
The Last Struggle

The division in the First Church Boston spilled into the politics of the Bay Colony. The issues involved far more than the congregation and its dissident brethren, and so John Davenport welcomed an invitation from the deputies of the Massachusetts General Court to deliver the annual Election Day sermon in May 1669, one week after the formation of Third Church. The elderly clergyman minced no words. Having elaborated on the need for the people to choose godly magistrates and for the magistrates to honor God, he told the magistrates that “when they that are called to ruling power, cease to exert it in subservience to the kingdom of Christ, there will be an end of New England’s glory, and happiness, and safety.” Davenport invoked his authority as one who was involved from “the first beginning of this colony of Massachusetts.” He related how the first churches “were gathered in a Congregational way, and walked therein, according to the rules of the Gospel, with much peace and content among themselves,” so that his friend John Cotton wrote that in New England “the order of the churches and of the Commonwealth was so settled, by common consent, that it brought to his mind the New Heaven and New Earth, wherein dwells righteousness.” But this order was threatened by “two extremes: misguided zeal, and formality.”

In words that clearly referred to the magistrates’ interference in the affairs of his congregation, he warned them that they “deprive not any instituted Christian church, walking according to Gospel rules, of the power and privileges which Christ hath purchased for them by his precious blood.” He indirectly criticized the council of churches which had endorsed Third Church and directly criticized the magistrates, who had “countenance[d]