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Sermon on the Seven Pillars of the Baptists

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SERMON
ON
THE SEVEN PILLARS
OF
THE BAPTISTS ;

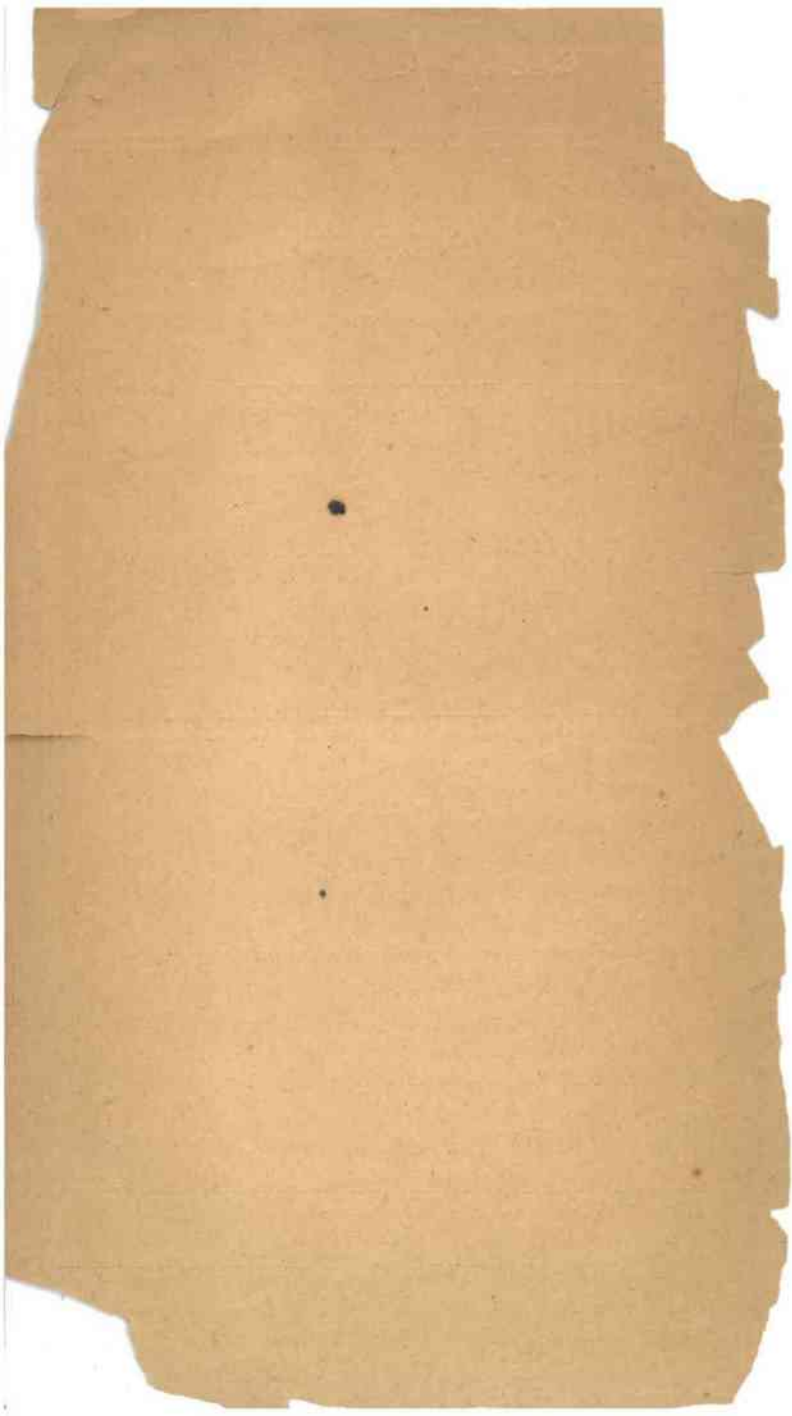
PREACHED TO THE
BAPTIST CHURCH, WESTERLY, R. I.,

June 23, 1867,

BY
REV. FREDERIC DENISON, PASTOR.



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1867.



THE SEVEN PILLARS OF THE BAPTISTS.

Prov. 9 : 1—“Wisdom hath builded her house ; she hath hewn out her seven pillars.”

I shall contemplate the text as predictive, like the prophetic visions of old ; regarding “wisdom” as the *voice of God*, the “house builded” as the preordained *christian republic*, and the “pillars” as the *representatives and principles of the christian system*.

This view is suggested by the use the Scriptures make of this term “pillar.” James, Cephas, and John, are termed pillars, (Gal. 2 : 9.) A christian church is styled a pillar, (1 Tim. 3 : 15.) And how beautiful and appropriate the figure, since pillars are not only supports of a house or temple, but, anciently, were also monuments graven with records of mighty deeds, with edicts and proclamations for the world’s instruction. In a sublime sense, then, christian individuals and christian churches are pillars—monuments of God’s grace—raised up by the power of Christ—graven by the Spirit of God—ordained to hold up the edicts and proclamations of Heaven to the world ; conspicuous, glorious office—truth-bearers for Jesus Christ ; trustees and representatives of the Saviour of the world ; to hold up the gospel, to illustrate its divine power, and its emancipating principles. Thus Peter speaks in addressing the saints, “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priest-

hood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The christian republic is committed to believers; they are to set it up, to support and extend it in the earth. It rests on them as on pillars. High, holy, glorious is the charge.

Dr. Judson used to say, that God had a particular path for every man to walk in, a particular work for every man to do. Grand and inspiring thought; God has an appointment, a sphere, and commission, for every believer, for every band of believers, every church, and every association of churches, as he has for every tribe and nation of men.

This brings us to the fact that there is an ordained mission for every christian denomination. Every body of believers has certain distinguishing christian principles put into their charge, and for which they are to stand as pillars. In the divine plan for the world's enlightenment and redemption, embracing as it does a division of labor, each sect of christians has a particular work—special pillars of truth to set up, hold up, and adorn. Differing as tribes, yet all belong to the christian republic; or as the divisions and brigades of a grand army, enrolled under various banners, using different uniforms and varied arms, yet one force, marshaled under one leader and for one great conquest.

Holding thus, in a broad faith and charity—the true catholicity—as we do, that different Christian sects have diverse yet interrelated missions, we come to the important, practical inquiry, What mission, what charge, what special work, has been assigned to the Baptists? Related spiritually, vitally, and in many points doctrinally and practically, to all true believers, to the whole saint family or christian nation, and working fraternal-

ly by the side of all evangelical workers in the vast enterprise of setting up the christian republic, it is indeed a fit and weighty inquiry, What are the great christian principles committed to us for guardianship, protection, and promulgation? What is our distinctive work? Why are we a denomination at all? Why have we been allowed to become so great a sect—now numbering many millions? Why have great means been put into our hands? What right have we to be marshaled separately and peculiarly under the great Captain of salvation? Can we, to God and to men, justify our singularity?

We think the Baptists have been called to set up, and hold up, and illustrate, and adorn, at least seven great pillars of truth in the christian republic—pillars first set up by Christ and his apostles, but assailed by the world, and too often overborne by the enemies of the gospel. This discourse, then, might be styled a *Sermon on the Seven Pillars of the Baptists*.

Perhaps every denomination can count its seven worthy pillars; certainly we hope so; that is for them to say, however, and to manfully define their principles and their mission. But we have our seven pillars given to us in the great house of truth, and we are not ashamed to hold them up. These we now propose to mention.

1. FIRST PILLAR. Observe it. *Soul-liberty*. No compulsion in religious things. Freedom of conscience in all matters of worship. In spiritual interests, to the Supreme Being alone we bow; from him alone we receive law. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind," for he must give account of himself unto God. Great, priceless principle; man dealing directly with Deity, personally and wholly responsible to Him. Not priests, kings, princes, hierarchs, prelates, nor all

earthly powers, may bind man's conscience. In this high freedom the first churches were planted, released from the yoke of Judaism and the chains of idolatries. As might have been expected, this freedom, rebuking hereditary and prescriptive claims, was assailed by envious Judaism, and wounded heathen hierarchs, and proud pagan philosophers, who asserted that men should think and worship as did their fathers, and should bow to the doctrines of the majority and to the divinities patronized by the State. Not so, said true believers; let all be free to bow to Jesus Christ. As antichrist set up his episcopal, papal and despotic scepter, faithful witnesses stood up against him and held fast to the pillars of truth. From these we count our lineage. They were known by various names, Montanists, Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Paterines, Albigenses, Waldenses, Henricians, Anabaptists, and lastly Baptists. They held to the old, divinely-bestowed liberty, amid papal fires, episcopal racks, and prelatical persecutions, till finally in this land we gained a provincial foothold under the agency of Roger Williams. Here the pillar has been honored, and to-day Baptist churches enroll three millions of members on this continent. The Baptists, from the days of John the Baptist, have held to this principle of soul-liberty, and suffered in its defense; and until within the last two hundred years they have been alone in holding it up; no other denomination stood with them. Papist, Episcopalian, Puritan, and Presbyterian, in turn bitterly opposed us, until the Providence of God disarmed them. Even the Methodists, prior to the Revolution, were in sympathy with the Episcopalians in persecuting the Baptists in Virginia. Indeed, all churches that have the hierarchic, episcopal, monarchical and ritualistic, or even prelatical

element in them, are, from the principle of hereditary faith they cherish, naturally opposed to this principle of perfect freedom of conscience. They have yielded to it only under the pressure of events. To hold up this great, divinely-bestowed pillar of truth, therefore, this principle, so essential to the Christian republic and the peace of mankind, has been, still is, and ever should be, a part of the mission of the Baptists.

2. SECOND PILLAR. Observe it. *Separateness of churches and states.* No church and state unions. No marriage of civil and ecclesiastical powers. No welding the sword to the gospel. States administer only civil affairs. Churches are charged only with religious affairs. Said Christ, "My kingdom is not of this world." "Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God the things which are God's." This is a great principle, essential to the integrity of christianity and the success of the christian republic.

God never ordained but one theocracy—the Hebrew; that was local and temporary; a school system for an early, preparatory age; a kind of educational plan to bring in ideas of law, and of the divine character, and to hold up types and symbols. Nothing of the kind preceded it. Nothing of the kind followed it. It was for one people only, and for one season only. Having performed its office, it was abolished. Then came the christian republic, the era of freedom, of which John the Baptist sounded the call, and the principles of which—the pillars—were set up by Christ and his chosen legates.

Antichrist, as foretold, gathering up old theocratic precedents, heathen usages, and philosophical theories, gradually corrupted the divine republic, and married it to Rome, creating and combining episcopal, papal, and

magisterial powers, in one great, overshadowing, tyrannous, persecuting church, and so inaugurated the era of christian strifes and wars. Yet bands of faithful witnesses were found protesting against such spiritual despotism, suffering even unto death in holding up the truth and proclaiming the priceless liberty. At last, in America, in the little colony of Rhode Island, a community was embodied, resting on the pure christian principle of the entire separateness of churches and states. Here for a time the principle was proudly scorned and bitterly opposed by the adjacent colonies. But time glorified the pillar. Light broke forth from it, as from the pillar of fire in the desert. At last the clause in our national constitution, guaranteeing religious liberty throughout all the land, was introduced, at the instance of the Baptists. The other denominations, pushed by the logic of events, gradually dropped their principle of church and state, and reluctantly conceded, first toleration, and finally liberty. The Baptists alone have always held the high doctrine of "religious liberty, from which all other freedom springs," marching always in the van of freedom, having never persecuted any people, or sympathized in any religious war. Their sentiments would exclude religious wars from the world, making them impossible. We wield only the sword of the Spirit—God's Word.

3. THIRD PILLAR. Observe it. *The organic completeness of every individual church.* Each church a separate and complete candlestick, not a taper or branch in a hierarchic or monopolizing chandelier. All churches as entire in themselves and as independent as the seven churches of Asia; they are accountable to Christ, and not to one another; each one is a depository of the gospel, and fully authorized to publish it. This is a

great and vital principle relative to the purity of Christianity, and a safeguard against its corruption. Every church draws its life directly from Christ, and not from any secondary, humanly-tainted source.

The unity of all Christians and all churches is in spirit and not in letter ; in heart and not ceremony ; in life and not form ; in holy, expanding, progressive aims and labors, not in an ecclesiastical frame-work, a churchianity, a patented machine. As families necessarily differ in respect to their dwellings, their customs, their methods of labor, while yet they make one prosperous, progressive people and nation, so christian churches, inevitably differing in native peculiarities, education, provincial customs, national speech, varied culture, and the pressure of their times, yet are one in spirit and aim, and make up the grand, growing, progressive christian republic. Contemplating the world's growth and freedom, Christ never intended to press his followers into any given ecclesiastical mold, or dress them up in any straight jacket of churchianity, Papal, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Puritan, or Quaker. He never meant to sanction popes, provincial bishops, district elders, and ecumenical councils. He set his followers in independent, qualified, responsible bands, remaining himself their only ruler, priest and life. This great principle, essential to the life, freedom and growth of Christianity, and the liberties of mankind, has always been held by the Baptists, and, until of late, held by the Baptists alone.

4. **FOURTH PILLAR.** Mark it. *The spiritual and voluntary constituency of every church.* A church made up only of regenerate persons, acting freely for themselves. John preached repentance. Christ said, "Ye must be born again." "He that believeth and is baptized shall

be saved. An apostle says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Men must be "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh—(mere human resolution)—nor of the will of man—(agency of others)—but of God." No man-made or inherited religion. None born into churches by fleshly birth. No hereditary church membership through parents, sponsors or godfathers. No regeneration of infants or adults by mere ceremony of ritualism and sprinkling or pouring water upon them. Children as well as adults must be born of the Spirit before they should be baptized; the fact precedes the figure—birth in Christ before baptism into Christ. Jesus deals with conscious, voluntary subjects. No manipulated piety; no machine religion. Christianity is a spiritual life, and not a physical force. The kingdom of God is not like a lever, but like leaven; it changes the hearts of men.

Consider how greatly this principle involves the purity, the intelligence, the activity, the mission, of churches, and so the life, freedom, holiness and power of the republic of Christ. Churches that gather into their membership unconscious infants, and confirm among their number unregenerate persons, marry christianity to the world, and open their doors to superstitions, ritualism, formalism, despotism, and spiritual death. Christ never ordained such an order. Churches should be spiritual, voluntary bodies. Baptists have held this principle from the days of the founder of the christian republic. No other denomination, save the Baptists, even claim such a record.

5. FIFTH PILLAR. Mark it. *One law of baptism, and baptism the ceremonial door of a church.* We read, "Repent and be baptized every one of you." "They that gladly received his word were baptized." They were

“all baptized into one body.” “One Lord, one faith, one baptism.” No two, three, or more kinds of baptism. We take the baptism introduced by John, ratified by Jesus, practiced by the first churches; a burial in water and a rising from the water; a type of death to sin and resurrection to newness of life; a beautiful, appealing, idea-uttering rite—grand symbol, holding statute rank in every church—the truth-arched door through which all members come. We have found no law or permission to change the ordinance. All the baptized are admitted to the Lord’s Supper and all other church privileges. If we should admit infant sprinkling to be baptism, we should invite such infants to the Lord’s Supper. But we hold baptism as did the first churches. It is like the oath of allegiance, by the acceptance of which we are duly and legally mustered into the visible ranks and service of Jesus Christ, buried to the world, rising to christian soldiership. Thus the Baptists have always held this ordinance as one of the pillars of christian truth—monumental of the origin of christianity, and bearing in symbol, like an engraved pillar, great ideas of our spiritual birth and our relation to Christ. Persons must be born of the Spirit before they are baptized, and must be baptized before they enter a church. No baptismal regeneration. Thus we endeavor to guard the doctrine of grace, the purity of God’s house, and the holiness of the christian republic. In this order of faith and practice, we always have been, and still are, a singular people.

6. SIXTH PILLAR. Note it. *No law in a church that is not plainly deducible from the New Testament.* “In that He hath said a new covenant, He hath made the first old.” The old covenant, used in the world’s early age,

and by one people only, is laid aside, as swaddling clothes. We drop the primer for the book of principles. "Ye are called unto liberty." In the New Testament we find only a few statutes, but a great many deep, broad, divine, prolific principles, suited to the enlightenment, salvation and liberation of mankind. And we earnestly contend for this faith once delivered to the saints. We draw from the fountain and not from human cisterns. Man's soul, born for growth, needs, with the Holy Spirit, but few statutes and symbols, full of life-germs, to start it out on its career of progress, and plume its powers for freedom. Alas that many churches stretch converts on their dogmatic racks, and complete the unnatural torture and despotism by nailing them to the church platform with thirty-nine or ninety-nine bolt-headed articles of creed, as if Christ needed their help in legislation. We hold rather that a church is like a nursery and school, where souls may grow, first by milk, afterwards by meat, upward toward manhood, to ever-widening freedom, and to world-wide reach of activities. Churches should foster souls and not fetter them.

We contend for New Testament statutes and New Testament liberties. Wherein we are free, we gladly grant to all perfect liberty. We are free in forms of worship, in dress, in style, in language, in places of worship. If any wish to write and read their prayers, to bow or stand, to dress in a Roman shirt, to worship in a cruciform meeting-house, let them have their liberty; but when they say we must do as they do, or as their church does, when they lay down a dictum or edict from prelacy, episcopacy or papacy, then we object and protest. If a man wants a liturgy or ritual, let him compose it and use it himself, for then it will

be the utterance of his own soul, and not the echo of another man's mind; let him never impose his ritual upon others. It is not manly to wear other people's clothes, and follow like a slave in other people's tracks. So, for our own sake, for the sake of churches, for the sake of the world, for the liberties of all men, we stand by christian liberty, a liberty suited to all peoples, and all countries, in all ages. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage"—yoke of priestly successions, of hierarchical churches, of prelati- cal councils, of ritualistic services, and patented cere- monies. This important principle has always been one of the pillars of the Baptists.

7. SEVENTH PILLAR. Note it. *The parity of rights in the members of a church, and every member a responsible one.* A church a pure democracy; a perfect, responsible brotherhood; a house of peers. "All ye are brethren." Neither lords nor wards in a church. A church can be a whole and competent body without a bishop. But some churches choose to have many lords—popes, priests, cardinals, bishops and the like, not suffering the members to elect their own officers, or creed, or mode of worship. Most of these have wards too, initiating infants into I know not what sort of church-membership—for they have never agreed themselves on the rela- tion. The Baptists are quite unlike these. We hold the christian republic in another light. All the members of a church rank as equals, as do citizens in the civil state, and all must act in choosing their officers, their articles of covenant and belief, and their form of wor- ship. Moreover, all may prophesy and bear testimony, male and female. And every one is held responsible directly to Christ through his word, he being the head

of every church. Churches are associated only fraternally, and for the furtherance of christian enterprises, as scholars unite in science, or merchants unite in commerce, and so rises over the earth the pure christian republic; every church speaking for Christ, illustrating his grace, disseminating his redeeming truths. To this pillar of christian equality and human freedom the Baptists have always fondly, strenuously clung.

But enough; though other peculiarities, not unimportant, attach to us as a denomination. We have named seven great, comprehensive principles clearly, dearly, firmly held by us. They distinguish us from all other branches of the great saint family. Are they necessary, justifiable, honorable distinctions? Ought these pillars to be held up? Have they secured any honor to Christ? Have they been of any benefit to the world? We appeal to their history. They are known by the results they have secured. And they are destined to achieve yet broader, mightier consequences. They involve the purity and power of christianity. Already they have evolved our free civil institutions, and are breathing freedom into a continent. They lie at the foundation of the liberties of mankind. For them our fathers suffered scourges, fines, imprisonment, fires, martyrdoms. But, being divine, they are destined to spread over the earth and bring in the grand era of emancipation. Let us hold fast to them. While in love we pray and labor with all christians in matters common to all, has not Christ called us to hold firm and high the seven pillars we have named? They are vital to the complete christian republic. Let then their calm, courageous, devout support, be a part of our testimony for Jesus, and of our service to mankind.

