

John Wise: In Defense of Sacred Liberty

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Although John Wise was incredibly influential on numerous aspects of life in New England in the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, the majority of his ministry was spent faithfully serving his small congregation of Chebacco Parish in Ipswich, Massachusetts. This preference for a simple life over a life of prominence is reflective of Wise's humble beginnings; his father Joseph Wise immigrated to the colonies in 1635 as an indentured servant, and was freed upon the death of his master. Joseph soon married Mary Thompson, and John was born the fifth of thirteen children. As a boy, Wise attended the "Free Schoole" of Roxbury and was a member of the church of John Eliot, who was known as the "Apostle to the Indians." He began his studies at Harvard in 1669, as the first son of an indentured servant to be admitted, and graduated in 1673. He was then called to a church in Branford, Connecticut and spent the next several years serving various churches in the area, as well as serving as a chaplain in King Philip's War. After his military service, Wise primarily ministered in Hatfield, Massachusetts, from 1677 to 1682, where he met and married Abigail Gardner. In 1682, Wise began his primary ministerial position serving Chebacco Parish, a recently established second congregation in Ipswich, Massachusetts.

When Wise began his ministry in Chebacco, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was facing serious political instability. Edward Randolph, an agent of the English Lords of Trade, was sent to the colony to collect representatives on behalf of the colony to answer a charge of violating the Navigation Acts. In 1684, just two years after Wise accepted his formal position, the Royal Charter was officially revoked and a new government was installed. Under the command of the Duke of York, who was wary of popular representation and believed that no colonial assembly was necessary, the new Governor Edmund Andros arrived in 1686 and immediately began to enforce a long list of royal requirements. Among these changes were the invalidation of land

titles, taking over the local Old South Meetinghouse for use as an Episcopal chapel, and requiring strict adherence to the Navigation Acts, which particularly harmed the economy of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Chief among these issues were the new tax laws Andros created and signed into law on March 3, 1687, which required “all male residents sixteen years old and upwards to pay a poll tax of twenty pence and a tax of a penny a pound on all property real or personal.”¹ The primary colonial complaint was not the rate at which the tax was fixed, but that it had been established without the use of town meetings or the input of representatives of the people. The people were required to next choose a tax commissioner in each town to collect the newly levied taxes the following November, but many towns strongly opposed the idea of complying with Andros’s demands.

The chief voice in this opposition was the small town of Ipswich, for which it has been noted “one of the most notable cases of resistance in colonial times.”² As a prominent influence in the town, John Wise was at the forefront of this resistance. The leaders of Ipswich held a meeting on August 22, 1687, and decided to stand against the Andros regime by refusing to elect a tax commissioner. When Wise addressed the townspeople at an open meeting the following day, he reminded the people that they “had a good God, & a good King, and Should Do Well to Stand for...[their] previledges.”³ The town of Ipswich, led by Wise, composed a formal letter of noncompliance and sent a copy to the Governor’s Council. The Andros Government received similar actions from several towns, and Andros decided to enforce his authority via arrests of leading rebels. Wise was served an arrest order and brought before a temporary court on October 3 with five others from Ipswich. They “all answered not guilty to the charge of contempt and

¹ George Allen Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, (Chicago, IL: Barakaldo Books, 2001), 72

² Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 73

³ Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 48

high misdemeanor...[but] a packed jury...returned them all guilty.”⁴ Wise was fined the highest sum of any arrested, served several weeks in jail, and was temporarily banned from the ministry. A month later, Wise was allowed to return to preaching when the Ipswich townspeople turned in the owed tax money along with a petition for Wise’s ban to be lifted. Wise also played a role in the final days of the Andros regime after the Glorious Revolution, as he was one of two elected deputies from Ipswich sent to the General Court prosecuting Andros and his officers in May of 1689.

Wise then returned to a quiet life of ministry in Chebacco Parish, reemerging into public prominence only on the occasions of fierce debate and strife in the colonies. One of these times occurred in the early 1690s, as New England was swept by the events of the Salem Witch Trials. These trials were centered in Essex County, where both Salem and Ipswich were located. On August 5, 1692, Wise submitted a petition of 32 community signatures pleading for the pardon of John and Elizabeth Proctor, who had been accused by their servant girl of witchcraft: “But as what we have ever seen or heard of them, upon our consciences we judge them innocent of the crime objected... We speak upon our personal acquaintance and observations, and so leave our neighbors, and this our testimony on their behalf, to the wise thoughts of your honors, and subscribe, etc.”⁵ Wise also signed a commendation of Increase Mather’s writings against “spectral evidence,” the ambiguous and unreliable method of condemning a person of witchcraft that became widespread in New England. Toward the end of the Salem Witch Trials, Wise also signed an address to the General Court which petitioned to excuse the “infamy and reproach” from the legacies of those charged with witchcraft. As a result of his fearlessness and willingness to speak up against injustice, a prominent historian of the Salem Witch Trials described Wise as

⁴ Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 93

⁵ David Goss, *Documents of the Salem Witch Trials*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2018), Document 81, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=053938ff-c25c-3991-b8dd-d3cde7f45fe9>

“a learned, able, and enlightened man. He h[a]d a free spirit, and was perhaps the only minister in the neighborhood or country, who was discerning enough to see the erroneousness of the proceedings from the beginning.”⁶ In addition, Wise was one of few ministers to support the innovation of smallpox inoculation, a movement led by the Mathers. Wise was also a supporter of note-singing and opposed the proposition to move away from paper money in the colonies. Despite his involvement in these important issues of his time, Wise for the majority of his career was satisfied to remain quietly working among his congregation in Chebacco, emerging into public prominence only to argue for an issue that caused disunity or carried great importance in the colony. For nearly 20 years following the Salem Witch Trials, Wise remained out of the public eye and quietly engaged in caring for his congregation. He reemerged to participate in the debate which has established his legacy as a zealous proponent for congregational liberty and a source of inspiration for the Founding Fathers.

The source of Wise’s legacy was the lengthy intellectual battle between John Wise and the Mathers that occupied for the final twenty years of Wise’s life. It centered around Wise’s opposition to the *Proposals*, which were created by the Mathers and other prominent figures and approved by the Boston Ministerial Convention in 1706. The Ministerial Convention emerged from an annual gathering of Massachusetts ministers who came together at the same time as the convention of the General Court, “which had begun in the informal coming together of the ministers in the earliest days of the colony and had crystallized sufficiently by about 1680 to have a moderator, a dinner, and a sermon.”⁷ The impetus of the *Proposals* began with the withdrawal of the colonial charter in 1684, which disrupted the established order of clerical authority and began a period of unrest and frequent instability in New England churches. In an

⁶ Clinton L. Rossiter, "JOHN WISE: COLONIAL DEMOCRAT," *New England Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1949): 9. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/john-wise-colonial-democrat/docview/1290846683/se-2>.

⁷ Rossiter, "JOHN WISE: COLONIAL DEMOCRAT," 20.

effort to combat this feeling of instability, a group of prominent ministers who would become known as the “Presbyterian Party” comprised of Samuel Willard, Ebenezer Pemberton, Cotton Mather, and six others, met in Boston in September of 1705 and drafted sixteen proposals to be presented to the Ministerial Convention. These proposals

would have imposed a form of government upon the hitherto autonomous churches of the colony...the centralizing plans of the Mather group...would have worked substantial alterations in the congregational quality of colonial New England. It was a pronounced step towards union and conciliar control, and thus hostile to the principle of autonomy and the local churches.⁸

The proposals stemmed from Benjamin Colman’s work “Proposals for promoting and settling an universall correspondence among protestant centers... Of the United Brethren, which is to be extended to all the continent of English America”⁹ and evolved via letters circulated among various regions through 1704 and 1705. The final form of these ideas, the *Proposals*, primarily suggested the establishment of a council to oversee and discipline member churches, with the aim of drawing various churches in closer unity and allowing more active control of individual congregations by the Ministerial Convention. The primary recommendation was the widespread formation of associations to convene at appropriate times to “consider such things as made properly lie before them relating to their own faithfulness to each other and the common interest of the churches.”¹⁰ The first half of the *Proposals* detailed that the association would primarily be

⁸ Rossiter, “JOHN WISE: COLONIAL DEMOCRAT,” 11.

⁹ John Oakes, “Beyond the ‘Democrat’/‘Conservative’ Dichotomy: John Wise Reconsidered” (*The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 3, 2015), 488. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24718223>.

¹⁰ John Wise, *The churches quarrel espoused, or, A reply in satyre, to certain proposals made, in answer to this question, What further steps are to be taken, that the councils may have due constitution and efficacy in supporting, preserving and well ordering the interest of the churches in the country?* (Printed and sold by William Bradford in N. York, 1713), 3.
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N01398.0001.001>

responsible for calling councils and recommending ministry. The second half of the proposals, more drastically proposed that councils would have the right to “inquire into the Condition of the Churches, and advise such things as may be for the advantage of our holy religion.” In addition, “the determinations of the Councils thus Provided, for the necessities of the Churches, are to be looked upon as final and decisive” on issues presented by member churches. Most descriptive of this proposed power is the example that if “a particular church will not be reclaimed... from... gross disorders,” councils had the authority to declare that congregation “no longer fit for communion with the churches of the faithful,”¹¹ effectively giving this group power to excommunicate the entirety of a congregation it had no personal connection to.

John Wise vehemently opposed these *Proposals*, and many small congregations were hesitant to submit to this subversion of the congregational independence they had been accustomed to. The proposals were not adopted in most church governments, and Wise and other opponents of the *Proposals* were satisfied with this suppression. However, the issue arose once again when the *Saybrook Platform*, which was heavily based on the *Proposals*, was adopted by the churches of Connecticut in 1708. Wise began composing his first major work, *The Church's Quarrel Espoused* (1710), in response. This work was entitled in full “*The Churches Quarrel Espoused, or, A Reply in Satyre, to Certain Proposals Made, in Answer to This Question, What Further Steps are to be Taken, That the Councils May Have Due Constitution and Efficacy in Supporting, Preserving and Well Ordering the Interest of the Churches in the Country?*” As evident in the title, Wise’s style in this work was primarily satirical, as he systematically addresses and discredits each of the proposals. Wise also displays his humility as he specifies that “I solely aim at Error, that is the But *I* Level for...not to any base intent of sinking the

¹¹ John Wise, *The churches quarrel espoused*, 5-8

honour, or darkening the Luster of better men.”¹² Instead of directly attacking the authors of the work, whom he sided with in many previous controversies, Wise addresses the individual reader as the “fraternity” and “brethren” of New England churches, stating that the rights of the fraternity were “so peculiarly the theme and subject” and that his purpose is to write “in defense of their sacred Liberties.”¹³

In modern scholarship, Wise is primarily discussed in terms of his influence on the Founding Fathers’ political thought. In *The Churches Quarrel Espoused*, Wise defends the present church government as an emulation of the English civil system, stating that

By the suffrage of our Nation, that Government which sensibly Clogs Tyranny, and Preserves the Subject free from slavery, under the ambition of men of great Fortune and Trust, is the only gover[n]ment in the state, to advance mens temporal Happiness; and we in the Country Honour the Resolve in Civil Affairs, and also affirm (upon great Experience) that such a Constitution in Church Government is (also) the only way to advance Grace and Mans Eternal Happiness.¹⁴

In this argument, Wise claims that a proper church government should mirror the civil government of the English system, which ideally serves to preserve individual liberties; as this system advances man’s “temporal happiness,” its mirror in the church system serves to advance man’s “eternal happiness.” Wise further draws on English precedent to argue that there is no legitimate legal precedent for the creation of state church councils, by describing seven “Principles of the English Government” which he compared to “great Arteries in Nature, which Circulate the Blood and Spirits through the Imperial Body.”¹⁵ This first major work displays both

¹² Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 168

¹³ Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 169

¹⁴ Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 169

¹⁵ John Wise, *The Churches Quarrel Espoused*, 116

Wise's passionate stance against any theological diversion from the Congregational tradition and his political thought that would influence succeeding generations.

In 1717, Wise published his second major work entitled *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*. This work moved beyond *The Church's Quarrel Espoused*, which had been negatively aimed at a specific and timely controversy, to instead give a positive systematic *apologia* of ecclesiastical democracy. Wise organized his work according to five sources of authority upon which he based his argument, and which are summed up in his opening lines:

"The Constitution of New-England CHURCHES, as settled by their Platform, may be fairly Justified, from Antiquity; The Light of Nature; Holy Scripture; and from the Noble and Excellent Nature of the Constitution it self. And lastly from the Providence of God dignifying of it."¹⁶

Wise called upon these authorities to establish his argument for the traditional Congregationalist structure of New England churches as it was established by the *Cambridge Platform* of 1648, the "constitution" to which Wise ascribes an "Excellent Nature" in his opening remarks above. The Cambridge Platform was established in 1648, when New England elders convened for the purpose of "the maintenance of the faith...[and] the holding forth of Unity & Harmony."¹⁷ Of ecclesiastical authority, it stated that "there is no greater Church than a Congregation" and a later convention in 1662 of the same leaders further asserted that

Every church, or particular congregation of visible saints, in gospel order, being furnished with a presbytery, at least with a teaching elder, and walking together in truth and peace, hath received from the Lord Jesus full power and authority, ecclesiastical within itself

¹⁶ John Wise, *A vindication of the government of New-England churches. Drawn from antiquity; the light of nature; Holy Scripture; its noble nature; and from the dignity Divine Providence has put upon it* (Boston, Printed by J. Allen, for N. Boone, at the Sign of the Bible in Cornhill, 1717), 1.

¹⁷ Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 136

regularly to administer all the ordinances of Christ, and is not under any other ecclesiastical jurisdiction whatsoever.¹⁸

It is this platform upon which Wise stood, both as a source of authority and as the definition of proper church government. Wise was willing to speak forcefully against what he viewed as dangerous attempts to stray from this model of New England religion.

As seen in the tax debate, other controversies, and his firm stance against the *Proposals*, Wise is often hailed as an early colonial democrat by modern scholars, and a strong influence on the political thought of the Founding Fathers. One aspect of this is his early exposition of what would become known as the social compact theory, which heavily influenced the American founding. This theory can be found in *A Vindication* as Wise states that

Every Man considered in a Natural State, must be allowed to be Free, and at his own dispose; yet to suit Mans Inclinations to Society; And in a peculiar manner to gratify the necessity he is in of publick Rule and Order, he is Impelled to enter into a Civil Community; and Divests himself of his Natural Freedom, and puts himself under Government...he is driven to a Combination.¹⁹

Wise is often referenced in modern scholarship as the founder of American democracy and an integral source of the Founding Fathers' revolutionary spirit. As Rossiter argues, "A relentless warrior for both ecclesiastical and political democracy, [Wise] was a companion-at-arms to all the Separatists who had gone before and to all the Revolutionists who were to come after."²⁰

However, other scholars posit that Wise was merely holding true to the Puritan and Congregationalist concepts that had long been tradition in the colonies; using nontraditional sources in some cases, but nevertheless arguing for adherence to the old instead of revolutionary

¹⁸ Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat*, 137

¹⁹ John Wise, *A vindication*, 43

²⁰ Rossiter, "JOHN WISE: COLONIAL DEMOCRAT," 3-4

ideas. As Oakes declares in opposition to Rossiter, “Wise sought to uphold the rights of “free-born Englishmen,” rights that extended back to the Magna Carta. Just as he thought them politically guaranteed by the British Constitution, he saw them ecclesiastically reflected in the Congregationalism of the Cambridge Platform.”²¹ The solution to this controversy is likely found in the examination of the true nature of the American Revolution: were the early Americans *revolting* in the sense of establishing a new and unique order of government, or were they *rebellious* in the sense of protesting the aspects of English rule that were straying from foundational English principles? Rossiter would claim the former, while Oakes would argue for the latter, and each would claim John Wise as a source of inspiration for their version of the American Revolution.

Nevertheless, it remains true that Wise’s work in both ecclesiastical and political thought is foundational in gaining a broader understanding of the historical and theological climate of the early 18th century. His defense against Andros’s resistance provides either an inspiration or parallel to the “no taxation without representation” cry of the Revolutionary War, and his spirit of boldness and willingness to devote himself to crucial controversies was carried on in the spirit of early America. His refutation of the *Proposals* in *The Churches Quarrel Espoused* and his systematic defense of Congregationalist tradition in *A Vindication* are awarded high esteem among scholars and historians of this time period. John Wise has earned the praise of one scholar’s assertion that “[Wise was] the one American who, upon the whole, was the most powerful and brilliant prose-writer produced in this country during the Colonial time.”²²

²¹ John Oakes, “Beyond the ‘Democrat’/‘Conservative’ Dichotomy: John Wise Reconsidered,” 505.

²² M. C. Tyler, *History of American Literature*, (N. Y., 1897), II, 104. Essex Institute Historical Collections (vol. 1, no. 60, 1859)