

NOTES ON RICHARD MATHER'S "CHURCH
GOVERNMENT," LONDON, 1643

BY THOMAS J. HOLMES¹

Some years ago I began to make a collection of the writings of those earnest men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries whose name I bear, more particularly the works of old Richard and Increase and Cotton, the four Samuels and the two Nathanael Mathers.

But I made little progress in this direction until a few years ago I had the good fortune to meet Mr. Thomas J. Holmes, who agreed, with the zeal of a true bibliophile not only to complete my collection as far as that was possible in these latter days, but so to steep himself in this musty lore that he could and would undertake the compilation of a Mather Bibliography. In this task Mr. Holmes is now occupied and the contents of this paper, of which he himself is the author, are adapted from the bibliographical notes upon which he is now working. My share in this undertaking consists simply in furnishing the sinews of war, and I, instead of Mr. Holmes, am reading this paper only because of the latter's earnest request.

By way of preface it should be said that a special point of interest in one of these Mather titles perhaps justifies a more lengthy note than need be accorded to the majority of the ancient tomes. That title is:

"Church-Government and Church-Covenant discussed in an answer of the elders of the several churches in New England to two and thirty questions, sent over to them by divers ministers in England to declare their judgments therein. Together with an Apologie of the said elders in New England for

¹Read before the Society by William G. Mather, who supplied the introductory paragraph.

Church-Covenant, sent over in answer to Master Bernard in the year 1639. As also in an answer to nine Positions about Church-Government. And now published for the satisfaction of all who desire resolution in those points. London, printed by R. O. and G. D. for Benjamin Allen Anno Dom 1643.'

This book contains three separate works, two of which; "Answer of the Elders . . . to two and thirty Questions"; and, "An Apologie . . . for Church-Covenant," are the earliest printed works of Richard Mather¹ now known, excepting of course his share in the Bay Psalm Book. The third work; "An Answer of the Elders . . . unto Nine Positions" was by John Davenport.²

These works, it is more than likely—as was common with discussions of the time—circulated in manuscript without any definite idea on the part of their authors of their being printed. When, three or four years after they were written, these works were published

¹"The Discourse about the Church Covenant, and the Answer to the XXXII Questions, both written Anno 1639, although they pass under the name of the Elders of New-England, Mr. Mather was the sole Author of, as Mr. Cotton in his Answer to Baily pag. 70, and Answer to Williams, pag. 63, and Mr. Nathaniel Mather in his Epistle to the XXI Questions concerning Church-members and their Children, have truly related." Increase Mather, *Life and Death of . . . Richard Mather*, Cambridge 1670, p. 32.

". . . So it is indeed in the 32 Questions, the Answerer whereof was Mr. Richard Mather, and not any other Elder or Elders in New-England, who likewise is the Author of the discourse concerning Church-Covenant printed therewith, which latter he wrote for his private use in his own Study, never intending, nor indeed consenting to its publication, nor so much as knowing unto this day how the copy of it came abroad into those hands by whom it is made publick, save that he conjectures some procured a copy of it from Mr. Cotton, to whom (such was their intimacy in his life time) he communicated it, as he writes in a late Letter to a Son of his now in England who it seems had enquired of him concerning those Treatises; and much lesse is there any truth in that which is said in the Title page prefixed to the Discourse of Church-Covenant, as if it were sent over to Mr. Barnard Anno 1639; Mr. Mather having neither acquaintance nor any intercourse by Letters with Mr. Barnard." [Nathanael Mather] in "To the Reader" prefixed to *Disputation Concerning Church-Members and their Children in Answer to XXI Questions*, London 1659.

"There is a Book which bears the Title of, An Answer of the Elders of the several Churches in New England to Thirty two Questions, Printed in the year 1643. Of which Book my Father Mather was the Sole Author. And he wrote it in the Primitive Times of these Churches, (viz in the year 1639) as himself assured me. What he wrote was approved of by other Elders, especially by Mr. Cotton, unto whom he communicated it." Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, Boston 1700, p. 73; London 1700, p. 39.

Holo.ms. of the Answer of the Elders . . . To two and thirty Questions, written in the hand of Richard Mather, is in the W. G. M. collection.

²"The 9 Positions (though written by Mr. Davenport) had the Approbation of the rest of the Elders in New England." Increase Mather *Discourse concerning the Unlawfulness of Common Prayer*, p. 14. See H. M. Dexter, *Congregationalism*, no. 938 in Bibliography at end, for records of two other editions of this work.

in London, the printing was without the consent or knowledge of Richard Mather. The entry of Richard Mather, who to my mind was the most logical thinker of any of his family line, into that special field of literature dealing with Church Government with which his name has been ever associated, came about reluctantly and by the hand of one whom he did not know, or did not connect with the printing of the piece.

The second and third parts of the book were printed by Thomas Paine, or Payne, and Mather Simmons for Benjamin Allen, while Richard Oulton and Gregory Dexter printed for the same publisher, Benjamin Allen, the first part of the book containing the text of the Answer to the thirty-two questions. The employment of two different printers to produce the one book may mean one of two things. Either that the second and third parts may have been printed before the first part and have had an earlier and separate issue of a few copies, though we know of no such separate issue; or, what is more likely, there may have been haste in printing, and that the purpose of dividing the work was to accelerate the production.

Whether there were any separate issues or not, it is no longer held in doubt that we are indebted, for the printing of the Answer to the thirty-two questions, and for the grouping of the three works into one book, not to the Mr. Bernard of the title-page, but to that belligerent, dynamic, much maligned Puritan who penned "The Epistle to the Reader"—Hugh Peter the Regicide,³ there signed "H. Peter." That Hugh Peter had then become a leader on the Parliamentary side in that war—which six years later culminated with Charles on the scaffold and the Commonwealth established—the martial even bellicose

³Hugh Peter, or Peters, born at Fowey, Cornwall, 1598, M. A. Cambridge 1622; five or six years in Holland; arrived New England 1635; minister at Salem, Mass.; left in 1641 to go to London as agent of the "Six colonies of New England"; Archbishop Laud showed him no leniency; aided Protestants in Ireland; civil war was afoot, joined Parliamentary forces; entertained by Earl of Warwick, and by Sir Thomas Fairfax, and aided them in some of their campaigns; friend of Oliver Cromwell; member of Westminster Assembly; chaplain to the Parliament; preached against the King; at restoration, was tried and condemned as regicide; protested innocence; died on scaffold at Charing Cross October 16, 1660. See J. B. Felt, *Memoir and Defence of Hugh Peters*, Boston 1851; Samuel Peters, *History of Hugh Peters*, New York, 1807; *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, and *Encyclo. Brit.*

spirit of his preface bears witness. It is clear that together with the artillery of his pulpit and his sword of the battlefield, this soldier Christian sought, and used efficiently, the weapon of the press.

In Peter's mind the little work we are now considering seems to have been regarded as a war pamphlet. Being a "soldier for Christ" in the England of 1643 was no symbolism; for the Puritan it was a stark reality. This soldier's urgency for literary ammunition might well have been reason for haste in printing the work in two printing offices. For him here was material for a chain-shot calculated to strike tottering Episcopacy and at the same time render Presbyterianism less tenable. Richard Mather did not quite relish this use of his work.⁴

We may conjecture that Peter caused a generous edition to be printed, perhaps with view to a possible wide circulation not in New England, but among the members of the Westminster Assembly, which began its sittings in July of the same year, and which was the occasion that called forth the printing of this work.⁵ We are sure, however, that the work was well dispersed, for, though now scarce, copies of it are more frequently found and offered for sale in recent years, than of most of the Mather works.

Whether Richard Mather voluntarily set himself to answer the thirty-two questions or whether the ministers in the Colony requested him to take up the task we seem now to be unable quite to determine. But that he was equal to the need we have ample assurance, for his Answer to these thirty-two questions had the general approval of the Elders in the Bay.⁶ Henry Martyn Dexter says "It is, therefore, of the

⁴See footnote No. 1, second paragraph.

⁵" . . . we would earnestly desire that none would call that unseasonable or unreasonable which God seems even now to call for at the calling of this Synode." Epistle to the reader.

There are entries in the Stationers' Company Register of other books printed by the printers of this work, though this work is not recorded. A leaf, pages 593-4, occurring between the entries for June 27 and 29, 1643, has been torn out of the Register. Whether the missing leaf contained the entry of this work can only be surmised. Cf. *Transcript of the Registers of the Worshipful Company of Stationers*, London 1913, vol. 1, p. 58.

⁶See footnote No. 1, third paragraph.

greatest value as evidence of what the earliest Congregationalism of New England actually was."⁷ The thirty-two questions were propounded by ministers in England, who, in the perplexities of the ecclesiastical-political problems of the time, sought aid and light of the experience of the brethren beyond the seas. On their emigration these brethren had left behind them in England hampering trammels of an Episcopacy hostile to puritanical conceptions of reformation. From their first landing on these shores they had been free to work out on new soil those theories of church government which the nonconformists of England had long sought in some form to embody in their church polity.

A glance at conditions in England contrasted with church conditions in the Colony at about the time the thirty-two questions were formulated, probably 1637-1639, explains why the questions were written, and why addressed to New England for an answer. In England, nonconformity, though waxing in strength, was still only aspiring to supremacy. Charles the first, with Archbishop Laud and his bishops, though on the defensive, were not routed. Episcopacy though waning still had power. Cromwell though forbidden emigration had not yet recruited his Ironsides. The civil war though brewing was as yet unseen; the Commonwealth—embodiment of nonconformist theocracy—as yet undreamed of. In New England, nonconformity, tried, tested, was an accomplished, fully established, triumphant reality in possession of supreme power. Ministers working toward similar conditions in England did well to ask advice of those in the Colony. They asked, for instance: "Whether do you give the exercise of all Church power of Government to the whole Church, or to the Presbiters thereof alone?"⁸ This question and the nature of the other questions show that in the minds of their authors, so sanguine were they, the future was to decide, not between episcopacy or noncon-

⁷H. M. Dexter *Congregationalism*, New York 1880, p. 426.

⁸See the 15th question.

formity, but which nonconformity—Presbyterian or Congregational—should govern or obtain in the Church and State of England. The bishops were to have no power. There were to be no bishops, and no Supremacy of either Pope or King. The main question in the minds of these enquiring ministers was: Should all ruling power over the combined churches rest in the hands of the ministers alone, that is, in the Presbytery, or should each church be a self contained unit and its minister share authority with his congregation, as the Congregationalists believed proper. Richard Mather answered them.

Soldier Peter, like Cromwell himself, was a valiant Congregationalist, but his literary and verbal ammunition, however, did not completely succeed in his campaign to blow up the whole of the defense works opposed to the Congregational conception of Church and State. There was temporary success, then followed compromise.

The Platform finally worked out and adopted at Westminster was indeed thoroughly Presbyterian and not Congregational; yet the Platform later adopted at Cambridge, Massachusetts, exhibited a polity so closely similar to that laid down in Richard Mather's "Church Government," that it is reasonable to suppose the work had much to do with preparing the way in New England for the synod of 1648.

The second part of the work, "An Apologie" consists of: a definition of Church-Covenant, (p.3); an explanation showing "the use of it, and the benefit and fruit thereof"; its antiquity, (p. 32); and a defence of it against twenty-eight objections or criticisms—in answers reasoned out from Scripture. The Covenant is set forth to be the voluntary true basis of all Christian churches, (see pp. 13, 15, 22, and elsewhere). Its clear phrases, with simple diction, explain the essential core of Puritan belief and practice, in relation to the formation of protestant reformed churches. The first part of the work then, deals with church government; the second part, with church formation and structure.

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