

At the General Court in March, 1638,<sup>1</sup> divers of the chief military officers of Boston, who had been favorers of the Familistical persons and opinions, being sent for by the Court, and told that they desired good satisfaction from them, having reason to be jealous of them, ingeniously acknowledged that they had been deceived and misled by the appearance, which was held forth, of advancing Christ and debasing the creature, which, since, they had found to be otherwise, and that their opinion and practice tended to disturbance and delusion; and so blessed God, that had so thoroughly discovered their error and danger to them.

### CHAP. XL.<sup>2</sup>

*A Synod called in New England, Anno 1637, at Cambridge. The occasion and success thereof.*

THE forementioned commotions in the country occasioned [by] the spreading of sundry Familistical opinions, which had received too much countenance and growth under the wing of the former Governor, required the help of the ecclesiastical, as well as the civil, power, to suppress and scatter them; and therefore the General Court of the Massachusetts judged it necessary to call an Assembly of all the elders of the churches, throughout the country, to consider thereof.

Many of the foresaid opinions were fathered upon Mr. Cotton, or were supposed to be gathered from some positions laid down by him in his public preaching, the which, being reduced to several heads, were discussed by the Synod when they met together in the first place, as well for the clearing of the truths in question, as the vindicating the honor of that reverend divine, not a little eclipsed by the laying those opinions to his charge.

When the Synod was assembled, Mr.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hooker and Mr. Peter Bulkley were chosen moderators for the first day, and continued all the rest of the Synod;

<sup>1</sup> This is New Style. See Sav. Win. i. 256.—H.

<sup>2</sup> Originally xxxix in the MS.—H.

<sup>3</sup> At Newtown, (now Cambridge,) Aug. 30, 1637.—H.

two as able and judicious divines as any the country afforded, by whom the disputes were managed with all liberty and fidelity to be desired ; and the matters in controversy debated with as much seriousness and inteness of mind, in the ministers, as the nature and circumstances thereof required ; being apprehended, by some, more dangerous in their tendency and consequences than in the notions themselves.

The errors<sup>1</sup> spreading in the country were first condemned by one consent in the Assembly ; then they came to discourse some questions in controversy between Mr. Cotton and Mr. Wheelwright on the one part, and the rest of the ministers on the other part.

The questions at that time discussed were five,<sup>2</sup> which follow, with the answers given thereunto by Mr. Cotton and the rest of the ministers, set down distinct.

Quest. 1. Whether our union with Christ be complete before, and without, faith ?

Reply of Mr. Cotton. Not before the habit, though without the act, of faith, i. e. not before Christ hath wrought faith in us ; for in uniting himself to us, he works faith in us, yet before our faith hath laid hold on him ; not before the gift of faith, though before the work of faith.

Then were two or three arguments urged by Mr. Cotton, that seem to carry some strength with them.

Arg. 1. From the utter impotency of the soul without, or before, union with Christ to any good act, (I mean complete union, for union standeth indivisible.) If we put forth an act of faith to lay hold on Christ, before we be completely united to him, then we put forth a good act, and so bring forth good fruit before we be in him, and before we be good trees.

Arg. 2. In our regeneration we are merely passive, our faith is not then active. But in our regeneration we are completely united to Christ, when our faith is not active. Many other great divines seem to speak this way. Mr. Strong, in a late treatise of the Two Covenants,

<sup>1</sup> " Being eighty in all," says Winthrop.—π.

<sup>2</sup> " Which were after reduced to three." Ibid.—π.

pag. 76, saith, that in our union we are passive, as well as in our conversion.

Arg. 3. If our union with Christ be an act of our faith, then it is by a work of ours, and then it is not a work of grace, according to Rom. xi. 6.

Answers of the ministers in the Synod.

We are not completely united to Christ by the habit of faith without the act, or by a faith merely passive.

We apprehend it to be beyond the reach of reason, or any expression in the Scripture, how this joining can be made by the habit merely, not putting forth any act upon the object. The habit of faith in the hand of the Spirit must needs be some cause of the union in question, and therefore must act therein. For faith is not said to receive, in Scripture, as a vessel receives water, but as the wife takes the husband, John i. 12, where the same word is used with that in Matt. i. 20, for Joseph's taking Mary for his wife.

Quest. 2. Whether faith be an instrumental cause of applying Christ's righteousness to our justification?

Reply of Mr. Cotton. It is an instrument to receive the righteousness of Christ applied to us of God for our justification, but not properly an instrumental cause.

Reply of the ministers. Faith is an instrumental cause in applying Christ's righteousness, and faith is active and not merely passive herein.

Quest. 3. Whether the Spirit of God in our justification doth bear witness in an absolute promise of free grace, without qualification or condition?

Reply of Mr. Cotton. The Spirit doth bear witness to our justification, either in an absolute promise, or conditional, in case the condition be understood, or applied absolutely, not attending the condition, as the cause or ground of our assurance, but as the effect or consequence of it.

Reply of the ministers. The Spirit, in evidencing our justification, doth bear witness only in a conditional promise, i. e. where some saving condition or qualification, wrought in us by the Spirit of Christ, is either expressed or understood; expressed, Acts xiii. 39; understood, Isaiah xliii. 25.

Quest. 4. Whether some saving qualification may be a first evidence of justification ?

Reply of Mr. Cotton. A man may have an argument from thence, but not a first evidence.

Reply of the ministers. Some saving qualification, wrought or discovered by the Spirit in the promise, may be a first evidence of our justification.

Quest. 5. Whether Christ and his benefits be dispensed in a covenant of works ?

Reply of Mr. Cotton. Christ is dispensed to the elect in a covenant of grace, to others he may be dispensed in some sort, ||to wit,|| in a taste of him, either in a covenant of works, or in a covenant of grace legally applied.

Reply of the ministers. Although Christ and his benefits may be revealed, offered, and, after a sort, exhibited, to men that be under a covenant of works, yet they are not revealed and offered by a covenant of works.

These things were thoroughly sifted and scanned divers days in the Synod, where every one had liberty to make his proposals and use his arguments, pro or con, as he stood affected. And upon this disquisition the presence of God did manifestly appear for the clearing of the truth in controversy to general satisfaction, so that a right understanding was thereby obtained between the rest of the elders and Mr. Cotton, who had been for some time before much estranged the one from the other. Many of Boston church, and some others, were offended with the procedure of the Assembly in the producing so many errors, as if it were a reproach laid upon the country without cause, and called to have the persons named, which held those errors ; but it was answered and affirmed by many, both elders and others, that all those opinions could be proved, by sufficient testimony, to be held by some in the country, but it was not thought fit to name the persons, because that Assembly (not owning themselves to have any judicial power) had not to do with persons, but doctrines only. For, according to the principles of those churches of the Congregational persuasion, the question is only to be carried to the Synod ;

the case remains with the particular church to which the person is related. But this would not satisfy some, but they oft called for witnesses; yea, many of them were so obstreperous, that the magistrates were constrained to interpose with their authority to prevent civil disturbance; upon which divers of Boston departed home and came no more at the Assembly.

In the first handling of the five questions premised, either part delivered their arguments in writing, which were read in the Assembly, and afterwards the answers to them, which spent much time without any effect; but after they came to open dispute about the questions, they were soon determined, and by that means, also, they came to understand one another much better.

And, in conclusion, the judgment of the Assembly did appear in the points controverted between them and Mr. Cotton, and if he were not convinced, yet he was persuaded to an amicable compliance with the other ministers, by studious abstaining on his part from all expressions that were like to be offensive; for although it was thought he did still retain his own sense and enjoy his own apprehension, in all or most of the things then controverted, (as is manifest by some expressions of his, in a treatise of the New Covenant, since that time published by Mr. Thomas Allen, of Norwich,) yet was there an healing of the breach, that had been between him and the rest of the elders, and a putting a stop to the course of errors in the country for the future, through the joint endeavors of himself and the rest of the ministers, in their respective places and congregations. By that means did that reverend and worthy minister of the Gospel recover his former splendor throughout the whole country of New England, with his wonted esteem and interest in the hearts of all his friends and acquaintance, so as his latter days were like the clear shining of the sun after rain, whatever distance had appeared heretofore; but as for others, whether broachers, or fomenters and maintainers, of Familistical notions, they were all condemned in the Synod, and by that occasion prevented from spreading in the country, notwithstanding the many active persons concerned with them.

Some had run on headily so far in the defending of those errors, that one offered to maintain in the Synod, that Christ himself was part of the new creature ; which made one of his disciples (who usually are more zealous in defence of any opinions than their masters) undertake, before the whole assembly in Boston church, to maintain it by Scripture, that Christ and the new creature were all one : not much unlike the gentleman that, to make it appear how resolute a Catholic he was, was heard to say, he not only believed Christ was really present in the sacrament, but that he was there booted and spurred, as he rode to Jerusalem : so this young Familist, not content to affirm that Christ was part of the new creature, will boldly affirm he is the new creature ; alleging for proof that in the 2 Cor. v. 17 ; for, having some smattering in the French tongue, he observed that, in the French Bible [qu' il soit]<sup>1</sup> is written in a different character, as if in the original it must therefore be, [if any man be in Christ, the new creature.]<sup>1</sup> To whom Mr. Cotton, according to his wonted meekness and moderation, yet with a nimble sagacity, replied, brother, if the words [he is]<sup>1</sup> are not literally expressed, they are necessarily understood and implied, for read them in your sense, [if any man be in Christ, the new creature,]<sup>1</sup> what follows then ? what sense will that be ? at which the nonsensical Familist was not a little confounded, which made him soon quit that station of defence and retire himself into a present silence as his best refuge. But this may suffice for a taste of the strange spirit of error, that had begun to leaven several forward professors in that place with such strange notions. Such was the issue of this Synod, of which it might truly be affirmed,

“ Est Synodus, nodus, sed quo constringit\* error.”

In the last day of the Assembly some other questions were debated and resolved, as about the public exercising of women's gifts, (as was then the custom in Boston,

\* Qu. Constringitur !—Ed.

<sup>1</sup> Thus in the MS.—z.

though in a private house,) when fifty or sixty persons were observed to attend constantly every week upon one woman, (who in a prophetic way would take upon her to resolve questions of doctrine and expound Scripture.) This was condemned to be disorderly and without rule.

And about asking of questions in public by the brethren, after sermon, not so much for information as for reproof, (then too much in use,) whereby the doctrines delivered were endeavored to be refuted, and the ministers themselves reproached, which was also condemned.

There was likewise a motion at that time made by the Governor about the way of raising maintenance for the ministers, there having been some difference amongst the churches a little before on that account. It was therefore desired that it might now be determined, by the present Synod, what way was most agreeable to the Gospel; but the ministers did not like to meddle with the question in that Assembly, lest some that were not well minded should thereby take occasion to say, that the ministers of the country had caused an Assembly to be gathered together for their own ends and advantage; and seeing it is positively declared, 1 Cor. ix. 14, in the Gospel, as a thing ordained of God, that they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel, it was thought best to leave it to the liberty of each church and people, to take that course for the maintenance of their ministers, which, all things considered, appears most agreeable to their state and condition.

For a conclusion, the reverend Mr. Davenport (as he had been desired by the Assembly) preached out of Philip. iii. 16, "Nevertheless, whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing;" out of which words he laid down the occasion of differences amongst Christians, and declared the fruit and effect of the present Assembly, and, with much wisdom and sound arguments, persuaded all to endeavor the keeping of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

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