Wise, John Encyclopedia Article

Wise, John

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Contents

Wise, John Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Wise, John.....3

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WISE, JOHN (1652–1725), Congregational clergyman and proponent of ecclesiastical liberty in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. A graduate of Harvard College in 1673, Wise by the end of the 1670s had settled in the town of Ipswich as its parish minister, remaining in that capacity and locale until his death. Wise is remembered chiefly for his defense of a pure "congregational" polity, each local church being left free to conduct its own affairs without hindrance or help from "higher" or more numerous clerical authorities. In *The Churches Quarrel Espoused* (1710) and again in *A Vindication of the Government of New-England Churches* (1717), Wise ridiculed the notion that pastors were unable to lead their own flocks, perform their proper duties, or steadily "steer in all weather that Blows." It was quite unnecessary, he argued, and indeed potentially dangerous, to resort to councils or synods—to consociations or committees—to "advise" or "assist" the independent congregation. If people cannot direct their own worship, he continued, perhaps they are incapable even of choosing their own spouses. Some may even think that a committee is needed to "direct all Wooers in their Choice for the Marriage Bed; for that there is many a fond Lover who has betrayed the glory of Wedlock by making an unwise and unfortunate Choice; and why not particular Beds be overruled, as well as particular Churches?"

With such wit joined with even more convincing arguments from antiquity, from nature, and from Christian scripture, Wise argued narrowly for the congregational way, but he also argued broadly for local rule and individual liberty. That Wise's plea for ecclesiastical liberty had inescapable implications for civil liberty found explicit recognition in the republication in 1772 of both works noted above. After the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), the Townshend acts (1767), and the Boston Massacre (1770), New Englanders welcomed the assurance that a natural person is "a Free-Born Subject under the Crown of Heaven, and owing Homage to none but God Himself."

Bibliography

The only modern biography of John Wise is George A. Cook's *John Wise: Early American Democrat* (New York, 1952, 1966). For a fuller assessment of Wise's significance, see Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953).