

John Howard Smith, "Sober Dissent' and 'Spirited Conduct': The Sandemanians and the American Revolution, 1765-1781" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 28, No. 2 (Summer 2000).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Editor, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*
c/o Westfield State University
577 Western Ave. Westfield MA 01086



**“SOBER DISSENT” AND “SPIRITED CONDUCT”:
THE SANDEMANIANS AND THE AMERICAN
REVOLUTION, 1765-1781**

By

John Howard Smith

We think every Christian must be a loyal Subject, submitting himself in civil Concerns to every Ordinance of Man for the Lord's sake, punctually regarding the Rules laid down [in] Rom. xiii. 1-7, 1 Peter ii. 13-17. This was required of the Disciples and Churches, when they were under a tyrannical and persecuting Government; and it cannot be less a Duty, under the present mild and peaceable one.

Samuel Pike, *A plain and full account of the Christian practices of the Church in St. Martin's-le-Grand* (Boston, 1766)

Hopetill Capen spent the night of 6 August 1776 in a Boston jail cell pondering his predicament as a prisoner of conscience. Because his religious beliefs demanded nonviolence and obedience to civil authority, Capen felt it his duty to remind his fellow Bostonians that resistance to Parliament's edicts were impolitic at best, and treasonous at worst. Capen joined other Boston Loyalists in signing petitions condemning the violence of the Sons of Liberty and the raising of local militias, as well as adding his name to several appeals to Governor Thomas Hutchinson and his successor, General Thomas Gage, proclaiming loyalty and willingness to take up arms to maintain civic order. Capen, as a member of this Boston Association of Loyalists, became a target for the Patriot

authorities assuming government in the wake of the British evacuation, who arrested and imprisoned him. In a conciliatory petition to the Court of Inquiry for release, Capen averred that

...had I not been check'd by the command of God... to be subject to the Higher Powers... I should have been one of the foremost in opposing the measure of the British Parliament... neither do I think myself in any ways bound in conscience to become an informer against my country... but to be subject to all the laws that are made that are not contrary to the laws of my Maker.¹

Capen was a member of a small, pietist Presbyterian sect known as the Sandemanians, and his attitude is typical of the Sandemanians' uncomfortable position before and during the American Revolution. The activities of Capen and several of his co-religionists in Boston, however, were decidedly atypical and stand in contrast to the behavior of Sandemanians throughout the rest of New England. They underscore the serious tensions within the sect, and in a larger sense reflect the complicated pattern of clefs in American society which made the Revolutionary War a bitter colonial civil war.

The Sandemanians originated in Scotland, where a minister by the name of John Glas (1695-1773) came to divergent conclusions regarding Calvinist doctrine and Presbyterian ecclesiology. Breaking from the Scottish Kirk, Glas believed that the absolute authority of the Scriptures was obvious only to the elect, who inevitably exhibit evidence of God's grace through the performance of good works.² A profession of faith was insufficient evidence of election for Glas. There had to be "charity, the fruit of faith, and the work and labour of that charity or love, without which there is no Christianity."³ Basing his doctrines on the primitive Christianity of the early Church, Glas felt that the Church of Christ was a

¹ Hopestill Capen, Petition to Court of Inquiry, 29 August 1776, Broadside, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Quoted with permission.

² John Glas, *The Works of Mr. John Glas*, 2nd ed., Vol. 11 (Perth, 1782-83), 136.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. V, 213.

mystical body composed of all true believers and therefore should not be bound by any league or covenant. The Glasite church was thus a highly Christocentric body repudiating the establishment of synods and presbyteries.⁴ This affront to ecclesiastical hierarchy did not sit well with the Synod of Angus and Meams, which censured its wayward brother. Glas, adamant in his beliefs, refused to recant or keep silent and was subsequently expelled from his pulpit by the General Assembly on 12 May 1730. Though eventually reinstated as “a minister of Jesus Christ,” he remained barred from the Scottish Kirk.⁵

The Glasites slowly increased their numbers, and Glas found a right-hand-man in his son-in-law and elder of the Glasite congregation at Perth, Robert Sandeman (1718-71).⁶ Encouraged by letters from American supporters, Sandeman convinced Glas that an America still trembling from the Great Awakening would prove an ideal place to spread the new word. However, disturbed by the heady emotionalism that accompanied the itinerant sermons of George Whitefield, the Tennents and John Davenport, Sandeman composed a number of tracts severely criticizing the enthusiasm of “popular preachers” who suggested that human endeavor can lead to grace.⁷ His objective was to

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 188; Vol. 111, 262. This hinges upon Glas’ interpretation of Matthew 16:18, in which Christ seems to grant authority to Peter. In I Peter 2:4-9 he disavows his authority over the Church and places it forever in Christ’s hands. What brought Glas to this conclusion was his presbytery’s disallowing him to appoint one of his elders to minister in his stead when he was leaving his church for an extended period.

⁵ Williston Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, American Historical Association Annual Report for 1901 (Washington, D.C., 1902), 136. See also John Glas, *A narrative of the rise and progress of the controversy about the national covenants* (Edinburgh, 1728-30; reprint Dundee, 1828), for a full, though subjective, account of the disputes and the proceedings against him. Glas’s radicalism can be better understood in the context of radical Presbyterianism and Quakerism in southwestern Scotland. See also G. D. Henderson, *Religious Life in Seventeenth Century Scotland* (Cambridge, 1937); Gordon Donaldson, “Scotland’s Conservative North in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Ser., XVI (1966), 65-80.

⁶ Their numbers were never great. Sandeman noted in a 1764 letter to Ezra Stiles that the Glasites had nine churches in Scotland and nine in England, with a total membership of approximately 800. Sandeman quoted in Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, 142.

⁷ The most famous of these is *Letters on Theron and Aspasio* (Edinburgh, 1757), which was a response to James Hervey’s *Dialogues between Theron and Aspasio* (1755). He

reinvigorate the rationalism that had once defined the Presbyterian Church in the colonies. With Glas's blessing, Sandeman and James Cargill, an elder of the Dunkeld congregation, sailed for Boston in August 1764, where they struggled to find an audience. After a disappointing week they settled in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where they successfully founded the First Church of Christ in 1765 before returning to Boston to finally establish a congregation meeting at Edward Foster's house. Sandeman urged quietism, pacifism, and submission to civil government, exhorting his followers to live peaceably and unobtrusively in harmony with the community and the government. By 1770 the Disciples of Christ, as they called themselves, had established congregations in several of New England's coastal cities, where most members were moderately successful artisans and merchants.⁸

In terms of doctrine, there seems little to separate Sandemanians from Congregationalists, but their peculiar public behavior and the details of their liturgical practices invited scrutiny and comment. They rejected a paid ministry, each congregation led by various elders elected from the congregation, which was composed only of confirmed members. Both elders delivered sermons, while various deacons read from the Bible and led prayers. Psalms were sung throughout, and each service concluded with the Lord's Supper. Following the Sunday morning service and before the evening meeting came the *agape*, or "Love Feast," held in various members' houses at which all were to attend and contribute a dish. Most unusual were the practices of kissing,⁹ foot-washing, and an insular, communitarian philosophy. Sandemanians were not to participate in government at any level or accumulate earthly

was especially critical of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and John Wesley. See *Ibid*, 137-39, 149.

⁸ Exact figures on the number of communicants is difficult to ascertain. Sandemanian churches had been established in Portsmouth, Boston, Danbury, Providence (R.I.), New Haven, Bethel (CT), Newtown, and one briefly existed in York, Maine. Jean F. Hankins estimates that there were never more than a hundred total Sandemanians at any given time. Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, 150-57; Jean F. Hankins, "A Different Kind of Loyalist: The Sandemanians of New England during the Revolutionary War," *New England Quarterly* (Jul. 1987), 224.

⁹ They were popularly known as the "Kissites" on account of their practice of greeting one another with kisses. Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, 148.

wealth; as such temporal matters were dangerously distracting.¹⁰ Congregations made no decisions without unanimous ratification, and the threat of excommunication discouraged dissent from the majority view. Perhaps not surprisingly, these churches remained quite small and prone to internal tensions. As the Reverend Doctor Samuel Langdon noted to Ezra Stiles in 1766: "I am persuaded [that] if they are not drove firm together by some kind of persecution, they will soon grow lax & disjointed by jealousies & quarrels among themselves."¹¹

Throughout the pre-Revolutionary period, Sandemanians came under increasing scrutiny from their neighbors for not joining in the popular protests against Parliament's measures, which appeared to violate Americans' constitutional rights as Englishmen. When the Stamp Act was passed in 1765 and the tumults began in earnest, Nathaniel Barrell, an elder of the Portsmouth church, predicted that, regarding those he believed were advocating sedition, "Christ will come in flaming fire to take Vengeance on all who know not God and Obey not the Gospel."¹² Benjamin Davis, Sr. of Boston was engaged in merchant trading with his brother, Edward, until Edward's refusal to sign the Non-Importation Agreement (1768) caused Benjamin to dissolve their partnership.¹³ In New Haven, Benedict Arnold and the Sons of Liberty vandalized the houses of Sandemanians who dared to speak out against "the outrageous conduct of the destroyers of the tea in Boston harbor."¹⁴ Edward Foster, a Boston blacksmith and host to the first Sandemanian meetings, made no secret of his loyalty, and when Boston Light was seriously damaged by a Patriot mob on the night of 20 July 1775, he

¹⁰ Robert Sandeman to Thomas Fowler, 31 Dec. 1759, in Robert Sandeman, et al., *Letters in Correspondence* (Dundee, Scotland, 1851), 41-42; Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, 144, 148.

¹¹ Samuel Langdon to Ezra Stiles, 17 Sept. 1766, quoted in Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, Franklin B. Dexter, ed., Vol. 2 (New York, 1901), 171n.

¹² Nathaniel Barrell to unknown, 19 Jun. 1766, Sandeman-Barrell Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Used with permission.

¹³ E. Alfred Jones, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts: Their Memorials, Petitions and Claims* (London, 1930), 113.

¹⁴ Samuel Peters, *General History of Connecticut*, Samuel Jarvis McCormick, ed. (London, 1781; reprint, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1970), 267-68.

volunteered his and his employees' assistance to the British army, repairing the lighthouse in just two days.¹⁵ The majority of Sandemanians, however, were prudently silent during these unstable times, preferring to practice their faith discretely without attracting attention. Among the prominent exceptions to this rule stood Nathaniel Barrell's brother Colburn, a Portsmouth merchant-trader who had recently been named an elder of the Sandemanian congregation in Boston. Colburn Barrell was more demonstrative in his loyalism, as were several others in the city. Overall, the behavior of the Boston Sandemanians was exceptional.

Barrell originally signed the Non-Importation Agreement, but later withdrew his support, after which he was apparently slandered by the popular press. Barrell published a letter of 13 November 1769 in the December issue of the *Boston Chronicle*, in which he detailed a deliberate attempt by Boston's Patriot merchants to ruin his business because of his change-of-heart regarding the Agreement. Publishing alongside this letter an earlier one of 6 October, Barrell demonstrated that while he shared in principle the grievances inspiring the Agreement, Barrell harbored second thoughts after initially joining the "Well Disposed Merchants." After describing some practical considerations concerning duties on the goods, the risks of seizure and detention in the Customs House, and the inevitable spoilage of perishables left unsold and in storage, Barrell politely excused himself from the Agreement. He promised, however, not to sell any of the enumerated items until the new year.¹⁶ This did not suit the majority of Boston's merchants who had entered into the "Solemn Agreement," and they apparently took measures to force Barrell either to acquiesce or risk a general boycott of his business and the maligning of his character. He angrily responded by accusing his former colleagues of having coerced him into the joining the "Well Disposed Merchants" in the first place.¹⁷ This was not Barrell's

¹⁵ E. Alfred Jones, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts*, 137.

¹⁶ *Boston Chronicle*, 4-9 Dec. 1769.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Such coercion was not limited to Boston, but was generally widespread. See Michael A. McDonnell, "Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution From Below," *The Journal of American History* 85 (Dec. 1998), 946-81, esp. 959-61, regarding the laboring classes' use of threats to force merchants into signing Non-Importation agreements in Williamsburg.

first public appearance as a Tory. Seeking redress from New Hampshire's governor for Patriot vandalism of one of their houses, the Sandemanians of Portsmouth presented him with a petition signed by six men, two of whom were Colburn and Nathaniel Barrell.¹⁸ Though undoubtedly feeling the brunt of some Patriot abuses, most Sandemanians trusted in the law to render them justice. Colburn Barrell had begun to abandon all hope of winning earthly justice for his inconveniences, and invoked higher powers to his cause.

Barrell continued his use of the press to justify his conduct as a means toward mending his reputation in Boston, where anti-British sentiment was concentrating. In a lengthy letter of 26 October 1769, Barrell expounded upon his obedience to God and King George III, which he regretted had lapsed when he originally signed the Non-Importation Agreement. He also published with it a letter sent to him by a person identifying himself only as "A Protestant" as further proof of the concerted effort to ruin him both personally and financially. Following a long section in which he reiterated the practical reasons for delaying his participation in the "Solemn Agreement," Barrell launched into a bitter invective against those who extolled the virtues of liberty while practicing extortion:

Upon the whole, Gentlemen, I would be far from having any dispute with you on a point of my own interest, tho' I must say it is extreme hard, that in a land where *LIBERTY* is the cry, and where Patrons for it abound, a poor man shall not be suffered quietly to enjoy the benefit of an honest and fair trade, which the very constitution of the nation is admirably adapted to secure to him, thro' the very influence of those who stile [sic] themselves "*The Friends to that most excellent Constitution.*"... But I must plainly tell you; and I do it without any desire to exasperate you, that I have a reason to offer, which is beyond comparison with me, more weighty than any I have yet given, to shew that the

¹⁸ Nathaniel Barrell to Gov. Benning Wentworth, Petition, 9 Jun. 1766, Sandeman-Barrell Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. The other four subscribers were Benjamin Hart, Moses Noble, Nathaniel Rogers, and William Fullerton.

agreement I entered into is of no manner of force, and this is that it was an Unlawful *ASSEMBLY*; --such an agreement as both the laws of my Maker and my Country forbid me to stand to-- I can no ways apologize for my entering into it, but that I was moved by the fears of suffering in my interest, and the terror of my life, or bodily harm from the resentment of an enraged multitude, the power of influencing which, I considered to be in the hands of my inquisitors, but upon cooler thoughts, I think the consequences are much more dreadful to which I expose myself by an act of *Disloyalty to my KING and Disobedience to my MAKER.*¹⁹

Barrell was not going to back down in the face of impending misfortune at the hands of those he was beginning to think of as impious criminals, and the fact that he was waging a public rhetorical battle is inconsistent with quietistic Christianity in general and Sandemanian doctrine in particular.

The letter to Barrell from the Protestant offers a glimpse into the minds of the Boston merchants who, to Barrell's thinking, had singled him out for special retribution for withdrawing from the Agreement. The Protestant implied that at least a part of the merchant community's rancor stemmed from Barrell's high position in a minority Christian sect. However, the bulk of the letter concentrates on the issue of loyalty to God and Country, his argument being that Barrell should not presume to judge either his fellow Bostonians or his countrymen. He also rebuked a pious Christian to return to heavenly contemplation instead of getting involved in a worldly matter, which clearly compromised Barrell's credibility as a Sandemanian:

Be contented therefore with submission, and take care how you abuse others who cannot so patiently suffer to be thought asses or idiots. --Whatever may be your pretences as a divine, it seems assuming too much of the wisdom of this world to take upon you to determine the boundaries of loyalty, treason and rebellion for a whole

¹⁹ *Boston Chronicle*, 7-11 Dec. 1769. The emphases are Barrell's.

continent. Besides your harsh censure of the views of so respectable a body of gentlemen as the merchants of Boston, and your poor evasive excuse for so doing, is scarce consistent with that simplicity which accompanies a conscience void of offence towards God and man.

The Protestant went on to deplore uninformed, blind loyalty to Britain, explaining how such unqualified loyalty encourages “tyrants and traitors.” He asserted that the word of a few fringe-element preachers was insufficient to guide a distressed multitude and was designed as a means toward achieving demagoguery.²⁰ He outlined the various injustices already instituted by Parliament and warned of further abuses to come “while such subverters of the liberties of mankind as [Barrell] and [his] accomplices” preach “the most damnable and treasonable doctrines of unlimited submission and passive obedience.” He concluded his invective by asking, “Are you, Mr. Barrell, apprehensive of no evil consequences from a total overthrow of all public faith and mutual confidence, so indispensably necessary to the very being of society, especially in large communities?”²¹

Barrell then added his own reply concerning the subject of political and civil liberty. Beginning with Montesquieu’s proviso that liberty cannot be unlimited, as such would constitute anarchy, Barrell complained of the abuses he had suffered as a result of his beliefs and his audacity to defend them; a liberty that he thought he enjoyed as a British subject. However, he revealed that he was in the process of being charged by a Grand Jury “for publicly speaking against the country and the clergy,” and denied these charges on the basis that he had not spoken against Parliament or the king. As for his criticism of the clergy, he was speaking only of those ministers who, in his opinion, encouraged a sedition that flew in the face of the Gospels. He concluded by pointing out that Parliament’s fiscal measures, specifically the taxes on tea, paper, glass, and oil, among others, were never the onerous financial burdens that the merchants were contending. Barrell argued that in fact the mark-up colonial merchants attached to necessities from Britain that were not subject to the Non-Importation Agreement, such as woolens, constituted

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

a far greater injustice to the average consumer being denied access to many other goods without their consent, not to mention the potential for putting many American tradesmen and merchants (such as himself) out of business. He ended this final public offering with a wish for a return to the *status quo*.²²

Robert Sandeman learned of this war of words between a Sandemanian elder and the greater part of Boston's merchant community, and took pains to caution his friend against getting wrapped up in any controversy:

I find by the *Boston Chronicle* that you are very closely beset by wicked and unreasonable men, and accordingly stand much in need of the sympathy of your friends; at the same time, I see you need to be reminded of your hazard of forgetting the attention due to *Him* who, when he was reviled, reviled not again. This reflection arises chiefly from your dispute with the Protestant; where you appear somewhat in the light of a provoked combatant, fired with animosity against a single antagonist...²³

Barrell was too much concerned with worldly affairs, in Sandeman's estimation, and he was warned by Sandeman not to allow himself or other Sandemanians to be identified as Tories, which would bring unwanted attention and may lead to greater inconveniences. Instead, he should recall "*the patience and meekness of Christ*" and try to live *as quietly as possible*, especially while you are encompassed on every side

²² Ibid. Adherence to the letter of the Non-Importation Agreement was never unanimous, not even in Boston. Nonetheless, many Americans lost their businesses and trades to the boycotts. See Charles M. Andrews, "The Boston Merchants and the Non-Importation Movement," Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications XIX* (Boston, 1918), 204-06; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* (New York, 1957), chaps. 11-12; Ronald Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1973), 85-87; Charles S. Olton, *Artisans for Independence: Philadelphia Merchants and the American Revolution* (Syracuse, NY, 1975), 29-47; and Billy G. Smith, "Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXXVIII (Apr. 1981), 163-202.

²³ Robert Sandeman to Colburn Barrell, 2 Dec. 1769, in Sandeman, et al., *Letters in Correspondence*, 107.

by wicked men.”²⁴ He reminded Barrell of the mutable quality of governments, and that he must remain flexible on the subject in order that he may adapt should a new situation arise. “In such times it is not our part to rebuke our neighbors for their disloyalty,” he wrote, “but as quietly as possible to preserve our own loyalty till God either strengthen the hands of those in authority or give us new masters.”²⁵

In another letter, Sandeman gently reminded Barrell of the virtues of perseverance achieved through silent endurance and repeated his warning that carrying on a bitter public debate could not only lead to grief for himself, but more ominously affect all Sandemans.²⁶ Barrell could not be content with such passivity, though, and continued to express his opinions, this time from the pulpit. At this point Sandeman’s own thoughts on the matter make an interesting about-face. Rather than insisting upon Barrell’s silence in more emphatic tones appropriate to the authority of a sectarian leader, Sandeman began to bend towards an agreement in principle with some of Barrell’s actions, though he retained his concern that such actions would be misunderstood:

Your first printed paper exposing the unlawful and oppressive conduct of the cabal seemed in some sort necessary... and as I was far from thinking that you said any thing of them beyond what was true, or that you was [sic] any way deficient in point of due respect to them, and as *I have a general bias in favour of spirited conduct*, I was not disposed to find fault with you, but was rather sorry to see you meet with any discouragement from among the brethren... [But] surely it would be a wild project at present to think of persuading the people of Boston to admit the Scripture doctrine about subjection to Government... From all I have said you will see I must have the greater satisfaction among my friends in Boston, the more they study to keep quiet even about their loyalty, and must

²⁴ Ibid., 108. The emphases are Sandeman’s.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Robert Sandeman to Colburn Barrell, 5 Jan. 1770, in Ibid, 110.

have the more entire sympathy in their sufferings[,] the more confident I am that they suffer only for righteousness sake.²⁷

By November of 1770 Barrell had not toned down his rhetoric and was pronouncing acerbic indictments of the Patriot leadership and the Congregationalist clergy allied with them, using his position as a Sandemanian elder to do so. He declared that the citizens of Boston “were disaffected to the Laws of the Land” and were in a state of “open Rebellion, Disobedience, & Disloyalty,” and that the clergy were foremost in “oppugning the Authority of the Laws of the Land.” For this Barrell was himself finally indicted and fined for delivering sermons fomenting loyal resistance, as he had suspected would happen nearly a year before.²⁸

Colburn Barrell vanished from public view from 1771 until 1775, when the outbreak of hostilities compelled him to leave the city. Unable to endure any longer the assaults upon himself, his family, and his property, he decided to move to Philadelphia, which had a large Loyalist community. According to the text of his petition for royal compensation in 1788:

...to avoid the fury of the Sons of violence [Sons of Liberty], he was constrained to send his wife, tho’ in an ill state of health, from Boston to Philadelphia with a Servant, not daring himself to travel openly, and when he did leave Boston it was at Midnight, and he went thro’ the Country in the most private manner, in constant terror lest he should be discovered and insulted.

However, matters did not improve in Philadelphia, so he moved his family to Charleston, South Carolina, “where thro’ the industry of the

²⁷ Robert Sandeman to Colburn Barrell, 13 Jan. 1770, in *Ibid*, 112-13, emphasis added. The Sandeman-Barrell Papers do not contain any letters written by Colburn Barrell to Robert Sandeman, the one-sided aspect of the correspondence and Barrell’s actions leading one to believe that Barrell simply ignored Sandeman’s advice.

²⁸ Massachusetts Supreme Court of Judicature, “Indictment of Colburn Barrell for preaching about rebellion,” Boston, 21 Nov. 1770, Boston Public Library, Chamberlain Collection; Hankins, “A Different Kind of Loyalist,” 232.

same Sons of violence, pointing him out as an addresser of Gov. Hutchinson and Gov. Gage, he was repeatedly on the point of being publicly insulted.” He finally fled to England where he lived in poverty until he decided to return to Philadelphia at the end of the war. He found that all of his property in Boston had been confiscated and resold, and was only able to regain a small portion of it in Connecticut through litigation, after which he then left America for England permanently.²⁹

As the imperial crisis reached its breaking point in 1775, events forced other Sandemanians to declare their position. Taking their cues from the Gospels, they espoused their loyalty to Britain as a ruling authority to which all Christians owed obeisance. Following the outbreak of hostilities that April, over 200 Boston Loyalists formed an Association and drafted a manifesto to General Gage declaring that

We the subscribers considering the present Alarming situation of the Town being now invested by a large body of the people of the Country, and at all times ready to do all in our power for the support of Government and good order and to resist all Lawless Violence, Have voluntarily assembled together and do mutually engage each with the other by this subscription, That in Case the town should be attacked or assaulted or things brought to such emergencies as that our Aid may be thought necessary by the General that we will upon proper notice Assemble together and being supplied with proper Arms and Ammunition will contribute all in our power for the Common safety in Defence of the Town.³⁰

Among the subscribers were at least ten known Sandemanians, four of whom are especially noteworthy: Benjamin Davis, Sr., Edward Foster, Isaac Winslow, Jr., and Hopestill Capen.³¹

²⁹ Petition quoted in E. Alfred Jones, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts*, 22. The original petitions are in the Public Record Office, London.

³⁰ L. Kinvin Wroth, et al., eds., *Province in Rebellion: A Documentary History of the Founding of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1774-1775* (Cambridge, MA, 1975), 2077-81, microfiche.

³¹ The others were John Winslow, Sr., John Winslow, Jr., Isaac Winslow, Sr., Joshua Winslow, Samuel H. Sparbawk, and Colburn Barrell. A copy of the list of “protesters” is

Benjamin Davis, Sr., whose brother Edward had dissolved their partnership over the Non-Importation Agreement, had in 1774 converted his warehouse into a barrack for British soldiers stationed in Boston. This act in and of itself did not stamp him as a Loyalist, for he was merely obeying the letter of the Quartering Act, but that he voluntarily opened an entire warehouse instead of waiting for the provincial government to apportion his property, as many colonials endured, constituted an endorsement of the British military presence in Boston. The alternative was to lodge Redcoats in his house, and that was an unattractive option to even the staunchest of Loyalists.³² Those in the Associated Loyalists who sought the protection of the British Army counted Davis in their number, and he accompanied the forces evacuating the city for Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1776. However, his ship was separated from the main fleet by a storm and was subsequently captured by the Americans, who sent Davis back to Boston to languish in jail until 4 June 1777, when he was released as part of a prisoner exchange. He left Boston for New York in a destitute condition and, unable to revive his fortunes, ended his days in Halifax. Edward Foster, the blacksmith who assisted in the repairs of Boston Light, also left for Halifax with the British troops, where he helped to establish the Sandemanian church there. Looking back on that period in a letter to a friend, he bemoaned the exodus of his co-religionists from their homes and the darkening of the light of pure Christianity from Boston as a result of their pride and folly:

...alas! that goodliest of all sights [the Sandemanian church] is no more to be seen at that place. At this were I not waxed very gross in heart, mine eyes must flow with rivers of tears, whenever i [sic] think on the goodness of God manifested to his people in that place, and the ill returns made Him, whereby he has been provoked to remove the candlestick out of his place; and,

found in the Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, XI, 1869-70 (Boston, 1871), 394-95.

³² See Douglas Edward Leach, *Roots of Conflict: British Armed Forces and Colonial Americans, 1677-1763* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 87-99; John Shy, *Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (Princeton, 1965), 385-91.

oh! what a large share of the guilt is chargeable on
me...³³

Isaac Winslow, Jr., a distiller and rum merchant, like many other Boston Sandemanians felt that he had to publicly demonstrate his loyalty by signing petitions to Governors Hutchinson and Gage, for which he and those identified or suspected as Tories suffered at the hands of the Sons of Liberty. From New Providence a friend wrote to Winslow in 1770 assuring him that “I can most sensibly conceive the uneasiness you feel under the present posture of publick Affairs, and most cordially wish, that all the tumults and animosities occasioned by them were at an end, & that perfect Harmony was restored by measures, the most salutary for America and honourable for Government.”³⁴ Winslow, like most Tories who tasted the wrath of Patriots, managed to keep a low profile and endure the gathering storm of revolution, which by 1774 was becoming more inevitable. From Newport, Simon Pease, one of Winslow’s business associates, intimated his wish for some sort of resolution to bring an end to the troubles, as most of the colonies were coming together in opposition to the Mother Country and the interruption of trade would have “terrible consequences.”³⁵ Such pressures may have impelled Winslow to take a more active role as a Loyalist, if only briefly.

He sought for and accepted the post of Mandamus Councilor, granted by royal appointment since passage of the Massachusetts Government Act in 1774, but only a few days after receiving it he resigned on 29 August 1774. His behavior in this particular matter is indicative of the social conflict sundering Boston at the time, and underscores the rift that plagued the Sandemanian sect throughout this early part of its history in America. On 5 September the *Boston Gazette* reported that Winslow “waited on Governor Gage last Monday, when he made an absolute and full Resignation of his Place at the Board,” after which “several of the most respectable Gentlemen, who have appeared

³³ Edward Foster to Robert Ferrier, 1 May 1782, in Sandeman, et al., *Letters in Correspondence*, 130-31.

³⁴ William Hutchinson to [Isaac Winslow, Jr.], 3 Jul. 1770, Winslow Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Used with permission.

³⁵ Simon Pease to Isaac Winslow, Jr., 29 May 1774, Winslow Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Used with permission.

foremost in the Cause of their Country's Liberties have paid their compliments to him on account of his Resignation."³⁶ Responding to some apparent confusion in the city regarding his actions, Winslow printed a clarification in the 8 September issue of the *Massachusetts Spy* "that such resignation was made by him on Monday the 29th of August inst., that he has not since attended at council and that he is determined not to give any further attendance."³⁷ It would seem that Winslow was forced to resign under pressure from the Sons of Liberty or other local Patriots. A letter from John Andrews to William Barrell written the day after Winslow's resignation states that at a Roxbury town meeting Winslow, with regard to his initial assumption of the post, "made an apology for his acceptance, and said that it was more owing to the perswasion [sic] of others than to his own inclinations."³⁸ Winslow was clearly torn in opposing directions. He sought and accepted the post to demonstrate his loyalty in a city whose citizens generally verged on open revolt, but immediately relinquished it for fear of Patriot wrath. However, he may have maintained at least a tacit loyalism, for in 1776 his house in Roxbury was burned to the ground by a Patriot mob, and by 1777 it became impossible for him to avoid arrest and the confiscation of what property he still had. He soon fled for Halifax along with the majority of New England's Sandemanians.³⁹

Winslow had violated the tenets of his sect by seeking an office in the civil government. In the heady atmosphere of Boston politics on the eve of the Revolution, it is evident that Winslow was pulled toward one pole by his loyalism and toward the center by the threat of violence to his person and his reputation. As both Tories and Patriots vied for adherents, and the Sons of Liberty were actively assaulting known and suspected Tories as well as vandalizing their homes and businesses, Winslow was surely not alone in being conflicted and apprehensive. Colburn Barrell was preaching active loyalism and condemning all resisters to British authority as traitors, and his brash example was

³⁶ *Boston Gazette*, 5 Sept. 1774.

³⁷ *Massachusetts Spy*, 8 Sept. 1774.

³⁸ John Andrews to William Barrell, 30 Aug. 1774, in *Letters of John Andrews*, Winthrop Sargent, ed. (Cambridge, 1866), 349.

³⁹ Hankins, "A Different Kind of Loyalist," 235.

persuasive, if the evidence from the actions of other Boston Sandemanians is any indication. That Winslow backpedaled is understandable, as is the fact that this relatively new sect would have members who feared for their lives as much as for their souls. Even Sandeman was confused as to where he stood on the issue. Whether or not Winslow remained a Loyalist was immaterial. The fact that he was a Sandemanian had placed an indelible stamp of loyalism upon him that no act of civic contrition could obliterate, and the same applied to all Sandemanians.

Hopetill Capen, a merchant and subscriber to the Non-Importation Agreement, later made his name known to Bostonians by likewise retracting his assent to the Agreement and avowing his pietistic necessity to remain loyal, as well as by refusing to flee the city with other Loyalists when the British evacuated. He and his family stayed behind in hopes of riding out the Patriot storm as unmolested as possible, just as Sandeman had implored Colburn Barrell to do and Isaac Winslow, Jr. had tried to do. He managed to last until the summer of 1776, when the new administration of Boston found him out and imprisoned him as “an Enemy to the Country.”⁴⁰ Attempting to convince the Court of Inquiry that his loyalty to the king was founded purely upon the doctrines of his faith, he insisted that he was as upset by the British government’s edicts as any other in his position -- hence his initial subscription to the Non-Importation Agreement--and that should the Americans win their independence, he would be as loyal a citizen as any other, in accordance with his beliefs.⁴¹ His petition was apparently unconvincing and immediately rejected, as the Patriots looked upon the Sandemanians as a threat to their authority, which they did even at the slightest hints of neutrality or loyalism. Capen remained in jail until sometime in October of 1778, when he was released and opted to leave the country for Nova Scotia.⁴²

While Boston’s Sandemanians are especially noteworthy for their public loyalty, others similarly distinguished themselves, though on a

⁴⁰ Hopetill Capen, Petition to the Court of Inquiry, 29 August 1776.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² For more information on the Sandemanians of Nova Scotia and the foundation of their church in Halifax, see Charles St. C. Stayner, “The Sandemanian Loyalists,” *Collections of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 29 (1951), 62-123.

much smaller scale. The church in New Haven, Connecticut, resisted declaring any position until 1774, when members refused to endorse Boston's Solemn League and Covenant ending all trade between America and Britain.⁴³ Local mobs assaulted Joseph Pynchon and other Sandemanians, proclaiming "that the Sandemanians had proved themselves to be guilty of the Damnable Sin of Loyalty to the King of England."⁴⁴ However, no official action against the Sandemanians as a body was taken until 1777 after the British attack on Danbury. Theophilus Chamberlain, elder of the New Haven Sandemanians who remained, was arrested by the Committee of Inspection, which demanded a statement defining the nature and extent of the sect's loyalism. While circuitously professing their duty to God and concomitant loyalty to the king, the statement expressed a desire to be left in peace. When the Committee insisted upon a more concise answer, the Sandemanians responded by emphasizing that they had no intention of acting on behalf of the British beyond the limits of the law, and resolutely affirmed that they would not take up arms against their neighbors or any of the Patriot forces. There immediately followed another significant statement, which candidly admitted that they had been equivocating, but not out of "Fear of God... but of Man..."⁴⁵ Though many members were imprisoned for brief periods, the New Haven authorities ultimately released them on the condition "that they will not do any thing injurious to this state or the united States of America."⁴⁶ The Revolution effectively destroyed the New Haven church, as several of its members relocated to Newtown, Guilford, and Derby.⁴⁷

⁴³ It is important to note that the Solemn League and Covenant was proposed by a minority intimately connected with Boston's committee of correspondence, and forcibly instituted against the protests of the majority of Boston's merchants, who called for the dissolution of the committee. See Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, N4A., 1970), 191-99.

⁴⁴ Samuel Andrew Peters, Declaration on Joseph Pynchon, 8 January 1784, in Betts Autograph Collection, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT. Peters' emphases.

⁴⁵ Connecticut Archives, Revolutionary War Records, 8: 239-42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8: 242.

⁴⁷ A tiny remnant in New Haven survived under the leadership of Richard Woodhull until 1797. Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, 157n.

Danbury's Sandemanians suffered greater inconveniences as a result of the British attack, as rumors spread throughout western Connecticut in advance of the British forces of a Loyalist uprising, resulting in massive arrests of suspected Loyalists, including some Sandemanians. Elder John Sparhawk was returning home to Danbury late one night when he was confronted by an armed band, placed under arrest, and subjected to a drumhead trial. Asked to declare where his loyalty lay, Sparhawk informed them that his religious convictions prevented him from supporting the American cause, for which his *ad hoc* judges denounced him as "a Scoundrell not fit to live in this world." Fortunately for Sparhawk, a former Sandemanian and officer of the militia secured his release on an exorbitant bond of 1,200 pounds.⁴⁸ However, after the British withdrew Sparhawk was arrested again, along with Ebenezer White and Munson Gregory, all of whom were threatened with summary execution. According to Daniel Humphreys, "it appeared that [Sparhawk's] being a Leader among the Brethren... was what made him so obnoxious."⁴⁹ While Sandemanians may not have been deliberately singled out for arrest, it is clear that an identified Sandemanian was an assumed enemy of the Revolution.

Military conscription flushed out still other Sandemanians. A petition signed by nineteen Danbury Sandemanians in March of 1778 requested exemption from the draft because "they declare it to be utterly against their Conscience to take up Arms against the King."⁵⁰ One of the signers, Comfort Benedict, fled to Long Island when conscripted the previous year, but was arrested upon his return and confined for three years. His petitions for release echo the objections of the Danbury declaration to military service and to rebellion against the king, citing the Continental Congress' exemption of conscientious objectors from the draft. Nonetheless, he was maintained in custody until transferred to Hartford, where he was allowed to work off the remainder of his sentence before his eventual release by the Connecticut General

⁴⁸ John Sparhawk to Isaac Winslow, 5 December 1775, Winslow Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴⁹ Daniel Humphreys to Joseph Hastings, 6 June 1777, Sandeman-Barrell Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵⁰ Connecticut Archives, Revolutionary War Records, 13:285.

Assembly.⁵¹ It was Benedict's Christian piety and obvious harmlessness to the Patriot cause that won him his freedom.

The Sandemanians of Boston distinguished themselves by their deviation from the doctrine of non-violence and avoidance of civic office. In general, the Sandemanians tried to be a quiet part of their various New England communities, but the internal divisions that Samuel Langdon noted can be looked to as contributing to the behavior of the Boston congregation as opposed to those in Portsmouth, Danbury, and New Haven. They generally did not garner attention until some event forced them to identify themselves. Despite the ardent exhortations of the sect's founder in America, the Sandemanians of Boston did not initially differentiate themselves from other Tories who adhered to Britain for political or social reasons, and this is a key to understanding the harassment and persecutions they suffered, which were as severe as any endured by other pietist sects.⁵² Nevertheless, for all their rhetoric of pious loyalism, the Sandemanians ultimately did not take up arms to enforce their beliefs, defend their civil rights, or even to restore order in their hometowns. They neither contributed soldiers to Loyalist regiments nor worked to undermine the Revolution.

The Sandemanians are a study in the difficult relationship between church and state. Christ roundly advised the Pharisees to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" for practical reasons, and likewise John Calvin, following Luther, demanded submission to rulers even if they were evil, for all authority emanates from God. However, he mitigated this by declaring that Christians can legitimately rebel against a government that prevented worship or forced apostasy.⁵³ This provided a means for American Protestants to justify a rebellion against a government which tolerated Catholicism in Canada and a state church that they feared

⁵¹ Ibid, 20:96.

⁵² The Moravians navigated the treacherous political waters more skillfully, rendering humanitarian aid to Redcoat and Rebel alike, while the less fortunate Mermonites suffered some Patriot abuses. See F. Ernest Stoeffler, ed., *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, 1976), 156-59, 256-64. See also Robert M. Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York, 1965), 334-39 for instances of Patriot abuse of Quakers and Baptists.

⁵³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.xx.

would force Anglican homogeneity by installing an American bishop.⁵⁴ The same conflict sundered England during its civil war, in which royalists put forward ancient arguments of the divine right of kings later favored in a modified form by some American Loyalists.⁵⁵ The Long Parliament had committed a mortal sin by deposing and executing the Lord's anointed, but the Glorious Revolution signaled a triumph for Protestantism over Catholicism, as well as for rationalism over radicalism. Loyalists, Christian and otherwise, feared that the rejection of British authority in the 1760s and 1770s would start a new civil war and a new type of oppression. In some respects they were justified in their concerns.

Another explanation for the persecution suffered by the Sandemanians, as well as other Loyalists and neutrals in New England particularly, is provided by the history of non-toleration of independent sects challenging Congregational orthodoxy.⁵⁶ Throughout the seventeenth and for much of the eighteenth century, orthodoxy was rigidly enforced, and toleration spasmodically implemented only after the passage of the Toleration Act (1689), and London's repeated threats to Massachusetts' charter.⁵⁷ Although New England's Puritanism had become diluted, the shadow of John Winthrop's Massachusetts still remained, and its suspicion of royal authority and the fear of an Anglican episcopate in America motivated Patriot hostility toward any who gave

⁵⁴ The Quebec Act (1774) granted religious toleration to Canadian Catholics. Sydney E. Ahistrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 361-64; Charles P. Hanson, *Necessary Virtue: The Pragmatic Origins of Religious Liberty in New England* (Charlottesville, Va., 1998), chaps. 3-5; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics* (New York, 1962), chaps. 10-11; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 188-216; John F. Woolverton, *Colonial Anglicanism in North America* (Detroit, 1984), ch. 10.

⁵⁵ See Anonymous, *An Homily against Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion* (1570) concerning the rebellion by northern English earls who resisted Queen Elizabeth's efforts at royal concentration of authority, printed in David Wootton, ed., *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England* (London, 1986), 95.

⁵⁶ Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620-1660* (Middletown, CT, 1984), esp. ch. 7.

⁵⁷ See William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty: The Baptists' Struggle in New England, 1630-1833* (Hanover, N.H., 1991); Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (New York, 1933), ch. 8; Gura, *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory*, chs. 4-5.

even the faintest hint of favoring British rule. Since the early hotbed of revolutionary sentiment lay in Boston and much of its leadership hailed from that city, Colburn Barrell's inflammatory rhetoric and the actions of some in his congregation appeared dangerously imprudent, though they were simply acting on their religious principles and obeying British law. Whether it was Edward Foster assisting in the repairs to Boston Light, or Benjamin Davis, Sr. converting a warehouse into a barrack, these people were not necessarily making political statements in favor of British authority. In an atmosphere of stark polarization, which demanded that one declare oneself a Patriot or a Tory, any act that did not publicly promote the Patriot cause was suspect, and Colburn Barrell attracted attention and made all Sandemanians into targets of Patriot suspicion and abuse. The oddities of Sandemanian tenets and practices had already made them objects of ridicule and suspicion, and this naturally carried over from the ecclesiastical to the political arena. A tradition of religious intolerance, compounded by radical political agitation, created a bitter societal witches' brew that even some Patriots found distasteful.⁵⁸

The accumulated effect of the years between the genesis of the Sons of Liberty in 1765 and the conclusion of the War for Independence in 1783 was, for more than half of the American population, a disorienting climate of insecurity. The power of "king mob"⁵⁹ and the revolutionary committees to enforce the new Patriot order knew almost no bounds. Those who failed to publicly and enthusiastically embrace the Revolution were harassed and assaulted as suspected Loyalists, and this evinced a tyranny that contradicted the Patriots' lofty rhetoric of defending English civil liberties.⁶⁰ The various committees of inspection, safety, and correspondence, though technically overseen by the

⁵⁸ John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1767-68).

⁵⁹ Mob actions were nothing new to colonial America, as they often served a function ancillary to that of the constabularies, hence the official endorsement of the Sons of Liberty and the revolutionary committees. See Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXVII (Jan. 1970), 3-35.

⁶⁰ Baptists also suffered the onus of suspected loyalism because of their deviance from the "New England Way." See Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* (Boston, 1773); William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), chaps. 9-13.

Continental Congress and the state legislatures, were generally given a free hand to seek out any and all enemies of the Revolution and punish them according to a broad spectrum ranging from the imposition of fines, to the confiscation of property, to the meting out of corporal and --in some extreme cases --capital punishment.⁶¹ Those who chose to remain neutral were sometimes more harshly treated, branded as “trimmers” who wanted the blessings of liberty without making the necessary sacrifices, or simply switched their loyalty according to the proximity of British or American forces.⁶²

Ultimate blame for the Sandemanians' inability to cope with the crisis in American society before and during the Revolutionary War rests upon the fundamental doctrines of the sect. The Reformation dilemma of how to maintain religious authority within the priesthood of all believers informed John Glas's basically eliminating the office of minister in favor of elders, but offered no other means of enforcing doctrinal discipline. Each church was left essentially alone to face rapidly changing situations, and Robert Sandeman's failure to temper Colbum Barrell's activities is indicative of how fatal a flaw that was for a sect newly arrived on America's troubled shores. The pacifism of the Sandemanians may be admirable, but their zealous loyalty to George III, though motivated by genuine Christian faith, ultimately sundered the sect beyond any hope of full recovery. The death of Sandeman in 1771 robbed them of an anchoring force that may have made a difference as the Revolution exploded four years later, but in the end, a reverse of Samuel Langdon's prophecy came true. Assailed from within and without, a dogmatic minority brought suspicion and persecution to all Sandemanians. They endured as long as they could until a significant number relocated or rejoined other denominations.⁶³ All they had ever

⁶¹ Robert Middlekauf, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York, 1982), 186-87, 551-53; Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America*, 290-94, 409-414.

⁶² Charles M. Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and the American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 280-82; Sung Bok Kim, “The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York,” *Journal of American History* 80 (Dec. 1993), 880-89.

⁶³ The Sandemanians as a sect survived in North America until 1900, while Glasite churches hung on in Edinburgh and London until at least 1987. Walker, *The Sandemanians of New England*, 133; Hankins, “A Different Kind of Loyalist,” 248n.

wanted was to be left alone to live their lives, practice their trades, and worship God in peace. However, circumstances beyond their control prevented that, and for their well-intentioned attempts to avoid the American Revolution, the Sandemanians suffered the loss of their homes and livelihoods, and the near destruction of their sect.

Versions of this essay were presented at the Society of Early Americanists First Biennial Conference and the New England Historical Association Fall Meeting. My thanks go to Sung Bok Kim, Ann F. Withington, James Leamon, and G. J. Barker-Benfield for their suggestions and insights. Thanks also to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich for providing an initial nudge.
