

# THE FIRST PROTESTANT ORDINATION IN CANADA

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AMONG the earliest sources of Canadian church history is an ordination sermon preached by the Reverend John Seccomb before a distinguished company of guests in the Protestant Dissenting Meeting House, sometimes called Mather's Place, at Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 3, 1770. On the title page of this rare work, it is stated that this sermon was "the first preached in the Province of Nova Scotia on such an occasion." It is doubtful if even the Governor, Lord William Campbell, or the members of His Majesty's Council who witnessed this historic ceremony, performed by a special presbytery composed of an Irish Antiburgher, a New Jersey Presbyterian, and two New England Congregationalists, were aware that actually this was not the first ordination in their province. Ten months previous, in a half finished pioneer meeting house at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, John Frost had been ordained to the pastoral office. Because of the remoteness of the settlement and the divisions which soon engulfed the Reverend Mr. Frost and his church, this first Protestant ordination in what is now the Dominion of Canada was soon forgotten and has been missed by later historians.

The Township of Yarmouth, situated at the south-western extremity of the Nova Scotian peninsula, had been settled in the years following 1760 by fishermen and farmers from Plymouth and Essex counties, Massachusetts, and from New London county, Connecticut. Three principal settlements were formed along the rock-bound coast, at Cape Forchu, Jebogue (Chebogue) and Argyle. Depending upon occasional trading schooners or fishermen for their communications with Halifax and Boston, these isolated outports developed social and religious institutions according to the patterns familiar to them in New England. The Proprietors, or Land Associations, which had obtained the land grants and had sponsored the migration to Nova Scotia, acted as a Town Meeting, regulated the division of lands into home lots, meadows and forests, and determined the location of highways and public lots. They also provided for the religious needs of the community.

Of the earliest religious services in Yarmouth nothing is known. The first *Return* of the township, 1763-64, contains

the names of two ministers. Reverend Samuel Wood was a graduate of Harvard College in the class of 1745, and had been "approved to preach the gospel by some ministers in New England." Coming to Yarmouth from Union, Connecticut in 1761, he was elected "Clarke of the Township" and "preacht at Times some Years chiefly at Jebogue." According to the *Return* in 1763 he had a family of nine and owned two hogs and two acres of cleared land. In 1767 he moved to the adjoining township of Barrington.<sup>1</sup>

The second minister was the Reverend Ebenezer Moulton, who had been ordained pastor of the Baptist Church at Brimfield, Massachusetts, in 1741 and had had a rather colorful career among the Baptists and Newlight Separates in New England. He had been one of the agents for the Land Association negotiating with the provincial government for lands at Yarmouth, and in 1761 was appointed a justice of the peace for the new township. He conducted occasional services at Cape Forchu and elsewhere in the province, but because of his Baptist views was unacceptable to the majority of the proprietors.

Nevertheless, even without a regular minister or a gathered church, interest in religion and attachment to traditional ways was strong enough to cause the settlers to hold a "raising frolic" on July 22, 1766, and erect the frame of a meeting house at Jebogue. The roof was shingled and the sides boarded in during the next few weeks, but nothing more was done until the year 1773, when the outside was finally finished and pews built. During the intervening years the congregation sat on rough planks and shivered as cold Fundy fogs drifted through the half finished sanctuary. It was here that the ordination of John Frost took place.

In the summer and fall of 1766, following the erection of the meeting house, there were signs of a revival of religion in Yarmouth. Regular meetings were conducted by laymen on the Lord's Day; and "there appeared extraordinary Concern and Engagedness on the Minds of some, and there was a Meeting set up on the Week Time, for Prayer and religious Conference." Chief among the exhorters and expounders of Scripture in these little gatherings was Squire Frost, a native of Kittery, Massachusetts (Maine) and a proprietor of Argyle.

"He was not," states the *Records of Church of Jebogue* concerning Mr. Frost, "a Man of Learning; not having a liberal

1. According to Edwin Crowell, *A History of Barrington Township* (Yarmouth, c 1932), 166, Mr. Wood died as a prisoner of war on board a prison ship in New York harbor during the Revolution.

Education and but ordinary School Learning; and he had not an entertaining and easy Way of Delivery in his publick Discourses, but the Contrary: which no doubt, was the Occasion of Disaffection to some that heard him." Doctrinally he was a Strict Congregationalist, holding fast "the faithful Word and main Doctrine of Christianity, which are the Foundation of all true Religion and Godliness: which doctrines are contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith with the larger and shorter Catechisms." Like later Newlights in Nova Scotia, he was inclined to be impatient with man-made requirements for admission to the Christian ministry, and emphasized conversion rather than college as the essential qualification for a preacher. Evidently, he also felt that the rather loose organization of religious meetings under the proprietors was unsatisfactory and smacked of civil control. "Christians" should separate themselves from those who knew only the forms of godliness, and form themselves into a true church. Such an attitude was, on the whole, unfortunate, for it tended to divide a community that was too poor and backward to be able to afford any kind of division of its energies. Most of the proprietors did not agree with Squire Frost's ideas, and outrightly rejected him as a "Teacher". Nevertheless, on December 10, 1767, ten men and one woman solemnly covenanted together and formed a church at Jebogue, and "fearing they should bring Guilt upon themselves if they should overlook this Servant of Christ . . . chose rather . . . to offend the whole Congregation," and elected John Frost to be their pastor.

The Covenant and Confession of Faith of the Church of Jebogue are preserved in the manuscript *Records* of the church in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. They are historically important as examples of the type of New England Congregationalism adopted by new frontier communities immediately preceding the American Revolution.

The Covenant consists of six articles. The first deals with the Trinity, emphasizing the personal relationship that exists between the individual believer and each of the three Persons, and that is "revealed to each . . . by the Holy Spirit of Promise." The members agree to submit themselves "to the Word and Spirit of God." Article II logically, deals with the obligations arising from the Word of God, especially those having to do with "the Increase of our Faith, and Growth in Holiness, and of maintaining a good Conscience; namely Gospel Preaching, mutual Exhortation, and the Ordinances of Prayer,

Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and Singing of Psalms and Hymns." In the third Article, which later gave rise to bitter feeling and much internal discord in the church, the members undertook "to watch over one another . . . in daily frequent Exhortations to Duty"; and in "Admonitions in Case of Sin and Failing".

Article IV is lifted almost word for word from the classic expression of the New England Way, the tenth chapter of the *Cambridge Platform*. It emphasizes the prerogative of the church to admit members, to choose officers and ordain them "in Case of real Necessity, and where a Scripture Presbytery cannot be obtained", and to remove both officers and members in case of grave scandal, "or any Thing that by the Rule of the Scriptures, renders them unfit therefor". Christ has also entrusted the church with the privilege of "supporting the Gospel Ministry, Ordinances, and the Poor of the Church, without using the civil Sword, or coercive Means to force Men thereto".

Article V deals with Christian conduct and behaviour and is an interesting example of Nova Scotian Puritanism.

We do also promise that, by the Grace of God, we will oppose all Sin and Error wherever they appear, both in our selves and others, as far as in us lies; namely, All foolish Talking and Jesting, and Wantonness; All vain Disputing about Words and Things that gender Strife, and doth not edify to more Godliness: also vain Company-keeping and spending Time idly, at Taverns and Tippling-Houses, or elsewhere: Evil Whispering or Backbiting of any Person: also carnal and unnecessary Discourse about Worldly Things, especially on the Sabbath Day; . . . And all other Sins whatsoever, both of Omission and Commission.

In the final article of the covenant, these ten men and one woman, met together in Mr. Daniel Crocker's kitchen, in that lonely outpost of church and empire, promised to teach their children "to know God, to fear him, and to live in his Ways", and so provided for the perpetuation of their venture and faith. The influence of the *Cambridge Platform* is apparent throughout the Jebogue Covenant, yet John Frost and his church were not mere imitators. Their covenant is more a digest of the essential tenets of Congregationalism than a copy of its platform.

The Confession of Faith which accompanied the Covenant is really a digest of the Westminster Confession of Faith and of the Larger Catechism. The phrases are the same, but their order is sometimes changed for the sake of brevity or clarity. The

chapters of the Westminster Confession relating to Oaths, Civil Magistrates, Marriage, the Communion of Saints and Church Censures and Councils are omitted altogether. Some of the more controversial doctrines of the Westminster Confession, such as the parts of the third and tenth chapters that deal with the divine decrees and effectual calling, are softened somewhat, but on the whole the Jebogue Confession is solid Calvinism, stressing the sovereignty of God, the fall and depravity of man, the election and perseverance of the saints, and the imputed righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of salvation. Curiously enough, the parts of the Westminster Confession that deal with the assurance of grace, so dear to the hearts of the early Puritans, are entirely missing from this grim eighteenth-century, Nova Scotian document. The Church of Jebogue could offer nothing more of comfort and assurance to its lonely and tormented congregation than the assurance that "as God chose some to everlasting Life and Glory, so the Means necessary for their Arrival at Glory and Blessedness, were absolutely determined. The Rest of Mankind God was pleased in his Sovereignty to pass by, and leave them to receive the just Reward due them for their Sins".

The "Uneasiness and Disaffection" educed at the formation of the Jebogue Church resulted in some delay in the actual ordination of John Frost. For almost two years the matter was allowed to drift, amid "many hard and bitter Things . . . vented by both Parties to the great Dishonour of God, and the Hurt and Wounding of Religion". Even the church members themselves were not agreed on the steps that should be taken. Article IV of their covenant provided that "in Case of real Necessity, and where a Scripture Presbytery cannot be obtained", the church might proceed to ordain its own officers. There was no doubt that a case of real necessity existed. The prospect of obtaining a minister from New England was almost hopeless, but was there not the possibility of calling "a Scripture Presbytery" to meet in Yarmouth? Elder Moulton was still in the township, and the Reverend Samuel Wood was only forty or fifty miles away at Barrington. Furthermore, for almost two years there had been another Congregational church in Yarmouth township under the leadership of the Reverend Nehemiah Porter.<sup>2</sup> Could not these three ministers meet in

2. Mr. Porter graduated from Harvard in 1745 and from 1749 to 1766, was pastor of the First Church of Essex, Mass. He left Nova Scotia in 1771 to become pastor of the First Church of Ashfield, Mass., and was subsequently famous as a chaplain with the continental army.

council and ordain a pastor for the Jebogue church? It was on this question that the Strict Congregationalist or Newlight views of John Frost became most obtrusive. He was convinced that outside ministerial assistance was unnecessary and that it would be better for the Christian brethren of Jebogue to ordain their own pastor, than to suffer "unconverted" ministers to lay their hands upon his head.

Squire Frost gained his own way only at the cost of splitting his tiny church. Two members and almost all of the society, or congregation, withdrew and invited Elder Moulton to preach to them on the next Lord's Day. Undismayed, the remnant proceeded with their plans. A day of fasting and prayer was set, when hearts were searched and the covenant carefully reviewed. Four laymen, Esquire John Crawley, Deacon James Robbins, Mr. Daniel Crocker and Mr. Moses Scott were chosen to conduct the service and to participate in the act of ordination.

On September 21, 1769, in the presence of a serious and tense audience of humble fisher folk, these four men offered prayer and, laying their hands upon John Frost's head, ordained him "to the Pastoral Office over them". A solemn charge to the new minister was delivered by one of the members of the church, and the first Protestant ordination service in Canada was over.

If the Jebogue brethren hoped that the act of ordination would change either John Frost or the disaffected members of the congregation, they were sadly mistaken. The new minister, in the words of worthy old Jonathan Scott, simply "did not have the Gifts to edify others as a publick Teacher". The church continued in its broken state, and violent recriminations were hurled back and forth between the various factions. Within three months of his ordination, a request for supply having been received from the religious society at Argyle, the Reverend John Frost intimated his desire to relinquish his charge. On this question there seems to have been no division. The church members agreed that their pastor should go to Argyle and that a young farmer named Jonathan Scott should conduct public worship and preach in the meeting house at Jebogue.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Frost continued to preach and farm and to perform his duties as Justice of the Peace at Argyle until his death in 1779.<sup>4</sup>

3. Jonathan Scott who became the most outstanding champion of orthodoxy and order in the Congregational Churches of Nova Scotia during the next twenty years, was a native of Lunenburg, Mass. From 1796 to 1819 he was pastor of the Congregational Church at Minot, Me. He was one of the founders of the Maine Missionary Society (1807).

4. In 1775 Mr. Frost was deprived of his magistrate's office for expressing the hope, during one of his sermons, that "the British forces in America might be returned to England confuted and confused," *Minutes of Council*, August 23, 1775.

The significance of the ordination of John Frost has never been recognized. Perhaps because of its unconventionality and the tendency towards separatism it implied, or perhaps simply because of the remoteness and smallness of the community involved, it was soon lost in the oblivion to which history must consign the greater part of human actions. Nevertheless, that humble act of faith and defiance on the part of the Church of Jebogue has significance as an example of the way in which the New England settlers clung to the ways of Congregationalism and adapted them to the religious needs of the frontier. The liberty claimed by them to choose and in case of necessity to ordain was a direct inheritance by way of Plymouth, Mass., from the Separatists and Independents of Scrooby Manor. Although the ordination of John Frost was soon forgotten, the need for, and the tradition, of independency remained strong in the Pre-Loyalist settlements of Nova Scotia, and after the Great Awakening of 1776 resulted in the spectacular growth of Baptist congregations in the province.

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