston, 1943), 186.
3 Ibid., 187.
the Americans shall be taught to believe Resistance to be lawful and consistent with their Duty to God, it will not be long before they sound the Trumpet of War, and publicly appear in Arms."\(^1\)

Thus, from the very small mustard seed of *A Platform of Church Discipline* which should ensure freedom of action to each local New England congregation, there grew the great tree of religious and civil liberty upon which, in the fulness of time, the American eagle could perch. And it is, perhaps, not going too far to see in the Cambridge Synod, working out for the handful of weak and isolated churches which it represented a system which should maintain their local independence with the advantages of common action, the initial step down the long road to the convention in Philadelphia a hundred and forty years later, confronted by the greater and more difficult, but not very dissimilar task of framing a federal constitution which should reconcile the maintenance of local liberties and state rights with the desperate need for national unity. Such were the far-reaching consequences and the larger significance of the Cambridge Platform of 1648.

\(^1\)Ibid., 186.
\(^2\)Ibid., 186.