

CHAP. XXXVIII.

Disturbance in the Massachusetts Colony, in New England, from the year 1636 to 1641, by Mr. Wheelwright and Mrs. Hutchinson.

HITHERTO the beauty of the Lord had been upon the primitive Plantations of New England, prospering their handi-work, and blessing the labor of their hands, so as in them might have been, in a sense, observed that which was said of the primitive church, in the days of the Apostles, that they had rest ; and, walking in the fear of God, and comforts of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied ; for hitherto their churches, as well as their townships and families, were increased ; nor were they without the comforts of the Holy Ghost in their measure. But the wicked one, that always envies at the prosperity of the church, took all opportunities to obstruct their flourishing, either in civil or ecclesiastical respects ; for he had stirred up several of his instruments, as the Pequod Indians, (the history of which may be seen in the Narrative thereof, page 117,) who made cruel and fierce war, besides troubles from within, by several persons that labored to infest the Plantation, by sowing the seeds of dissension and corrupt doctrine, the one much increasing and fomenting of the other, as may appear briefly in what follows. That which is in sacred writ recorded of John Baptist may in its measure not unfitly be applied to Mr. John Cotton, that holy man of God and reverend teacher of the church of Boston, viz. that he was a burning and shining light ; and so many of his hearers, that abundantly resorted to his weekly lecture, might be said to have rejoiced in his light for a season, and much gloried in their gifts and enjoyments, looking upon themselves in so flourishing a condition as were scarce any where else to be paralleled. For some have been heard to say, they believed the church of Boston to be the most glorious church in the world ; and indeed they deserved to be highly honored, both for their faith

and order, with their eminent gifts of utterance and knowledge. But he who uses to stain the pride of the glory of all flesh, by withdrawing or withholding the influence of his grace, (which at that time some pretended so much to magnify,) blasted their beauty, that it might appear that all flesh was grass, and the goodness thereof as the flower of the field. For some of the church and town of Boston, and the neighboring assemblies, who either did not understand, or notoriously abused, what their reverend teacher had expressed concerning the doctrine of free grace, union with Christ, and evidencing that union, had secretly vented sundry corrupt and dangerous errors and heresies, denying all inherent righteousness, and all evidencing a good estate thereby in any sort, and, (to use Mr. Cotton's own words in print,) "some of them denying the immortality of the soul, and resurrection of the body." And when they were questioned by some brethren about these things, they carried it as if they held forth nothing but what they had received from Mr. Cotton; and possibly they might strangely pervert some unwary expressions, occasionally let fall by that worthy and eminent divine, to a far different and contrary sense, than ever they were intended by the speaker, insomuch that himself, after he was advertised thereof, and had preached against ||those|| errors, yet did this generation of Familists make their friends believe, that they were otherwise informed by himself in private. So as when Mr. Cotton himself, who, by reason of his candor and charity, was not forward to believe that those erring brethren and sisters were so corrupt in their judgments as they were reported to be, much suffered thereby in his repute; for it occasioned some of the country to have a jealousy that himself was a secret fomenter of the spirit of Familism; if he were not far leavened that way. These erroneous notions inspired many of the place also with a strange kind of seditious and turbulent spirit, and that upon every occasion they were ready to challenge all, that did not run with them, to be legal Christians, and under a covenant

of works. Under the veil of this pretence men of corrupt minds and haughty spirits secretly sowed seeds of division and schism in the country, and were ready to mutiny against the civil authority. For at a General Court, held March 9th, 1636, complaint was made of a sermon, preached by Mr. Wheelwright a little before, supposed to tend to sedition and disturbance of the public peace; and being sent for to the Court, he was evidently convict of sedition and contempt of authority, for sundry passages in his sermon, which he stood to justify; and, notwithstanding all means used, would not be brought in the least to retract. On which account the Court saw cause to order his removal out of the jurisdiction. The magistrates set forth an apology to justify the sentence, which the adverse party had ||remonstranced|| against, altering the words and meaning of such passages as were the ground of the Court's sentence. Mr. Wheelwright also himself put forth a small tractate, to clear the doctrine of his sermon from sedition, as if he had only declared therein the covenant of grace, which was also differing from his sermon, and was confuted by some of the ministers by many strong arguments. Mr. Cotton replied largely to their answer, and brought the differences to a narrow scantling. But Mr. Wheelwright could not be prevailed with, to make any kind of recantation, which might have saved himself and others much trouble. The Court also, though they had power enough to crush that party, yet deferred passing their sentence, that their moderation and desire of reconciliation might appear; but himself persisting in his way, it was at the last declared, and put in execution.

And in the latter session of the General Court, wherein he was sentenced, sundry persons were called in question for subscribing their names to a remonstrance or petition, (there were about sixty of them in all,) wherein they did not only justify Mr. Wheelwright's doctrine and practice, but strongly reflect upon the proceedings of the Court against him; whereupon the petitioners were all called before the Court, and proceeded with

| remonstrated |

according to the degrees of their offence, (which none of them were willing to see or acknowledge,) in some, to their removal out of the Patent; in others, to their disfranchisement only. With all which they were so dissatisfied, as §that§ they generally, at least many of them, removed out of the Patent, and made a Plantation at Rhode Island, near the Narrhaganset Country, where their successors and their posterity are remaining at this day; so as the sentence of the Court was not prejudicial, but occasionally an advantage to their outward estate, being by that means seated in one of the fertilest places of the country; only, for fear of making great disturbance, which might have ruined them all, the authority of the Massachusetts was not willing to have them to abide longer amongst them within their jurisdiction.

At the same Court, also, was called in question one Mrs. Hutchinson, supposed to be the occasion of all the forementioned commotions in the Colony of the Massachusetts; whose name it is wished might have been forborne, out of respect to some of her family, long after and still surviving, noted for eminent piety, great integrity of judgment, and faithful service in the church of God.

This gentlewoman was of a nimble wit, voluble tongue, eminent knowledge in the Scriptures, of great charity, and notable helpfulness, especially in such occasions where those of that sex stand in need of the mutual help of each other; which was the opportunity usually taken for insinuating into the spiritual state of those she came amongst, telling them of the danger of being under a covenant of works; by which means the affections of those that labored under wants, and bodily infirmities, were notably prepared to become susceptible of any novel impressions; especially such as seemed to tend to the exalting of free grace, and depressing of the creature, and leaving all for Christ to do. And as when the devil attempted to ruin mankind by the insinuation of a new divinity, he began with Eve, and by her surprised her husband; the same course is still found the

most successful for that end, and was to admiration at this time verified in and about Boston.

When the said Mrs. Hutchinson was brought into the Court, it was laid to her charge, that she had a great hand in the public disturbance of the country, partly by erroneous opinions, which she broached and divulged, and partly by countenancing and encouraging such as sowed sedition therein, and partly by casting reproach upon the faithful ministers of the country, and their ministry, thereby weakening their hands in the day of the Lord, and raising prejudice against them in the hearts of the people. It was added, that they would either have her acknowledge and reform her errors, and other offences, or else they must take such a course with her, that she might trouble them no further. After a long agitation with her, she pressed to declare her mind about the manner of God's dealing with her; which having at last liberty to do, she expressed herself in a way of immediate revelation: applying to herself, and her present condition, sundry texts of Scripture, as Jerem. xlvi. 28, and Isaiah xxx. 20, [and] viii. 9; adding, that the Lord spake that to her, with a strong hand, and also using that instance of Daniel, Dan. vi., where the princes and presidents sought something against him, concerning the law of his God, when they could find nothing else, and so concluded: "see this Scripture fulfilled this day in mine eyes, take heed what you go about to do unto me, &c. I am in the hands of the eternal Jehovah, my Savior." She insisted much upon that place of Scripture, Jer. xlvi. ult., "though I make a full end of all nations, yet will I not make a full end of thee;" which was very remarkable, as to the end that befel her, for within a very few years after the sentence of the Court, occasioning her to remove, first to Rhode Island, and not being contented there, she withdrew voluntarily into some remote part of the country, from her friends and neighbors at Rhode Island, (with whom neither could she agree,) she herself, with most, or many, of her family, were destroyed by the Indians, as shall be showed afterwards, when none else

were ; whereby it is evident how dangerous a thing it is to trust to such pretended revelations, and neglect the word of God, which is our only rule, both as to faith and manners.

The Court hearing of her thus speak, gathered from her own words that she walked by such a rule as cannot stand with the peace of any State or Church, for such bottomless revelations, if they be allowed in one thing, they must be admitted for a rule in all ; and upon such a foundation were built the tragedies of Munster and other places, and might be also in America, if such things went on after this sort ; for they who are above reason and Scripture will be subject to no control. The Court, therefore, finding no hope of her being persuaded to recal her opinions, or reform her way, judged it necessary to proceed against her by such a sentence as necessarily required her departure out of the country. The church likewise passed a sentence of excommunication upon her, by Mr. Cotton's consent and approbation, as well as of the church.¹

This discovery of a new rule of practice by immediate revelation, and the consideration of such dangerous consequences, which have and might follow thereof, occasioned the Court to disarm all such of that party, as had their hands to the petition aforesaid, and some others who had openly defended the same, (which was a true shibboleth, whereby the disaffected were discovered,) except they would give satisfaction to the magistrates therein ; which some presently did, about twenty in all : others made a great question about bringing in their arms, but they were too weak to stand it out, and therefore at the last submitted.²

CHAP. XXXIX.

The occasion of spreading erroneous opinions in New England, and much disturbance occasioned thereby in and about Boston, in the years 1636, 1637, etc.

MRS. HUTCHINSON, of whom large mention is made in the foregoing chapter, did by degrees discover two

¹ See page 336.—H

² See Sav. Win. i. 247.—H.