
Boston Divided

The Boston Church had been formed in July 1630 at Charlestown when John Winthrop, Thomas Dudley, Isaac Johnson, and John Wilson subscribed to a covenant pledging themselves to “walk in all our ways according to the rule of the gospel, and in all sincere conformity to his holy ordinances, and in mutual love and respect to each other so near as God shall give us grace.”¹ On August 27, additional members having joined and taken the covenant, John Wilson was chosen to minister to the congregation. That fall most of the members of the church relocated to the Shawmut Peninsula, calling their new town Boston.² In 1633 Wilson was designated pastor and the newly arrived John Cotton was named teacher. Boston was the region’s most important political and cultural center, which made the church the most visible in the colonies. It was the Boston Church that members of the colony’s General Court attended to hear sermons when that body was in session.

When John Cotton died in 1652, Wilson labored on alone until 1656, when the church called John Norton, previously the minister at Ipswich, to join him in the ministry. The Synod of 1662 met in the meetinghouse of the First Church, and Norton was one of the principal proponents of the Half-Way Covenant during its final session. Despite this, the church did not embrace the changes recommended by the synod. Norton died in 1663, once again leaving Wilson as the sole clergyman. The congregation clearly hoped for a star to fill the post. There had been hopes that Thomas Goodwin would come to Massachusetts at this time, but, as Increase Mather reported to Davenport, his wife would not agree to leave England.³

The church then voted to invite the distinguished English Congregationalist John Owen to become pastor, and John Endicott wrote on behalf of