

ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

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VOLUME III.

NEW YORK:
ROBERT CARTER & BROTHERS
530 BROADWAY.
1858.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1856.

BY ROBERT CARTER & BROTHERS,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern
District of New York.

McNish was the minister of the congregation, some ten or eleven years, it is supposed that he never preached in the house of worship belonging to it, after his installation, as it was not restored till some time after his death. The particulars of this controversy form an interesting chapter in American Church History.

JONATHAN DICKINSON.*

1708—1747.

JONATHAN DICKINSON was descended from a highly respectable family. He was a grandson of Nathaniel Dickinson,—one of the first settlers of Wethersfield, Conn., who removed to Hadley, Mass., in 1659. He was a son of Hezekiah and Abigail Dickinson, and was born in Hatfield, Mass., April 22, 1688. At a very early age he lost his father,—after which, his mother was married to Thomas Ingersoll, and removed to Springfield—she is said to have educated her sons by assistance derived from the estate of her second husband. He was graduated at Yale College in 1706, after which he gave himself for a time to the study of Theology, and was licensed to preach the Gospel. He went to Elizabethtown, N. J., in 1708. He was ordained by the ministers of Fairfield County, Conn., September 29, 1709. His field of labour embraced not only what is now Elizabethtown, but Rahway, Westfield, Connecticut Farms, Springfield, and a part of Chatham. He met with the Philadelphia Presbytery, as a corresponding member, in 1715, and, at the ordination of Robert Orr†, actually joined the body, in 1717.

Here Mr. Dickinson continued to exercise his ministry during a period of nearly forty years. Dr. Green, in the notice which he has taken of him in his History of the College of New Jersey, expresses the opinion that he was accustomed, during a considerable portion of his ministry, to receive young men for instruction in the different branches preparatory to their entering on the study of some one of the liberal professions. He had also more to do with the public concerns of his denomination than almost any other man; and especially in the great controversy by which the Synod of Philadelphia, then representing the whole Presbyterian Church, was so much agitated, and at length actually divided, he bore a most prominent part. For this he was eminently qualified, not merely by his great familiarity with the rules of ecclesiastical procedure, but by his uncommon sagacity, his calm judgment, and his unshrinking firmness,—tempered, however, by the spirit of Christian forbearance and moderation. And

* Pierson's Fun. Sermon.—Miller's Retrospect, II.—Chandler's Life of Johnson.—Appendix to Green's Discourses.—Murray's Hist. Elizabethtown.—Webster's MSS.

† ROBERT ORR, came as a probationer to this country from Scotland or Ireland. Having preached for some time to the people of Maidenhead and Hopewell, he presented his credentials to the Presbytery, in 1715, and they were approved. He was ordained and installed at Maidenhead on the 20th of October, of that year. His field embraced the ground covered by Pennington, Lawrence, Trenton, (First Church), Trenton City, Titusville, and perhaps Amwell. He was dismissed from his charge in 1719, and received a general Synodical recommendation, being uncertain where Providence might cast his lot. On account of the loss of the Records of the Philadelphia Presbytery, his subsequent course cannot be traced.

besides the numerous and various duties devolving upon him, at home and abroad, in connection with his office as a minister, he was a practising physician, and acquired considerable reputation in the medical profession.

In the conflict of opinion that prevailed in relation to the revival in which Whitefield had so prominent an agency, Dickinson was found an unflinching assertor of the genuineness of the work; and few, if any, in the denomination to which he belonged, had more to do than he in sustaining and promoting its interests. Whitefield is known, on one occasion at least, to have visited him, and to have preached in his parish to a very large audience, collected upon the short notice of two hours. Brainerd, the field of whose most important labours was at no great distance from Elizabethtown, was Dickinson's intimate friend; and they were cordial coadjutors in promoting all the great interests of truth and godliness. But, notwithstanding Dickinson was the earnest friend and promoter of the revival, no one was more careful than he in discriminating between the precious and the vile in Christian experience, and no one set his face more resolutely against the spirit of fanaticism and extravagance by which the revival was, in many cases, so materially marred.

He published a tract bearing on this subject under the following extended title:—"A display of God's special grace, in a familiar Dialogue, between a minister and a gentleman of his congregation, about the work of God in the conviction and conversion of sinners, so remarkably of late begun and going on in these American parts: wherein the objections against some uncommon appearances among us are distinctly considered, mistakes rectified, and the work itself particularly proved to be from the Holy Spirit: with an addition in a second conference, relating to sundry Antinomian principles, beginning to obtain in some places." This pamphlet was widely circulated, and produced a great effect. It was published at first anonymously, but it soon became known who was the author, and it drew forth a strong recommendation from most of the clergymen in Boston, with Dr. Colman at their head, and subsequently a corresponding recommendation from some of the brightest lights of the Presbyterian Church,—such as the Tennents, Blairs, &c. It is written with great vigour and discrimination, and in a tone not unlike that which characterizes the works of Edwards, written about the same time, and on the same general subject.

The division of the Presbyterian Church, which resulted in the formation of the separate Synods of New York and Philadelphia, occurred in the year 1741. From this period, each of the Synods was intent upon making provision to train up young men for the ministry; and as nearly all the ministers of New Jersey attached themselves to the Synod of New York, and as the Presbyterian interest was stronger in New Jersey than in any other part of the Synod, it was proposed to establish a College, if possible, and to fix it within the limits of New Jersey. Dickinson had been the acknowledged leader in the old Synod of Philadelphia, when that constituted the entire Presbyterian body; and he was no less the leader of the Synod of New York, after the separation; and no doubt he had more to do in originating the College of New Jersey than any other man. The business of teaching had been familiar to him for years; and this, taken in connection with his confessed intellectual superiority and commanding influence, naturally directed the attention of the community to him, as the individual most suitable to preside in so important an undertaking. A charter for a College

having been granted by John Hamilton, at that time acting Governor, the infant institution which, in due time, took the name of Nassau Hall, forthwith went into operation at Elizabethtown, with Dickinson at its head. Still he did not relinquish, in any degree, his pastoral charge, but connected with his accustomed duties as a minister the oversight and instruction of the new College: indeed it is probable that the office which he now formally assumed as President, occupied scarcely more of his time than he had previously devoted to the young men whose education he had undertaken to superintend. He, however, sustained this office but for a brief period; for the College did not commence its operations till the charter was given in October, 1746, and his death occurred on the 7th of October, 1747. But, though his Presidency lasted but a single year, there is no doubt that he left upon the institution the permanent impress of his own character.

He died of an attack of pleurisy, in the sixtieth year of his age, and at a time when his usefulness was probably greater than it had been at any period of his life. Mr. Johnes* of Morristown, who was with him in his last illness, asked him, just before his death, concerning his prospects, and his reply was—"Many days have passed between God and my soul, in which I have solemnly dedicated myself to Him, and I trust what I have committed unto Him, He is able to keep until that day." These were his last words. His Funeral Sermon was preached by the Rev. John Pierson† of Woodbridge, and was published. He was buried among his flock, where is still to be seen a venerable old monument, with a long poetical inscription, marking the place of his grave.

That President Dickinson's intellect was of a very high order, no one can doubt who reads half a dozen pages of any thing that he has written. There is a vigour and perspicuity of both thought and expression, an accuracy of discrimination, and an ability to grapple with the most difficult problems, that mark him at once as an extraordinary man. His style compares well with that of the best theological writers of his day. He possessed great energy and decision, as well as great conscientiousness; and, though he had no relish for controversy, for its own sake, he never hesitated to engage in it, when he supposed the interests of truth required it. Hence a considerable portion of his published works bear a controversial character, and are designed to defend what he regarded the cardinal doctrines of Christianity. It may be doubted whether, with the single exception of the elder Edwards, Calvinism has ever found an abler or more efficient champion in this country, than Jonathan Dickinson.

* TIMOTHY JOHNES was of Welsh extraction, and was born at Southampton, L. I., May 24, 1717. He was graduated at Yale College in 1737, and was ordained and installed at Morristown by the New York Presbytery, February 9, 1743. There were several extensive revivals in connection with his labours, and four hundred and twenty-four were added to the church, on a profession of their faith, during his ministry. While the American army was encamped in Morristown in the winter of 1777, Washington, on one occasion, communed with Mr. Johnes' church. He received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Yale College in 1783. The late Rev. Dr. James Richards preached to the aged man (then near the close of life) in his own dwelling, that he might judge of his fitness to succeed him. He received a call just before the death of Dr. Johnes, who was removed by dysentery, September 19, 1794, aged seventy-eight.

† JOHN PIERSON was a son of the Rev. Abraham Pierson—first President of Yale College; was graduated at Yale in 1711; was ordained and installed pastor of the church at Woodbridge, N. J., in 1714; was dismissed at his own request, after a ministry of about forty years; and died at the house of his son-in-law, the Rev. Jacob Green of Hanover, in the month of August or September, 1770. It is stated on his tomb stone that he was a minister of the Gospel fifty-seven years. Besides the Funeral Sermon already mentioned, he published a Sermon preached at Newark before the New York Presbytery, entitled "Christ the Son of God, as God-man Mediator," 1751.

He was eminent for the warmth and strength of his devotional feelings, and for the uniform consistency and purity of his life. He was bland and courteous in his manners, and though sufficiently easy of access, was never tolerant towards undue liberties. He had great power in the pulpit, and enchained the attention of his audience by both his matter and his manner. His memory is still fragrant on the spot where he lived, and the children and children's children of those who knew and loved him, cherish an hereditary reverence for his name and his grave.

Forty-six years after his departure, the Rev. David Austin, one of his successors in the pastoral office, wrote thus concerning him:—

There are those now living who testify that he was a most solemn, mighty and moving preacher; a uniform advocate for the distinguishing doctrines of grace; industrious, indefatigable and successful in his ministerial labours. His person was manly and of full size, his aspect grave and solemn, so that the wicked seemed to tremble in his presence.

The Rev. Thomas Foxcroft, of Boston, in a Preface to his work on the "Five Points," says:—

I'm of opinion a book of this nature has long been wanting among us; and I give unfeigned thanks to God, which put this same earnest care for us into the heart of our brother, whose praise is in the Gospel throughout the churches, particularly by means of his elaborate writings, in vindication both of the faith and order of the Gospel, and other more practical publications. * * * * Now, as Paul said of Timothy, 'I have no man like-minded,' so I will presume to speak it, without any design of flattery or offence,—I know no man better accomplished (in my opinion) for a work of this kind than Mr. Dickinson; and without entering into recommendation of his performances, I doubt not the superior and established character of the Reverend author, with the improvement of the Divine subjects, is enough to invite a general reading, and solicit the attention of every serious and impartial reader.

Dr. Bellamy speaks of him as "the great Mr. Dickinson." Dr. John Erskine, of Edinburgh, said that the British Isles had produced no such writers on Divinity in the eighteenth century as Dickinson and Edwards. Dr. Rodgers, of New York, who knew Dickinson well, used to say that he was one of the most venerable and apostolical looking men he ever met with.

Mr. Dickinson was married at Elizabethtown, shortly after he went thither to reside, to Joanna Melyne, a descendant of Joseph Melyne, one of the associates in the purchase of the Elizabethtown tract under Governor Nicoll's grant. She died April 20, 1745, aged sixty-three. She was the mother of a large family, of whom only three daughters survived her. The third child, who was named after his father, was born September 19, 1713, and was graduated at Yale College in 1731. His youngest daughter, *Martha*, married the Rev. Caleb Smith, of Newark Mountains (now Orange). Another was the second wife of Jonathan Sergeant of Princeton, the grandfather of the Hon. John Sergeant of Philadelphia, and Mrs. Dr. Miller of Princeton. The third married Mr. John Cooper, probably of West Hampton, L. I.

David Brainerd was Dickinson's intimate friend,—the latter having interested himself deeply in his behalf, when he was refused a degree from Yale College. Brainerd spent part of the last year of his life under Dickinson's roof, and solemnized his second marriage at Newark, April 7, 1747. He rode back to Elizabethtown in the evening "in a pleasant frame, full of composure and sweetness."

The following is a list of President Dickinson's published works:—Remarks upon Mr. Gale's Reflections upon Mr. Wall's History of Infant Baptism, in a Letter to a friend, 1716. A Sermon preached before the

Synod on I. Timothy iii. 17, 1722. Defence of Presbyterian ordination in answer to a pamphlet entitled, "A modest proof of the order and government settled by Christ and his Apostles in the Church," 1724. Reasonableness of Christianity: Four Sermons, 1732. A Funeral Sermon on Mrs. Ruth Pierson, wife of the Rev. John Pierson, 1733. Remarks upon a pamphlet entitled, "A Letter to a friend in the country, containing the substance of a Sermon preached at Philadelphia in the congregation of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill"—(Defence of the commission of Synod by Mr. Dickinson), 1735. The vanity of human institutions in the worship of God: A Sermon preached at Newark, 1736. A Defence of the above Sermon, 1737. The Reasonableness of non-conformity to the Church of England, in point of worship: A second Defence of the same Sermon, 1738. The Witness of the Spirit: A Sermon preached at Newark, N. J., wherein is distinctly shown in what way and manner the Spirit Himself beareth witness to the adoption of the children of God, on occasion of a wonderful progress of converting grace in those parts, 1740. Observations on that terrible disease, vulgarly called the throat-distemper, 1740. The true Scripture Doctrine concerning some important points of Christian faith, particularly Eternal Election, Original Sin, Grace in Conversion, Justification by Faith, and the Saints' Perseverance. Represented and applied in five Discourses, 1741. A Display of God's special grace, in a familiar Dialogue, 1742. The Nature and Necessity of Regeneration considered in a Sermon from John iii. 3, preached at Newark, N. J., at a meeting of the Presbytery there. To which is added some Remarks on a Discourse of Dr. Waterland's, entitled "Regeneration stated and explained, according to Scripture antiquity," 1743. Familiar Letters to a gentleman upon a variety of seasonable and important subjects in religion, 1745. Reflections upon Mr. Wetmore's Letter in Defence of Dr. Waterland's Discourse of Regeneration. With a Vindication of the received doctrine of Regeneration, and plain scriptural evidence that the notion of Baptismal Regeneration is of a dangerous and destructive tendency, 1745. A Vindication of God's Sovereign free grace. In some remarks on Mr. J. Beach's Sermon, with some brief reflections upon H. Caner's Sermon, and on a pamphlet entitled a letter from Aristocles to Anthades, 1746. A second Vindication of God's Sovereign free grace, &c., 1748. An Account of the deliverance of Robert Barrow, &c., when shipwrecked among the cannibals of Florida.