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THE PERSONALIZATION OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY:  
SUBJECTIVE ASSURANCE AND THE PURITAN CONVERSION NARRATIVE

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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By  
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December 2021

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For Abby

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Brooks Holifield noted that the Puritans would withhold the Lord's Supper sometimes from those who lacked the gratitude for a meal of thanksgiving. "Having benefitted from the gracious encouragement and assistance of many... I can understand that particular expression of Puritan rigor."<sup>1</sup> I can second his sentiment. As this project has extended for a number of years, the list of those who have contributed has grown and the memory of all who should be acknowledged is not to be trusted. I will here only attempt to mention those directly related to the writing of this dissertation; and ask forgiveness of the rest. First, I want to offer my gratitude to my study committee. My initial advisor, Will Schumacher, allowed me to try out an early version of my argument on students, and spent much time talking through questions, implications, influences and generally giving shape to my project. David Schmitt, due to his impressive familiarity with Puritanism on both sides of the Atlantic, took on the lion's share of helping me navigate the remarkable quantity of secondary literature in the field, and spent patient hours on the phone or in emails helping me see the implications of what I was arguing or failing to argue, ultimately becoming my advisor. Tim Dost showed genuine interest in me as a student, indeed was the first professor I got to know at Concordia, and was a willing volunteer to sit on my committee. His stylistic insights have been valuable not only in this capacity, but in my development as a writer during the program. Gerhard Bode was a helpful guide early on in the process of narrowing my questions into an actual thesis and served as a reader of my proposal. James Cooper, of the Congregational Library in Boston was kind enough to meet with me several times, gave valuable feedback on an early chapter and offered insights and guidance at several key points in the

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<sup>1</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), x.



process. Thomas Kidd, of Baylor University, was kind enough to take a blind phone call from an admirer and offer helpful advice, as well as remarkably fast response to emails for help. Will Barker, of Covenant Theological Seminary gave early encouragement and advice. His mentorship has been much appreciated. Valerie Ottinger took time out of packing her home for a move to edit my chapters last minute, a gesture I am deeply grateful for (and which my reading committee is unwittingly grateful for!).

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## ABSTRACT

Bishop, Curran D. "The Personalization of American Christianity: Subjective Assurance and the Puritan Conversion Narrative." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2021. 311 pp.

The North American Puritans introduced a concept that has shaped American theology: a test of subjective assurance as a predicate to communing church membership. While previous Reformed communities had tested would-be communicants in their knowledge of church teaching and their adherence to that teaching in their lives. The New England colonists added a relation of the individual's experiential conversion. This was intended to protect the purity of the church while also ministering to the individual by encouraging them in their faith by their inclusion in church membership. The results of the test led immediately to declining numbers of adults becoming communing members, which produced tensions for the interconnected systems of the Puritan society. Scholars have disagreed over whether the test represented a change in ecclesiology, whether later adaptations improved or worsened the situation, and whether these later adaptations were even more significant breaks with the Reformed tradition.

This study argues that the initial test introduced a fundamental instability into the New England Way. The test was not a change in ecclesiology, but in soteriology, and flowed out of the ongoing evolution of the doctrine of assurance in the Reformed tradition. The policy adaptation of the second generation in the half-way covenant continued to hold the presupposition that experiential conversion was normative to subjective assurance. Consequently, it failed to address the issues that created the problem in the first place. The decline in membership was corrected over the course of the last quarter of the seventeenth century because the traumas of this tumultuous time creating experiential conditions like those of the first generation from which individuals were able to draw subjective assurance sufficient to pursue church membership. The sacramental renaissance of this period led to sacramental innovation in Stoddardianism, though it was not as extreme as scholars have often understood it. While faulting the founders test itself, Stoddardianism continued to share the presupposition of the normativity of experiential conversion, and so it was unable to correct the instability inherent in the New England Way.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SUBJECTIVE ASSURANCE AND EARLY AMERICAN PURITANISM

In 1728, just two years after the Westfield church called Nehemiah Bull to take Edward Taylor's place as their pastor—the latter “had become imbecile through extreme old age”<sup>1</sup>—Bull put a radical question to the congregation: “Whether such persons as come into full communion may not be left at their liberty as to the giving the church an account of the work of saving conversion.”<sup>2</sup> Bull's question was not radical because it was new; in fact he was only asking the congregation to adopt the sacramental polity that three quarters of the other churches in the Connecticut River Valley had adopted over the course of more than a generation. Rather, it was radical for several other reasons. First, Bull's predecessor, Taylor, had committed most of his professional life to arguing against the practice of his neighboring pastor, Solomon Stoddard, of admitting to communion people who had not made a formal relation to the congregation of their experience of conversion. To look on such relations as matters that could be left to the individual candidate's liberty was essentially to adopt the practice Stoddard had promoted and to sweep away the labor of Taylor's whole career. That the congregation actually voted to affirm Bull's proposal after only six weeks' consideration is shocking in light of the fact that for more than fifty years they had been sitting under Taylor's rhetorically powerful and logically thorough condemnations of Stoddard's practice. The willingness of the congregation to reverse a practice their previous pastor had held with such ardency points to the other factor that made Bull's proposal so radical. Bull's proposal, like the policies of all churches that had adopted Stoddard's

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<sup>1</sup> Henry W. Taylor, “Edward Taylor,” in William B Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (New York, 1857), I, 178, quoted in Norman S. Grabo, *Edward Taylor* (New York: Twayne, 1961), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Grabo, *Edward Taylor*, 39.

practice, struck at the central issue of the sacramental controversy which Taylor, Stoddard, Increase and Cotton Mather, and others had engaged in for more than a generation: the “relations” or experiential conversion accounts which had been instituted by the founding generation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and had become the central tenet of the New England Way. That the Westfield congregation would judge so central a practice to be a matter of the candidate’s liberty underscores the tension the New England Way had created. They were not alone: the majority of churches in the Connecticut River Valley had reached a similar conclusion after nearly a century of rigorously practicing the Way.

That century of rigorous practice is the subject of this study. For historians of early American Puritanism, the landscape is familiar. This century of ecclesial controversies extends from the beginnings of the test act in the early seventeenth century, through the Cambridge Platform and the half-way covenant, to the sacramental controversies at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The scope of my particular study, however, is to look at this period through the lens of the Puritan doctrine of assurance and to discern how the doctrine of assurance contributed to the personalization of American Christianity through a process of ecclesial controversy, decline, and growth.

The founding generation of North American Puritans were faced with the new issue of establishing the grounds of church membership upon their arrival in what would become Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> Within a few years of their arrival and with remarkably little discussion—given their prolific discussion in pulpit and publication on almost any other issue—the churches had nearly unanimously adopted a new test for membership that added to the tests which had been

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<sup>3</sup> For documentation of the introduction of the new test, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965).

the consensus in virtually all previous Reformed contexts. From Calvin's Geneva to the Church of Scotland, Reformed churches had required that applicants for membership show knowledge of—and state their belief in—the church's doctrine and then demonstrate their adherence by their unscandalous lifestyle. This had also been the practice of the separating Puritans in their churches in London and Holland and in the Plymouth colony. The non-separating Puritans of the Bay Colony, however, added to these tests the requirement that candidates demonstrate their election by offering a verbal testimony of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and relating how they had been drawn from a condition of unbelief to a condition of belief. This new test was intended to produce pure churches made up more certainly of elect members than the previous tests could ensure. The founders knew that their system was imperfect: only the Holy Spirit could know the elect for certain,<sup>4</sup> but they would do their best by this system to purify their membership and protect the Lord's Supper from abuse.

In this way, Puritan Christianity became more personal. Such personalization, however, was not without difficulties. The founders knew they could not objectively know for certain if a person was elect. Yet they sought to test as well as they could for that very thing: if a person was elect. This resulted in building a tension into their system: they wanted pure churches, so they sought to test for subjective assurance to limit the unregenerate from their fellowship. At the same time, they did not want the tests to be so difficult as to exclude people who were actually regenerate. They sought to protect “weak Christians” through several measures, enshrined in the

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codification of the founders' practice of the New England Way in the Cambridge Platform. They included the exercise of rational charity in judging the profession of faith, the admonition to avoid severity in examination, and the provision for private rather than public relation of one's faith. Personal assurance came with a price as congregations needed to consider carefully their policies and practices that integrated such assurance into community life.

Within a generation of this innovation, the churches began to experience decline. Such decline was disconcerting and demanded an answer. The North American Puritan errand into the wilderness had anticipated that, by their careful adherence to their understanding of God's intention for His Church, they would become a truly Christian society, with most of its members truly regenerate.<sup>5</sup> As churches practiced the New England Way, converted parents could anticipate their children's eventual conversion, and a new generation would be welcomed into the pure churches of New England's Puritan experiment. The difficulty was that fewer, rather than more, children were experiencing conversion as the years passed, and the membership of the churches was declining, both in absolute numbers as well as in comparison to the broader society.<sup>6</sup>

This crisis forced a reexamination of the New England Way but not its presupposition. Regeneration and proof of election would still be tested by having individuals demonstrate their

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<sup>5</sup> They realized that this could not be perfectly achieved: They were explicit that "hypocrites" and self-deceived people could still end up as church members. The goal was to tighten the system significantly as compared to the Anglicanism they had experienced—and fled—in England.

<sup>6</sup> Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 211. Pope demonstrates that in the Roxbury church, the low-point of church membership—both in terms of new communicant members added as well as membership viewed as a proportion to the town's population—occurred in the decade of 1660–1669. He continues in this chapter to examine the three other churches in the Massachusetts Bay Colony for which sufficient records exist to make such a comparison—Charlestown, Third Church Boston, and Dorchester—finding similar results.

assurance through recounting their experience of conversion, termed the “reflex act of faith.”<sup>7</sup> Leaving in place the necessity of experiential conversion to the assurance of regeneration, the reexamination questioned whether it was proper to bring into the covenant through baptism those children of members who themselves had been brought into the covenant through baptism, but who had not demonstrated their regeneration by articulating a personal experience of conversion. While pastors had begun to propose that baptizing the children of “unconverted” though covenanted adults was proper as early as 1645—barely ten years after the institution of the new membership test<sup>8</sup>—this solution was left out of the Cambridge Platform of 1648, which essentially dogmatized the new test as a cornerstone of the Congregational system. It was not until 1662 that the membership disparity had progressed to the point that the majority of pastors were ready to press for a change in polity. In that year a synod was held at Boston that adopted a series of resolutions—called the “half-way covenant” by its detractors a century later<sup>9</sup>—which included the statement that the proper subjects of baptism included the children of

church-members who were admitted in minority, understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publicly professing their assent thereto; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> R. M. Hawkes, “The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (September 1990): 257. By this term the Puritans meant not, “an immediate, intuitive self-knowledge, as might be assumed by the modern reader,” but a reflective action in the self-consciousness, a “rational self-inspection of our works, ends, and desires in the context of Scripture doctrine,” which would lead the believer to a certainty—though never unassailed—of their standing before God.

<sup>8</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 14. Richard Mather, who helped write the document that would become the Cambridge Platform, did not include this proposal in the final draft for unrelated reasons that shall become clear.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 8n2. Pope has traced what he believes to be the first use of the term “half-way covenant” to Joseph Bellamy’s *The Half-Way Covenant: A Dialogue*, New Haven, 1769. Because the term is so universally used by modern scholars to describe the 1662 synod’s resolutions, I will use it despite its late origin.

<sup>10</sup> Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1991), 314. The statement uses the term “members”—which I have used to designate those who had testified to experiencing regeneration and could vote and take communion—to designate the opposite: people who had received baptism and were subject to church discipline, but who had not experienced conversion, gone through the candidacy

It is somewhat surprising that this description of the parents of proper subjects of baptism was not, to the synod, a description of those presumed to be regenerate, but only of those who were within the visible covenant due to their baptism, yet had not demonstrated their election and were not, consequently, eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper.

While the pastors had offered a solution, Congregational polity meant that the solution had to be approved on a church-by-church basis. Since this meant majority votes of all the members of each congregation, the solution would have to win support of far more lay members than clergy. The laity were wary of any innovation, even when it challenged an orthodoxy that had itself been innovative only thirty years earlier. It took nearly a decade for any new churches to adopt the resolutions of the 1662 Synod into their practice, and more than a generation for those policies to become the mainstream of the New England Way.

While congregations were debating how to govern their people during a period of stability, times of instability returned. The Half-Way Synod met the same year that Charles II came to the throne, ending England's Puritan government and putting the status of the New England colonies—and the New England Puritan's charters—on uncertain footing. 1675 saw the outbreak of King Philip's War, which killed approximately ten percent of the able-bodied, male, colonist population of New England—the bloodiest conflict in recorded history in North America—and in the closing years of the decade Boston was struck by epidemic, killing an estimated ten percent of the city's population, and then fire. Massachusetts lost its charter in 1684, rending apart the Congregational churches and the covenanted civil society of the Puritan state. This was followed by the formation of the Dominion of New England in 1686, which sought to bring all of

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process described below, and been admitted to the Lord's Supper. By this phrase—which was not a matter of deceptive maneuvering but rather an ambiguity of the way the term “member” was used, and was apparently not a matter of confusion at the time—the statement is omitting the requirements of experiential conversion and admission to the Lord's Table for one to be eligible to have one's children baptized.



the northeastern colonies together under the governorship of an administrator known to be hostile to Puritan sensibilities. While the Dominion was dissolved in 1689, the political uncertainty would not see resolution until well into the 1690s. In the midst of such social tumult, it is easy to see why contemporary observers believed their churches were experiencing decline, even as the implementation of the half-way covenant and the religious response of individuals in crisis swelled the membership of those churches.<sup>11</sup> Growing membership rolls were not enough, however, to preserve the understanding of orthodoxy thrust on the New England Way by the founders' new membership test.

The tension of trying to preserve the New England Way with its new test in constantly changing contexts was seen in the myriad of ways New England churches adopted the half-way covenant. Some would baptize only the grandchildren of members; others would baptize multiple generations so long as the parents continued to “own” the covenant without experiencing conversion; others opened baptism to the children of any who owned the covenant, whether they were descendants of members or not. A small handful refused to adopt the new standards. Even among the variety of ways churches adopted the half-way covenant, there was variation in how much it was actually applied: in Plymouth colony the half-way covenant was accepted in theory, but the test for regenerate membership was so lenient that there was little need for a “half-way” membership status.<sup>12</sup> The most extreme adaptation was pioneered in the frontier of the Connecticut River Valley. People who wanted solace amidst epidemics, wars, and socio-political unrest did not find enough reassurance in baptizing their children and receiving

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<sup>11</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 272–75. Pope states that “if the half-way covenant can be interpreted as part of a general religious awakening caused by fifteen years of crisis (1675–1690), then the concept of declension, which has often been used to explain religious behavior at that time, must be seriously questioned” (Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 272–73).

<sup>12</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 204.

the discipline of the church themselves: they wanted the assurance provided in the Eucharist. In Northampton, Stoddard attempted to find a way to reconcile this desire with the founders' definition of regeneration. He proposed that, beyond just baptizing those who were willing to own the covenant despite not having experienced personal conversion, such people should be welcomed into full communion, so that the Lord's Supper itself might serve as a "converting ordinance" that would bring about the assurance they lacked.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which his solution assumed—and therefore did not address—the redefinition of regeneration itself, shall be one aspect of this inquiry. This present study examines how the North American Puritans, across three generations, in times of stability and instability, contextualized the doctrine of assurance in a way that ultimately was important for the future development of American theology.

### **The Thesis**

This study will examine the contextualization and historical development of the doctrine of assurance in Puritan New England from 1629 to 1723. At the heart of this study are the effects of two assumptions: first, that experiential conversion was the surest basis for a believer's assurance of regeneration and their identity among the elect; and second, that the identification of conversion, through "confessions" or "relations," was crucial to ensuring the purity of the local church. The Puritans began to form these assumptions in England, first put them into practice in New England, and ultimately made them foundational for the New England Way. By examining how the Puritans contextualized the doctrine of assurance, this study will reveal the way in which personal tensions, congregational polity, and both public stability and instability all contributed

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<sup>13</sup> Stoddard's view of the Lord's Supper as a "converting ordinance" was not as innovative as it might seem: It was "part of a wider discussion that had been going on in English Puritanism for three decades." See for further study David Paul McDowell, *Beyond the Half-Way Covenant: Solomon Stoddard's Understanding of the Lord's Supper as a Converting Ordinance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 42.

to the personalization of American Christianity.

### **The Current Status of the Question**

The institution of the new membership test, the half-way covenant, social unrest, and the sacramental controversy have been addressed before, but usually in a study that focuses on one element much more than the others,<sup>14</sup> or on part of a much larger survey of North American Puritanism,<sup>15</sup> or on North American religion in general.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, because of the broad range of scholarship with which I will be interacting, it makes the most sense to consider that scholarship in terms of two areas: first, the question of assurance and the new test in its historical context, and second, the historical unfolding of this theological tension through the half-way covenant, social unrest, and the sacramental controversy. The question of assurance is both the issue of debate and the historical context of the study: The North American Puritans were participants in an ongoing debate within the Reformed tradition. This tradition—as well as the modern study of that debate—must be examined to provide context for the present study. The question of conversion relations as a test of church membership, the question of the half-way covenant and social unrest, and the question of the sacramental controversy will provide the three main chapters of the present study. The current status of scholarship related to each of these

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<sup>14</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, and E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: Sacramental Theology in Old and New England* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1974), are examples of studies of these respective questions.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Francis J. Bremmer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), and Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America: Religion and Life in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990) would be examples of this.

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Porterfield, ed., *Modern Christianity to 1900, A People's History of Christianity, Volume 6* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), and Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) are examples of this type of survey.

shall be expanded upon below. The question of decline from the mid-seventeenth century to the Great Awakening and the scholarly understanding of what was really occurring provides the contemporary context of almost the entire present study, but as such will not be taken up as a separate chapter since it pervades the whole study. I will survey scholarship related to this question below and state the assumptions under which this study will proceed.<sup>17</sup>

One additional issue should be addressed before proceeding to these topics. Because the incident related in the opening anecdote included in its full context the term “indifference,” it is worth noting briefly the history and significance to this study of this weighted term. In the complex arguments between conformists and nonconformists in the Anglican communion<sup>18</sup> in England during the Restoration, matters of indifference were matters that conformists viewed as able to be regulated, given that such issues did not touch upon salvation, and adherence to the general rule in such cases should not be viewed as binding the conscience.<sup>19</sup> Given the term was not widely used in the debates over what qualified a person for admission to the Lord’s Supper in the North American context, a generation later it seems likely that Bull’s use of the term was more a matter of coincidence, though his understanding of the term would have likely been

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<sup>17</sup> This issue does not need to be addressed as its own section in the dissertation as it is the context of the study and not the study itself; however, there have been diverse enough interpretations of the period—and whether or not there was, in fact, a decline—that noting the status of the question on this topic, and then explaining why one interpretation is to be preferred over another, is necessary.

<sup>18</sup> “Conformists” and “nonconformists” are not to be confused with separating and non-separating Puritans: The latter term in each pair identifies the same group, while the former terms in each pair identify groups diametrically opposed to each other.

Also, the term “Anglican” is a bit anachronistic here, as there is only one recognized “English” church. However, it is a useful shorthand for “the established church” that allows differentiation between the majority within the establishment who determined practice and polity for the church and the Puritan dissenters, and so I shall use the term for clarity.

<sup>19</sup> Nonconformist minister Edward Bagshaw laid out the issues of worship and matters deemed indifferent in a series of three polemical pamphlets between 1660 and 1662. See Edward Bagshaw, *The Great Question Concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship* (London: n.p., 1660), *The Second Part of the Great Question Concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship* (London: n.p., 1661), and *The Necessity & Use of Heresies, or The Third and Last Part of the Great Question About Indifferent Things in Religious Worship* (London: Printed for S. M., 1662).

shaped to some extent by these earlier debates.

### Assurance and the New Test in Its Context

The examination of the role of assurance in the North American Puritans' doctrine of conversion must be understood in the context of the development of the doctrine of assurance in the Reformed community as a whole. There at least appears to be a significant difference between Reformation and post-Reformation theologians on the doctrine of assurance and its relationship to faith.<sup>20</sup> Early reformers often lump assurance in together with faith as inseparable, while post-Reformation theologians distinguish between the two with, for example, the Westminster Confession treating faith and assurance under separate chapters. The distinction is important to this study; if faith and assurance are indeed inseparable, then it is necessary to have assurance if one has faith, and testing for such assurance would be a valid means of determining if one is indeed regenerate—and thus, the new test would be quite well-grounded within the tradition. If they can be distinguished, or if there can be different types of assurance—objective, which is inseparable from faith, and subjective, which might only be the product of faith over time—then the test assumes too much. The test's assumption that assurance—and specifically subjective assurance—is part of the essence of faith misreads the reality that subjective assurance typically follows faith and therefore to institute the test of faith by assurance is to miss the mark, creating a measure for faith that does not apply to all believers. Dealing with this apparent discrepancy between Reformation and post-Reformation theologians has produced several distinct schools of interpretation among scholars of the history of Reformed theology.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Joel R. Beeke, "Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 5, no. 1 (1994): 45.

<sup>21</sup> Beeke, "Does Assurance Belong," 46–47. Beeke uses the Westminster Confession of Faith as the classic example of this distinction in the later Reformers and summarizes the various schools helpfully in his footnotes.

The older school—mostly a nineteenth-century perspective—viewed the distinction between Reformation and post-Reformation theologians as a matter of contextualization. Calvin’s theological descendants helpfully nuanced the principles stated by him. This school saw an implicit distinction between subjective and objective aspects within Calvin’s doctrine of assurance, which Calvin’s later followers fleshed out more explicitly. For the nineteenth-century school, the distinctions between founder and followers was a matter of emphasis. Later theologians adhered to Calvin’s doctrine of assurance but placed emphasis upon different aspects of that doctrine due to the pastoral situations and political contexts they were addressing. According to this school, Calvin—arguing against Catholic opponents who said believers could not have assurance of their salvation—focused mostly on the objective nature of assurance which believers could claim. Calvin’s later followers—dealing with more nuanced arguments among Protestants who all agreed that believers could have assurance of their salvation—began focusing on the way in which believers subjectively came to such assurance. The leaders of this first school include William Cunningham, Robert Dabney, Charles Hodge, and John Macleod among others.<sup>22</sup>

A second school—which became the majority of the field<sup>23</sup>—viewed the distinctions Calvin’s followers made in his doctrine of assurance as the negative impact of scholasticism on

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<sup>22</sup> William Cunningham, “The Reformers and the Doctrine of Assurance,” *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (October 1856), (reprinted as “Essay III” in *The Reformers and Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1862) is considered the prototypical expression of this school’s position.

<sup>23</sup> Leaders in this school include Brian Armstrong, Karl Barth, John Beardslee, M. Charles Bell, Ernst Bizer, James Daane, Johannes Dantine, Edward Dowey, Otto Gründler, Basil Hall, R. T. Kendall, Walter Kickel, Donald McKim, Philip McNair, Jurgen Moltmann, Charles Munson, Wilhelm Niesel, Norman Pettit, Pontien Polman, Jack Rogers, Holmes Rolstrom III, and Hans Emil Weber. Basil Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford, UK: Sutton Courtenay, 1966) 19–37; R. T. Kendall, “Living the Christian Life in the Teaching of William Perkins and His Followers,” in *Living the Christian Life* (London: Westminster Conference, 1974) 45–60; *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); “The Puritan Modification of Calvin’s Theology,” in *John Calvin*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 199–214 are considered the prototypical texts of this school of interpretation.

the simplicity of the earlier reformers' position; a difference that was not merely a matter of emphasis due to pastoral and political concerns but rather was a matter of creating a fundamental distinction between faith and assurance through the use of various methods for determining assurance. For this school, Calvin held assurance to be central to faith without nuance, while his later disciples' nuances weakened the believer's assurance and drove works back into the equation of how a believer calculated their assurance.

A new incarnation of the first school began to emerge in the 1970s, and gain momentum in the 1980s, critiquing the arguments of the second school in light of a fresh reading of the sources<sup>24</sup>. This school presents a significant challenge to the majority view and is growing in acceptance.<sup>25</sup> These scholars hold that Calvin's theological heirs were generally doing helpful, biblically consistent work as they consistently applied his theology to new circumstances. Calvin's later followers added nuance to his doctrine as they addressed faith and assurance separately and used his categories with appropriately different emphasis as they applied his concept of assurance, often in pastoral settings rather than in debates with Catholic interlocutors. Proponents of this school hold that Calvin held objective assurance to be part of the essence of faith, but allowed that subjective assurance might only develop in the believer over time; Calvin's followers were simply making explicit what was only implicit in Calvin's own

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<sup>24</sup> Representatives of this school include Marvin W. Anderson, Joel R. Beeke, John Patrick Donnelly, Oliver Fatio, W. Robert Godfrey, Martin I. Kaluber, Richard A. Muller, Jill Raitt, Donald W. Sinnema, and Stephen R. Spencer.

<sup>25</sup> Jill Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza: Development of the Reformed Doctrine* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972); John Patrick Donnelly, *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli's Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); John S. Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1975); Marvin W. Anderson, *Peter Martyr: A Reformer in Exile (1542–1562)* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1975); W. Robert Godfrey, "Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dordt, 1618–1619" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1974). Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vols. 1–2; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987–1994) are the leading texts of this school.

articulations of the doctrine.

This author finds the old and new arguments of the first school most compelling with reference to English Puritanism. With reference to American Puritanism, however, this study will seek to demonstrate that, while the North American Puritans remained generally consistent with the broader Calvinist tradition in their theology, their institution of a practice that functionally made assurance dependent on the subjective aspect of faith placed them in a position that produced not only differences of practice from Calvin, but also produced practical differences that had the potential to generate more serious theological differences of the sort associated with the second school's criticism of Calvin's European and English heirs. Indeed, within some branches of North American Puritanism, and in the soteriological perspective they bequeathed to their heirs, significant theological change took place. While disagreeing with the second school's assessment of the European context generally, this dissertation will argue that the North American Puritan's test made assurance too focused on subjective elements of the believer's experience and left the believer's assurance on much shakier grounds. Functionally the New England Way, in contrast to Calvin's and the Reformed tradition's practice, made subjective assurance part of the essence of faith, inserting works (in this case, the emotional-experiential comprehension of one's own subjective assurance) into faith itself and robbing believers of assurance. Thus, the second school's assessment is valid when applied to the North American strain of Puritanism. The New England Way would bequeath this instability to much subsequent American theology.

### The New Test in Its Historical Development

#### **Conversion Relations as a Test for Church Membership**

Edmund S. Morgan was most responsible for beginning the modern discussion of the



unique importance the Puritans—and particularly the North American Puritans—placed on conversion in virtually all aspects of their theology, especially that of church membership, with his monograph, *Visible Saints*.<sup>26</sup> He traced the birth of the new test from its roots in the theology of conversion in English Puritanism in the sixteenth century through the half-way controversy, noting the importance for Puritan ecclesiology of excluding from the visible church as much as possible those who are not elect,<sup>27</sup> and focusing on the institution of the test as a means of creating pure churches.<sup>28</sup> This concern for purity led to the idea that an individual church “should rest on a covenant, voluntarily subscribed to by believers, and must exclude and expel all known evildoers.”<sup>29</sup>

If the church is defined as the company of the faithful, the problem arises of how to identify faithful individuals. Separatist Puritans had lived with this ambiguity in both the English and the Dutch contexts, and they had generally seen separation from the state church as the only necessary identifier of the faithful beyond the previous reformed consensus of belief and behavior.<sup>30</sup> Non-separating Puritans, however, had not had to deal with the question prior to the North American context because they had been bound by the institutions of the Anglican Church. In the first years of their experience as colonists, they found themselves in need of an

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<sup>26</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1963).

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> The practice of having candidates for church membership give an account of their experience of conversion to the gathered membership of the church and then field questions was variously called “confessions,” “church relations,” and other similar terms. Different original sources and also different scholars tend to prefer one or the other terms in their writing, and I have used the various terms interchangeably, depending on who I am interacting with.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 31. Morgan points out that leaders of the non-separating English Puritan movement, William Ames, William Bradshaw, and Henry Jacob, writing in the late sixteenth century, conceded this point to the separatists, though they did not think it appropriate to separate in order to achieve such a covenanted and pure church.

<sup>30</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 37. The reformed consensus of what was required for church membership will be explored more extensively in chapter 2.

answer, and looked to a concept they had been developing for two generations: the doctrine of conversion.<sup>31</sup> Morgan traced the North American innovation of applying the process of conversion as a test of elect status for the purpose of church membership to the arrival in the colony of Thomas Hooker and, especially, John Cotton.<sup>32</sup> He used Thomas Shepard's recorded confessions, given in his church in the late 1630s and early 1640s, as examples of the form that early relations of conversion experiences took, finding in them that "the pattern [of conversion] is so plain as to give the experiences the appearance of a stereotype."<sup>33</sup> According to Morgan, fewer and fewer people over time, however, fulfilled the stereotype, forcing the churches to begin to question the New England Way. In the new test, Morgan saw an attempt to answer what he called "the Puritan dilemma"—how one is to do right while remaining in a world that does wrong—with a distinct leaning toward removing one's self from that world.<sup>34</sup> This, in his estimation, set up the system for enormous and inevitable conflict in the generations to come.

Robert G. Pope, Morgan's student, followed Morgan in interpreting the impact of applying the conversion test to church membership as negative. He states,

New England started moving toward the half-way covenant the moment the churches introduced regenerate membership.... Had access to the sacraments been easier, had knowledge of the faith and a moral life remained the bases of church membership, baptism would never have troubled New England. But the churches rapidly accepted

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<sup>31</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 68. The doctrine of conversion was very important to the early English Puritans, not as a matter of ecclesiology, but as a matter of soteriology. For example, the Puritan leading light William Perkins, a lecturer at Cambridge, had worked out a multi-stage process of conversion in the late sixteenth century as a means for individuals to examine themselves in order to gain assurance of their own salvation.

<sup>32</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 94–95.

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 114–15. Morgan references his work, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), noting that while Winthrop, "helped to prevent the government of Massachusetts from seeking a greater perfection in this world than God required or allowed," Winthrop was not in charge of the churches, and "the New England churches, by the mid-1630's, were committed to a degree of purity that left their relationship with the world highly uncertain and untried by any previous experience in England or Europe" (Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 115).

the test of conversion, and by 1640 this had become an integral part of the New England Way.<sup>35</sup>

Pope was careful to note the diversity of ways in which New England churches practiced the New England Way. To Morgan's broad picture, he adds the nuance that each step in the New England Way was not realized in the statements of a synod, but by the decades-long debates of individual congregations and pastors. For both Morgan and Pope the new membership test was an innovation that had negative consequences for New England. Scholars have clearly accepted the assertion that the new test caused problems. They have not explored, in particular, the dynamics of the test—its theological foundations, its built-in tensions—which means that they have not analyzed the history with the perspective this study will bring by examining the new test in its context and in relation to the development going on in doctrine of assurance within the Reformed community at the time of the new test's institution.

Earlier, Phineas Stearns and David Brawner had challenged the idea that the new test represented an innovation. They saw the church relation as a “technical adaptation of the old standard to new circumstances” not as “an innovation embodying a new standard of piety.”<sup>36</sup> Stearns and Brawner argued not that previous reformed churches had required conversion relations but, rather, that previous reformed churches had intended the church to be made up of the elect and had simply used different methods of seeking to achieve that goal. The relation was the old goal: pure churches, applied in a new context, that of a fledgling colony where the opportunity to start with a “clean slate” presented itself. This means that there are scholarly forces that would argue against a closer reading of the new test—because it was just a different

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<sup>35</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Raymond Phineas Stearns, and David Holmes Brawner, “New England Church ‘Relations’ and Continuity in Early Congregational History,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 75, no. 1 (April 1965): 44.

way of doing things. This study, however, will argue that this difference is exactly key to understanding the history that followed. The test was not just a different way: it was a different way that had consequences.

Patricia Caldwell challenged not whether the test was in keeping with tradition, but rather, whether the church relation should be understood primarily as a negative development. Examining the relations as literature, Caldwell challenged Morgan's finding that the relations display a formulaic stereotype and, rather, saw in them individuals processing the shared experience of transatlantic passage—a dangerous and traumatic experience—as well as the common experience of life in the North American wilderness, an equally dangerous and traumatic experience. She cautioned against seeing the New England Way as more strict or “harsh” than that of old England. While Cotton and Shepard might have had distinct ideas that kept church membership numbers down, they “opened up a literary vista of peculiar importance: this was the situation in which the ‘speaking Aristocracy and silent democracy’ that New England churches have been called actually allowed—and required—that silent democracy to speak.”<sup>37</sup> In this context the church relation was not a harsh tool for weeding out imposters, but a means of processing difficult experiences for the traumatized first-generation colonists. Caldwell did not comment on the implications this tool would have for later generations. This study will argue that the lack of these shared traumatic experiences is what causes people to not be able to process their life in a relation (hence the ebb and flow of relations related to the ebb and flow of trauma in the history). In this sense, this study will build on her insight while offering a clearer sense of the problematic nature of the new test (that is, still seeing it as negative) but also

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<sup>37</sup> Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 79–80.

fleshing out the implications of her thesis as the history unfolded.

Michael McGiffert took a similar approach in his edition of Shepard's autobiography, diary, and confessions.<sup>38</sup> As with Caldwell, McGiffert saw church relations as vehicles for working out personal meaning, though with less focus on the rigors of ocean crossing and frontier life, and with a greater emphasis on the role the confessions played in coming to terms with their understanding of their relationship to God. The confessions were the process of

creating the community and structuring the polity by sharing information about new neighbors: confession time was a great get-acquainted time when, quietly and effectively, the confessors and their audience were shaping a new society. Above all, public confession applied the binding power of religious commitment to the common interest, giving it the force of moral mutuality and focusing it in sacred space.<sup>39</sup>

Church confession aided individuals in dealing with the anxiety the Puritan understanding of assurance subjected its adherents to by both allowing them to process their condition with the community, and by allowing them to receive the community's input about their condition. The confessions also structured, focused, defined, and created the new community. Here again, the confession was a positive force, indispensable in the necessary work of forming the community of the founding generation. The impact the confessions would have on future generations when that initial community bequeathed the practice to them is not part of McGiffert's analysis of Shepard's early confessions. In understanding the whole period, we must acknowledge the important contribution of such scholars as Caldwell and McGiffert who classify the confessions as having positive roles—processing trauma and building community. These realities must be affirmed, but also nuanced in order to correctly understand the period.

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<sup>38</sup> See Michael McGiffert, "The People Speak: Confession of Lay Men and Women," in *God's Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard's Cambridge*, ed. Michael McGiffert, rev. ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 135–48.

<sup>39</sup> McGiffert, "People Speak," 148.

While the confessions have often been painted as laity trying to parrot the theology their pastors forced on them, George Selment analyzed Shepard's *Confessions*<sup>40</sup> and showed that the laity were familiar with their pastor's ideas, but applied that theology in their own vernacular:

Most historians have rather assumed that for all practical purposes in writing about the history of ideas there was at least a rough correspondence between lay and clerical thought—a collective mentality. With certain qualifications, Thomas Shepard's "Confessions" supports their assumption. Cambridge parishioners grasped remarkably well Shepard's teaching on election, union with Christ, sanctification, the means to close with Christ, and several signs of grace. True, their knowledge was often unsystematic and sometimes cursory, just as their terminology frequently lacked precision, and on less practical doctrines—justification, reconciliation, adoption, glorification, and perseverance—their comprehension was understandably shallower than Shepard's. But despite their omissions, distortions, modifications, and simplifications, the laity reflected their pastor's theology.<sup>41</sup>

They were not parroting or conforming to a stereotype; they were simply listening and responding to what they hired their pastors to preach to them in the first place.

A final voice to consider in engaging with the subject of relations is that of John Stachniewski in his work, *The Persecutory Imagination*.<sup>42</sup> This work has touched on an important idea in its very title: that of applying the concept of imaginaries to the problem of the impact of relations on the Puritan psyche. Mapping the Puritan imaginary beginning with Calvin and moving through Donne, Stachniewski writes as a scholar of English, not theology or history, and so engages the Puritans without the nuance or context necessary to flesh out the origins of his thesis.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, he has touched on an important phenomenon: the rise of despair in

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<sup>40</sup> By the time of his analysis, Selment had helped to publish an edition of Shepard's recorded confessions in George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley, *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 58 (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1981). Caldwell relied on this edition and it should be noted that the disparity between her impression of the form of the confessions and that of Morgan may be due to the fact that Morgan only had a few of the confessions available at the time of his writing.

<sup>41</sup> George Selement, "The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638–1645," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (January 1984): 48.

<sup>42</sup> John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> This is evidenced by his very definition of "Puritan," which is both limited, but also very insightful of the

Puritan experience, particularly in Puritan spiritual autobiography. He notes that the confessions of despairers (the historical term for those struggling with despair at their own perception of their reprobate status), “speak a shared language, not the uncommunicative private languages of obsessives. And that language emerges directly from a religious system which provides a rational basis... for their view of themselves.”<sup>44</sup> The Puritans were living in a milieu, or imaginary, which was both a product of their theology, and their theology was a response to their context: Puritan theology (which Stachniewski does not differentiate from Calvinist theology) was not merely a response to social conditions, nor was it the total explanation for those social conditions. The two are shaped by and shape each other. This is the role of the social imaginary: “Calvinism fitted a historical sensibility and, in the process of articulation, directed and modified it, as does any ideology. From the point of view of the people subjected to it there was no prior mood; Calvinism and their social conditions existed in imaginative compound.”<sup>45</sup> In Stachniewski’s view, this meant that the persecutory imagination was of an arbitrary God standing behind the individual’s experience of the increasingly hostile and disconnected world of early modernism.<sup>46</sup> Describing the process of using the confession to interpret the individual’s experience, Stachniewski notes that,

A life described one of two narratives and the aim was to construct a narrative governed by a teleology of election, love, acceptance which could convincingly subordinate, while accounting for, all the evidence of experience that seemed to document a narrative governed by a teleology of reprobation, hatred, rejection. The sense of ultimate success or ultimate failure as the controlling principle of experience, the inability to see a variegated picture or to accept life as a communal actuality, not a

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importance of the ideas of conversion and assurance to the Puritan worldview: “Puritans, for my purposes, were people whose minds appear to have been captured by the questions whether or not they were members of the elect, and how the life of an elect (and elect community), in contradistinction to that of a reprobate, should be ordered” (Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 11).

<sup>44</sup> Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 69.

story in the mind at all, is perhaps a cultural legacy for which an amalgam of protestantism [sic] and capitalism is to be thanked.<sup>47</sup>

While this perspective seems to assume that earlier eras of human existence were less fraught with pain than Elizabethan England—a strange assumption, given the relative stability of the period, and the clear counterpoint of earlier periods which were not without their own experience of pain (the Wars of Religion of earlier that century and the Black Death and Hundred Year’s War of an only-slightly-earlier period come to mind), it lends a helpful perspective to the experience of the New England Puritans. A persecutory imagination of sorts had begun to develop, which related the individual’s experience to that of the broader culture. When the corporate experience was painful—in such times as the first generation of colonists experiencing persecution in England, the rigors of Atlantic crossing, the difficulty of establishing new lives in the North American wilderness—the individual was able to accommodate their story to the corporate experience in ways that agreed with a teleology of election. In times of relative prosperity, when individual’s experiences of personal pain—whether emotional or physical—were not so easily accommodated to the corporate experience, the story of reprobation seemed to make more sense of individual’s experience.

In Stachniewski’s engagement with the struggle for assurance the problem of applying the same word objectively and subjectively without distinction is evidenced. Stachniewski erroneously finds the problem in Calvin by only surveying Calvin’s objective uses of the word, and then tying them to various of Calvin’s engagements with the concept of reprobation.<sup>48</sup> Yet as

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<sup>47</sup> Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 104.

<sup>48</sup> Stachniewski uses the old canard—abandoned by most modern Calvin scholars—that the “central tenant of [Calvin’s] theology” is “absolute divine sovereignty” (Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 19). Nor does he differentiate between the theology of Calvin himself and the various developments of the “Calvinists” as Calvinist scholars of all modern schools differentiate to a greater or lesser extent, but rather sees Calvin, Beza, Perkins, and even Jonathan Edwards as monolithic in their theology and application (Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 24–



he moves into the Puritans—who often did not acknowledge space for a lack of subjective assurance—his diagnosis gains more traction. Calvin did not spend much time on examining the details of individual experience, preferring to focus on the objective work of Christ. In the Puritans’ introspective theology of conversion, Stachniewski rightly points out the burden which determining one’s own subjective appropriation of the work of Christ posed to the faithful.

The positive understanding of the institution of confessions as part of church membership application has been well documented; it should be noted, however, that it does not erase Morgan’s thesis. He may have caricatured the stereotypical nature of the church relation overmuch, and he may have missed its significance for the founding generation, but seeing the church relations in better light does not deny that the new policy set up difficulties for later generations living in altered circumstances. While this study affirms Morgan’s recognition of the problem, it will seek to move deeper into the analysis of the nature of the problem, aided by seating the problem more accurately within its historical context, that is, the development of the nuanced doctrine of assurance within the Reformed tradition. This context included the idea of the “persecutory imagination”: the communal perception of membership in the people of God as membership in a persecuted group. This is a nuanced appropriation of Stachniewski’s contribution to the field. The current study also affirms the positive value of the relations as documented by Caldwell, McGiffert, Selment, and other scholars as a means of communally processing the anxieties of life in traumatic times and as a means of forming personal and community identity. This study will seek to push their work forward by making a deeper

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46, 88). Indeed, he seems only to differentiate between Calvin and Luther as a question of how much time they focus on reprobation, not as having actual differences of theology (Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 19). Stachniewski considers only Calvin’s uses of the term “assurance” in the objective sense despite the fact that Stachniewski spends much time stressing the importance and nuance of the term “subjective” (Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 85).

examination of the tensions the new test created against its theological and historical context, and then analyze the historical unfolding of those tensions.

### **The Half-Way Covenant**

Once the analysis of the nature of the new test in its context has been offered, this study will turn to the conflicted history which resulted from that action. Scholars of New England Puritanism have debated the influence of the new test in relation to specific moments of ecclesial crisis and confession. By the mid-1640s New Englanders were calling for a synod to address the problem of the growing number people who did not find in their experience sufficient material for relations and, therefore, admission to the Eucharist. The first attempt at such a synod—the synod which produced the Cambridge Platform—came shortly on the heels of the Westminster Assembly and, rather than taking up the topic for which it was called, it sought to answer Westminster’s Presbyterianism with a clear statement of the principles of the system of the New England Way. Unaddressed, the problem continued to grow, and New Englanders’ calls for the matter to be taken up eventually led to the Synod of 1662 which produced what came to be known as the half-way covenant. Many of the same scholars who weighed in on the initiation of the test have contributed to our understanding of this response to the test.

The traditional consensus on the half-way covenant, which emerged as early as the First Great Awakening, is well summarized in the work of Williston Walker in his commentary which accompanied his seminal 1893 primary source collection, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. Describing its implementation over the following several generations, Walker is critical of the of the half-way covenant for opening the door to a practice which “tended vastly... to cheapen the Gospel ordinances. Indeed, there is reason to believe that in many places admission to the covenant came to be looked upon much as signing a temperance

pledge has frequently been regarded in our day.”<sup>49</sup> In this sense the half-way covenant was a betrayal of the New England Way as set forth in the Cambridge Platform. Walker saw “Arminian” attitudes which placed “increasing weight... upon the cultivation of morality as a means to a Christian life, rather than upon an insistence on the prime necessity of a divinely wrought change in a man’s nature,” as what allowed for the acceptance of the half-way covenant and even states, “that New England Unitarianism derives, in large part, its origin” from the “Arminian” preaching of the period surrounding the half-way covenant. It was a return to the “preaching and experience which characterized the Puritans at their exodus from England” which overturned the half-way covenant practices at the time of the Great Awakening: “the principles of the school of theology which came out of the revivals were thus of necessity opposed to the Half-Way Covenant, and to that school its destruction was due.”<sup>50</sup> Seen in this way, the half-way covenant was a product of the gospel decline which the pastors bemoaned throughout the period of its adoption. It represented a watering-down of the robust theology codified in the Cambridge Platform, an attempt to bring the wandering masses back into the Church at the expense of the Church’s essential message.

Perry Miller, Morgan’s mentor, assumes this perspective of the half-way covenant in his landmark 1939 monograph, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*<sup>51</sup> which revived academic interest in North American Puritan studies after a lull. In Morgan’s treatment of the half-way covenant, however, it becomes clear that he saw the issue entirely in terms of the “Puritan dilemma” referenced above. For him, the institution of the new test revealed a church so

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<sup>49</sup> Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, 279.

<sup>50</sup> Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, 284–85.

<sup>51</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

intent on excluding the impure from its ranks that it failed to notice it had almost entirely removed itself from the world.<sup>52</sup> In opposition to the old consensus, he saw the half-way covenant as a helpful and positive attempt to reinsert the world into the church. While this new perspective of the half-way covenant as a positive development proves helpful to our understanding of the covenant in its context, Morgan also revealed his own misunderstanding that earlier Reformed churches had viewed the Church as something other than the assembly of the regenerate. In describing the difference between the New England Way's test and the transition from child membership to adult membership among the Separatists, he states that, "children of Separatist church members ... did not participate in the Lord's Supper, but as they grew to maturity, they could easily qualify for all the privileges of the church, if they wished to, simply by behaving themselves and learning what they were taught."<sup>53</sup> By contrast, in New England churches, because they had prescribed "an experience beyond the range of human volition," it was "arrogant and inconsistent" to expect children to transition as they had in the Separatist churches and the Church of England as "no Christian could believe that grace was really hereditary."<sup>54</sup>

This shows that, in Morgan's estimation, if the Separatists did not believe grace to be hereditary (Morgan sets up a bit of a straw man here), but still expected their children to progress from child to adult membership, to Separatists, adult membership did not necessarily correspond to regenerate faith in the individual. Morgan was accusing the New Englanders not of redefining regeneration by conversion—he too seemed to accept that experiential conversion is necessary to

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<sup>52</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 122, writes that the New England Puritans' engagement with English Puritans' concerns of the stringency of their tests "exposed their failure to recognize the church's mission in the world."

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 126.

regeneration—but of departing from what he understood to be the ecclesiology of the old Reformed consensus. For Morgan, that ecclesiology did not view the Church as the assembly of the elect, but as an institution that gathers all indiscriminately into its membership in the hope that some will experience conversion.<sup>55</sup>

In this light the half-way covenant is an attempt by later generations to bring the world back into the church while still preserving the framework of the founder’s ideal of a covenanted society. Much previous scholarship had viewed the half-way covenant as a symptom of the decline the pastors of the second and third generations bemoaned (whether moral or theological, perceived or actual, varied by the interpreter). Morgan rejected this interpretation: “New England piety may have been declining, but the half-way covenant was *not* a symptom of decline. Rather it was an attempt to answer questions ... which were created by New England’s rigorous new conception of church membership but which the originators of that concept ... had generally been able to evade.”<sup>56</sup>

Pope, Morgan’s student, also rejected the earlier consensus that the half-way covenant was a solution that created bigger problems than it solved. When the half-way covenant was

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<sup>55</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 116, states, “To the Anglican as to the Roman Catholic Church, this [the difficulty of the Church being separate from the world while still reaching out to the world] was no problem. With all but the most notorious sinners included, indeed compelled, within the visible church, each man could gain from it whatever God wished him to gain: the saint could grow in grace; the as-yet-unconverted saint could gain the understanding he needed for conversion; and all others could learn the justice of God in damning them.”

This assessment of the differences between Anglican and Roman Catholic ecclesiology and that of the Puritans is challenged by Morgan’s own sources, however: Thomas Hubbard, a 1642 graduate of Harvard, in *A General History of New England from the Discovery to 1680*, Second edition, collated with the original manuscript, ed. William T. Harris (Boston, 1847), 181, said of the early Puritan colonists, “It must not be denied that they were of the offspring of the old Nonconformists, who yet always, walked in a distinct path from the rigid Separatists, nor did they ever disown the Church of England to be a true church as retaining the essentials of faith and order. And although they could not persuade themselves to live contentedly under the wing of Episcopal government, yet their offence was rather at the ceremonies than the discipline and government thereof.” This seems to be claiming that the New England Puritans did not perceive themselves as changing their ecclesiology from that of the Church of England, but rather that they derived their practical and ceremonial living out of that ecclesiology.

<sup>56</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 136. Emphasis original.

addressed in the Old Light-New Light debates during the Great Awakening, New Light pastors who rejected the half-way covenant tended to be pitted against laity who had come to view it as unassailable tradition.<sup>57</sup> Later scholars took their cues from this debate and viewed the half-way covenant with suspicion themselves. What is remarkable is that the situation that turned scholarship against the half-way covenant for almost two centuries—pastors attempting on the basis of theology to wrest apparently long-held tradition from their parishioners—was the same situation, though with the issues reversed, that existed less than a century earlier as pastors attempted to bring their congregations from the “strict Congregationalism” of the Cambridge Platform, to the solution of the Half-Way Synod. In the face of previous scholarship that had viewed the half-way covenant as part of the problem of decline, Pope suggested that decline—which he demonstrated was very real in the 1660s—was actually solved by the half-way covenant. The problem of decline had been created, in Pope’s estimation, by the decision of the founding generation to limit full church membership to members who could attest to their regeneration through conversion relations. In his interpretation of the test, he implicitly followed Morgan in understanding earlier views of church membership not as identifying regenerate believers, but as simply including all members of a society who lived within the region of the church, whether they were regenerate or not. For Pope, had the founding generation not attempted to limit church membership to the regenerate, they would not have needed the half-way covenant at all. In light of their ecclesiological practice, the half-way covenant became

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<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections, Works*, 2: 417, quoted in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 305, came to the conviction that “there ought to be good reason, from the circumstances of the profession [of faith] to think that the professor don’t make such a profession out of a mere customary compliance with a prescribed form . . . as confession of faith are often subscribed.” He was careful to keep this change in his view to only intimate friends as he realized “the potential explosion in the town if he announced his departure from his revered grandfather Stoddard’s practice” (Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 305).

necessary to re-incorporate the society into the church.<sup>58</sup> This ecclesiological practice was not, for Pope, a redefinition of the marks of regeneration; it was in itself innovation to identify membership with regeneration in the first place:

The visibly holy, drawn by the moving of the Spirit to erect pure churches gathered out of the world, rarely sustain their fervor in succeeding generations. Spontaneity is lost, and experiential piety becomes routinized. Children cherish the past, imitate it, but cannot recapture it. Slowly the churches accommodate their purity to the world and redefine their mission or goal to fit the new standards. When the Spirit moves anew, the saints gather at the river once again. As the puritans were called out of Anglicanism, so the New Lights were called out of the remnants of Puritanism. Every generation has its half-way covenant.<sup>59</sup>

In Pope's understanding, there was something spiritually different between the faith of the first generation and that of the second and third generations. Enshrining that difference was the mistake, in Pope's estimation, and necessitated the adaptation of the half-way covenant. His resolution did not recognize the change in the definition of regeneration and assumed Morgan's understanding of prior ecclesiology; thus, it did not take into account the change of circumstance. It is not the younger generation's loss of the vitality of the older generation; it is the change in context. When the older generation redefined theology according to their context, the redefinition did not work for the children's context.

Stout rejected that a significant spiritual difference existed between the founding generation and their successors but did so in a highly nuanced way. While he acknowledged that the 1660s saw a decline in membership as membership rates fell to one in two inhabitants in Dedham and fewer in Boston, he saw the half-way covenant in a similarly positive light as had Morgan and Pope, though for different reasons. He saw the half-way covenant as addressing the problem of the Church's influence in the civic realm, which was necessary in the North

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<sup>58</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 263.

<sup>59</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 278.

American Puritan schema since the project was to restore and conform the whole of society to God's intention for human experience:

For the New England Way to survive, the churches had to be pure, but they also had to represent a core of the society large enough to exert power and influence over all its operations. Clearly, the delicate balance of purity and power that worked so well for the first generation would have to be readjusted for the second and third generations. Otherwise, purity would stifle power and become self-defeating; the churches would remain pure—and empty.<sup>60</sup>

For Stout, the half-way covenant was the “crowning achievement of the founders” in demonstrating a necessary shift in focus from reforming Europe to preserving New England,<sup>61</sup> and in showing how to alter particular details in civil and ecclesiastical administration, in a society that acknowledged no sovereign but *Sola Scriptura*.<sup>62</sup> As such, the half-way covenant represents not a means of including less-zealous later generations in the over-specific expectations of their more-zealous ancestors, but rather shows the way forward of adapting the system established by the founders to new circumstances, as would necessarily be the case over time. In the 1630s, the community was seeking to establish pure churches; by the 1660s, the project had to shift to adapting the New England Way to its own future.

Further, Stout pointed out that the half-way covenant proved effective as many half-way members eventually did experience conversion; that is, they demonstrated their continued share

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<sup>60</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 59. Stout stated that “the most important question was no longer how might New England best serve the cause of reform in Europe, but how could their abandoned Way be preserved in the American wilderness until such time as Christ returned to earth.” This view would be nuanced by Bozeman’s insights into the real nature of the “Errand into the Wilderness,” but Stout’s appeal to it here does not lessen the force of his main argument that the half-way covenant should be understood as a demonstration of the adaptability of the Congregational model.

<sup>62</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 59. Stout noted the involvement in the debates over the half-way covenant of the majority of surviving members of the founding generation on the side of adoption of the new measures. He wrote that by “1662 the [Cambridge] *Platform* had assumed an almost canonical status” and the half-way covenant represented the surviving founders’ reminder to future generations that “such reverence . . . should be reserved exclusively for the Scriptures” (Stout, *New England Soul*, 60).



in the zeal of their predecessors.<sup>63</sup> This is also a positive interpretation of the half-way covenant, and one that does not require seeing a significant religious change taking place for an unknown reason. Stout did not explore the role of the half-way covenant itself as a significant factor in reversing the decline—a reversal that he acknowledged without tying it to the half-way covenant—as that relationship was not part of his project. Stout appreciated the canniness the remaining founders displayed in the 1662 Synod, but he did not dwell on that event as correcting an earlier mistake; as well, he made no mention of the founding test as either a redefinition of the church (as did Morgan and Pope), or as a redefinition of regeneration and assurance. To Stout, the new test was a matter of suiting polity to the context of peopling new churches on the North American continent.

Another view of the half-way covenant should be taken up briefly before moving on to survey the literature corresponding to the historical context which followed the half-way covenant. One of the aspects of the relations—and the circumstances they produced—that would confound later generations was their relationship to the civic franchise. As the local congregation was constituted around a covenant, the local town was also constituted around a covenant, and to participate in the latter, one had to be a member of the former. With extremely limited numbers of people gaining the status of full membership in the churches, an increasingly limited percentage of the community was participating in town government. This would lead to increasing tensions given the political implications of gaining church membership.

According to Richard L. Bushman, Congregationalist polity, in which all members have a vote in actions of the church—including discipline—was developed in part to resist the social control that the Anglican episcopal system imposed. In New England, the fathers of the

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<sup>63</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 61.

community quickly realized the need to exercise social control, but it was difficult to do so when the congregation had to approve discipline. Factions could develop and threaten social stability, so community fathers began expanding the powers of the clergy and elevating their status in society. The problem, however, was that, with the church existing as a voluntary community of people who had experienced conversion, together with their children, more and more of the society was not seeking to be admitted into the visible church and, thus, to place themselves under the authority of the pastors.<sup>64</sup> In light of this situation, Bushman interpreted the 1662 initiation of the half-way covenant as a move by the clergy to extend their influence over a larger portion of society.<sup>65</sup> This provided for not only children of full church members to be eligible for baptism (and thus, subject to church discipline), but also for the children of baptized parents who had not experienced a personal conversion and not become full members to be eligible for baptism (and church discipline) as well. A difficulty with this interpretation is that the extension of pastoral authority implicit in the extension of baptism was still voluntary and still depended on the unconverted parents “owning the covenant” on behalf of the child for whom they sought baptism. Further, such baptism would subject the child to the discipline of the church, which the parents were, according to Bushman, trying to avoid, while not granting them the rights and privileges of full membership and its attendant access to the franchise. It is difficult to understand why parents would submit to such a ploy, if a ploy it was.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765*. Revised ed. edition. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 148.

<sup>65</sup> Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 147–48.

<sup>66</sup> It should also be noted that discipline was exercised by the congregation, not the pastors. If the pastors were trying to extend their power in the face of the Congregationalist system, increasing the number of people answerable to the congregation’s discipline did not explicitly enlarge pastoral power. The pastor’s power was exercised primarily through the pulpit, and that extended to the whole community—in small New England towns where the sermon was often the only public address in the week—whether members were baptized or not.

It seems better to understand the half-way covenant more in line with Morgan's and Stout's interpretation: as the New England Way shifting in response to changing circumstances, seeking to protect the purity of the church while also drawing children to the place where they could offer relations and take their place as full members. From the primary sources of the half-way covenant itself—which shall be examined in later chapters—this is the clear understanding of the participants. Further, over the course of the next generation as the half-way covenant was implemented in the New England churches, this is how it was received. Not as a political maneuver, but as a religious adaptation. The arguments for and against it, from clergy and laity, seem never to touch on the civic aspect of church membership. This is not to say there was not a link between civil and religious life, however. That link was very strong and, in the decades that followed the synod, the tumult and uncertainty of civil life in New England had a significant effect on religious life. That link, however, ran through the impact of civil circumstances on the emotional experience of the individual.

### **The Sacramental Controversy**

In seeking to address the need for assurance in such times and flowing on the sacramental discussions which surrounded the half-way covenant concerning the nature of baptism and what it entailed and provided, ministers turned increasingly to the sacraments—indeed they participated in a Puritan sacramental renaissance—in holding out assurance and hope to their congregations in traumatic times. One minister in particular, Solomon Stoddard, began to critique the New England Way, and the very practice of relations, as he sought to apply the assurance of the sacraments to his congregants. The arguments surrounding Stoddard's innovations and the Congregational churches' reception of these changes over the first decades of the eighteenth century marks the last period of research for this study.

The current scholarly debates about Stoddard are built on an inability to differentiate the nuances I will examine in this study. The Sacramental Controversy is a period which many scholars have treated only peripherally, or have misread or misrepresented by approaching the sources with simplistic glosses of the actual arguments. This occurs sometimes because they are engaging one source as their primary subject—as in the case of a biography—and consequently view the arguments of their subject’s opponents primarily as their subject represented the opponent’s position. Other times it appears to be because the modern scholar is accepting the perspective of previous scholarship without close examination of the sources themselves. By a careful reading of texts on both sides of the controversy, this study will present a more nuanced perspective of this very complex and multifaceted debate.

Stout only engaged the sacramental controversy peripherally by noting that Stoddard’s sacramental theology was essentially evangelistic. He noted that both Stoddard and his protagonists, the Mathers, were in agreement on the “importance of conversion preaching.”<sup>67</sup> This seems to underscore the importance of the new test to the sacramental controversy, though Stout did not comment directly as, again, this was not part of his project.

Brooks Holifield, examining the renaissance of sacramental piety,<sup>68</sup> noted that “the problem of admission became extremely complex, particularly in view of New England’s traditional restriction of the Lord’s Supper to converted visible saints.”<sup>69</sup> This suggests that the sacramental

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<sup>67</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 99.

<sup>68</sup> This renaissance was partly expressed in the outpouring of communion manuals between 1690 and 1738 and coincided with—and may be seen as the context which produced—the sacramental controversy.

<sup>69</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, “The Renaissance of Sacramental Piety in Colonial New England,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 29, no. 1 (January 1972): 43. This statement itself only hints at the layers of complexity. While the Westminster divines were codifying baptism as including “solemn admission . . . into the visible church” . . . (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 28.1) in the 1640s, the Puritans of New England were coming to divorce baptism from church membership, with the claim that “only papists and Baptists . . . thought that the Church was ‘made by Baptisme’” (Richard Mather, *Church-Government and Church-Covenant Discussed* [London, 1643], 12, quoted in Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 144).

controversy should be viewed as an outworking of the New England Way's new test. He states,

Ministers who otherwise disagreed violently about sacramental issues testified with one voice to the prevalence of an extreme conscientiousness about the sacrament. Solomon Stoddard complained about men neglecting the Lord's Supper from 'Meekness of Conscience, fearing whether they have liberty to come.' Edward Taylor agreed that some persons abstained because of fear and doubt. While recognizing that other sinners lived in "total neglect" of the sacrament, he devoted his longest description of the New England absentee to the earnest Christian who was guilty of the sin of abstention.<sup>70</sup>

In his definitive work on Puritan sacramental theology,<sup>71</sup> Holifield seated the sacramental controversy firmly in the context of the half-way covenant and sacramental renaissance, seeing the problems between the Mathers and Stoddard as different ways of addressing the situation of half-way members in the midst of a new interest in sacramental piety. His assessment of Stoddard's position placed the sacramental controversy squarely on the shoulders of the New England Way's innovation in membership: Stoddard "thought it presumptuous to try to identify the regenerate and inadvisable to encourage the merely hopeful to think of themselves as converted [as the Mathers sometimes did]. Having been convinced by the earlier English controversy that the Lord's Supper itself was one solution to the problem of conversion, he expounded that view in New England."<sup>72</sup>

This perspective shows Stoddard as rebelling against the test while still firmly accepting the redefinition of conversion: Though he was opening the table to those who believed and did not lead scandalous lives, as Reformed churches had always done, he did not view such people as regenerate until they could ground their assurance in the reflex act of faith, i.e., the experience

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<sup>70</sup> Holifield, "Renaissance of Sacramental Piety," 42.

<sup>71</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*.

<sup>72</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 224. The English controversy over the Lord's Supper as a converting ordinance from which Stoddard borrowed took place in the late 1640s and early 1650s when William Prynne suggested that the sacrament was a "grace-begetting" ordinance and John Humfrey proposed open admission to the table. For a succinct treatment of the controversy, see Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 109–26.

of conversion. Seen in this light, Stoddard's view could have been a greater departure from the previous Reformed consensus than the Mathers, in that the Mathers encouraged many reluctant half-way members to view their desire for the Lord's Supper as proof of their conversion (and, thus, their regeneration),<sup>73</sup> while Stoddard may have simply opened the table more widely in hopes of bringing about regeneration.<sup>74</sup> Holifield did not comment on whether he understood the new debates as resting on either a redefinition of the church or a redefinition of regeneration. It will be a purpose of this study to examine Stoddard's highly nuanced view to determine how much his view participated in the redefinition of regeneration, and how much he held to the older Reformed understanding, or if he was developing his own new hybrid. Greater clarity on Stoddard's theology of regeneration will serve to demonstrate what precisely is at stake in these larger arguments.

Norman Grabo examined the debate between Taylor and Stoddard.<sup>75</sup> His description of the controversy as it unfolded in print between the Mathers and Stoddard and in letters and unpublished sources between Taylor and Stoddard makes clear that it was a continuation of the issue the 1662 Synod sought to resolve, with Taylor and Mather urging the conclusions of the synod and with Stoddard moving toward a repeal of relations aimed, in contrast, at bringing about the conversions the relations sought to prove. In Grabo's view—which is focused on Taylor's writings, and so generally accepts Taylor's characterization of his opponent—Stoddard

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<sup>73</sup> Increase and Cotton Mather, "Defence of the Evangelical Churches," quoted in Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 211–12, charged that Stoddard assumed too great an "Exactness, in his Thoughts about a Work of Regeneration" and claimed that his system constituted "the Judgement of Severity" against any assurance of an individual's salvation.

<sup>74</sup> The Mathers may have been closer to the old theology, but they were still looking for conversion—subjective assurance through experience—as the evidence of regeneration.

<sup>75</sup> Norman S. Grabo, ed., *Edward Taylor's Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966).

was advocating for a wide inclusion in the Eucharist so it might bring more to conversion. A clarification that this dissertation shall explore should be offered here: it appears that all three combatants agreed with the founders on soteriology, that conversion is the basis for assurance of regeneration. Stoddard disagreed on ecclesiology and, to a certain extent, sacramentology: the Lord's Supper was not limited to the regenerate for him, but may actually produce regeneration, and so should be extended to all those with objective assurance that it might work subjective assurance in them. Regardless of what system was used for admitting people to the Table, Stoddard pointed out that some unregenerate would slip through—a point Puritans had always conceded. His focus on the sacrament's converting power was another answer to the problem purifying the churches was supposed to solve: the unregenerate who inevitably made it into communion fellowship could be brought to regeneration by the ordinance, generally solving the problem of purity.

Thomas and Virginia Davis also presented Taylor and Stoddard as understanding their debate to be about the founding practice, while sharing with the founders their new assumption concerning the role of conversion in assurance. They pointed to Taylor's letter to Stoddard in 1687/8<sup>76</sup> in which he said that Stoddard's practice "will be slanderous to those 'that brought us hither in this wilderness,'" and to Stoddard's reply three months later that "I have been abundantly satisfied these many years, that we did not attend the Will of God in this matter."<sup>77</sup> Taylor, in the Davis presentation, clearly saw Stoddard as not just being in conflict with Taylor's

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<sup>76</sup> The letter exchange took place in 1688 by modern reckoning, but is actually dated "1687/8" due to the common practice of stating both years between January 1 and March 25.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas M. Davis and Virginia L. Davis, eds., *Edward Taylor's "Church Records" and Related Sermons*, vol. 1 of *The Unpublished Writings of Edward Taylor*, Twayne's American Literary Manuscripts Series (Boston: Twayne, 1981), xx–xxi, quoting their own transcription of Taylor's letter. A published edition of the letter can be found in Norman S. Grabo, "The Poet to the Pope: Edward Taylor to Solomon Stoddard," *American Literature*, 32, no. 2 (May 1960): 197–201.

understanding of biblical precedent, but also with the founders' practice, while Stoddard explicitly depicted the founders' practice as a departure from biblical precedent. Their controversy was, thus, over the founders' new test. In their assessment of Stoddard in his conflict with Taylor, the Davises noted his "intense desire to bring the conversion experience, if at all possible, within the reach of every man. . . . Conversion is clearly 'the heart of the matter.'"<sup>78</sup> For Stoddard, the founders' test was a departure from Scripture, but it was a departure because it served to impinge on a doctrine he shared with them: their belief in the normativity of experiential conversion, and its function as the ground of assurance. He accepted their soteriology but not their practice. The Davises did not discuss whether Taylor's and Stoddard's views support the assertion that the founders' redefinition was of regeneration, or of the doctrine of the church.

The ambiguity in the question—soteriology or ecclesiology—is understandable because the Cambridge Platform maintains that ambiguity: when it speaks to ecclesiology, it is primarily concerned with the purity of the church; when it speaks to soteriology, it is primarily concerned with the judgment of charity being exercised towards the candidate for membership. Given this ambiguity, it is understandable why modern scholars such as Morgan and Pope would begin to confuse which issue is being altered from the Reformed consensus. Understandable as it may be, it remains a confusion which has negative consequences for our historical understanding of this period. The New England Puritans were not confused about whether they were redefining who the Church was; they were seeking to make their churches more consistent expressions of the existing paradigm which saw churches as local assemblies of the elect. In doing so, however,

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<sup>78</sup> Davis and Davis, eds., *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard: The Nature of the Lord's Supper*, vol. 2 of *The Unpublished Writings of Edward Taylor*, Twayne's American Literary Manuscripts Series (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 48.



they were pushing up against a limitation in theological development. The Reformed tradition was still working to articulate the difference between subjective and objective assurance which had been implicit in Reformation era theological expressions, while the New England Way did not acknowledge such a distinction.

### The Question of Decline

While late seventeenth century Puritans observed a decline in the piety, as they termed it, of their society from that of the founding generation, modern scholars generally fall into one of two camps in their interpretation of this decline. One group generally accepts that the decline in piety and church involvement was not imagined, even if the indicators and causes its contemporary observers blamed for the decline have been deemed inaccurate by modern historians.<sup>79</sup> The other group denies that such decline actually took place, and ultimately explains the pastors' perceptions as being rooted in social and political differences between the founding generation and the context of later generations, or in the increase in social, political, and physical tensions in the era of the third generation,

Among scholars that affirm that some sort of decline took place, various reasons for the decline have been offered, and many are quite convincing. Some define the nature of the decline

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<sup>79</sup> Several clarifications should be offered here: The pastors were complaining of (1) a decline in the numbers of people who achieved communing membership, (2) a decline in church involvement—i.e. attendance, and (3) a decline in piety and personal morality as indicated by frequenting taverns excessively, failing to respect those of higher social status, coarse joking and speech, rising cases of accusations and church discipline, etc. On the first point—communion membership—Pope has demonstrated statistically what the pastors complained of anecdotally (this is the point of *The Half-Way Covenant*). The second point is harder to examine statistically as attendance records were not rigorously kept nor remain extant. The third point is also difficult. James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), demonstrates the statistical rise in accusations and the use of process, and in church discipline. Claims of increased rudeness are difficult to ascertain and examinations of primary sources are inherently inconclusive given the complaints are generally being made by people comparing their experience to their impression of the experiences of people who predate them. On the charge of increased frequenting of taverns, see the confrontation between Leverett and Mather for a primary source example of disagreement about this issue (below, 172).

in terms of lived experiences and practices. Richard Bushman is typical of this group in offering reasons based on contextual factors of community life. He explained the change by citing the natural process of organic community growth and decentralization as the population expanded and younger sons had to travel farther and farther from town centers—and the control of town fathers—to farm their land, combined with the tensions created as an anti-establishment protest movement in England transitioned to being the establishment in New England.<sup>80</sup> While not denying this, Jon Butler focused more on the shift in motivations for immigration as time progressed, with early colonists primarily motivated by religious factors, and later colonists increasingly motivated by economic factors.<sup>81</sup>

Within the group of scholars who affirm some sort of decline, Perry Miller is the most prominent to define the decline as a change in the theology of the Puritans. He saw two primary shifts in the perspectives of the North American colonists' theology in the first hundred years of its existence. The first shift was the move from John Winthrop's ideal of being a city on a hill that would show the way to those left in England, to being concerned with preserving the New England Way for its own sake. This was a shift from a more global perspective to a more provincial perspective.<sup>82</sup> The second shift was an intensification of the role of the covenant as a restraint on God's activity and a stronger focus on man's responsibility to God as a free agent who was primarily accountable to God because of man's voluntary entrance into the covenant.

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<sup>80</sup> Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*.

<sup>81</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 63.

<sup>82</sup> This shift is primarily articulated in Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953). According to Miller, as Puritan influence advanced in England in the wake of the colonists' departure, the leaders of the movement in England went in different directions from those of the North Americans, which led the colonists to reconsider the reason for their "errand into the wilderness" and to become more introspective and provincial in their theology.

Miller attributed the change to the fact that, by the latter part of the century, the colonists had firmly established themselves in North America and did not live in a world of uncertainties to the extent their predecessors had; they had come to view God as relatively tame, once confined by the covenant.<sup>83</sup> Miller's work was primarily focused on the theology itself, not the impact of that theology on the broader culture. His project was to explain the changes, not define the nature of the decline in terms of attendance, membership, or behavior. Aware of the concerns that leaders in the latter part of the century had for impiety, Miller tended to explain these concerns as the result of the pastors working out their new role with their new theology in changing times.<sup>84</sup>

Theodore Dwight Bozeman has criticized Miller's thesis that the Puritans saw themselves on an "errand into the wilderness" for the purpose of creating a "city on a hill" to be a beacon to England, citing the fact that the whole concept comes from Miller's speculation on a brief statement in Winthrop's sermon aboard the *Arbella*, a statement that was not the thrust of the rest of the sermon, and which was not picked up again in any significant way in the writings of the first or second generations of North American Puritan thinkers. He noted that, while Miller only offered the thesis as speculation, it has been embraced by many Puritan scholars and accepted as though it were a proven statement, to the detriment of our understanding of American Puritan motivations.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> This shift is the focus of Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).

<sup>84</sup> For other examples of scholars who perceive declension, see Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630–1649* (Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1965), Ross W. Beales, "The Half-Way Covenant and Religious Scrupulosity: The First Church of Dorchester, Massachusetts, as a Test Case," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1974): 465–80, Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) and Gerald F. Moran and Maris A. Vinovskis, "The Puritan Family and Religion: A Critical Reappraisal," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1982): 29–63.

<sup>85</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 82–97. Also see Abram Van Engen, *The City on a Hill Archive* (<https://sites.wustl.edu/americanexceptionalism/>).

A second group of scholars seek to explain the period by claiming that the decline was only a misperception of the pastors. Harry Stout, continuing in the trajectory of Miller who examined the situation in terms of shifts in theology, came to almost opposite conclusions. He infers that there was, in fact, no significant decline in the churches and no radical theological shifts among the pastors. He contended that most historians had based their research on published sermons, which were primarily occasional sermons that focused on political and social goals, not the individual faith of the hearers. From his survey of over two thousand unpublished “regular” Sunday sermons, Stout came to the conclusion that, while the political and societal applications of the pastors changed over time, their theology remained largely the same throughout the period. In making this claim, Stout undercuts the idea that New Englanders’ participation in the churches—both attendance and membership—declined significantly over the course of the century.<sup>86</sup>

Thomas Kidd saw change, but not decline, contending that the shift in Puritan society was not from global to provincial, but rather the opposite. It required all of the attention of the founding generation of North American Puritans to simply survive; in addition to this, the building of the New England Way required that attention be given to creating a workable system in their own context. As political and economic realities shifted toward the end of the century, the isolation the early generations had experienced lessened, and the New England Puritans had to begin to view themselves as members of a global Protestant movement, lest they be perceived as an opposition party to England’s new Anglican leaders.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *The Protestant Interest: New England after Puritanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 51–73.

Robert Pope, who also denied the reality of the decline that second and third generation pastors complained of, frequently acknowledged that declining membership was indeed a reality in the decades following the Cambridge Synod. The half-way covenant, for him, proved to be a solution to this problem and reversed the negative trend of membership. His conclusions are based on statistical comparisons of the four churches in Massachusetts for which enough records exist to make such a comparison. He saw the social upheaval of the last quarter of the seventeenth century as the reason contemporary observers understood their churches and society to be in decline when, in fact, the reverse was true.<sup>88</sup> It is clear to him, however, that the New England Way began to fragment through the close of the seventeenth century. Pope blamed congregational autonomy for this breakdown: “in the rapidly changing society of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, the autonomy of the individual congregation proved to be the undoing of religious uniformity.”<sup>89</sup> The problem for Pope was not that the half-way covenant brought down the church and led to decline but that there was no decline. Later generations defined success for the founding generation’s “errand into the wilderness” as uniformity while pursuing a polity that eschewed unity. When they could not find uniformity, they assumed decline. Their perception was exacerbated by the social and political turmoil of the late seventeenth century.

As has been demonstrated, different scholars have approached the question of decline for different periods and, depending on the period and the data taken into consideration, have arrived at contradictory conclusions. The general agreement among most of the more recent scholars, for example Pope and Stout, that the Congregational churches were neither in numeric decline by the end of the seventeenth century, nor were they theologically distant from the founding

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<sup>88</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 272–75.

<sup>89</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 269.

generation, rests on careful analysis of data not generally considered by their predecessors and should be viewed as conclusive. Pope does demonstrate numeric decline during the period of 1640–1675. During the broader period, however, he is also able to definitively demonstrate numeric growth.<sup>90</sup> Cooper documents a rise in church process and discipline; but moral decline is difficult to demonstrate, as it is based on subjective impressions. Nor does members making more use of church courts as they became more familiar with the new congregational system prove moral decline.<sup>91</sup>

For Stout, the New Englanders remained quite religious throughout the period he surveyed (1630–1776) and he does not contend that the period under study here was one of decline. The idea of religious decline was a misperception by the pastors, grounded in real numeric decline which Pope notes, yet extrapolated to periods when growth was actually taking place. While the research of Pope and Stout establish that the decline was more a perception of the pastors than a historical fact, for the purpose of this dissertation the perception of the pastors is crucial. For these pastors and the laity whom their sermons and conversations influenced, the imagined experience of a decline was important. Given the role of the persecutory imagination in configuring Puritan religious experience, this imagined decline influenced the contextualization

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<sup>90</sup> Pope made a statistical examination of church records as noted above. Stout examined virtually all extant unpublished sermons from the period while much previous scholarship was limited to the comparatively small sample of extant published sermons.

<sup>91</sup> Taken together Stout and Pope provide theological and social analyses that contradict the theological and social analyses of Miller and Butler, respectively. These do not constitute formally acknowledged “schools,” however. With the exception of Butler, all authors considered here were examining what changed in the mindset of the American colonists during some period between the founding in 1629 and the American Revolution in the 1770s–1780s. With the exception of Butler again, their foci were on the same geography as this study, but over different periods. Kidd was looking primarily at the period from the Glorious Revolution (1688) until the Great Awakening (1740s), while Bushman considered the period from 1690–1765, and Pope, the period from the 1640s to the 1690s. Butler was seeking to examine the whole of what would eventually become the United States, from 1600 to 2000; his insights into the Puritans are limited to the period from about 1630 to 1670 (and in some cases the 1690s). His thesis was that the early North Americans were generally irreligious. He acknowledged that the New England Puritans were not a microcosm of the rest of the colonies: they were more religious, though he also contended that they were not as big an exception to his thesis as some would claim.

of the doctrine of assurance for the Puritans in this period.

### **Moving Forward**

This study builds on the idea that the new membership test of the founding generation set up the various theological controversies that consumed theologians and laity for the next century, but this study departs from most existing theories by focusing on the new test not as a redefinition of ecclesiology but of soteriology. Rather than viewing the test as a change in how the church was viewed, it understands the test as a change in how regeneration was viewed, and this change would prove to be a watershed for theology in North America. For this reason, this dissertation will clarify the theological and experiential dynamics that are present in the test act itself and then reexamine the history of these theological controversies in light of the new understanding.

First, the practice of earlier Reformed churches will be briefly surveyed to establish both the consensus of membership practice and to examine what such a practice meant concerning how to understand the relationship of conversion to assurance and regeneration. Second, the institution of the membership test, itself, and the immediate discussions and responses among observers and participants in the test will be examined to ascertain the founder's reasons for instituting such a test, to understand if they were seeking to redefine the church or if they were seeking to identify the elect, and to determine if such a change represented a break with the prior consensus. Special attention will be paid to the Cambridge Platform and the debates surrounding it as it served to institutionalize the newly developed New England Way (though its actual formulation occurred as a response to the Westminster Assembly).<sup>92</sup> Third, the debates leading

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<sup>92</sup> This issue of how modern interpreters understand the reason for the new test is not to be confused with an internal tension within the Cambridge Platform of 1648: Within that document, when the focus is on ecclesiology,

up to and culminating in the Half-Way Synod of 1662 and the decades-long process of the adoption of the synod's result will be examined against the backdrop of King Philip's War, disease, fire, and political and social trauma. The goal of this examination will be to see what conditions the institution of the test had produced, and whether the debates and the eventual resolution point to a problem based on making the reflex act of faith a normative basis for assurance of regeneration or on some other cause. Here, Pope's arguments that the decline in actual numbers was reversed by the half-way covenant and by the political and social tumult of the period following the synod that proposed it are accepted. This study also accepts his explanation that the numeric decline in church membership leading up to the 1660s was the source of the second generation's perception of decline, as the political and social turmoil of the period from 1675–1693 was the source of the third generation's perception of decline, even as that turmoil combined with the new procedures of the half-way covenant to drive people back to the churches in increasing numbers. Fourth, the sacramental controversy will be examined in its context—the continued implementation of the half-way covenant, socio-political turmoil, and sacramental renaissance—and will be assessed as to whether it should be understood as another means of seeking to adapt to the new soteriological definition. Through such a careful analysis of the religious practices of the Puritans regarding the doctrine of assurance and experiential conversion, this dissertation will clarify the complexity of early American religious thought and practice that has given shape to the personalization of American Christianity.

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the concern is for the purity of the church, and greater emphasis is placed on the need of individual experience to conform to theological expectation. When its focus is on soteriology, the concern is for the individual applying for membership, and there are demands that examinations not be conducted with severity and that congregations extend the judgement of "rational charity" as far as possible to include even the "weakest measure" of faith. The Cambridge Platform, XII, 2–3, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 222.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A REFORMED CONSENSUS AND ITS DISSIDENTS

To call the new test a redefinition of soteriology would likely not have been well received by its promulgators. The New England Puritans were not innovators but primitivists.<sup>1</sup> They sought to return to the primitive purity of the Apostolic church. They believed that the Reformation had begun this work and that they were carrying it on by their actions. In this respect they were products—though extreme examples of such—of the Reformed branch of the Reformation. Their pursuit of the local church's purity led to the need to ensure that its members were indeed members of the Church universal, and for this they turned to the Reformed doctrine of assurance. As shall be discussed shortly, according to Calvin, true believers had assurance of faith. To achieve true purity, the New Englanders needed a means of discerning assurance, and the discernable feature they looked to was subjective assurance—what was called “the reflex act of faith”<sup>2</sup>—as the proof of objective assurance. They tested for this subjective assurance by verbally relating the experience of conversion, and in so doing they inadvertently inserted a new step into the *ordo salutis*: experiential conversion as the normative ground of assurance.

Because earlier definitions of assurance—Calvin's in particular—assumed its presence in the believer, there was no test for it: if a candidate passed the test of doctrine and life, they were assumed to have assurance. Later definitions such as those of William Perkins and the Westminster Confession of Faith broadened and nuanced the issue, suggesting it was possible to not always experience assurance or to not experience full emotional assurance. These definitions

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 11: “Primitivism embraced the conviction that the Christian pilgrimage forth through the age of reformation and toward the eschatological climax was simultaneously a retrogression.”

<sup>2</sup> R. M. Hawkes, “The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (September 1990): 257.

were explicit that an individual might not *feel* fully assured, but their objective testimony of their belief in the sufficiency of Christ’s work was sufficient to demonstrate their objective assurance. To better understand the Reformed consensus from which the Puritans drew, and inadvertently departed, we will begin by examining the development of the doctrine of assurance within the Reformed tradition. This doctrine of assurance is what the later North American Puritans were ultimately using to determine if a person could be admitted to the Lord’s Table. This was not the reason, however, for which Reformed theologians—and the early English Puritans in particular—had taken up a careful study of the doctrine. In earlier discussion it was not so closely related to admission to the Eucharist but had more to do with offering solace to those already acknowledged to be regenerate.

### **Solace to Uncertain Saints**

#### *Assurance in Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Over the course of his career, Calvin formulated a definitive statement of his theology in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which reached its final form in 1559. The product of multiple revisions, this work can be seen as his “mature understanding” of a given topic. In the *Institutes*, Calvin generally discussed assurance in two ways.<sup>3</sup> First, he discussed this doctrine in the context of describing the objective assurance of the believer’s salvation rooted not in his own merit, but in the work of Christ—usually in polemical sections against Roman Catholic opponents who were arguing that the believer could not be assured of one’s elect state. Second, he discussed assurance in the context of discussing the subjective assurance of the objective reality that the believer obtains through ongoing reception of the Word and sacraments—often in

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<sup>3</sup> This evaluation of Calvin’s doctrine of assurance comes against the backdrop of the long debate in scholarship noted in the preceding chapter.

the context of pastoral concerns for believers struggling with doubt.

The first type of assurance is, in Calvin's view, essential to salvation in that the believer must place his trust in Christ, not himself. One statement of this comes in the context of Calvin's response to Osiander's doctrine of essential righteousness. Osiander claimed that Christ justified the believer not by imputing Christ's own righteousness, but by indwelling the believer with his real, justifying presence. Salvation consisted of the indwelling of Christ who is the inner Word, and it is that indwelling itself—not a changed life, nor imputed righteousness—which saves.<sup>4</sup>

Contra to this point Calvin states,

Scripture shows that God's promises are not established unless they are grasped with the full assurance of conscience. Wherever there is doubt or uncertainty, it pronounces them void. Again, it declares that these promises do nothing but vacillate and waver if they rest upon our own works. Therefore, righteousness must either depart from us or works must not be brought into account, but faith alone must have place, whose nature it is to prick up the ears and close the eyes—that is, to be intent upon the promise alone and to turn thought away from all worth or merit of man.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after this statement Calvin makes an allusion to the doctrine of essential righteousness and, in the two sections prior, numerous paragraphs are explicitly dedicated to refuting Osiander. In this use, the believer's assurance is not the subjective state of the emotions, but the object of belief. If the object is human works, then there is no assurance because works change; if it is Christ's work, then that is the definition of assurance because Christ's work is complete. Hearing in this statement the suggestion that a lack of emotional confidence demonstrates the condition of reprobation is reading a subjective use of the idea of assurance into Calvin's objective point. Calvin is here focused on the believer's faith in the objective reality of Christ's work that saves

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief treatment of the issues between Calvin and Osiander, see W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, (Cambridge: James Clark, 2002), 133ff.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Book 3, chapter 13, section 4. (Hereafter, the format 3.13.4 will be used.)

as opposed to union with Christ and indwelling of Christ making the believer saved, as in Osiander's doctrine. In this use Calvin does not take up the issue of how the individual "feels"; he is talking about the basis of the individual's salvation,<sup>6</sup> as evidenced by his quoting Zechariah 3:9–10 immediately following: "Thus Zechariah's famous prophecy is fulfilled: when the iniquity of this land will be removed, each man 'will invite his friend under his vine and under his fig tree.'" He then explains that "we must grasp this analogy in the prophets: when they discuss Christ's Kingdom, they set forth God's outward blessings as figures of spiritual goods."<sup>7</sup> For Calvin, salvation rests in the actions of God, and the man who perceives this can have assurance of his position, regardless of his emotional state.

The first type of assurance gives rise to the second type. When Calvin deals with the emotional state, he depicts the believer as having grounds for confidence. Calvin notes,

[T]here are very many who so conceive God's mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrained with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them, or rather, whether they will come to it. This reasoning, when it stops in midcourse, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt God's goodness clearly manifested for us. But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it in ourselves. For this reason, the apostle derives confidence from faith, and from confidence, in turn, boldness. For he states: "Through Christ we have boldness and access with confidence which is through faith in him." By these words he obviously shows that there is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God's sight. This boldness arises only out of a

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<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Calvin is concerned with assurance in this doctrine as, when he confronts Osiander's doctrine directly, he notes that "although not intending to abolish freely given righteousness, he has still enveloped it in such a fog as to darken pious minds and deprive them of a lively experience of Christ's grace" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.5). The concern that Osiander's doctrine "deprives" believers of "a lively experience of Christ's grace" speaks directly to the believer's assurance.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.13.4.

sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation. This is so true that the word “faith” is very often used for confidence.<sup>8</sup>

Here we see how the objective reality of assurance is capable of producing subjective assurance in the midst of the believer’s doubts, when the focus is put back on the objective reality in Scripture and not the believer. This passage comes as part of a section differentiating “what sort is that faith which distinguishes the children of God from the unbelievers”<sup>9</sup> and in that context he is actually arguing against the sort of subjective introspection which he sees as weakening faith and for refocusing on objective realities for the sake of subjective confidence.

Sometimes he uses the language that the believer does indeed have confidence, such as when, in treating the peace of conscience that flows from gratuitous justification, he describes the danger of assuming that life revolves around chance with the manifold dangers that surround people: disease, accident, enemies, and so on. He then offers,

Yet, when that light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care. For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God. His solace, I say, is to know that his Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it. Moreover, it comforts him to know that he has been received into God’s safekeeping and entrusted to the care of his angels, and that neither water, nor fire, nor iron can harm him, except in so far as it pleases God as governor to give them occasion.<sup>10</sup>

This sounds like the second type of assurance—subjective, emotional confidence—is a constant. He even goes on to say that “they have this never-failing assurance.”<sup>11</sup> This, however, is in the context of explaining why their confidence never fails, and as the argument progresses it is clear

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.15.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.13.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.11.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.11.

that the argument is taking place in the believer's head, that some emotional vacillation is taking place:

Now if their welfare is assailed either by the devil or by wicked men, then indeed, unless strengthened through remembering and meditating upon providence, they must needs quickly faint away. But let them recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God's hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable either to hatch any plot against us or, having hatched it, to make preparations or, if they have fully planned it, to stir a finger toward carrying it out, except so far as he has permitted, indeed commanded.<sup>12</sup>

With each statement that the elect individual is unable to doubt comes a qualification that, were he to doubt, he would be reassured by another aspect of the argument. This ideal depiction of the believer's assurance includes the assumption that believers need reassurance offered to their doubts in their emotional state. This is testified to elsewhere when Calvin states that "the consciences of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness."<sup>13</sup> The conscience of the believer seeks assurance. What distinguishes the elect from the reprobate is that the believer finds this assurance not in his or her own works, but in Christ: Calvin concludes the summary of the importance of assurance to salvation, with the statement that "we must seek peace for ourselves solely in the anguish of Christ our Redeemer."<sup>14</sup>

F. Bruce Gordon sees Calvin's appreciation for the necessity of giving assurance to believers in his sacramentology, and specifically in his ordering of the liturgy during his years in Strasbourg: "Calvin developed a theme evident in the Strasbourg liturgy—knowledge and assurance. He was deeply sensitive to the psychological needs of the faithful. Because union with

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.11.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.2.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.13.4. Battles noted, "An adverse reference to Osiander's view of justification is implied here." Again, even in addressing the subjective sense of assurance, Calvin is pointing the believer away from something innate in them and to the objective doctrine.

Christ is incomprehensible to the human mind, believers require assurance of its reality.”<sup>15</sup>

Calvin states, “Here, then, is the singular consolation which we derive from the Supper. It directs and leads us to the cross of Jesus Christ and to his resurrection, to certify that whatever iniquity there may be in us, the Lord nevertheless recognises [sic] and accepts us as righteous.”<sup>16</sup>

Assurance is, thus, both the objective reality that every believer has if he or she is placing his or her trust in Christ and not his or her own works, but also the subjective state of conscience in which the believer needs frequent reassurance from the Word and sacraments. Calvin assumed that, while the believer has perfect assurance of the first kind, nonetheless, their whole life long the believer will continue to need the testimony of this reality through the Word and sacraments to reassure them in the second.

In this practical reception of assurance by the believer—through Word, prayer, and sacraments—we see in Calvin a joining of the subjective and objective assurance. Calvin’s discussion of prayer in the *Institutes* primarily engages assurance on the objective pole as his primary concern is the ground of the acceptability of prayer to God:

For the value and need of that assurance, which we require, is chiefly learned from calling upon him.... Now what sort of prayer will this be? “O Lord, I am in doubt whether thou wilt to hear me, but because I am pressed by anxiety, I flee to thee, that, if I am worthy, thou mayest help me.” This is not the way of all the saints whose prayers we read in Scripture. And the Holy Spirit did not so instruct us through the apostle, who enjoins us to “draw near to the heavenly throne ... with confidence, that we may receive ... grace” [Heb. 4:16]; and when he teaches elsewhere that we have boldness and access in confidence through faith in Christ [Eph. 3:12]. If we would pray fruitfully, we ought therefore to grasp with both hands this assurance of obtaining what we ask, which the Lord enjoins with his own voice, and all the saints

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<sup>15</sup> F. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 166, Kindle edition. While Calvin’s time in Strasbourg (1538–41) preceded his conflict with Osiander (his writings against Osiander are based on Osiander’s writings during the latter’s time in Königsberg, which began in 1549), one can see similarities between Calvin’s concept of union with Christ (which Bruce argues may even be viewed as the center of Calvin’s theology) and Osiander’s “essential righteousness.” Yet even during his time in Strasbourg, Calvin saw knowledge of one’s justification as the more useful factor to subjective assurance, rather than one’s experience of union with Christ.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, “A Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper,” in Beveridge, *Tracts and Treatises*, 2:159–60, quoted in Gordon, *Calvin*, 166.

teach by their example. For only that prayer is acceptable to God which is born, if I may so express it, out of such presumption of faith, and is grounded in unshaken assurance of hope.<sup>17</sup>

Here we see the objective nature of assurance: the confidence in prayer rests not on the worthiness of the supplicant, but on faith in Christ. This section is explicitly polemical (“Against the Denial of Certainty that Prayer is Granted”<sup>18</sup>) and in such contexts where he is arguing against the Roman position, Calvin was very focused on the certainty of subjective assurance believers could have.

When he turns to the Word and sacraments—which he unites even more closely to the doctrine of assurance than he does prayer—he demonstrates the subjective side of assurance in less certain terms:

Word and sacraments confirm our faith when they set before our eyes the good will of our Heavenly Father toward us, by the knowledge of whom the whole firmness of our faith stands fast and increases in strength. The Spirit confirms it when, by engraving this confirmation in our minds, he makes it effective. Meanwhile, the Father of Lights [cf. James 1:17] cannot be hindered from illumining our minds with a sort of intermediate brilliance through the sacraments, just as he illumines our bodily eyes by the rays of the sun.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin is talking about the work of the Spirit in our minds (engraving this confirmation) in addition to the work of the Spirit in the sacraments. Thus, there is a two-fold operation of the Spirit: external and internal. It is that internal operation where we see the working of subjective assurance. Again:

Such is the presence of the body (I say) that the nature of the Sacrament requires a presence which we say manifests itself here with a power and effectiveness so great that it not only brings an undoubted assurance of eternal life to our minds, but also

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.12.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.12.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.10.



assures us of the immortality of our flesh. Indeed, it is now quickened by his immortal flesh, and in a sense partakes of his immortality.<sup>20</sup>

Here assurance is something brought to the believer's mind by their reception of the Eucharist, and, thus, their participation in Christ. For Calvin, assurance is both the objective ground of the believer's faith and also the subjective reception of and participation in Christ. In both cases, however, its focus is Christ, not the believer's works or emotional state. These are simply not discussed. The later Puritans would vary in this. They would spend much time considering what the believer's works and emotions might tell the believer about whether he had indeed placed his confidence in Christ or was still placing it in his works or emotions.

In engaging with Calvin's complex view of assurance, scholars have differed over how to receive his teachings. Charles Hodge, in commenting on 2 Cor. 13:5 in the mid-nineteenth century, stated "that we are commanded to examine ourselves ... proves that assurance is not essential to faith. Calvin, in his antagonism to the Romish doctrine that assurance is unattainable in this life, and that all claims to it are unscriptural and fanatical, draws the directly opposite conclusion from this passage."<sup>21</sup> He noted, "Elsewhere, however, Calvin teaches a different doctrine, in so far as he admits that true believers are often disturbed by serious doubts and inward conflicts," citing the *Institutes*, 3.2.17 and 4.7.8 as examples. Hodge, apparently, saw inconsistency between Calvin's statements of objective and subjective assurance.

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32. This assurance is experiential and subjective. This quotation comes in the paragraph after Calvin's statement that "if anyone should ask me how [the mystery of the Eucharist] takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32). Battles points us here to H. Boehmer's comment that Luther "felt the inward need not only to *think* the personal communion with his Lord and Master but actually to experience it through communion. Zwingli did not understand this need at all. Calvin, as Luther realized at once, not only understood it but felt it himself" (*Luther in the Light of Modern Research* [tr. E. S. G. Potter], 241, emphasis original).

<sup>21</sup> Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Robert Carter, 1862), 305.

John Cunningham, also writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, pointed to the complexity of Calvin's view by citing Calvin's statement in the *Institutes*:

Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. Yet, once again, we deny that, in whatever way they are afflicted, they fall away and depart from the certain assurance received from God's mercy.<sup>22</sup>

This makes it very evident that Calvin held to a complicated view of the subjective state of the believer's assurance. Calvin clearly had a high view of the importance of personal—we might say subjective—assurance. Cunningham noted, however, that the more emphatic statements the Reformers in general made about this assurance were generally in the context of debating with Roman Catholic opponents about the kind or degree of assurance an individual could have, not “whether, without any special revelation believers could and should ... be assured of their justification and salvation?”<sup>23</sup> Protestants always answered that question in the affirmative; even the more moderate theologians in the Roman camp were uncomfortable denying it and would seek to engage the question by discussing how much assurance was reasonable. Cunningham admitted that the Reformers, including Calvin, made statements in these contexts that were extreme in tying together subjective assurance and saving faith—indeed Cunningham called the position “untenable,” stating that

in the heat of controversy many of them were led to lay down the untenable position, that the certainty or assurance ordinary attainable by believers was of the highest and most perfect description,—that it was the certainty of faith, or as they sometimes expressed it, the certainty of divine faith, the same certainty with which men believe in the plainly revealed doctrines of God's word.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.17.

<sup>23</sup> John Cunningham, *Collected Works* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 1:123.

<sup>24</sup> Cunningham, *Collected Works*, 1:123–24.

But Cunningham stressed that these statements were always in the context of polemical debate over the degree of assurance. He noted that “Calvin had undoubtedly taught in his ‘Institutes,’ and also in his ‘Catechism’ of Geneva, that saving faith necessarily includes or implies personal assurance.” Yet Calvin did not include this idea in the Confession of the French Protestant Church, though he most likely only revised and sanctioned that document. For Cunningham, Calvin’s view was complex, but his simple statements of the necessity of subjective assurance are not consistent with his more careful statements and do not represent the essence of his view.<sup>25</sup> Calvin did not explicitly relate the two, but seemed rather to speak in one way in one context, and another in a different context. While this study agrees with Cunningham’s assessment, the complexity and ambiguity of Calvin’s position produced a tension that later generations would struggle to resolve in their application of the doctrine.

#### Assurance in the Continental Reformed Tradition: A Case Study of Theodore Beza

The extent to which the Reformed tradition conformed to or departed from Calvin’s teaching on assurance is a matter of significant scholarly debate. I will briefly examine the contributions of Theodore Beza and John Perkins as a means of sketching out this debate, as the two are well-studied in the literature, overlap chronologically, and—both being significant figures in this broad tradition—provide an overview of most of the developmental period in the Reformed tradition between Calvin and the start of the North American Puritan experiment. Beza was Calvin’s immediate successor at Geneva and significantly shaped the continental Reformed tradition as it impacted the English Puritans. Perkins monumentally shaped the corpus of Puritanism at the close of the Elizabethan period as it shifted its focus from external matters of

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<sup>25</sup> Other proponents of this view include R.T. Kendall, Basil Hall, and Joel Beeke.

church government and liturgical form, to internal matters of piety and salvation.

Theodore Beza, as Calvin's protégé and successor in Geneva, was the man most responsible for shaping Calvin's legacy to the Reformed tradition in the immediate wake of his death. The resulting theological system, with reference to the doctrine of assurance, represented a shift of some sort from Calvin's position; the question is the nature of that shift.

Beza was published widely in the English presses and was, therefore, readily available and influential in the formation of Puritan doctrines of assurance. Like Calvin, Beza maintained that the primary ground of a believer's assurance was the objective reality of Christ's work. This reality should be the focus of the believer's reflection, and reflection on that reality would be the chief source of the believer's comfort. An example of this thinking is seen in an English edition of his sermon on the "canticle of canticles," which was published in Oxford in 1587.<sup>26</sup> There, referencing 2 Cor. 5:5, "*waiting vntill God be all in all in his children,*" he states,

This is heere represented vnto vs in the person of the Church composed of al the faithfull, which although they be here belowe creeping as it were & groueling on the ground, are notwithstanding already in a maner rauished into heauen, and as a betrothed damsell, or rather a bride, desireth the end and consummation of the marriage: with which affection we ought euery day to be stirred vp & moued, whereas aboue & before al other things, we daily craue and desire of our father, *That his name bee hallowed, That his kingdome come:* seeing, that euen our own saluation is not the farthest end whereunto wee tend, but the glory of our God therein.<sup>27</sup>

The believer's desire is to be focused not on the believer, but on the Father. And even the purpose of this desire is for "the glory of our God" even above the value to the believer of his own salvation. Yet as he proceeds in the sermon, he focuses the believer on other grounds of

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<sup>26</sup> Théodore Bèze, *Master Bezaes Sermons Vpon the Three Chapters of the Canticle of Canticles Wherein are Handled the Chiefest Points of Religion Controversed and Debated Betweene Vs and the Aduersarie at this Day, Especially Touching the True Iesus Christ and the True Church, and the Certaine & Infallible Marks Both of the One and of the Other. Translated out of French into English by Iohn Harmar* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1587), <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A09998.0001.001>

<sup>27</sup> Bèze, *Sermons Vpon the Three Chapters*, 14.

assurance: that the believer perceives his own love for God and for other believers:

But let vs on the other side remember that which the spouse teacheth vs by these words, namely, that the free loue of the Lord towardes vs, engender in vs that other loue, with which we loue God, and with which the faithfull loue one another in the Lord, things so linked & knit together, that they cannot bee separated. For as this is a sure testimony that wee are the sonnes of God, if wee loue him: 1. *Joh.* 3.10. so againe the loue which we beare vnto God is shewed herein, that we loue one another: 1. *Joh.* 4.20.<sup>28</sup>

Here Beza goes to a ground of assurance Calvin seldom appeals to: the believer's growth in sanctification—feeling love for God and showing love for one another. Beza adds to these grounds a third ground, as he at the same time brings the sermon back explicitly to the primary ground:

the spouse, which is the Church of God, *hath not receiued the spirite of feare by the condemnation of the Law*, Rom. 8.15. but the assurance of that holy hardines and boldnes which doth thrust vs forward euen to the throne of Grace, Heb. 4.16. not for any opinion of our selues, but by an holy assurance grounded on him which is our peace, *Ephes.* 2.14. *as his spirit beareth vs witnes in our hearts*, Gal. 4.6.<sup>29</sup>

Here the assurance of the Holy Spirit to the heart of the believer is blended with the first ground, of Christ Himself. This statement seems to bear some internal conflict, however, given that it implicitly rejects the previous appeal to the believer's emotional experience in its rejection of the believer's opinion of themselves, and at the same time weds the internal testimony of the Spirit to the external reality of Christ.

The question at hand for scholarship is whether this was a continuation of or departure from Calvin's teaching. As noted above, Cunningham, expressing what might be called the traditional interpretation of the issue, referred to the view of Calvin and other early Reformers as “untenable,” suggesting a disconnect with later Protestantism, but he insisted that the

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<sup>28</sup> Bèze, *Sermons Vpon the Three Chapters*, 16–17.

<sup>29</sup> Bèze, *Sermons Vpon the Three Chapters*, 17.

discrepancy was merely the result of the polemical context in which arguments with Romanists pressed the early Reformers to state their position more fervently: arguing that the assurance most believers attained was of the highest degree. By focusing on the complexity of the early Reformers' views, and the polemical context of their more extreme statements, Cunningham argued for the consistency of early and later Protestant thinking on assurance. This tradition was challenged by Basil Hall's presentation of Beza's views. Hall stated that, because Beza's opponents in the Counter-Reformation were more scholastic than Calvin's, he was forced to take up the scholastic tools to a far greater extent than Calvin. This contextual response, however, in Hall's view, led not only to a different form of argument, but to an argument that was also different in content. By focusing on scholastic method, Beza hardened the earlier method of scriptural exegesis "and made scripture itself into a corpus of revelation in almost propositional form with every part equal to the other parts in inspiration, thereby developing or encouraging a literalism, in the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, which encouraged Reformed theologians to go beyond the more guarded statements of Calvin."<sup>30</sup> At the same time this focus on scholastic method led to a greater reliance on logic and implication, and much greater tolerance for speculation into the mind of God: Beza taught supralapsarianism, while Calvin was never explicit on that point "and would have regarded discussion of it as being impertinently precise in setting out God's purposes."<sup>31</sup>

Joel Beeke—while acknowledging a difference of context and focus—argues, however, for the consistency of Beza's thought with that of his predecessor. He stated,

Beza was certainly willing to step out beyond Calvin in pertinent theological issues (e.g., in his supralapsarian tendencies and the role he gave to secondary evidences in assurance) which may be attributed in part to his being more of a rationalist and

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<sup>30</sup> Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," 26.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," 26.

scholastic. But much Bezan innovation is the result of his historical context which demanded answers to questions on predestination and assurance beyond those given by Calvin. In fact, Beza's own testimony was that his primary concern in dealing with predestination was to foster assurance in the believer.<sup>32</sup>

This stepping “out beyond” Calvin was a matter of emphasis as Beza adapted to different polemical and pastoral contexts. Beeke also sees in Beza an increased tendency to rely on “subjective” personal assessment compared to Calvin, “reflected in Beza’s increased tendency to examine the authenticity of faith by looking subjectively into one’s own heart and life rather than objectively toward the promise and Word of God which even the reprobate believe with their minds.”<sup>33</sup> This does not mean for Beeke, however, that Beza was stepping away from reliance on the Scripture: “Calvin and Beza differ here only in terms of emphasis, for Beza also often emphasized God’s Word and promises in Jesus Christ as lying at the heart of faith and assurance.”<sup>34</sup>

Beza maintained the same three grounds of assurance that were in Calvin, and that would later be enshrined in the Westminster Confession of Faith: the promise of the gospel in Christ, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, and sanctification. However, while Calvin—opposing Roman arguments that the believer cannot have assurance objectively—tended to focus on the first of these grounds, Beza—dealing with individuals who were not sure they were among elect—tended to emphasize the latter two as he sought to demonstrate assurance to the afflicted consciences of the saints under his care. In this way Beza “departs from Calvin by upgrading the external testimony of sanctification and the internal testimony of the Spirit as two pillars upon

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<sup>32</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 79.

<sup>33</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 79–80.

<sup>34</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 80.

which assurance can rest just as firmly as on the applied promise of God in Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

Beeke summarizes, “The difference between Calvin and Beza does not lie in how to pastor those believers who are not overwhelmed with anxiety” for in that instance both,

point to the primary grounds of God’s promise in Christ, with subsidiary support in sanctification and the Spirit’s witness. The difference... lies in pastoring the believer who is anxious over his inability to know his election, who cannot call upon God as his “father” with any degree of freedom, and who does not feel any confirmation of the Spirit’s internal testimony that he is a child of God. While Calvin seldom discusses such cases in a pastoral context, Beza felt obliged to do so. Even though Beza taught that the elect always received assurance at least once before they died, he also recognized ‘that sometimes faith [may] lie buried in the chosen for a season, insomuch that it may seem to be wholly extinguished or quenched’.... Whereas Calvin always maintained a secondary status at best for assurance by works, Beza comes closer to equalizing all three grounds of assurance by utilizing the *sylogismus practicus* more freely than Calvin, particularly in the case of tried believers.... My contention is that Beza used the *sylogismus practicus* and even to a degree the *sylogismus mysticus* as it would later be called, without allowing his supralapsarianism to impinge upon *sola fide* and *solus Christus*.<sup>36</sup>

The *sylogismus practicus* which Beeke refers to is the third ground of assurance: sanctification, or the evidence of the believer’s life to the reality of their faith. Meanwhile the *sylogismus mysticus* would be the second ground of assurance, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Beza used the *sylogismus practicus* not because he saw it as primary, but because he saw it as useful in a specific context. For Beeke, Beza’s pastoral context actually caused the distinction from Calvin as he sought to comfort anxious members of his flock. This did not, however, put him at odds with Calvin: “For Beza and Calvin, the critical point is *faith in Christ*. There are no

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<sup>35</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 83–84. This practical syllogism consists in the formula ‘If A, then B; B, therefore A’ with the statement: ‘the Gospel states that those who believe and repent are elect; I believe and repent, therefore I am elect’ (R. T. Kendall, “The Puritan Modification of Calvin’s Theology,” in *John Calvin*, ed. W. Stanford Reid [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 207–8). While Kendall is describing Perkin’s use of the practical syllogism here, he notes that it originates in Ursinus; Beeke discusses the syllogism throughout his work as a use of the third ground—sanctification—because it relies on the believer’s response (‘I believe and repent’) to the first ground (‘the Gospel states that those who believe and repent are elect’). He argues that Calvin used the practical syllogism implicitly, though always in an *a posteriori* role (Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 74).



*essential* differences between their views on assurance, though their *emphases* and *methods* vary considerably—no doubt in some measure due to their being in different milieus.”<sup>37</sup>

### Assurance in Puritan England: A Case Study of William Perkins

In turning to the immediate context from which the North American Puritans were to develop their doctrine of assurance—late-Elizabethan English Puritanism—the figure of William Perkins stands prominent as a leader, developer, and representative of the Puritan understanding of assurance. Like Beza, and Calvin before him, Perkins held a complex view of assurance, in which he nuanced between kinds of assurance; he also appealed to various grounds in helping the believer to lay hold of assurance.

In order to understand the meaning of Perkins’ complex view of assurance we must trace Perkins system of the stages of faith, a perspective of faith which Perkins was involved in developing. In the Puritans’ context of the Elizabethan church-state compromise, a relative tolerance for theological innovation existed, while ecclesiastical variation was strictly forbidden. For Puritans such as Perkins, the application of their theological developments was limited to the realm of private morality and especially introspective soteriology. Thus, Perkins broke down the operation of faith into a succession of observable stages for the purpose of applying his soteriology to the introspective activity of the believer to an extent which substantially exceeded Calvin’s system. We must investigate Perkins’ precise stages in order to understand the process of conversion and assurance in Perkins’ thought.

Before discussing the stages or “actions” of the operation of faith, Perkins listed three questions he was setting out to answer: “The first, What a man must do, in order that he may

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<sup>37</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 86, emphasis original.

come into the favor of God, and be saved? The second, How hee may be assured in conscience of his own salvation? The third, How he may recover himself, when he is drifted or fallen?”<sup>38</sup> It is in answering the first question that Perkins described the ten stages of his process. It is important to note, then, that this entire process was called the “direct act of faith.”<sup>39</sup> Perkins stated, “In the working and effecting of mans salvation, ordinarily there are two special actions of God: the *giving of the first grace*, and after that, the *giving of the second*. The former of these two works hath ten several actions.”<sup>40</sup> The first four actions of grace are (1) the ministry of the word, together with some outward “crosse, to breake and subdue the stubbornness of our nature, that it may be plyable to the will of God,”<sup>41</sup> (2) God’s impressing His law—together with the knowledge of good and evil—on the mind, (3) God’s making one to see their particular sins, and (4) God’s impressing fear on the heart with despair of salvation. Perkins noted that “these four actions are indeed no fruits of grace, for a Reprobate may go thus farre; but they are only *works of preparation*, going before grace.”<sup>42</sup>

This view has caused some to accuse Perkins of being a preparationist. This is not the case, however, for Perkins clearly stated that these steps are part of the “giving of the first grace” and therefore the result of God’s grace, not man’s preparation. His statement that they are “no fruits of grace” does not mean that they are not the result of grace, but rather that they are not certain proof of saving grace. He calls them works of preparation, “not so much because they were not

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<sup>38</sup> Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1626), 2:12.

<sup>39</sup> The direct act of faith was the soul’s power “to put forth a *direct act* of faith on Jesus Christ,” i.e., the initial action of putting trust in the objective reality of Christ’s death and resurrection. The reflex act was the soul’s “power also to *reflect* upon its own actions,” i.e., to reflect on the direct act and gain subjective assurance by it (John Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, 330, cited in Hawkes, “The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” 257).

<sup>40</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13, emphasis original.

<sup>41</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13.

<sup>42</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13, emphasis original.

saving *in the elect*, but because one would never know if these steps were saving until led” to the remaining actions.<sup>43</sup>

The remaining actions, which Perkins called “effects of grace,”<sup>44</sup> are (5) God’s “stir[ring] up the mind to a serious consideration of the promise of salvation;” after this (6) God will “kindle in the heart some seedes or sparkes of faith, that is, a will and desire to beleve, and grace to striue against doubting and despaire” and, “at the same instant” God “justifies the sinner and withall begins the worke of sanctification.” Next, (7) “as soone as faith is put into the heart, there is presently a combate: so it fighteth with doubting, despaire, and distrust.” Faith proves itself in this by, “feruent, constant, and earnest invocation for pardon: and... a prevailing of this desire.”<sup>45</sup>

At this point (8), “God in mercie quiets and settles the Conscience, as touching the salvation of the soule, and the promise of life, whereupon it resteth and staieth it selfe.”<sup>46</sup> Beeke commented on this point, “In this context, it becomes apparent that ‘objective assurance of the sinners “forgivable-ness”’ lies in actions #5–7, and ‘subjective assurance of being forgiven’ in action #8, which is, for Perkins, a further step in grace. Nevertheless, in neither case is the object of faith anything in the sinner himself, nor in his experience or faith, but always and solely Jesus Christ.”<sup>47</sup> The fact that this step was still part of answering the question of objective assurance—how is a person saved—rather than the subjective question—how a person knows they are

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<sup>43</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 110, emphasis original.

<sup>44</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13. Here again, Perkins does not mean that the prior steps were actions of the person while the following are works of God, because in steps one through four his description of each action depicts God acting upon the person, just as he continues to depict God as the actor in steps five through ten. This is underscored by the fact that Perkins calls the steps “actions of grace” and only depicts God as the actor of those actions. All of the actions, both those unique to the elect, and those which some reprobate may experience, are God’s actions.

<sup>45</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13.

<sup>46</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13.

<sup>47</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 110.

saved—may seem inconsistent, but it is reminiscent of the way Calvin would talk of assurance in alternate ways without distinction.

After this “settled assurance and persuasion of mercie,” there is (9) a “stirring up of the heart to Evangelical sorrow ... that is, a grief for sin because it is sin and God is offended: and then the Lord works repentance, whereby the sanctified heart turns itself unto him.” This step had special meaning for Perkins because he noted that “though this repentance be of the last in order, yet it shewes itself first.” This seems to imply a state of lifelong repentance. Finally, (10) “God giveth a man grace to endvour to obey his Commandments by a new obedience.”<sup>48</sup>

This explanation of the “giving of the first grace” completed, Perkins stated that “the second worke of God tending to salvation, is the giving of the second grace: which is nothing else but a continuance of the first grace given.... God gives the first grace, to believe and repent; and then in mercie gives the second, to persevere and continue in faith and repentance to the end.”<sup>49</sup> This second grace, then, is sanctification. It is important to note that all of this explanation is still answering the first question, “What a man must do that he may come into favour of God and be saved?” i.e. the basis of objective assurance.

This first question answered, Perkins addressed his second question, “How hee may be assured in conscience of his own salvation?”<sup>50</sup> Before answering the question, he laid down the “main Ground” as being “that election, vocation, faith, adoption, justification, sanctification, and eternal glorification, are never separated in the salvation of any man... so as he that can be

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<sup>48</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13.

<sup>49</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:13.

<sup>50</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:12. When he takes up the second question, Perkins restates it as, “how a man may be in conscience assured of his salvation” (Perkins, *Works*, 2:18). This does not alter the content of the question, but underscores the subjective nature of the assurance as it is the individual’s consciousness of assurance being addressed.

assured of one of them, may infallibly conclude in his owne heart, that he hath, and shall have interest in all the others in his due time.”<sup>51</sup> This ground, of the “reflex act of faith,” is an appeal, not to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, nor to the sanctification evidenced in the life of the believer, but to the very nature of the gospel, laid out in Scripture; i.e., it is an appeal to the primary ground, the basis of the “direct act of faith”—the same ground Calvin preferred. This ground established, Perkins reaffirmed it in the close of the introduction with the sentence “This is the Ground.”<sup>52</sup> He then moved on in “Sect. 1.” to exegete Rom. 8:16, “And the Spirit of God testifieth together with our spirits, that we are the sonnes of God”<sup>53</sup>, i.e., the second ground, the inward testimony of the Spirit. Then in “Sect. 2.,” Perkins exegeted Ps. 15, showing that the one “Who of all the members of the church shall have his habitation in heaven” is the one who is “to walk uprightly in sincerity, approving his heart and life to God ... to deal justly in all his doings ... to speake the truth from the heart, without guile or flatterie.”<sup>54</sup> We recognize here the third ground offered in Beza, which is sanctification. Both are explicitly subordinated to the primary ground.

As with Beza, the last century has been a time of debate in historical interpretation of Perkins. Hall presented Perkins as having introduced casuistry to Protestant theology, and suggested he had a more severe, speculative, and less biblical version of the doctrine of grace than Calvin, lacking the latter’s attempted Christocentric emphasis:

The element of Puritan pragmatism, the desire for personal feeling in the work of grace ... the warm assurance of election known within and demonstrated outwardly in one’s works of piety, reversed Calvin’s purpose for he pointed away from the

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<sup>51</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:18. Here Perkins cites Rom. 8:30, “Whom he predestinate, them also he called; whom he called, them also he justified; whom he justified, them also he glorified.” From this we see that the first ground—the objective work of Christ—is in view in Perkins argument here.

<sup>52</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:18.

<sup>53</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:18.

<sup>54</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:19.

feelings of the individual to Scripture, Christ, the church and the sacraments for the assurance of salvation. This represents the essential factor in the development of English Protestantism which is miscalled Calvinism.<sup>55</sup>

Hall asserted that in Perkins' translation of Beza's *A Treatise for comforting such as are troubled about their Predestination*, Perkins turned—with Beza—to praying for internal feelings rather than looking to the sacraments.<sup>56</sup> Perkins' *On the Creed*, uses the language of feelings to discuss assurance, rather than the objective work of Christ.<sup>57</sup> In a similar vein, R. T. Kendall stated that, for Perkins, the means of determining effectual calling was the conscience, but because sanctification can be demonstrated by ineffectual calling as well as by effectual calling, "how would the conscience be able to demonstrate whether one is elect or reprobate?"<sup>58</sup> Kendall stated that Calvin did not reach this solution; rather, Calvin made the object of faith and the ground of assurance the same thing—Christ's death. Kendall alleged that Beza made a separation between the object of faith (Christ's death) and the ground of assurance (sanctification).<sup>59</sup> Perkins, following in Beza's trajectory, equated the practical syllogism with the witness of the Spirit, but "if the testimonie of Gods spirit be not so powerful in the elect," then assurance of election can be found "by that other effect of the holy Ghost: namely, Sanctification."<sup>60</sup> Perkin's use of the practical syllogism is, for Kendall, the basis of Perkin's reflex act of faith. The practical syllogism is, thus, the ground of assurance, which Kendall says is not looking to Christ, "but to this reflection of oneself."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," 29.

<sup>56</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 114; cited in Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," 30.

<sup>57</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 284, cited in Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," 30.

<sup>58</sup> Kendall, "Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology," 205.

<sup>59</sup> Kendall, "Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology," 206.

<sup>60</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:115, quoted in Kendall, "Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology," 208.

<sup>61</sup> Kendall, "Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology," 208.

The reflex act of faith, however, is always dependent on the direct act of faith for Perkins. R. M. Hawkes noted, “While the Puritans distinguish full assurance from the initial trust of faith, they will not allow a division between the two, for full assurance grows out of an assurance implicit in the first act of faith.”<sup>62</sup> The reason for the distinction between full and initial assurance was that, “In their historical position, the Puritans were concerned with addressing people who, though raised with sound doctrine, lacked the assurance concomitant with a living religion.”<sup>63</sup> Here, as with Beza, Beeke’s thorough study of Perkins’ teaching is instructive. He stated,

Perkins’s legacy was a highly refined experiential predestinarian tradition, which fleshed out the practical theology of Beza and Zanchius and would be subsequently validated by the Westminster Assembly. Perkins used Beza’s method for comforting consciences, but provided a more schematized, experiential *ordo salutis* in which faith and doubt were more narrowly examined. He systematically organized insights from Puritan preachers like Richard Greenham who expounded conversion “as a progression of inner states.”<sup>64</sup>

It is worth noting the nuance of this statement: Beeke stated that Perkins “fleshed out the practical theology of Beza.” This is not in opposition to the essentials of Calvin’s system, as Hall and Kendall claim, but an acknowledgement that Perkins’ practical theology bore closer resemblance to that of Beza than Calvin because of their contexts. The distinctions Perkins made beyond Calvin and in keeping with Beza are explained by following this contextual, practical application of Perkins’ theology. Perkins laid out the grounds of assurance in his exposition of Galatians. Here Beeke noted,

first, the general *promise of the gospel*, which by faith becomes a particular, personal promise; second, *the testimony of the Holy Spirit* witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God; and third, *the syllogism* which rests partly on the gospel and partly on experience. His groundwork on assurance is patterned explicitly after Beza

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<sup>62</sup> Hawkes, “Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” 251.

<sup>63</sup> Hawkes, “Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” 250.

<sup>64</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 106.

and Zanchius, and only implicitly after Calvin who laid the seeds for this threefold division which would be “canonized” by the Westminster Assembly.<sup>65</sup>

These are the three grounds of assurance, familiar from the discussion of Beza above. The first ground, the objective promise of the gospel, is associated with what the Puritans called the “direct act of faith.” The second and third ground, the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and testimony of sanctification, are more associated with the “reflex act of faith,” as they are rooted in, and bear testimony to, the direct act, which is the primary ground and are discovered by reflection upon the direct act. Like Calvin, Perkins would sometimes describe assurance as certain: “Whereas some are of the opinion, that faith is assurance [assurance] or confidence, that seems to be otherwise; for it is a fruit of faith.”<sup>66</sup> At other times he would describe assurance as subjective: “True faith is both an unfallible assurance, and a particular assurance of the remission of sins, and of life everlasting.”<sup>67</sup> Though, unlike Calvin, this was where the majority of Perkins’ writing on the subject was focused. This additional focus does not mean that Perkins was any more inconsistent than Calvin had been; however, as Beeke wrote, “Perkins knew very well what he was saying; in fact, he intended to teach both that assurance is and is not part of the essence of faith depending on which assurance is signified!”<sup>68</sup> Beeke summarizes Perkins’ view in this way:

William Perkins differed from the magisterial Reformers by placing more accent on the covenant, secondary grounds of assurance, active pursuit of assurance, subjective feeling, steps of faith, and the role of the conscience in ascertaining assurance. He particularly emphasized the role of conscience in relationship to covenantal obedience and with regard to the recognition of that obedience in the “practical syllogism.” Growth in grace as a sign of assurance was inseparable from intense examination of the conscience. Perkins, however, never abandoned the basics of the magisterial Reformers’ teaching on faith and assurance. His emphases arose out of pastoral concerns. Though at times Perkins’ emphases appear to be more on salvation

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<sup>65</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 107–8.

<sup>66</sup> William Perkins, *The Works of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (London: John Legat, 1612–13) 1:125, cited in Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 108.

<sup>67</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 564, cited in Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 108.

<sup>68</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 108.



than on the primacy of God and His grace, he never formally shifted the ground of assurance from Christ nor abandoned *sola gratia*. . . . In a word, none of Perkins's accents were foreign concepts to the Reformers. Their differences lay in emphases rather than in substance.<sup>69</sup>

That the difference from Calvin lay in emphasis rather than substance was true for the Puritans in general. R. M. Hawkes has demonstrated this using a variety of authors. He quoted Walter Marshal, describing the believer's interaction with subjective assurance: "If they get some assurance by the reflex act of faith . . . they often soon lose it again by temptations. The way to avoid these evils, is to get your assurance, and to maintain it. . . . by the direct act of faith, by trusting assuredly on the name of the Lord."<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere Hawkes stated,

One safeguard the Puritans institute against a subjectivist faith is to insist that the establishment of assurance is not a proper ultimate goal for Christian obedience. Instead, the believer seeks assurance only that he may be moved more toward grateful obedience. "The truth is," says Owen, "the more we are assured with the assurance of faith . . . the more eminently are we pressed in a gospel way." The believer is quite mistaken, insists Owen, if he places any confidence in his love for God; rather, it is God's love for the believer which is his assurance: "This is the most preposterous course. . . . thou wouldst invert this order and say, 'Herein is love, not that God loved me, but that I loved him first.'" The believer does not approach God on the basis of assurance in himself but on the basis of God's love for him in Christ.<sup>71</sup>

Hawkes called this approach to assurance the "helical nature of assurance," a spiral relating the believer to God that

helps explain how the Puritans avoided being trapped between the passive tendency of saving faith and the necessity for active obedience in the Christian life. This Puritan solution is especially elegant because it shows how the repetitive, introspective nature of obedience may be drawn out and guided by an externally directed faith, so that the believer's life becomes significant as being life in Christ.

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<sup>69</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 117–18.

<sup>70</sup> Walter Marshal, *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification* (1692; repr. London: Oliphants, 1954), 13, quoted in Hawkes, "The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology," 259.

<sup>71</sup> John Owen, *Works*, 11.48, 2.36, quoted in Hawkes, "The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology," 258–59.

What was the work of man becomes the work of God, a natural tool that is used for supernatural work, the sanctification of the believer.<sup>72</sup>

As noted briefly above, the context in which the late-Elizabethan Puritans were working offers some insight into why the doctrine of conversion and assurance was so important to them, given it was not being applied to church membership. As a group, the Puritans had pressed for a number of reforms to the Anglican church: changes of polity—from episcopacy to presbyteries; changes of financial structure—from pastorates supported by the local authorities or nobles to parishes directly supported by the parishioners; and changes of liturgy—from the mandated services of the *Book of Common Prayer* to services organized by the local pastor, to name a few examples. By the late sixteenth century it had become evident that such reforms were beyond the pale of what could be accomplished under Elizabeth I's leadership. As Anglican Puritan pastors sought to minister to their parishioners' needs within a system they perceived as deeply flawed, they began to turn inward, to the inner life of the believer so as to provide guidance to individual spiritual development where they perceived the outward establishment of the church as insufficient to the task.<sup>73</sup> The development of a theology of experiential conversion was intended to produce subjective assurance within a system that was perceived as not reliable for that purpose.

This feature of English Puritanism, which Perkins, Marshal, and Owens had worked so

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<sup>72</sup> Hawkes, "Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology," 260.

<sup>73</sup> Peter Lake, "Moving the Goal Posts? Modified Subscription and the Construction of Conformity in the Early Stuart Church" in Lake and Michael Questier, *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560–1660* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 2000). Lake pictures this moderate Puritanism as a reasonable alternative to the Laudian exclusivism that sought to prevent any diversity of opinion within the Anglican communion. In Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), he explains that the important "internal spiritual dynamic" of English Calvinist Christianity forced each believer into a constant struggle to express faith in good works in order to achieve personal assurance. See also Basil Hall, "The Calvin Legend" in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield; (Appleford, UK: Sutton Courtenay, 1966), 3. Hall noted, "In the reign of Elizabeth, when the Puritan effort failed to modify in a Genevan direction the provisions of the settlement of religion and its interpretation by the bishops, the next generation of Puritans turned to the more intense cultivation of personal piety."

hard to keep grounded in the objective assurance of the reality of the gospel would, inadvertently, come undone in the New England Way. By making the subjective ground the basis for church membership and, thereby, the basis of a believer's right to claim certainty of their status as visible saints, the North American Puritans accidentally introduced a discrepancy into their theology. While they continued to purport a theology consistent with the Reformed tradition, their practice drove them further and further from that tradition.

The flow of contextualization here is important: Calvin, engaging largely in polemics in the infancy of the Protestant movement, developed a complex theology of assurance which tended to focus on his belief that the believer could indeed experience assurance, contra his opponents who argued that believers could not have such assurance. Beza, working within a maturing movement, found it necessary to point congregants who had not experienced such assurance to not only the objective grounds of assurance, but also to subjective experiences in the believer's life as additional signposts. The English Puritans, who had been denied influence in the realm of ecclesiology, turned their attention to the personal appropriation of soteriology. The North American Puritans, given access to ecclesiology by their new context, would apply the soteriological work of their predecessors to ecclesiology/sacramentology and subtly impact their soteriology.

### **The Problem That Never Was**

That earlier Reformed communities had reached a general consensus concerning how to admit people to the sacraments is easily established. The regenerate and their children were to receive baptism, and when the children showed sufficient proof of regeneration, demonstrated by their knowledge and belief in the teaching of Scripture—what could be called objective assurance—and their unscandalous lifestyle, they were to be admitted to the Eucharist. The

relationship of the doctrine of regeneration to experiential conversion as proof of assurance is somewhat of an argument from silence, however, because of the great ambivalence of these communities towards the experience of conversion. Here it must be noted that a distinction needs to be drawn between the term *conversion* as it is used in formal theology as an element in the *ordo salutis*—for in that case Reformed churches did see conversion as leading to regeneration—and the term *conversion* as it is used colloquially to refer to the subjective, conscious experience of moving from a condition of unbelief and damnation to a condition of belief and salvation. In its darker incarnations this developing understanding within Protestant theology, and specifically within Reformed theology, is involved in what Stachniewski refers to as the “persecutory imagination.”<sup>74</sup> It is conversion in the sense of subjective, conscious experience that, due to their context, was a matter of such importance to the English Puritans, and then later in a different context, to the North American Puritans, of relative ambivalence to previous Reformed communities.

### Conversion in the Reformed Tradition

Calvin himself only speaks of his own conversion on two occasions. Once, in 1539, he described his conversion in language that indicates he viewed it as “essentially a shift of allegiance from the Church of Rome to the Word of God,”<sup>75</sup> and in terms of a slow and gradual

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<sup>74</sup> Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 36. The “persecutory imagination” was the emerging shared worldview that conceived reality as humankind persecuted by the arbitrary whims of God into elect and reprobate. In arbitrary and fatalistic simplifications of Protestant and Reformed theology the individual’s place as “saved” or “lost” was the all-important question in life. Determining where one stood in the cosmic balances was aided by experiential markers—yet determining these markers was a fraught difficulty which could lead to despair and even suicide. This was widely documented in the case of the Italian Francis Spira who converted to Lutheranism but, under pressure, renounced his Lutheranism and became convinced he was in a state of reprobation. This induced a years-long despair which ended in his suicide. His story was picked up by many authors and publishers to the point of almost becoming a trope, and many similar stories followed. This publishing frenzy over Spira and other stories of “despairers,” despite its continental roots, was most indulged in Puritan England. (Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, 37–41).

<sup>75</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 33.

transition. Twenty years later, in his introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, he made the brief statement, “God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life.”<sup>76</sup> Gordon contended that these accounts are not antithetical, but are “two different ways of expressing the same reality”: the reality that Calvin viewed the Christian life as a journey or pilgrimage—two frequent metaphors he used when discussing the topic—and of conversion not as the completion of the journey, but of its beginning.<sup>77</sup> There is little in this, then, to link the subjective experience to regeneration, or to use as a basis for a subjective sense of assurance. Even if Calvin’s metaphors resemble the Puritan conception, it is clear that the North American Puritans would tend to equate conversion with regeneration as the destination of the journey.

In his organization of the practices of the church at Geneva, Calvin was consistent with his view. Herbert Foster outlined Calvin’s program of instituting membership in the Genevan church:

In order that the church might be properly instituted, two other steps were necessary. First, “the right beginning of a church” required “that all the inhabitants should make confession of their faith and give reasons for it,” in order to show that they were “united in one church.” Second, in order that future generations might preserve “purity of doctrine . . . and be able to give reasons for their faith,” the children should be instructed at home by their parents in a simple catechism, and then be examined

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<sup>76</sup> John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss (Brunsviggae: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 31:13–35, quoted in Gordon, *Calvin*, 33. This later reflection took place after Luther’s 1545 publication of his reflection on his 1519 “breakthrough.” It is possible that Calvin’s admiration for his “father in the faith” caused him to reevaluate or reflect more deeply on his own “breakthrough.”

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 34. Stachniewski analyzes John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in his exploration of the persecutory imagination, and in this sense the Christian life is viewed by the English Puritans as a journey or pilgrimage as well. This does not supplant, however, the enormous focus the Puritans put on the narrower portion of that journey which encompassed experiential conversion itself—even though this could be a years-long process in their system—when compared with the relative ambivalence with which Calvin treated the topic. C.f. Perkins’ multi-layered analysis of the conversion process above, contra Calvin’s, “God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame.”

and, if necessary, further taught by the minister until pronounced “sufficiently instructed.”<sup>78</sup>

Foster stated that Calvin took three practical steps toward forming the church system:

“determination of present membership by a creed; admission of future members by a catechism; and discipline of morals as a means for both training and pruning membership.”<sup>79</sup> Here there was no subjective test of experience, no expectation that regeneration could be reliably identified apart from the objective data of the applicant’s knowledge, beliefs, and holy life.

While the Anglican Church may not be squarely in the “Reformed” tradition, given its diversity of influences, nonetheless, it provided the immediate context from which the North American Puritans were departing, and it followed the practices from which they varied. William Black traced influence in church discipline practices among English Puritans back to Bucer’s practices in Strasbourg, noting that in the Anglican parishes, “provision had been made in church canons for those baptized as infants to proceed to the privileges and responsibilities of adult membership through the process of confirmation, a process that was supposedly secured by episcopal verification of the confirmands’ grasp of the faith.”<sup>80</sup> While English Puritans objected that the parishes were not being diligent to apply their standards to new candidates for the Lord’s Supper, it was clearly the case that such standards existed.<sup>81</sup> Having limitations on admittance to the table demonstrates that the table was intended to be reserved for the regenerate. The

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<sup>78</sup> Herbert Darling Foster, “Calvin’s Programme for a Puritan State in Geneva, 1536–1541,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 1, no. 4 (October 1908): 409.

<sup>79</sup> Foster, “Calvin’s Programme for a Puritan State,” 409. This demonstrates that “mak[ing] confession of their faith” in the previous quote is not a confession of their experience of conversion, but of their beliefs.

<sup>80</sup> J. William Black, “From Martin Bucer to Richard Baxter: ‘Discipline’ and Reformation in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England,” *Church History* 70, no. 4 (December 2001): 663–64. Black attributed this idea to Kenneth Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor: The Episcopate of James I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 123–29.

<sup>81</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 116, asserted that “everyone in the community was ... exposed to all the means of grace, and there was no need to distinguish one man’s eternal condition from another’s.” This was clearly not the intent of the Anglican standards.

verification process was intended to test what could be observed, while it was understood that such tests were imperfect. Black noted Baxter's vexation that adherence to the limitations was lax, and "men and women who were ignorant of basic Christian teaching and whose lives were a scandal to Christian profession were admitted into full adult membership and given the right to participate in the Lord's Supper, and given the assurance thereby that their eternal well-being was secure."<sup>82</sup> That admittance to the table would give such "unworthy" supplicants "assurance ... that their eternal well-being was secure" demonstrates that the Anglican Church understood the Lord's Supper to be reserved for the regenerate. It also indicates that membership and Eucharistic participation was understood to help produce subjective assurance. That Baxter would cite both ignorance of basic Christian teaching and scandalous lives as reasons to withhold adult membership but would make no mention of subjective assurance indicates that these two elements, but not subjective assurance, were accepted as the basis of adult membership.

To the north, in Scotland, the Presbyterian tradition of transitioning from child membership to adult membership has been examined by Margo Todd. She noted that first communion for children was something of a "puberty rite" and was conditioned on, "a particularly celebrated public performance of the catechism" giving a particular case in which the child, "was effectively 'confirmed' by congregational approbation rather than a bishop after he 'timeously pronounce[d] the words whereby thy people were edified.'"<sup>83</sup> Part of preparation for receiving the sacrament, which only occurred yearly in most parishes, was "examination of every prospective communicant for correct doctrine and upright behaviour" by the elders.<sup>84</sup> That such

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<sup>82</sup> Black, "From Bucer to Baxter," 664

<sup>83</sup> Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 90–91, quoting Robert Blair, *The Life of Mr Robert Blair, Minister of St Andrews, Containing his Autobiography from 1593–1636*, ed. Thomas M'Crie (Edinburgh, 1848), 7.

<sup>84</sup> Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*, 91.

examination took place before each celebration of communion does not suggest that it was supposed the communicant's regenerative status had altered, only that sin—both behavioral or intellectual—may have crept in, disqualifying them from participation or, in extreme cases, identifying their unregenerate status (and, thus, the understood limitations of the examinations). Here as well, the consensus on right belief and right behavior were seen as the indicators that an individual was indeed regenerate and, therefore, a member of the Church. The focus was not on the process of regeneration or the experience of it being observed, only on the outward signs that indicated its likelihood.

### Conversion in English Puritanism

In the English Puritan context, until the migration to North America, experiments in Puritan ecclesiology were conducted with participants who had largely grown up in the milieu of the English Reformation consensus. While the Puritan movement was approximately sixty years old at the time of the founding of the Boston Bay Colony,<sup>85</sup> it had not been given the unfettered opportunity to establish churches according to its own convictions and, generally, existed within the Anglican establishment. Exceptions to this rule included the Dutch exiles and a few renegade churches established in England itself. In all of these exceptions, church membership tests were limited to examination of the applicant's knowledge of theology and moral practice in life,

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<sup>85</sup> Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 2, dates the founding of Puritanism as a movement distinguishable from the English Reformation as a whole to the publication in 1572 of *An Admonition to the Parliament* by John Field and Thomas Wilcox. The *Admonition* was an “unqualified statement of the Puritan conviction that the accession of Elizabeth and the official return of the nation to the Protestant religion had turned out to be promises without fulfillment: ‘We in England are so fare of[f], from having a church rightly reformed, accordyng to the prescript of Gods worde, that as yet we are not come to the outwarde face of the same’” (Foster, *The Long Argument*, 2. Foster noted, “Some six decades separate the first assertion of militant Puritanism from the departure of the Winthrop fleet for America in 1630, but in broad outline the goals of the New England Way were still the agenda articulated by the Elizabethan radicals, and the reason for creating a New England at all was yet another setback in the continuing campaign to reshape English life on English soil” (Foster, *Long Argument*, 3).



according to the Puritan interpretation of biblical morality. In some cases there was added to these the applicant's conviction that the English consensus was inappropriate.<sup>86</sup> This is significant because it underscores a difference in the role conversion came to hold in Puritan theology between England and North America. English Puritanism required no explicit account of experiential conversion. While such accounts were being written, and preachers were encouraging their congregants to such self-examination, this was for personal edification and spiritual growth, not church membership and access to the sacraments. As a protest movement in English society, the primary experience of conversion was from general Anglicanism to Puritanism. While Puritan theologians spent considerable time seeking to explain the process of realizing one's election, and Puritan congregants paid close attention to their own spiritual progress, this conversion was not a factor in church membership. The factor that marked the Puritan as a church member, at least among the separatists, was one's choice to pursue a different ecclesiology than that of the general public—an ecclesiology that subjected the entire life to careful personal scrutiny, of which one's conversion experience was only one aspect: an aspect of personal piety. This aspect of the Puritan movement—its shift in focus from polity, sacraments, and liturgical form to the interior life of the believer—has a likely cultural source, as noted above. By the latter part of the sixteenth century it was clear that there was no room in the Elizabethan consensus system for Puritan polity; as an unsuccessful reform movement within the English church, the Puritans of the 1580s and following (when the question of assurance began to receive more treatment in their writings) were giving up hope of altering the official practice of the sacraments or conduct of worship along with polity and every other external aspect of the

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<sup>86</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 37. The phrase “the applicant's conviction that the English consensus was inappropriate” belies some of the vehemence of these statements, which could include such language as the conviction that the Anglican church was “a synagogue of Satan” (Perkins, quoted in Darren Oldridge, *Devil: In Tudor and Stuart England*, [Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, 2011], 45).

life of the church. When the North American Puritans were able to take up these issues afresh in their new context, they did so armed with a new tool for understanding the theological life of the individual: a system for understanding the experiential process of conversion in the life of the believer as related to their quest for subjective assurance. That tool, however, had been developed in an entirely different socio-political and ecclesiastical context. The application of this tool to the original goal of the Puritan movement—church reform—yet in a vastly different act of the church contextualizing its faith, will be the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A SOLUTION THAT CREATED A PROBLEM

The European contextualization of the doctrine of assurance thus established, we move to the North American contextualization of it in what would eventually become the New England Way, and the problems this unique contextualization created. Two significant events impacted and defined this contextualization. The first was the establishment of a Puritan state in New England that was populated by the great migration—the arrival of approximately 21,000 English people, mostly of Puritan conviction,<sup>1</sup> on the shores of New England during the decade of the 1630s. This migration created the need to form from this multitude a new society and, most importantly for our topic, new churches with new entrance requirements: a test of experiential assurance in the form relations. The second event was the North American response to the emergence of Puritan political dominance at the conclusion of the English Civil War. When the Westminster Assembly appointed by the Long Parliament pursued a Presbyterian, rather than a Congregationalist, ecclesiology in its formulation of the Westminster Standards, the New Englanders had to formulate an answer to defend the New England Way. Their answer was the Cambridge Platform.

This chapter will explore the institution of the test of relations and the ramifications of its creation. Before considering the origins of the test it is important to prove the very existence of the test, however, given a recent suggestion in scholarship regarding relations. The first question, then will be, did the test exist? That dealt with, the study will proceed to consider the questions of why the test came into existence (what was the purpose for which it was created; what

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<sup>1</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 22.

structures, assumptions, and goals made it appear necessary), how the test came into existence (the events of its creation), and what did the test do (what, specifically was the way the test was carried out and how it shaped the institution of the church, as articulated in the Cambridge Platform).

### **Did the Test Exist?**

The first issue to take up in addressing the North American Puritans' contextualization of the doctrine of assurance is whether they actually began to use relations to test for subjective assurance as the gatekeeper to full church membership. This issue comes up as a result of a new suggestion in North American Puritan studies. In his 2012 biography of John Davenport, Francis Bremer stated, "It has commonly been assumed that membership in a New England congregation required applicants to offer a personal account of how they had experienced God's grace and been born again. This was not the case in New Haven, undoubtedly because of Davenport's understanding of the process of salvation and how true faith could be detected."<sup>2</sup> Bremer explained that "what was required to join the New Haven church was evidence of godly behavior and a true profession of faith" alone.<sup>3</sup> Bremer does not understand "a true profession of faith" to mean a "church relation" but rather a statement of one's conviction of the church's beliefs.

The significance of this claim was first identified by Walter Woodward;<sup>4</sup> but Michael Winship has done the most to refute it. He pointed out that if Bremer's claim is correct, then "two of New England's three most prominent ministers" were opposed to what scholars have

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 185.

<sup>3</sup> Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem*, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Woodward, review of Bremer's *Building a New Jerusalem*, *New England Quarterly* 86 (June 2013): 325.

understood to be the norm. Scholars have thought that Thomas Hooker opposed relations while John Cotton has been understood to support them; until Bremer's biography, John Davenport had been seen as a staunch supporter of Cotton's position. If Davenport was actually on Hooker's side of the debate, it "emphasizes just how outside the Puritan mainstream the practice was."<sup>5</sup> Winship enumerated several problems with Bremer's claim. First, while Hooker was frequently pointed to as deviating from the norm by his contemporaries, Davenport never was. Second Davenport was actually seen by his contemporaries as the strictest of New England pastors in his admission practices, at a time when the debate surrounding admission practices tended to focus on the requirement of church relations. Third, and in some ways the largest difficulty for Winship, Bremer's arguments are largely from silence.<sup>6</sup>

In his response, Bremer contended that if scholars simply stop assuming that the church relations existed, most of the evidence for them disappears. If terms like "profession," "confession," "narrative," and "relation" are not assumed to mean an account of the individual's experience of the process of conversion, but rather an account of the individual's beliefs—not as mere academic assent, but as deeply-held conviction—Bremer claimed that the evidence for experiential accounts would vanish.<sup>7</sup> This answer, however, was already refuted in Winship's challenge. Winship noted several examples of the terms Bremer refers to which, when discussed at greater length by their original users, are explicit in noting that they are referring to relations of experiential conversion. Winship noted,

That relations are indeed what Davenport is referring to [by such terms] is indicated by a further passage from *Another Essay* that Bremer neither cites nor discusses. In it,

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<sup>5</sup> Winship, "Reconsiderations: An Exchange, Did John Davenport's Church Require Conversion Narratives for Church Admission? A Challenge," *The New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (March 2014): 133.

<sup>6</sup> Winship, "Reconsiderations," 133–34.

<sup>7</sup> Bremer, "Reconsiderations: An Exchange, Did John Davenport's Church Require Conversion Narratives for Church Admission? A Response," *New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (March 2014): 140, 145.

Davenport is explicit about the need for a relation or, as Bremer puts it, a personal statement of religious experience. Davenport first says that the requirement for church membership is “visible saving Faith in Christ, in the lowest degree.” He then expands: “Let them that are to be admitted into membership shew how Faith was wrought and how it works in them, in the lowest degree; then the Church will have some ground for Charitable judgment concerning their fitness for regular Church membership.”<sup>8</sup>

Winship goes on to establish that the parallel Bremer draws between Davenport and Cotton is correct,<sup>9</sup> but that it points to Davenport’s use of relations:

The implicit presence of relations is made explicit in another treatise, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*. Cotton twice gives the admission requirements as faith and repentance. A third time, he presents a similar pair, confession of sins and faith. But this time he is open about what is hidden within these terms. In order that the church may know that the confession of sin is truly “penitent,” the applicant must give a relation. He “declareth also the grace of God to his soul, drawing him out of his small estate into fellowship with Christ.” After citing relations, Cotton also explains how “subjugation,” which he notes as a separate requirement elsewhere, is subsumed in the category of “faith.”<sup>10</sup>

Cotton, thus, offers an example of how writers, even when not using the term relations, often assume the practice. Thus, simply to read without this assumption does not offer an accurate representation of the the status of relations in early New England.

A weakness in Bremer’s arguments that has not been engaged thus far is that he argues that Davenport did not spell out a set morphology of conversion in his sermons and, therefore, “as someone who did not spell out preparatory steps in his sermons, he would likely not have expected his listeners to discuss such steps in seeking admission to the church.”<sup>11</sup> The weakness in this argument is that Thomas Shepard, who recorded the largest volume of conversion narratives and is undisputed as requiring such relations as part of the membership process, is

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<sup>8</sup> Winship, “Reconsiderations,” 136.

<sup>9</sup> Winship, “Reconsiderations,” 137.

<sup>10</sup> Winship, “Reconsiderations,” citing John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (London: 1645), 55.

<sup>11</sup> Bremer, “Reconsiderations,” 143.

only documented as preaching one sermon in which he laid out his morphology of conversion, and explicitly stated on that occasion that he did not think it wise to preach on the specifics of the process with any regularity as it would likely produce “a ‘literal’ rather than a ‘saving’ knowledge of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Shepard did not intend parishioners to simply parrot back his morphology to him, but he did require them to detail their experience of conversion. Davenport’s lack of frequent sermons detailing his own morphology therefore more likely demonstrates that he desired to hear authentic accounts of conversion rather than that he did not expect candidates for membership to recount theirs.<sup>13</sup>

Bremer arrived at a new position, clearly stated in a 2014 article, in which he acknowledges that the tests existed but that

puritans did not demand uniformity in the tests used to achieve these ends. As in matters of theology, far more diversity in matters of polity existed than we have been accustomed to acknowledging. Thomas Shepard may have required that those seeking admission to the Cambridge, Massachusetts, church give a detailed analysis of how they had been born again. Those joining the New Haven church had to demonstrate a well-ordered life and give an emotionally persuasive profession of faith. Other puritan churches, on both sides of the Atlantic, used one of these tests or some other means for distinguishing saints from sinners. A reexamination of the evidence indicates that the standards, who applied them, and with what degree of charity they did so was much more varied than we have previously believed to be the case.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Selement and Woolley, *Thomas Shepard’s Confessions*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> A similar problem with arguments from silence comes up in a later article in which Bremer points to the lack of widespread written accounts of church relations, noting that “few such examples are extant, and equally few descriptions of the practice, surprisingly few, it would seem, if such spiritual accounts were required in all of Massachusetts’ churches” (Bremer, “‘To Tell What God Hath Done for Thy Soul’: Puritan Spiritual Testimonies as Admission Tests and Means of Edification,” *The New England Quarterly* 87, no. 4 [December 2014]: 644). In modern churches which generally require an account of conversion or “testimony” as part of their membership process (the Southern Baptist Convention, the second largest religious body in the United States is a good example here), there are almost no written records of these testimonies when given as part of a membership application process, and the written or recorded conversion accounts that do exist tend to be documented in other venues than membership application. John Cotton is an uncontested contemporary advocate of church relations as a requirement of membership, yet this prolific writer produced no extant recordings of church relations.

<sup>14</sup> Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 664.

This paints a picture of a New England Way in which the most recognizable feature does not appear or, at least, only appears sporadically. Bremer holds that modern scholarship has misunderstood the nature and prevalence of the relations for the first generation. He suggests that

narratives of religious experience ... served as tests for membership, but they fulfilled other purposes and operated on other levels as well. A relation represented the fruits of a believer's effort to understand his or her experience of grace and to bolster that saint's assurance as he or she reviewed and organized the experience. ... When delivered before those seeking to understand God's working in their souls, the testimonies helped listeners place their own spiritual struggles in context and thus helped some to find their way to God. Testimonies of God's work in recognized saints could reassure listeners of the validity of those who had a sense of the Spirit's presence and edify those who were seeking assurance. The sharing of experiences strengthened the bonds that united members of a congregation, making of such a body a true communion of saints. In all these ways, in both what they revealed of the individual and what they say of the community of saints, they remain a vital expression of the lived religion of puritans in England and New England<sup>15</sup>

This is similar to McGiffert's assessment noted in the introduction.<sup>16</sup> It is clear that the relations would likely have served such a function in the communities of the first generation. Bremer's focus on the formative power of relations, however, does not refute the ways in which the relations would have limited church membership. First, as a widespread practice, relations would have underscored the Puritan belief that some form of experiential conversion was normative, and potential applicants for membership would have self-selected themselves out of the process if they did not think they had experienced important prerequisites. Second, because the relations performed a social and emotional function for the community does not mean that they were not widely required as part of the admission tests for membership. Indeed, it is likely that because they were required for membership, they performed a foundational social and emotional function for the community.

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<sup>15</sup> Bremer, "To Tell What God Hath Done," 664–65.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter One, "Introduction: Subjective Assurance and Early American Puritanism," 21.



In reference to limiting church membership by self-selection, the journals from contemporary and later periods reveal individuals examining their religious experience and finding reason for hesitation in pursuing membership or questioning their assurance of salvation. Michael Wigglesworth is an extreme example of the constant struggle to find cause for assurance. In his edition of Wigglesworth's diary, Morgan noted,

The modern reader of these pages will find it hard to believe that Wigglesworth was the chief of sinners; the frequent protestations of guilt may even strike one as a pose, almost a literary formality, but it is undeniable that the man expresses a feeling of guilt, whether merely formal or not, on virtually every page of the diary. And in many cases where more specific statements are made, it is apparent that the feeling had deep roots.<sup>17</sup>

Consider a few examples of Wigglesworth's struggles. After a sermon in 1653 he wrote, "Mr. Mitchel preacht twice to day upon John 1:14 and we saw his glory. Now woe is me! that I cannot see christs glory, I never find my heart more carnall, and my eys more blind that I cannot behold and feel a present excellency in christ, than when his glory is display'd before me."<sup>18</sup> A month later he recorded, "The Lord is very urgent with backsliders to return (out of Jeremiah 3. 22. 23.) I see my self guilty of daly backslidings from god cooling affections to him, and whoarish outgoings of heart after other things."<sup>19</sup> Several years later, in Sabbath reflections he cries, "Ah Lord! my soul longs yea it even faints for thy salvation: I haue desired and long begged power against the carnality of my heart, that this lust might dy, and the contrary grace be increased: but yet I find my heart as carnal as some years since for ought I can tell."<sup>20</sup> While Morgan focused in his analysis of the diary on the selfish and critical attitude of Wigglesworth toward others, it is

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<sup>17</sup> Morgan, ed., "The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth," in *Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions*, vol. 35 (December, 1946), 314, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/911#ah2401>.

<sup>18</sup> Morgan, ed., "Diary of Michael Wigglesworth," 329.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan, ed., "Diary of Michael Wigglesworth," 336.

<sup>20</sup> Morgan, ed., "Diary of Michael Wigglesworth," 417.

clear from the sheer volume of anxiety and self-deprecation in the diary that the person Wigglesworth had the lowest opinion of was himself. He lived in constant fear that his portion in the Lord was a farce. While it is true that much of this self-deprecating reflection and lack of assurance of status seems to post-date Wigglesworth's entry into the church, it should be remembered that he was actually a student at Harvard, and then a candidate for ministry during the time of his diary. If a seminarian could barely find solace in the system of reliance on subjective assurance, it seems clear that farmers and tradespeople would have an even greater struggle finding assurance in their subjective experience.

Almost a century later, no less a figure than Jonathan Edwards reflected that, "the chief thing, that now makes me in any measure to question my good estate, is my not having experienced conversion in those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it."<sup>21</sup> While all these examples come from ministers who did eventually pass the subjective assurance test, it should be remembered that it was the leaders of society and culture—such as ministers—who both had the resources to keep diaries, and also whose diaries were preserved. Such leaders of society were, within the covenanted society of early New England, members of the churches. Yet even they had anxiety and doubt sufficient to cause them to question the veracity of their regenerate status. If anxiety and uncertainty of assurance were the norm among leaders who documented their experience, it seems no great extrapolation to assume those who did not attain to full church membership had equally anxious experiences that led them to avoid the test.

In general, Bremer allows that some relations were present but denies that relations were

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2 vols., ed. Edward Hickman (London, 1835), 1:lxixiii, quoted in Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983), 163. While Edwards made this observation half a century after the institution of the Half-Way Covenant, he still felt the demands of his ancestors' conception of conversion and illustrates the tension such a culturally bound conception created.

required. Modern scholars are not the only ones who understand relations to have been a widespread requirement. First generation pastors and observers, both those in favor of such relations and those opposed, state that such relations were the norm in New England.<sup>22</sup>

Bremer dismisses these statements by claiming that modern scholars have misunderstood the semantic range that words like “profession of faith” had for the North American Puritans: “for puritans such as John Davenport, a ‘profession of faith’ referred to a catalog of doctrinal beliefs that by content and (equally important) by delivery suggested that the individual was blessed with saving grace.”<sup>23</sup> He used the 1648 Cambridge Platform to support this thesis, pointing to the statement that what was “requisite to be found in all church members are repentance from sin, and faith in Jesus Christ” such “as may satisfy rational charity” and noting that such repentance and faith can be demonstrated apart from a relation of experiential conversion.<sup>24</sup> The Platform goes on, however, to state, “A personall & publick *confession*, & declaring of God’s manner of working upon the soul, is both lawful, expedient, & useful, in sundry respects, & upon sundry grounds.”<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the Platform was concerned that candidates for membership state their doctrinal beliefs not merely as a matter of intellectual assent but as personal convictions, imprinted by saving grace—which is Bremer’s point.

The Platform’s explicit recommendation of a public presentation of “God’s manner of working upon the soul” that is personal to the individual candidate, however, makes it clear that

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<sup>22</sup> Winship cites John Cotton, *A Copy of a Letter* (London, 1641), 5; John Norton, *Responsio ad totam quaestionum syllogem a clarissimo viro domino Guilielmo Apollonio* (London, 1648), 13; and Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing: or, News from New England* (Boston, 1867 [originally published in London, 1642]), 18–25, as examples of this presentation of relations as common practice.

<sup>23</sup> Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 636.

<sup>24</sup> Cambridge Platform, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 222, quoted in Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 636.

<sup>25</sup> Cambridge Platform, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 223. Emphasis original.

experiential conversion is in view as well. True, the Platform’s language of “lawful, expedient, & useful” does not rise to an explicit requirement. Given, however, the grass-roots nature of Congregational polity, it was impossible for the Platform to require anything of any church; its statements came only as recommendations. As such, it appears that an account of experiential conversion was recommended as strongly as the assembled ministers could reasonably speak to the autonomous churches. To dismiss statements about ‘personal accounts’ of the ‘manner of God’s working’ as nothing more than concern that candidates have personal conviction of doctrinal propositions, misses the mark of what the authors were saying. A “profession of faith” may have had sufficient range of meaning to include a statement of belief evidencing faith, but it is also clear that most churches added to this the requirement of a profession of how one came to such faith.

In the debates of the 1662 Synod—which included many men still alive from the early days of the first generation—it is clear that they understood relations to be what the Cambridge Platform was talking about. The most hotly debated language of that synod was the fifth part of the answer given to question one, “Who are the subjects of Baptism?” After defining that baptized children were members insofar as they were subject to the discipline and government of the church, but were not to be admitted into full communion “without such further qualifications, as the Word of God requireth”<sup>26</sup> the Platform went on to state:

Church-members who were admitted in minority, understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publickly professing their assent thereto; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church, their children are to be Baptised.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cambridge Platform, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 313–14.

<sup>27</sup> Cambridge Platform, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 314.

This was such hotly debated wording because Davenport, who was present at the synod and objected strenuously to this clause, did not believe that baptism should be extended to the children of those who were not full members themselves. This is important because the wording of section five is describing not full members, but the unqualified children of full members. These unqualified adult children of members not only understood and publicly professed their understanding of and assent to the doctrine of faith and led upright lives in obedience to that doctrine, but they also had publicly “owned the covenant,” defined as having “give[n] up themselves and their children to the Lord,” yet were not admitted as full members. If Davenport’s only requirements of membership were a profession of faith and leading a life without scandal, why would he have objected to this group having their children baptized? If Bremer’s understanding of Davenport’s practice is accurate, it seems that, rather than trying to prevent their children from being baptized, he would have been seeking to admit the parents as full communing members. It is true that Davenport rejected “a simple intellectual assent to certain revealed truths”<sup>28</sup> as grounds for membership, looking instead for a true profession of faith. Simple assent, however, is far less than the Platform claims these individuals had done: they had “owned the Covenant.” If these partial members understood, publicly owned, and lived in accordance with the covenant, what more could Davenport be looking for than experiential accounts? It is clear from the result of the 1662 Synod that church relations were assumed to be the norm in most churches, and this was the cultural and ecclesiastical circumstance to which the “half-way covenant” addressed itself.

In addition to arguing that common terminology for the requirements of church

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<sup>28</sup> Davenport, *The Power of Congregational Churches Asserted and Vindicated in Answer to a Treatise of Mr. J. Paget Intituled The Defence of Church-Government Exercised in Classes and Synods* (London, 1672), 15–16, quoted in Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 636–37.

membership had semantic range to include more concepts than “conversion narrative,” Bremer goes so far as to actually exclude that concept from the realm of possibility. He noted that,

A 1637 report “of the manner in which persons are received into the congregations of New England” in England’s Public Record Office lists the steps of the process applicants successfully had to accomplish as follows: “witnessing (as they are able) the main fundamental points of religion”; answering questions about that knowledge; “condemning the course of . . . sin which they once lived in”; “acknowledging the good mercy & grace of God in receiving them to his grace”; and accepting the covenant. There is no mention of a narrative of personal experience.<sup>29</sup>

It must be asked, what “condemning the course of . . . sin which they once lived in” and “acknowledging the good mercy & grace of God in receiving them to his grace” should be taken to mean, and why a narrative of personal experience cannot be their meaning? While the specific contexts of each narrative would be expected to vary, these particulars are highlighted precisely because they are the heart of the subjective experience of assurance. Other points of the narrative may differ; these two points, however, are the essence without which there is not personal assurance. These particulars—seeing specific sins in their own lives as such, and articulating the way in which they saw their reception of God’s mercy and grace—are the very points narratives were made to demonstrate.

New England was not universal in practice. These were churches committed to congregational autonomy, but there is a general consensus on many things,<sup>30</sup> and the relations are

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<sup>29</sup> Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 644–45; by way of bibliographic reference for this report Bremer noted, “There is no indication of who sent the report or to whom it was sent, but its place in the State Papers Colonial next to other news from New England endorsed by Archbishop Laud suggests that it was directed to his attention. I would like to thank Michael Ditmore for providing me with a copy of the report and his transcription of it. There is no mention of a narrative of personal experience” (fn64).

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 42–43, noted, “Churches generally avoided difficulties arising from dissent by adopting and maintaining a spirit of cooperation through which officers and members agreed to abide by ‘the mind of the church’ or a sense of the meeting. In practice, ministers raised questions before the membership and invited debate. If sufficient dissent appeared, ministers concluded that the mind of the church was unclear and they refused to call for a vote. On the other hand, if only a handful of members objected, the dissenters’ unspoken duty was to express their views and then accept the consensus of opinion. No written provision specified how much dissent was sufficient to halt church actions; the early Congregationalists allowed this spirit of cooperation, rather

one of them.<sup>31</sup> When pastors argued that relations were not strictly necessary,<sup>32</sup> they were clearly arguing against other pastors, as well as members of their congregations, who were arguing for relations. Strenuous opposition to a practice is not evidence of the scarcity of the practice, but of

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than rules and regulations, to guide them. Ministers generally refused to ratify church actions on the basis of a majority consent until the late 1660s and 1670s, and they preferred unanimity throughout the colonial period.” Where such was the practice of the individual churches, it is clear that essentials would not vary enormously from church to church.

<sup>31</sup> Strangely, Bremer enlisted Hooker—the main documented example of variance on the issue of membership admission—to state the requirements of membership in Congregational churches as though his practice were representative: “In a word, if a person live not in the commission of any known sin, nor in the neglect of any known duty, and can give a reason of his hope towards God, this casts the cause, with judicious charity, to hope and believe there is something of God and grace in the soul, and therefore fit for Church-society” (Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* [1648], pt. 3, p. 5, cited in Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 647). Confusingly, Bremer then points to the Cambridge Platform as “reflecting a similar stance,” noting that “the weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church” (Cambridge Platform, quoted in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 222, cited in Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 647). This suggests that Hooker was a proponent of the practice that was enshrined in the Cambridge Platform when in fact he left the Bay Colony to found the Connecticut Colony over these very differences (Winship, “Reconsiderations: an Exchange,” 133, stated, “Hooker heretofore has been the only prominent New England minister known to have rejected conversion narratives. Not coincidentally, he chose to found the colony of Connecticut rather than remain in Massachusetts.” Five pages later he cited Hooker’s *Survey of the Summe*, pt. 3, p. 5, as an explicit statement that he did not require relations.)

Hooker was unsettled by the “curious inquisitions and niceties” that often were part of the congregational evaluation of narratives (Hooker, *Survey of the Summe*, <https://archive.org/details/surveyofsummeofc00hook> [accessed December 3, 2020], pt. 3, p. 6). Hooker believed that some people may not remember the event of their conversion in a manner that allows them to narrate it (Hooker, *Survey of the Summe*, pt. 3, p. 5, “for there be many truly and savingly called who *never knew the time and manner of their conversion*, and therefore cannot relate it unto others”). It would, therefore, be reasonable that he would argue against being too severe in the evaluation of such relations (*Survey of the Summe*, pt.3, p. 6). In this section Hooker was arguing for the elder or elders to take the chief role in private, so that the essence of faith, as opposed to “curious inquisitions and niceties,” would be the content of the examination of external evidences of salvation. Bremer seems to see Hooker advocating the majority position, yet it is a stretch of the Cambridge Platform to find Hooker’s practice there without much nuance or modification.

Bremer also disregards that the Platform goes on to recommend that the weakest measure of faith be demonstrated by a “personall & publick... declaring of God’s manner of working upon the soul” (Cambridge Platform, quoted in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 223). One might ask, if Hooker was arguing against narratives, but was somehow on the same side as the Cambridge Platform, who was he arguing against?

<sup>32</sup> Bremer, “To Tell What God Hath Done,” 650, noted Hooker’s co-pastor, Samuel Stone, for example, stating that “the central proposition of Stone’s work is that ‘A competent knowledge and blameless life are qualifications sufficient to render a man worthy of admission into a church without a particular relation of the order and manner of his conversion.’ ‘There is,’ he went on, ‘no divine precept binding everyone to make a relation of the manner and order of his conversion before his admission into a visible church.’ To support his contention, Stone remarked that ‘Calvin, Beza, Cartwright, [and] Dr. Preston were visible saints though they never made the relation aforesaid; Mr. Cotton and Mr. Hooker were visible saints in old England and so in New,’ though they did not make such a relation. All that should be required for membership was confirmation of a candidate’s true knowledge of the principal articles of the [Apostles’] creed, a statement that he looked to Christ alone for salvation, and that he was subject to the Gospel.”

its abundance.

Finally, Bremer seeks to support his thesis by explaining how the argument over the test actually proceeded back in Britain:

In the 1640s and 1650s, some Scottish Presbyterian and other opponents of the New England Way criticized the colonial practice of restricted membership. They did not focus their attention on personal narratives as a test of admission; rather, they objected to any examination of aspirants that was designed to limit church membership, though they imposed similar procedures to control access to the Lord's Supper.<sup>33</sup>

It might be asked, then, what the Scots were arguing about if they were not addressing the experiential relations and imposed the same sorts of restrictions as Bremer claims the New England Puritans imposed? Would it not be reasonable to assume they were arguing about a difference from their own practice? Bremer cited Stearns and Brawner's work for this point, but what Stearns and Brawner actually say is not that the Scots were objecting to any examination at all and therefore were not commenting on the relations; instead, they state, "These critics seem, however, to have been less concerned about the test for saving faith as such than about the exclusiveness which, in their opinion, it signified."<sup>34</sup> That is, the Scots saw a difference in practice between themselves and the New Englanders, which they believed revealed that the New Englanders' admission requirements were too strict.

Bremer is seeking to enlist Stearns and Brawner as allies in his argument against the existence of a widespread practice, and therefore against Morgan's thesis. Stearns and Brawner indeed attacked Morgan's thesis, but not in the way Bremer does. They were attacking Morgan's claim that the innovation of the test was placing any faith or belief-based limitation on membership at all, and they argued that having some form of test for membership was indeed the

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<sup>33</sup> Bremer, "To Tell What God Hath Done," 645.

<sup>34</sup> Stearns and Brawner, "New England Church 'Relations,'" 26.



Scottish practice and was, in some sense, consistent with the New England practice. This does not support Bremer's claim for the following reason: Morgan was correct in noting the significance of the new test, but he viewed it as a deviation in ecclesiology. Morgan held that previous generations of churchmen had viewed the local expression of the church not as the assembly of the elect, but as all the people within a given geographic location. As I have demonstrated above,<sup>35</sup> this is clearly not the case. Stearns and Brawner do not assert that the test did not exist, but that it did not represent a change in ecclesiology. Morgan identified an important change, but he imbued it with the wrong significance: he saw the new test he demonstrated as a change in ecclesiology. The solution is not to reject the existence of the relations as a widespread practice within the New England Way; for the reasons stated above, in addition to those offered by Winship, such a proposal is clearly out of accord with the available evidence. Rather, we should correct our understanding of its significance: the test indeed existed, but represented a change from previous traditions in how the Puritans approached soteriology.

What Bremer's new challenge is helpful in pointing out, however, is the fluidity and diversity of practice within the New England Way. Morgan's depiction, while not stating so explicitly, gives the impression of a unified and cohesive system in which the statements of synods were quickly the law of the land for all churches and which all churches practiced identically. Pope was careful to point out that this would be a misimpression,<sup>36</sup> but the very nature of trying to talk about what was done by a whole group of individuals and institutions over a period of almost a century masks the diversity and liquidity of the grass-roots reality, as does the task of trying to define what a moniker like "the New England Way" actually means.

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<sup>35</sup> See Chapter Two, "A Reformed Consensus and Its Dissidents."

<sup>36</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 269.

Bremer reminds us that even a closely-held practice like church relations was not monolithic in the diversity that was Congregationalism in seventeenth century New England.

### **Why Did the Test Come into Existence?**

Having established that it is appropriate to understand church relations as not universal but certainly common and central to the New England Way, we now turn to the actual events of the institution of the subjective assurance test itself.

In forming a Puritan society in the wilderness of New England, a major difference from previous contextualizations of the Reformed doctrine of assurance was that, while the European models—Genevan, Scottish, English—were integrating the doctrine into an established, diverse society, the North American Puritans were, by the very nature of their colonial endeavor, starting over as a whole. In England, the Puritan doctrine of assurance was worked out within or alongside a seemingly static and immovable ecclesiastical structure. As Holifield notes,

Elizabeth would relinquish to no man or congregation authority over the regulations and ceremonies of sacramental worship, and with Whitgift's assistance she thwarted the Puritan reforms. Her success helped to divide the reformers and, incidentally, to inform the new directions of Puritan sacramental thought. Increasing numbers of Separatists illegally formed their own churches, apart from the Anglican establishment, where they were compelled to consider the meaning of sacraments within pure communities of the faithful.... Their activities represented a retreat from direct structural reform, a move toward an inward, introspective piety that temporarily bypassed institutional restructuring. The first step, as they now saw it, had to be the inculcation of piety, not dramatic innovations in polity. They spoke of the sacraments, therefore, primarily as aids in the pastoral task of recreating the English laity, through in so doing they also reconsidered Reformed sacramental doctrine, particularly in relation to the subjective introspection of the pure in heart.<sup>37</sup>

In later chapters, I shall take up the impact of this process on Puritan sacramentology, examining the impact of the half-way covenant on baptismal theology and the developments which led to

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<sup>37</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 38.

both the sacramental renaissance and the sacramental controversy in the last decades of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century. With reference to the development of the doctrine of assurance among English Puritans, we should note that the doctrine of assurance functioned in English Puritanism virtually without reference to polity, as Anglican polity was off-limits (in the case of nonseparating Puritans), or unimportant (in the case of illegally formed churches where the individual's involvement was testimony enough to their sincerity at the polity level).

In the new society of North America, where the Puritans were no longer the counter-establishment but the establishment itself, the subjective experience of faith was still important. Now, however, assurance became the gatekeeper to a covenanted society in which each part intentionally interconnected with the rest. Not only that, but all parts needed the certainty, and in which all needed the certainty that the decision makers were visible saints and, for that, one needed the test of subjective assurance.

In describing the Puritan formation of early American society, Perry Miller memorably depicts the inter-relation of three different covenants. In *The New England Mind*, Miller noted,

The first Puritans did indeed succeed in impressing upon the *tabula rasa* of America a European and Protestant seal. With their sciences of theology, psychology, logic, and rhetoric, above all with the three-fold doctrine of the covenant—the Covenant of Grace, the church covenant, and the social covenant—they possessed coherent answers to all conceivable contingencies.<sup>38</sup>

This portrays a tightly woven society in which proper adherence to the interrelated parts was vital to the success of the experiment that the Bay colony represented. According to Miller, the system which the Puritans established viewed the proper functioning of reality as proper

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 14.

adherence to the three covenants which brought together the historical work of Christ applied to the individual, with the example of the primitive church and the experience of the Old Testament church-state nexus. The Covenant of Grace was the individual and invisible covenant between God and the believer by which salvation was realized; the church covenant was among the individual members of a particular, local church, and between this body and God; the social covenant was society-wide and existed among all the people of a society and their government. Because the social covenant assumed that people would act morally, that covenant was dependent on the church covenant to provide it with people who knew how to act morally. In New England's Puritan state, only those who were members of the church covenants were eligible to become voting members of the social covenant. Because the church covenant assumed people to be in proper relationship to God, it was dependent on the Covenant of Grace between God and the individual; but this covenant could not be witnessed, and so could lead to a problem. This interrelated view of the covenanted society makes clear why church membership was to become such an issue to the New England Puritans.

This perspective of the society of the New England Way must be further nuanced, however. Miller's picture is an oversimplification. It is not wrong, per se, but needs nuance. Bozeman provides greater nuance in recognizing the Puritan desire to imitate the structures of the primitive Church, but with the complexity of relating Church to Christian magistrate.<sup>39</sup> The Puritan experiment in North America was not in any way an attempt at innovation, but an attempt at returning to the primitive roots of the faith.<sup>40</sup> Their goal was to re-enact the world and forms of the early church and ancient Israel. Yet, according to the Puritan understanding, ancient

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<sup>39</sup> Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives*, 153.

<sup>40</sup> Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives*, 10–11. Bozeman states that “Primitivism supplies both a conceptual axis along which neglected root meanings of the Puritan enterprise can be expounded.”

Israel had failed and the early church had eventually innovated, compromised, and needed reformation. The New Englanders sought to succeed by their conformity to Scripture. For this conformity to be real, the churches needed pure members who were proven—as well as possible—to be among the elect: visible saints. The New England Way was not an attempt at building a new society.

The reason assurance came to take on a new function in the new world was not that the unified society demanded it. The society was unified as a mere byproduct of the reality that most of the participants in the great migration were Puritan.<sup>41</sup> Assurance came to its new role because the primitivism of the New England Puritans required, in their understanding of the Scriptures, individual churches made up of visible saints and founded on individual covenants. The New England Way was an attempt to return to the primitive ideal, whether that ideal had been historically realized or not in either ancient Israel or the early Church. The Puritan obsession with the covenant as a structure for civil, ecclesiastic, social, familial, and personal life was not viewed as an innovation, but as a return.

The primitive purity of the specific mechanics of the New England Way was not self-evident to English critics as being either workable, or biblical. Because the workability was the first point criticized, several defenses of the system explaining its practical workability had been offered in letters and treatises which were later published in England. Yet because the New Englanders developed their approach not primarily from practical considerations, but from primitivist biblical considerations, the ministers began to formulate biblical-theological defenses of their system. John Cotton made his earliest biblical defense of the New England system by “adding to his sketchy descriptions of Bay procedures a justification of them based on

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<sup>41</sup> See Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 22.

Scripture.”<sup>42</sup> This began to circulate in England in manuscript form as early as 1642, though it would not be published until 1645 as *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*. He began this treatise by explaining that “the Church which Christ in his Gospel hath instituted ... is, Cætus fidelium, a Communion of Saints, a Combination of faithful godly men, meeting for that end, by common and joint consent, into one congregation; which is commonly called a *particular visible church*.”<sup>43</sup> He based this claim on his exegesis of Matt. 16:18–19; 18:17; 1 Cor. 1:2; 5:1–5; 14:23; 16:1–2. In arguing from these passages, Cotton appealed to his understanding of what Jesus and the Apostles were actually telling the primitive church to do, not to an extrapolation of a future ideal. Because it had circulated in manuscript form, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* actually had attracted published refutations prior to its own publication.

That publication also post-dated Cotton’s publication of what he viewed as his more definitive statement on church polity, *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, in 1644.<sup>44</sup> This statement too makes clear that polity for Cotton—as for the New Englanders in general—was not about innovating an ideal society, but about recreating the primitive church in their own context. He opens not with a discussion of what would be best, but with exegesis of what the keys of the kingdom of heaven are and what their power is according to Christ in Matt. 16.<sup>45</sup> The book proceeds as an unpacking of polity from Christ’s statements according to exegetical, rather than logical or pragmatic, arguments, to such an extent that it has been accused of being, “unrelieved by any element of what one might consider ordinary human interest. Here the seventeenth-

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<sup>42</sup> Larzar Ziff, *John Cotton on the Churches of New England* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1968), 26.

<sup>43</sup> John Cotton, *Way of the Churches of Christ*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches*, 26–27.

<sup>45</sup> John Cotton, *The Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven* (London: 1644), in Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches*, 87.

century theologian, at ease in the Zion of scriptural interpretation, seems to set forth his argument in a dead language. Recalling the remote days of the apostles he seems scarcely to glance at the history of his own day.”<sup>46</sup> This is clearly not a philosopher innovating according to a devised logical model, but an exegete seeking to conform to a primitive precedent. This approach is evidenced throughout the work. For example, in treating “the power and authority given to synods,” Cotton makes no appeal to pragmatics, but cites the example of the church in Antioch sending Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, noting as exemplary that “the course which the apostles and elders took for clearing the matter, was not by publishing the counsel of God with apostolic authority, from immediate revelation, but by searching out the truth in an ordinary way of free disputation, Acts XV, ver. 7, which is as fit a course for imitation in after ages as it was seasonable for practice then.”<sup>47</sup> That is to say, according to Cotton, if the modern church needs direction it should follow the precedent of the ancient church.

The society which resulted from this primitivizing approach was not necessarily a unified, integrated society because that was the goal toward which the New England Way strove, but because of the New England Way contextualized the early church belief in covenant in a social context where most of the members of society were Puritan. Churches could exist in primitive purity amidst either Christian or pagan societies. Since their society was comprised mostly of Christians, they sought to build a Christian civil order, but that civil order was not essential to the task of building pure churches, according to their understanding of the primitive ideal. Cotton wrote:

[S]eeing Christian Magistrates being also Brethren and members of Churches, are called of God to be Nursing Fathers unto the Church, *Isa.* 49. 23. it can not but encourage them to take the more speciall notice and care of every Church, and to

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<sup>46</sup> Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Cotton, *The Keys* in Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches*, 117.

provide and assigne convenient allotments of land for the maintenance of each of them, when in times of peace they are made acquainted with the persons and proceedings of such as gather into Church-fellowship, under the wing of their Government: And yet seeing the kingdome of Christ is not of this world, nor regulated by the wisdome of this world, we do not doubt but that a Church may be clearly gathered, and rightly ordered, though they want opportunitie, or omit to acquaint the Magistrates with their proceedings, especially when Magistrates are not acquainted with the Lawes of Christs kingdome.<sup>48</sup>

According to Cotton, pure churches could exist with or without a covenanted civil society. If the elect had the opportunity to erect a civil society, it would naturally be one that nurtures the church. But such a society was not necessary for the church to exist. Describing the Puritan society of early New England as an intentionally unified web of covenants—as Miller does—obscures the reason for this form. It makes what was actually an emergent phenomenon into an intentionally designed theological necessity.

Individual church covenants, entered into explicitly, are the focus of Cotton's introduction—the basis of his argument as a whole—in his defense of the New England Way. In Cotton's view, while a universal Church exists, it is the individual, covenanted church that is the source of authority, power, sacraments, and the individual Christian's only actual experience of the Church universal. The creation of such local institutions is essential to the individual believer's care, and so the joining of members to form a particular church is the issue of importance, not the joining of an individual to the Church universal. In this context members lend legitimacy to the particular church, which in turn provides its benefits to the individual member in his or her quest for growth in grace.

The relationship between an individual believer and the church was one of reciprocity that made the doctrine of assurance more important to both the individual member and to the church.

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<sup>48</sup> Cotton, *Way of the Churches of Christ*, 6.



In regard to the individual, the doctrine of assurance was important in that the Puritan concern with assurance involved rigorous self-examination to ensure the individual believer is not self-deceived with reference to his or her status before God. In the reciprocal structure of the New England Way, the importance of the individual member to the local church communicated to that member that he or she was indeed among the elect to an extent that membership in the state church back in England had not. Thus, concern for not misleading individuals in their quest for assurance of salvation deepened the need to ensure that incoming members were indeed elect, as well as the local church could tell, in order to protect against giving them false assurance. It would be a disservice to the individual to offer him or her false assurance and leave the individual in the reprobate state while believing himself or herself to be among the elect. Thus, it was actually a concern for individuals, not for exclusivity, which led the churches to examine individuals' personal assurance. At the same time, the theologians were aware that certainty was impossible, and were concerned to safeguard against making the churches exclusive clubs; thus they urged care in examining for the smallest spark of faith.

In regard to the church, we can see why the doctrine of assurance began to take on a new role in this context. Churches were not run by clerical elites as in the Anglican structure back in England. Regardless of the training of and respect for the pastor, churches were run by democratic votes of the whole congregation. Thus, the individual believer was necessary to the local church, and so their credentials as a believer were more important to that body. If the church was run, as the Puritans understood its primitive state, by the believers themselves, not a hierarchy, the purity of the church bore renewed importance. At the same time, and because of this, the individual believer's role in the church increased the significance that a person's membership communicated to that person's subjective consciousness. This placed a greater

burden on the institution to care for their souls by not giving false feedback.

### **How Did the Test Come into Existence?**

When the colonists first arrived, they based church membership—and admission to the sacraments—on the traditional signs used in most Reformed communities: assent to, and knowledge of, the doctrinal teachings of the church and adherence to the behavioral norms of the churches. Early in their existence, however, the congregational churches began demanding an additional proof of faith: an account of experiential conversion. That this test came into existence and why the Puritans saw the need for it has been explained; now we shall examine the specific way in which the new test was instituted and became normative to the New England Way.

In England, non-separating Puritans did not control church membership practices, and separating Puritans were primarily differentiating between themselves and Anglicans. In North America, however, the alteration of the membership test was aimed not at differentiating between Anglican and Puritan, but between elect and reprobate. For the leaders of the religious establishment in the Bay Colony, there was no longer a religious establishment to convert from, but there was a critical change still being looked for.

As noted in the first chapter, Edmund Morgan saw the influence of John Cotton and Thomas Hooker as the reason that the test of conversion became a societal convention so quickly.<sup>49</sup> Cotton is known as the great defender of the relation as the proper system for ensuring

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<sup>49</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 94–95, points to the *General History* of Thomas Hubbard, a graduate of the first class of Harvard in 1642, as the earliest discussion of the establishment of the test of conversion. Hubbard was fully convinced of the necessity of the test for conversion and excused the mistake of early ministers in not making so rigorous a test at first because they “walked something in an untrodden path.” While Hubbard noted that one George Phillips, the minister of Watertown, advocated more strict practices, he did not have any support until the coming of Cotton and Hooker in 1633, “who did clear up the order and method of church government, according as they apprehended was most consonant with the Word of God. And such was the authority they (especially Mr. Cotton) had in the hearts of the people, that whatever he delivered in the pulpit was soon put into an Order of Court, if of a civil, or set up as a practice in the church, if of an ecclesiastical concernment” (Hubbard, *A General History*, 182,

the purity of the church, but he had not always held this view. In 1630, while still in Lincolnshire, Cotton became aware of some “honored magistrates,” one of whom had a child born aboard ship on their journey to the Bay Colony. When they came to Salem, “they themselves could neither be admitted to the Lord’s Table, nor their child to baptism.” Though desperately sick, Cotton wrote to the pastor of the Salem congregation, Samuel Skelton, “doubting the lawfulness of that practice.”<sup>50</sup> In the letter he faulted Skelton for two matters he “conceiue to bee erroneous”: in the first place, that Skelton thought “*that* no man may be admitted *the* Sacrament, though a member of *the* catholike church, vnlesse hee be also a member of *some particular* reformed church.” This was why Skelton denied the sacraments to members of Cotton’s church. The second error was that Cotton perceived Skelton to hold that “none of *our*

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quoted in Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 94–95). Why Hubbard pointed to Hooker as influential in making the new test standard is unclear, given that “Increase Mather remembered ... Hooker’s as being an earlier Congregationalist church that did not use relations” (Mather, *Magnalia*, 2:28, 103, cited in Michael P. Winship, “Reconsiderations: an Exchange, Did John Davenport’s Church Require Conversion Narratives for Church Admission?: A Challenge,” *New England Quarterly*, 87 [March 2014], 132), and it is generally accepted that one of Hooker’s reasons for leaving the Bay Colony to found Hartford was his disagreement with Cotton over relations. Frank Shuffelton, in his biography of Hooker, noted that Hooker was “unwilling to sacrifice the ideal of a godly community for that of a godly elite within the community. By evading neighboring ministers’ interrogations of spiritual standards among his church members, Hooker could work out his own balance between church purity and the godly community by excluding the obviously unfit and by simultaneously avoiding the establishment of a spiritual elite within the church” (Frank Shuffelton, *Thomas Hooker: 1586–1647* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977], 175).

Hooker wrote his own defense of the New England Way—the codification of which he was not able to participate in due to his illness and death during the synod that produced the Cambridge Platform,—which was published posthumously in London in 1648 under the title *A Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline*. In it he spends a good deal of time defending the reality that the church is a mixture of visible saints: “*Some are such according to Charity: Some according to truth*” (Hooker, *A Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline* [London: 1648], Part 1, Chapter 1, page 14, emphasis original). He goes on to define what he means by saints “according to charity”: “*Saints according to charity are such, who in their practice and profession (if we look at them in their course, according to what we see by experience, or receive by report and testimony from others, or lastly, look we at their expressions) they savour so much, as though they had been with Jesus. From all which, as farre as rationall charity directed by rule from the Word, a man cannot but conclude, That there may be some seeds of some spirituall Work of God in the soul. These we call visible Saints (leaving secret things to God) in our view, and according to the reach of rationall charity, which can go no further, then to hopeful fruits. We say and hope, and so are bound to conceive they are Saints: though such be the secret conveyances, and hidden passages of hypocrisie, that they may be guilt, not gold, seemingly such only, not savingly, known to God and their own hearts, not known to others. ... That which the Church doth not see, it can not censure*” (Hooker, *Sum of Church Discipline*, 14–15). From this passage it is clear that Hooker did not see that probing the mysteries of conversion and assurance was helpful to the membership of the church: rational charity and external observation were sufficient, not careful examinations of introspection.

<sup>50</sup> John Cotton, “A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636,” 41–42.

congregacions in England are particular reformed churches, but mr Lathrops & such as his.”<sup>51</sup>

This was because Skelton had administered both sacraments to members of John Lathrop’s church, a London church that, “while formally a non-Separatist congregation, was known to have Separatist leanings.”<sup>52</sup>

Cotton’s letter—a four-page treatise providing scriptural and logical refutation of Skelton’s perceived positions—was copied and circulated in both England and New England due to its “treatment of issues that remained central to the colonists’ concerns about their desire to purify church practice and membership in the larger Church of England.”<sup>53</sup> When Cotton revised his view—taking “a 180-degree turn”<sup>54</sup>—he was left having to explain himself in the very pulpit of the man whose views he had attacked when he preached at the Salem church in 1636. On that occasion he began his address with a “confession,” telling that Skelton had written him a “large and loving answer” which, “through the extremity of sickness then upon me, I could not read it; and afterwards being shuffled among other papers, I could never find it to this very day: but what might have been for instruction to me from his letters, the Lord hath since shewed unto me by diligent search of the Scriptures.”<sup>55</sup> The particulars of this particular “diligent search of the Scriptures” that led Cotton to change his position are not specifically stated.

For some historians Cotton emerges as a figure who combined pastor and politician in a dangerous yet effective ability to survive amid the hostile ecclesiastical landscape of

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<sup>51</sup> Cotton, “John Cotton to Samuel Skelton, October 2, 1630” in Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 143–44.

<sup>52</sup> Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, n9, 148.

<sup>53</sup> Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Cotton, “A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636” in Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches*, 41–42, quoted in Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 142.

Lincolnshire and the shifting and sometimes hostile social landscape of the Bay Colony. For Larzer Ziff, “Cotton appears as an artful compromiser and a carefully diplomatic rhetorician.”<sup>56</sup> Whether Cotton should be understood as a politician and survivor, compromising some positions in order to promote his interests, or as a concerned pastor and scholar who came to new views in light of new contexts, is beyond the scope of this study. In his letter, Cotton explicitly accused Skelton of taking too much the tack of the Plymouth Separatists. In addressing the Salem congregation six years later—when he was closer to the groups he was discussing—he made it clear that he saw a distinction between the Separatists of Plymouth and the non-Separating congregations in the Bay Colony who had developed a membership test distinct from that of the Plymouth Separatists.

The process of application for church membership that Cotton promoted was generally as follows: A candidate would approach the elders, who would examine him or her privately concerning his or her religious views, lifestyle, and spiritual experience. If the candidate passed this interview, the elder would present the candidate to the membership of the church, who would report any infractions in belief or practice they were aware of; the candidate would then either explain or repent of the offense. If the congregation was satisfied with this, several members of the congregation would testify to his or her good behavior, and the candidate would give a narration of the way God’s saving grace had come to him or her (his or her conversion). After this, the congregation would question the candidate about his or her conversion relation. Following this, the candidate would make a statement of his or her beliefs concerning doctrine and, if it was acceptable, the members would vote on whether to approve him or her. Finally, the

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<sup>56</sup> Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 9, commenting on Ziff’s *Career of John Cotton*.

candidate would formally agree to the church covenant and officially become a member.<sup>57</sup> The actual content of the conversion, or its morphology followed a general pattern that Morgan described:

first comes a feeble and false awakening to God's commands and pride in keeping them pretty well, but also much backsliding. ... Sooner or later true legal fear or conviction enables the individual to see his hopeless and helpless condition and to know that his own righteousness cannot save him, that Christ is his only hope. Thereafter comes the infusion of saving grace, sometimes but not always so precisely felt that the believer can state exactly when and where it came to him. A struggle between faith and doubt ensues, with the candidate careful to indicate that his assurance has never been complete and that his sanctification has been much hampered by his own sinful heart.<sup>58</sup>

As Puritan children in North America grew up being taught according to their parents' beliefs, it would naturally become increasingly difficult to differentiate the critical change that would allow them to seek full membership with access to the Lord's Supper. While this difficulty would go a long way with Bushman's and Butler's explanations about the disenfranchisement of the younger generation, it is also the case that people who sincerely held their parents' convictions but could not identify in their experience the looked-for conversion would not seek church membership out of genuine conviction that they were not qualified to seek it. As time progressed and these children became adults who continued to hold their parents' convictions but had failed to attain their parents' standing in the church, they naturally sought to provide their own children with the opportunity to experience what they themselves had failed to experience.

This situation is sometimes depicted as a sort of clerical tyranny. Morgan, for example, saw the confessions as formulaic, the result of the morphology of conversion having been articulated by the pastors over and over again.<sup>59</sup> McGiffert underscored the difficulty of the ordeal of public

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<sup>57</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 88–89.

<sup>58</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 90–91.

relations: “The candidate for admission stands, takes a breath, gets ready—no speaking had ever been so hard. We know these were not impromptu performances; they had been practiced at home, coached by the minister, vetted by senior saints.”<sup>60</sup> The question must be asked, however, if such a depiction is accurate. Were the ministers and “senior saints” seeking to control who was in and who was out, or were they simply doing the job they had been elected to do? The latter seems the more accurate picture, since innovations aimed at broadening the New England Way—the half-way covenant in particular—met with clerical approval long before the laity of the congregations could be convinced to alter their individual church practice to include less limiting measures.<sup>61</sup> Further, as noted above, Selement, in examining the extent to which congregants agreed with the theology they heard preached, stated that “the laity rarely employed [their pastor, Thomas] Shepard’s formal terminology of effectual vocation, revelation, illumination, presumption, rebellion, and justifying faith. But twenty-nine of them in forty-nine references evinced a general knowledge of the concepts of answering God’s call and embracing the Holy Spirit without undue confidence or unnecessary hesitation.”<sup>62</sup> They did not simply regurgitate their pastor’s theology but made it their own. Shepard, working to this end, “eschewed preaching a systematic doctrine of conversion. This subject was perhaps beyond the comprehension of some parishioners and at best provided men with only a ‘literal’ rather than a ‘saving’ knowledge of Christ.” In only one sermon did he detail the theological nuances of the process and then “he felt compelled to apologize to his hearers.”<sup>63</sup>

Despite this care, the parishioners discerned enough of Shepard’s morphology from his

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<sup>60</sup> McGiffert, *God’s Plot*, 137.

<sup>61</sup> Pope documents this process of lay resistance to clerical “softening” of the tests in *The Half-Way Covenant*, 33–37.

<sup>62</sup> Selement, “The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds,” 43.

<sup>63</sup> Selement and Woolley, *Thomas Shepard’s Confessions*, 14.

preaching to see it in their own experiences. This does not mean that they all had the same experiences; it means that they fitted diverse experiences into a similar pattern in their own understanding. This process of assimilation of the candidate's experiences to the order of conversion that their pastor taught should not be understood as the candidate trying to fake the right answers. It is important to recognize that the candidates were not only seeking church membership to gain the rights and privileges associated with it, but also to gain the community's endorsement that their personal understanding of their spiritual status and assurance was correct. Shepard, like the pastors back in England and his colleagues throughout New England, encouraged his congregation to spend significant time in introspection and self-examination to be clear about their spiritual condition. Not only did the pastors encourage their congregants to this activity, they also practiced it themselves.<sup>64</sup>

The result of all this introspection can be seen in the confessions of the candidates. Many spent years believing the pastors' claims about the human condition and need for salvation, but believed themselves to be outside such salvation. Applying for church membership was asking the community to examine one's experience and provide the emotional solace of agreeing that it was probably genuine and that one was indeed among the elect. Frequently, confessors concluded their stories without claiming to have personal assurance of their election; John Stansby and John Trumbull are examples of this.<sup>65</sup> In such a situation it seems clear that part of the whole exercise of church membership was gaining some assurance from the community.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Writing in his autobiography, Shepard identified seven separate steps in his personal conversion process and related the constant introspection required to move through this process. McGiffert, *God's Plot*, 42–48.

<sup>65</sup> Selement and Woolley, *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*, 88, 109.

<sup>66</sup> It must be remembered, of course, that such assurance was only partial. McGiffert noted that "public certification of sainthood, for this first generation of Puritan New Englanders, did not bring about a tidy happy ending to spiritual stress. A confessor might pass the test, in the judgment of the saints, but human judgments were notoriously fallible, especially where God was the true judge. Moreover, such assurance as church membership



Even in this inconclusiveness within their own stories, the parishioners were able to look to their pastor's experience and theology as a guide: Shepard's journal records what he called "renewed conversions,"<sup>67</sup> which suggest a lack of subjective assurance in his own salvation, even though he recorded in the last stage of his own initial conversion that "[t]he Lord made me to see that so many as receive him, he gives power to be sons of God (John 1:12), and I saw the Lord gave me a heart to receive Christ with a naked hand, even naked Christ, and so the Lord gave me peace."<sup>68</sup>

The problem the new test created was not that it initiated a process that was hostile and therefore kept people out. Rather, the new process stumbled into a problem the previous Reformed consensus had avoided; objective membership requirements of belief, knowledge, and lifestyle had allowed Reformed churches to include in their ranks any who desired to believe and practice what the churches taught. By adding a subjective, experiential requirement, the New England Way broke that stability. The pastors had told the people what experiential conversion looked like and faithful adherents examined themselves for what they thought was normative. When they failed to find it, they chose not to apply.

This was what Thomas Lechford, an English layman and lawyer who had lived in the colony for a short time, feared would be the result of the test shortly after its institution. He was critical of the New England Way and feared "that 'the major part' of New Englanders would be

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conveyed could be undercut by the same old resurgent doubts, their edges now sharpened by the expectations and requirements of membership itself" (McGiffert, *God's Plot*, 142). The community was not the final source of assurance; but the community's judgment was certainly an additional indicator in the quest for solace. McGiffert acknowledged the value that the act of making the relation itself had on the candidate's sense of assurance, though more as a function of the candidate asserting their individual validity than as a function of the community's affirmation. This individual validity is, nonetheless, the individual's self-assertion as a participant in the community: "In this crucial moment of disclosure they came out of hiding, into the open, into the light.... Individuals who had thought themselves alone now found themselves companioned and supported, receiving assurance from the reassurance of others and giving it back again. Here they touched the concordant heart, the living inner principle, of religious consensus" (McGiffert, *God's Plot*, 145).

<sup>67</sup> McGiffert, *God's Plot*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> McGiffert, *God's Plot*, 47–48.

unbaptized ‘in twenty years.’”<sup>69</sup> His concerns were published in 1642 and were based on his experiences in the colony prior to his return to England in 1641. As early as 1645, however, the beginnings of the situation Lechford feared prompted Richard Mather to propose a means of keeping more New Englanders baptized. He proposed that “the baptism of all church members, even the children of those who had not yet reached the stage of experiential religion which would qualify them for the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>70</sup> This suggestion—which was not adopted—came in the process of framing the New England Way’s first official formulation, the Cambridge Platform.

Long before that formulation, however, controversy was stirred by varying interpretations of the new test. Remembered as the Antinomian Controversy, this debate boiled out on both sides of the Atlantic in a pamphlet war, but its most significant impact was felt in the Bay Colony where Anne Hutchinson was banished in 1638 for claiming direct revelation from God in her ability to discern the presence of the Spirit in other believers. While her claims to direct revelation may have been the official reason for her banishment, the claims were made in the context of an argument about what actually constituted proof of assurance. The second “head” of Hutchinson’s party (as summarized by Winthrop, one of its opponents) was “that no sanctification can help to evidence to us our justification.”<sup>71</sup> John Cotton was sympathetic to Hutchinson and her followers but managed to nuance his position sufficiently to avoid

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<sup>69</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 145, quoting Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing: or Newes from New England* (London, 1642), “To the Reader.”

<sup>70</sup> Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant*, 14. Pope cites Richard Mather’s proposal, which was never published but included in a document titled “A Plea for the Churches of Christ in New England,” drawn up in preparation for the Cambridge synod and quoted in Increase Mather, *First Principles of New England*, (Cambridge, 1675), 10. This document, which Richard Mather prepared for the synod at Cambridge, consists of an answer to William Rathband’s *A Narrative of Church Cources in New England* (London, 1644), and a “contriving” of “*Positive grounds from scripture and reason for justification of ye Way of ye said Churches*” (R. Mather, “A Plea for the Churches,” title page [not numbered]). The original manuscript in Mather’s hand is in the possession of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

<sup>71</sup> John Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal*, ed. J. K. Hosmer (New York: Scribner, 1908) I, 195, quoted in John Ball, *Chronicling the Soul’s Windings* (New York: University Press of America, 1992), 62.

banishment. Seeking to summarize the controversy, and his own position, while the debate was still raging, Cotton explained that “the first evidence of grace is assurance from justification, an inwardly felt experience. This first evidence is the convert’s own experience of witnessing the evidences of his or her own soul.”<sup>72</sup> Cotton stated, “Should people reason that ‘first Assurance’ stems from moral behavior, ‘it will unavoidably follow that our works are the grounds and cause of our first Assurance,’ a conclusion which would violate ‘Protestant doctrine.’”<sup>73</sup> Cotton was concerned that assurance not be based on the evidence of an unscandalous life, but on the objective grounds of assurance, Christ himself. Yet in seeking to protect those objective grounds, his advocacy against the subjective grounds of unscandalous living led him to advocate for the subjective grounds of personal experience of the Holy Spirit’s working as the “first Assurance.”

Hall’s documentary history of the Antinomian Controversy sees the controversy as a response to the New Englanders’ quest for assurance. Cotton’s preaching in Boston ignited a revival in 1633 that brought sixty-three new members into the church in one month—nearly half as many as had been added in the previous three years. This influenced the debate that was already occurring over church membership:

The colonists wished to restrict the church to the godly, but they were not sure what terms to demand of prospective church members. By 1633, they had set up two requirements, soundness in doctrine and evidence of good behavior. Some of the ministers, among them John Cotton, wanted to go further by requiring candidates to testify before the church about their experience of conversion. Since the revival seemed to guarantee an abundance of conversions, the other ministers agreed, and in February, 1636, when Thomas Shepard formed a new church in Cambridge, the advice of the ministers present was “that such as were to join should make confession

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<sup>72</sup> Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 54. It is worth noting here a departure from the earlier debates about evidences of assurance in the previous chapter. For Beza and Perkins, as for Calvin before them, the first evidence was the objective reality of Christ’s work. Inward experience of the soul was, like outward evidence of behavior, relegated to second and third positions in these classic formulations of the doctrine.

<sup>73</sup> Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1990), xvi.

of their faith, and declare what work of grace the Lord has wrought in them; which accordingly they did.”<sup>74</sup>

This action, undertaken in the throes of a revival with many people experiencing conversions and coming before the congregation to give their relation, had negative consequences when the revival ended. “The revival and the new requirement for church membership were forcing everyone in the colony to ask himself, am I saved? In the aftermath of the revival many were not sure of the answer.”<sup>75</sup> The anxiety this produced was acute, and in its most extreme case, “A woman of Boston congregation, having been in much trouble of mind about her spiritual estate, at length grew into utter desperation, and could not endure to hear of any comfort, etc., so as one day she took her little infant and threw it into a well, and then came into the house and said, now she was sure she should be damned, for she had drowned her child.”<sup>76</sup>

Spiritual anxiety combined with growing frustration at the ministers for preaching the need for conversion without seeming to be able to actually produce conversion. “All that was needed,” in Hall’s estimation, “to turn these two ingredients into Antinomianism was the preaching of John Cotton.”<sup>77</sup> While the traditional understanding of the controversy centers on Anne Hutchinson, Hall claimed that “in the new documents, the major figure is John Cotton.”<sup>78</sup> Cotton’s and Hutchinson’s answers to this predicament—the essential content which would be called Antinomianism—did not solve the problem, but served to pour fuel on the fire. The teaching branded one’s looking to good behavior—or “duties”—as a means of subjective assurance a “covenant of works.” Rather, Cotton preached:

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<sup>74</sup> Winthrop, *History*, I, 215., quoted in Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Winthrop, *History*, I, 281–82, quoted in Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 15

<sup>77</sup> Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 4.

“Doth the Lord draw you to Christ, when you are broken in the sense of your own Sins, and of your own Righteousness? When you look at duties you are not able to do them, not able to hear or pray aright.... If the Lord do thus draw you by his Everlasting Arm, He will put a Spirit into you, that will cause you to wait for Christ, and to wait for Him until He doth shew Mercy upon you.” The person who waited for Christ, whose heart was “emptied of every thing besides,” could be judged one of the elect, and hence be eligible for church membership: “You may safely receive him into your Church fellowship.”<sup>79</sup>

Cotton avoided the claim of extra-biblical revelation that ultimately condemned Hutchinson and minister John Wheelwright, but this focus on justification to the exclusion of sanctification became the theological fight. The particulars of the debate itself are beyond the scope of this study; the point here is that the Antinomian Controversy was a further expression of the difficulty the still-forming New England Way was encountering by basing objective assurance on subjective assurance. The ministers in general were maintaining a tension between two elements of the new membership requirements: good behavior and the new test of experience. The Antinomians were seeking to throw out good behavior as a consideration entirely and appeal only to the new test of experience. Thus the “Antinomian” answer did little more than the “orthodox” answer to heal the rift that basing objective assurance on individual experience had opened.

### **What Did the Test Do?**

The foundation of the test thus demonstrated, we can now proceed to some analysis of its first official formulation, The Cambridge Platform. In England, the 1640s had produced a very different social, political and religious landscape than the one which the colonists had fled in the 1620s and 1630s. Civil war had given power to the Puritan party, which had allied itself with

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<sup>79</sup> John Cotton, *A Sermon Preached... At Salem* (Boston, 1713), 30–33; Cotton, *A Conference Mr. John Cotton Held at Boston with The Elders of New England* (London, 1646), 7, quoted in Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 16.

Scotland; a situation which had privileged Presbyterianism over Congregationalism in English Puritan thinking. Back in North America the colonists, who had seen themselves as leaders in the Puritan ecclesiastical experiment, found themselves increasingly at odds with the ecclesiology of Puritan England. In light of this, a synod which had been called for a different issue shifted its own focus to define and defend the North American position. The formulation of the New England Way which this synod produced—the Cambridge Platform—was not, as Morgan’s monograph seems to suggest,<sup>80</sup> primarily a response to an internal crisis, that is, the problem created by the new test. The synod was also not called to address the problem of diminishing church membership—although, as Pope documented, that phenomenon was indeed happening. The synod was called, rather, to frame a response to an external crisis just noted: the formulation of doctrine that the English Puritans had articulated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.<sup>81</sup> Presbyterian divines had dominated the Westminster Assembly,<sup>82</sup> and the threat of Parliament forcing the New Englanders in line with their new ecclesiastical polity was very real. The response the Cambridge Platform represented was not seeking to forge new paths, but to enshrine and codify the New England Way as it was being practiced.<sup>83</sup> This is stated explicitly in

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<sup>80</sup> I am not accusing Morgan of misrepresenting the reason for the Cambridge Platform, only noting that, as the topic functions in *Visible Saints*, that this reader had the impression that the main reason for the Platform was to deal with the ecclesiastical situation created by the relation test. Given that the Platform did not make changes to the existing system, but served rather to formally codify Congregational practice up to that point, it is clear that the Platform was formulated not to change or address circumstances in New England, but to explain those circumstances in light of a new context.

<sup>81</sup> Cambridge Platform, Preface, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 195.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Hooker and John Cotton had been invited to participate in the Westminster Assembly but, recognizing that it was dominated by Presbyterians, Hooker stated that he “liked not the business, nor thought it any sufficient call for them to go 3000 miles to agree with three men” (Robert C. Winthrop, *Life and letters of John Winthrop: governor of the Massachusetts-Bay Company at their emigration to New England* [Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864] ii, 91–121, cited in George Leon Walker, *Thomas Hooker: Preacher, Founder, Democrat* [New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1891], 137).

<sup>83</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 159, states that the New Englanders were concerned that “a Parliament which had seemingly brought the ecclesiastical institutions of England into conformity with those of Scotland might next proceed to enforce a similar uniformity in New England.”

the Platform's preface:

The more we discern ... the unkind, & unbrotherly, & unchristian contentions of our godly brethren and countrymen in matters of church government, the more earnestly do we desire to see them joynd together in one common faith, & ourselves with them. For this end, having perused the publick confession of faith, agreed upon by the reverend assembly of Divines at Westminster, & finding the sum and substance thereof, (in matters of doctrine), to express not their own judgments only, but ours also: and being likewise called upon by our godly Magistrates, to draw up a public confession of that faith which is constantly taught, & generally professed amongst us, wee thought good to present unto them, & with them to our churches, & with them to all the churches of Christ abroad, our professed & hearty assent & attestation to the whole confession of faith (for substance of doctrine) which the reverend assembly presented to the Religious & Honorable Parliament of England: Excepting only some sections in the 25, 30 & 31. Chapters of their confession, which concern points of controversy in church discipline; touching which we refer ourselves to the draft of church discipline in the ensuing treatise.<sup>84</sup>

These concerns about chapters 25, 30 and 31 encompass the main Congregational objections to the *Westminster Confession*. In chapter 25, there were concerns about the universality of the church visible, and what that would mean for New England churches if churches in Old England chose a different form of government. In chapter 30 the officers, rather than the congregation, are explicitly vested with church authority. In chapter 31 church synods and councils are made authoritative—though explicitly not inerrant—for individual churches. All of these were not only objectionable to Congregationalists, they were also dubious for congregational churches which seemed to be implicitly placed under the authority of English synods. The Cambridge Platform needed to explicitly state that churches were independent of each other, and of oversight from synods of officers from other churches. For the congregational system to work, however, it was necessary—given that authority rested with the congregation, not the officers—that the churches be exceptionally pure in their membership, as members exercised the very authority of the

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<sup>84</sup> Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, 195. The chapters referenced as being excepted pertain to the universal Church, the nature of church censures, and the authority of church synods and councils—all essential differences between Congregational and Presbyterian systems.

church. At the same time—and in light of the fact that the primary objection which had come against the New England Way from English observers was the difficulty of church members being accepted into churches—it was also necessary that the judgement of charity be extended as far as possible in examining potential members lest the smallest evidence of faith be missed and genuine saints be bared not only from the benefit of the sacraments, but also from the exercise of authority necessary to the proper functioning of the independent church. This being the case, we can see within this codification a tension the New Englanders had carefully and intentionally built into their system.

The tension can be seen when the Platform talks about relations. On the one hand, when the Platform is talking about relations as a means of protecting the purity of the local church, it sets a high bar for demanding that only the demonstrably holy—by their relation of their experience of subjective assurance—be allowed entrance. On the other hand, when the Platform is talking about the admission of individual members, it instructs gentleness and the exercise of charity.

The first of these tendencies is seen when the subject of relations is first taken up in chapter 3, “Of the matter of the Visible Church Both in respect of Quality and Quantity,” section 1, which reads,

The matter of a visible church are Saints by calling. By Saints wee understand, Such as haue not only attained the knowledge of the principles of Religion, & are free from gros & open scandals, but also do together with the profession of their faith and Repentance, walk in blameles obedience to the word, so as that in charitable discretion they may be accounted Saints by calling, (though perhaps some or more of them be unsound, & hypocrites inwardly:) because the members of such particular churches are commonly by the holy ghost called Saints and faithful brethren in Christ, and sundry churches have been reprobud for receiving, and suffering such persons to continu in fellowship amongst them, as have been offensive & scandalous: the name of God also by this means is Blasphemed: & the holy things of God defiled & Profaned. the hearts of the godly grieved: & the wicked themselves hardened: &



holpen forward to damnation. the example of such doeth endanger the sanctity of others. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.<sup>85</sup>

Here it is clear that the issue of purity in the churches is foremost in the framers' minds. Some of this language had occurred in polemic prior to the Platform, and this context offers insight into the reason for the concern. In 1639, when a group of English ministers sent a series of thirty-two questions to the New Englanders, Richard Mather, framing the New Englanders' response in his *Church Government and Church Covenant Discussed*, laid some of the groundwork for this concern. In response to the question, "What things doe you hold to be Essential and absolutely necessary to the being of a true Visible Church of Christ?"<sup>86</sup> Mather stated, "That when a Visible Church is to be erected, planted or constituted by the Appointment of Christ, it is necessary that the matter of it, in regard of quality, should be Saints by calling, Visible Christians and Believers, 1 Cor. 1.2. Eph. 1.1."<sup>87</sup> He set up this statement by noting, "It is one thing what Churches ought to be by the appointment of Jesus Christ, another, what weaknesse and swervings from his appointment, he may beare with all for a time, before he renounce and cast off a People from being his Church."<sup>88</sup> Clearly, saints by calling are pure, just as the institution and the visible church that they constitute is pure. This sanctity must be carefully guarded or else they hazard the renunciation of Christ. From this the need arises for being as sure as possible that a saint is truly a saint. The practical undertaking of preserving this purity can be seen in Mather's answer to the previous question, "Whether the greatest part of the English there (by estimation) be not as yet unadmitted to any Congregation among you, and the Reasons thereof?"<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Cambridge Platform, 3.1 in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 205–6.

<sup>86</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 1.

<sup>87</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 8–9.

<sup>88</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 1.

1. Many are not admitted because they are not yet knowne. ... 2. When by time they come to be knowne many do appeare to be carnall, and give no Testimony of being Members of Christ, and therefore if they should offer themselves to be Members of Churches the Churches would not see warrant to receive them, because the Church is the body of Christ. 3. Soules that are Godly do of their own accord for a time forbear to offer themselves, till they be better acquainted with the Church and Ministry where they intend to joyne. ... 4. Those that are knowne to be Godly, are all admitted in some Church or other presently, upon their own desire, when they offer themselves thereto: except any have given offence by walking (in any particular in their Conversation) otherwise then becomes the Gospell; and then such are to give satisfaction to them to whom they have given offence, by acknowledging their offence, and shewing repentance for it, and then they are Admitted.<sup>90</sup>

Because the very nature of the church requires purity, and because by admission the church is sanctioning the saint's assurance, the church must be careful to get to know the newcomer before admitting him or her into fellowship.

Larzer Ziff depicted this exchange with the English pastors as an appeal for help. In the wake of Parliamentary dominance during the English civil war the English Puritans had the opportunity to begin working out which ecclesiastical system would govern the English church. The English independents (proponents of congregationalism) wanted instruction, arguments, and systems from their North American counterparts. This would help them make the case for congregationalism against those advocating Presbyterian church government. Ziff noted, "Before 1644 [the date Welde published an account of the Antinomian Controversy and sparked a new direction of inquiry about the New England Way back in Old England], the news that Puritans sought from New England was practical information about the procedures followed in a Congregational church."<sup>91</sup> As the conversation in England intensified during the meetings of the Westminster Assembly, "Presbyterians had the Church of Scotland to point to as an ecclesiastical system successful in practice as well as sound in doctrine, and the initial questions addressed to

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<sup>90</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches* 24.

the New England ministry were questions about how they handled specific situations within the church.”<sup>92</sup>

Ziff's interpretation, however, encounters difficulties: Specifically, in the actual sources, the English ministers asking questions did not phrase their questions as requests for guidance on how their own ministry might be conducted, but as concerns that the New Englanders were departing from orthopraxy in their ecclesiastical conduct. When English ministers received the answers to their questions, some published them, along with what they considered to be other relevant texts, which seemed to demonstrate the inconsistency of the New England Way, while others—those who seemed more friendly to the New Englanders—published the answers with different supporting documents which seemed to support the New Englanders' practice. For example, Simeon Ash and William Rathbund published a book titled *A Letter of Many Ministers in Old England Requesting the Judgment of their Revrend Brethren in New England concerning Nine Positions. Written Anno Dom. 1637. Together with their Answer thereunto returned, Anno 1639. And the Reply made unto the said Answer, and sent over unto them, Anno 1640*. As its title indicates, it is the correspondence between groups of pastors in New and Old England. Its purpose, however—far from seeking answers on how to model the Old English ecclesial system on that of the New—is to show the error of the New England pastors. In their preface to the reader, Ash and Rathbund stated,

These differences betwixt the loving Brethren of old *England* and New, had not been made thus notorious, if some who cry up the Church way in *New England* as the only way of God, had not been forward to blow them abroad in the world. But surely the providence of God is remarkable in bringing these questions into debate at this time when the Ministers of the Gospel from all the Counties of the Kingdom are called

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<sup>92</sup> Ziff, *Cotton on the Churches* 25–26.

together by both houses of Parliament, to consult about the healing of our breaches which are very many and dangerous.<sup>93</sup>

This is clearly not a request for guidance, but an attempt to demonstrate the problems the old English ministers saw in the doctrine of their North American counterparts. The nine positions begin, “When we lived together in the same Kingdom, we professed the same faith.... But since your departure unto *New England*, we heare (and partly believe it) that diverse have embraced certain vain opinions, such as you disliked formerly, and we judge to be groundless and unwarantable.” They go on to lay out the nine positions, broadly describing the practice of the New England Way. Most relevant to the point:

3. That the children of godly and approved Christians, are not to be Baptized until their parents bee set members of some particular congregation. 4. that the parents themselves, though of approved piety are not to be received to the Lord’s Supper until they bee admitted as set members. 5. That the power of Excommunication &c. is so in the body of the Church, that what the major part shall allow, that must be done, though the Pastors and Governors and part of the assembly be of another minde.... 6. That none are to be admitted as set members, but they must promise, not to depart, or remove unless the Congregation will give leave. 7. That a Minister is so a Minister to a particular Congregation, that if they dislike him unjustly, or leave him he ceaseth to be a Minister.... 9. That members of one Congregation may not communicate [i.e., take communion] in another.<sup>94</sup>

These positions describe the highly localized authority and church fellowship of the New England Way. The old English ministers then related that congregants returning to England from North America frequently condemned and refused to participate in worship according to the *Book of Common Prayer*, “excommunicating themselves” from the Lord’s Supper and holding out the New England Way “as the only Church way, wherein the Lord is to be worshiped,” and then offered this judgement: “you have changed from the truth which you did profess, and

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<sup>93</sup> Simeon Ash and William Rathbund, *A Letter of Many Ministers in Old England Requesting the Judgment of Their Revrend Brethren in New England Concerning Nine Positions. Written Anno Dom. 1637. Together with Their Answer Thereunto Returned, Anno 1639. And the Reply Made unto the Said Answer, and Sent over unto Them, Anno 1640* (London, 1643), “To the Reader,” 1, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A70435.0001.001>.

<sup>94</sup> Ash and Rathbund, *Letter of Many Ministers*, “The Letter of those Ministers” 1.

embraced that as truth which in former times and upon sound grounds you did concede as erroneous.... Non-conformists in practice are Separatists in heart.”<sup>95</sup> This is not a letter asking to learn from the New Englander’s experience; rather, it is calling erring brethren to repentance!

The English ministers’ concerns centered on the radical separation and the localism of authority and church fellowship of the New England congregations. The New England churches were clearly deeply concerned with the purity of these local churches. This concern flowed out of their ecclesiology. As noted above,<sup>96</sup> the local church was the locus of authority—beholden to none higher—and virtually the sole instrument of God’s working in the experience of the believer; as such, its individual purity was vital to its mission. This is made explicit in the Cambridge Platform in chapter 2, “Of the Nature of the Catholick Church in Generall, & in speciall, of a particular visible church,” which explains that the “Catholick Church” is the whole company of the elect, but subdivided into Triumphant (in glory with Christ) or Militant (still in this life). Militant is further subdivided into Invisible (all who have true faith) and Visible (those who profess faith and are in particular churches), “& so there may be acknowledged an universall visible Church.”<sup>97</sup> Within this “militant, visible” church there are those “either as not yet in church-order, or as walking according to the church-order of the Gospel.... So wee deny an universall visible church.”<sup>98</sup> In assessing the role of assurance in the Cambridge Platform, I will note shortly an intrinsic tension. Part of the reason for this tension is that the law of non-contradiction is not strictly observed in North American Puritan thinking. Further, these two sections of chapter 2 are concluded with almost identical clauses with the words “acknowledge”

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<sup>95</sup> Ash and Rathbund, *Letter of Many Ministers*, “The Letter of those Ministers” 1–2.

<sup>96</sup> See discussion of Cotton’s *Way of the Churches of Christ*, in section “Early Contextualization in Milieu,” above.

<sup>97</sup> Cambridge Platform 2.3, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 204.

<sup>98</sup> Cambridge Platform 2.4, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 205.

and “deny” exchanged so as to actually underscore the necessary contradiction that the framers perceived in their discussion of the nature of the church.<sup>99</sup>

The importance of the individual, congregational nature of the primitive church structure is emphasized following this juxtaposition with the assertion that “the state of members of the Militant visible church ... since the coming of Christ [is] only congregational.”<sup>100</sup> The congregational church is then defined: “A Congregational-church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification one of another, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>101</sup> The authority of these institutions rested not in the episcopal structure, nor in presbyterial leaders identified by the membership, but in the membership itself. As such the purity of the membership was vital to the proper functioning of the institution.

This point is clear from the way Cotton describes the local church in the very first sentence of *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*, noted in brief above, but quoted here at length to underscore the point:

That the Church which Christ in his Gospel hath instituted, and to which he hath committed the keys of his kingdom, the powers of binding and loosing, the tables and seals of the Covenant, the Officers and censures of his Church, the administration of all his public Worship and Ordinances, is, Cætus fidelium, a Communion of Saints, a Combination of faithful godly men, meeting for that end, by common and joint

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<sup>99</sup> These two statements come too close together to be an oversight; rather, the framers of the Cambridge Platform were intentionally demonstrating that the theology they were explaining was above human reason and the law of non-contradiction. That they were willing to do so gives insight into their willingness to knowingly set up a system with internal conflict—using subjective assurance to test for objective assurance, for example—or that would urge both charity and rigidity in the application of that test.

<sup>100</sup> Cambridge Platform 2.5, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 205.

<sup>101</sup> Cambridge Platform 2.6, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 205.

consent, into one congregation; which is commonly called *a particular visible church*.<sup>102</sup>

Cotton was stressing the gravity of what the particular visible church actually was by piling clause upon clause describing its power: having the keys of the kingdom, binding and loosing, holding the tables and seals of the Covenant, ordaining officers and censuring on behalf of Christ, administering worship and ordinances—these last in particular, for a group who believed the past failures of the Church related to its departure from primitive purity, were a mark of its awesome responsibility. Elsewhere, Cotton explained the authority of the church by examining what keys Christ was giving to Peter in Matt. 16:19. There he stated,

The keys of the kingdom are the Ordinances which Christ hath instituted, to be administred in his Church; as the preaching of the Word, (which is the opening and applying of it) also the administring of the Seals and censures; For by the opening and applying of these, both the gates of the Church here, and of heaven hereafter, are opened or shut to the sons of men.<sup>103</sup>

This power given to the church is not given only to certain officers or officials of the church, but to the church membership as a whole:

How Peter is to be considered in receiving this power of the keys, whether as an Apostle or as an Elder ... or as a Believer professing his faith before the Lord Jesus, and his fellow Brethren.... Take any of them, it will not hinder our purpose in this ensuing Discourse.... Take Peter considered not onely as an Apostle, but an Elder also, yea, and a Beleever too, professing his faith, all may well stand together. For there is a different power given to all these, to an Apostle, to an Elder, to a Beleever, and Peter was all these, and received all the power, which was given by Christ to any of these, or to all of these together.<sup>104</sup>

If these are the responsibility and prerogative of the particular, local church, and the authority of that church rests in the membership itself, then the purity of that church must be carefully

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<sup>102</sup> Cotton, *Way of the Churches of Christ*, 1, emphasis original.

<sup>103</sup> Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven, and Power Thereof, According to the Word of God* (London, 1644), 20.

<sup>104</sup> Cotton, *Keyes of the Kingdom*, 22.

safeguarded, Cotton argued, by requiring of those coming into it that they “publicly confirmed that profession of repentance and faith,” which gave the church some assurance of their sainthood.<sup>105</sup>

Richard Mather expanded on this idea in his answer to the eighth question from the English ministers:<sup>106</sup>

We do believe that all Members of Churches ought to be Saints, and faithfull in Christ Jesus, Eph. 1.1. 1 Cor. 1.2. Col. 1.2. Phil. 1.1. and thereupon we count it our duty to use all lawfull and convenient meanes, whereby God may helpe us to discerne, whether those that offer themselves for Church Members, be persons so qualified or no: and therefore first we heare them speake concerning the Gift and Grace of Justifying faith in their soules, and the manner of Gods dealing with them in working it in their hearts: which seemes to be your first particular in this Quæry. ... And hereby also so we would prevent (as the Lord shall helpe us) the creeping in of any into the Church that may be infected with corrupt opinions of Arminianisme, or Familisme, &c. or any other dangerous error against that faith which was once delivered to the Saints, as knowing how ensily such men if they were admitted, might infect others, and perhaps destroy the Faith of some.<sup>107</sup>

This statement is instructive of the process the New Englanders were undertaking: Because the authority structure of the church necessitated that all its visible members—as nearly as humanly possible—be true saints, “all lawfull and convenient meanes” must be used to assure this. But how can mere humans actually ascertain what only God can see? The New Englanders knew that the purity of their churches depended upon their discerning as clearly as possible what only God could certainly discern: “the Gift and Grace of Justifying faith in their soules.” Therefore, to test if their claim to have such was true—and, pastorally, to help the applicants for membership

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<sup>105</sup> Cotton, *Way of the Churches of Christ*, 5.

<sup>106</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 2: “8. Whether doe you require of all persons of age, whom you admit Members of any Church? 1. A publike vocall declaration of the manner and soundnesse of their conversion? 2. A publike profession of their faith concerning the Articles of Religion. 3. An expresse verball covenanting to walke with the said Church in particular, in Church fellowship. 4. And not to depart from the said Church afterward without the consent thereof: or how doe you hold and practise in these things?”

<sup>107</sup> R. Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant*, 23.



discern for themselves if this was true—they would listen to the “manner of Gods dealing with them in working [Justifying faith] in their hearts.” The objective reality of justifying faith would be tested for by the subjective experience of its occurrence and compared against other experiences to see if it was authentic.

As important as purity was, this system for discerning it was clearly on shaky ground. So the Cambridge Platform framers introduced a tension into their work to mitigate against setting too high a bar, or missing the real presence of the objective reality in their examination of the subjective experience. In discussing the purity of the individual church, the Platform was harsh in its demand for proof of purity. When it turns to the actual admission of members, however, the document begins to call for care and for a gentle touch. This is the second place the Platform touches on relations, referred to above. In chapter 12, it states that church members ought to be “examined and tryed” for the requisite characteristics of “*Repentance* from sin & *faith* in Jesus Christ,” which candidates must “profess & hold forth in such sort, as may satisfie *rational charity* that the things are there indeed.” The Platform then goes on to state, “The weakest *measure* of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church: becaus weak christians if *sincere*, have the *substance* of that faith, repentance & holiness which is required in church members: and such have most *need* of the ordinances for their confirmation and growth in grace.”<sup>108</sup> Given the concern that the legitimacy of the church’s authority to provide the ordinances rested, in the framers’ understanding, on the purity of its membership, this is a remarkable extension of charity. Cotton noted about this idea,

Nevertheless, in this trial, we do not exact eminent measure, either of knowledge, or holiness, but do willingly stretch out our hands to receive the weak in faith, such in whole, spirits we can discern the least measure of breathing and panting after Christ, in their sensible feeling of a lost estate; for we had rather 99 hypocrites should perish

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<sup>108</sup> Cambridge Platform 12.3, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 222.

through presumption, then one humble soul belonging to Christ, should sink under discouragement or despair; and by reason of these hypocrites received into the Church, it is that the Church is said to have in it good and bad, wheat and tares.<sup>109</sup>

This is a remarkable statement. Cotton was deeply concerned with the purity of the church, lest it fail in its essential duties due to the impurity of its members—which are the essence of its authority and legitimacy. Yet he was willing to risk that authority and legitimacy to ensure against barring genuine saints from fellowship. He later explained his position thus:

And those that have the keys of the Church, should not open the door to any, but such as in charitable discession, they conceive to be better than hypocrites, even Saints by calling, and faithful brethren; and yet not with such rigid examination, as to discourage broken-hearted Christians, for as I there said, better 99 hypocrites should perish by presumption, then one humble soul should sink under discouragement, or despair.<sup>110</sup>

Cotton wrote this missive to his congregation in Boston, Lincolnshire, England, when—in the wake of Puritan victory in the civil war—they invited him to return to England and be their pastor again. He wrote to explain that, despite “the Lord [having] dispelled the storm of malignant Church-governemnt,” he could still not serve them because, besides his old age and continued obligations to his New England church, “the estate of our Church, admitting more than professed Saints to the fellowship of the seals, and the government of your Church subjected to an extrinsecal Ecclesiastical power would have been a perpetual scruple and torment to my conscience, which knowing the terrors of the Lord, and the conviction of my own judgment, I durst not venture upon.”<sup>111</sup> Here Cotton preserved the same tension he helped to write into the Cambridge Platform: deep concern for the purity of the local congregation coupled with deep concern for the comfort of the weak, individual believer.

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<sup>109</sup> Cotton, *Way of the Churches of Christ*, 58.

<sup>110</sup> Cotton, *Of the Holiness of Church Members* (London, 1650), 28.

<sup>111</sup> Cotton, *Holiness of Church Members*, 2.

This view was not universal. Richard Mather specifically rejected the idea, stating that, while some may contend there is “hurt to ye church by keeping out one sincere christian, than by admitting many hypocrits; on ye contrary much greater hurt by admitting any of these [i.e. hypocrits], than by keeping out some one or few of the other [i.e. sincere Christians].”<sup>112</sup> For Mather, the holiness of the whole was worth the exclusion of the few from the benefit of subjective assurance if it ensured that fewer unregenerate made it past the test. The tension between the two men is preserved in the form the Cambridge Platform took with its uncompromising language when discussing the purity of the church, and its gentle language when discussing administration of the individual test. There is also a hint of the instability that the new system would engender, one that was not yet fully apparent to the framers. In a draft of the Cambridge Platform, Richard Mather actually proposed the very solution that would be recommended in the result of the 1662 Synod—extending the franchise of baptism to the children of baptized adults who had not been admitted to the Table—but that was still fourteen years in the future, and the suggestion would not be adopted in the Cambridge Platform.<sup>113</sup>

The Cambridge Platform served not to institute, but to describe a system—or way—that had already been formed in the eighteen years since the start of the Bay Colony. It was necessary because that way had begun to raise concerns back in old England. As such, the document was participating in a transatlantic dialogue about the New England Way decision to test for objective assurance by examining subjective assurance—to make church membership dependent on experience, in addition to creed; it was a departure from the practice of previous Reformed

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<sup>112</sup> R. Mather, “A Plea for the Churches,” Pt. I, 72.

<sup>113</sup> R. Mather, “A Plea for the Churches,” Pt. II, 72–73. The second part of “A Plea for the Churches,” which appears to have served as an early draft for the Cambridge Platform, included a defense of baptizing the children of unregenerate parents, (i.e., baptized adults who had owned the covenant and lived unscandalous lives, but who had not been admitted to the Lord’s Table). The measure was not adopted in large part due to its unpopularity with certain influential divines, John Davenport most notably.

contextualizations.<sup>114</sup> This departure was undertaken with some understanding of the difficulty it created, and the ministers sought to address that difficulty as the complexity of the Platform's approach to purity and charity attests. Mather's anticipation of the practice arrived at in the 1662 Synod in his initial draft of the Platform demonstrates that there was some awareness that this tension would not be enough. I shall turn now to examining how this tension continued to work itself out in the years following New England's response to the rise of Puritanism in England as the wave of immigration began to slow, and the Bay Colony continued to adjust to life as the new establishment.

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<sup>114</sup> It should be noted that the Old English ministers seemed more concerned that the New Englanders were becoming Separatists by their practices than any specific articulation of concern over confusing objective and subjective assurance. For example, in investigating the New Englanders' position, a group of Old English ministers wrote, "These [the nine positions] ... are written and reported to be the common Tennants in New England, which are received ... as the only Church way, whering the Lord is to be worshipped. And letters from New England have so taken with diverse in many parts of this Kingdome, that they have left our Assemblies because of a stinted Liturgie, and excommunicated themselves from the Lords Supper because such as are not debared from it.... And if it be to us grieffe of heart to heare that you have changed from that truth which you did profess, and embrace that for truth which in former times upon sound grounds you did conceed as erroneus, we hope you will not be offended. You know how it hath often been objected, that Non-conformists in practice are Separatists in heart.... But both these are much countenanced by your sudden change if you are changed, as it is reported" (Ash and Rathbund, *Letter of Many Ministers*, "The Letter of those Ministers," 1–2).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ATTEMPTING TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM

The synod which produced the Cambridge Platform had been called to answer an internal problem—the growing number of unconverted people in New England’s churches due to the new membership test. Instead, they codified New England’s existing practice as a means of responding to an external threat. This external problem was that the new Puritan government of England declared for Presbyterianism in the Westminster Confession.<sup>1</sup> This shift of focus was necessary given the significance of English political events for the New Englanders, but it failed to resolve the problem that had grown out of the first decade of the colonists’ new practice. This failure would necessitate revisitation in the coming decades to debate a solution—new policies intended to correct the problem their new test was creating. The question of whether these policies were sufficient to correct the problem was overshadowed by the social upheavals of the 1670s which I will argue did much to address the crises of faith that the new practice of grounding church membership in subjective assurance had caused.

In this chapter, then, I shall examine the failure of the Cambridge Platform to resolve the issues that had led to a general desire for the expansion of baptism—the problem, if you will. Next, I shall take up the policies by which the churches sought to address this problem: the debates surrounding the assemblies of 1657 and 1662 as they sought solutions to the matter. I shall examine these policies by looking at the documents themselves, as well as at the theological

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<sup>1</sup> James Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 68, summarized, “In 1643, the Westminster Assembly convened in London to define beliefs and a system of church order, advancing a Presbyterian form of discipline. That same year, Parliament established the Commissioners for Plantation, a board empowered ‘to provide for, order, and dispose all things’ in the colonies. It seemed plausible that through the Commissioners Parliament might attempt to impose the results of the Westminster Assembly upon New England.”

debates and sermons through which the ministers negotiated and reviewed these policies. Finally, I shall turn to examining the role that painful events like King Philip's War, the great Boston fire and plague, and the political uncertainty following the Restoration played in bringing temporary resolution to the problem. I shall look at the practices by which ministers processed the political and social events of this time in their sermons and theological debates, the way in which ministers and laity processed such events in their diaries and journals, and the way in which applicants for church membership processed these events in their conversion accounts. So, I shall first flesh out the problem, then consider the policies by which the New Englanders sought to address the problem, and then finally look at the practices by which the churches processed the unexpected pain of the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

### **The Problem the Cambridge Platform Was Supposed to Resolve**

The Cambridge Platform served primarily as an answer to the external threat posed by the English Puritans having adopted a Presbyterian form of polity in the Westminster Confession of Faith as they came to dominate English politics. As such, the Platform served not to propose changes to the practice of New England churches, but to state and defend their existing practice. This was not, however, the reason for calling the synod that produced the Platform.

By the late 1640s the internal problem for which the synod was called had to do with to whom baptism should be applied, a debated referred to as the expansion of baptism. The debate seems to have begun in the Dorchester church in 1634 when, according to Walker,

a godly grandfather, a member apparently of the Dorchester church, whose son or daughter could claim no regenerative work of God, desired baptism for his grandchild, since baptism was the outward witness to that interest in the covenant which children of visible saints were held to possess by birth. The advice of the

Boston church was sought, and there the matter was publicly debated, with a result favorable to the grandfather's request.<sup>2</sup>

The letter that relates this story—and which did not bear the signature of Wilson, Boston's pastor, because of his absence in England<sup>3</sup>—is signed by John Cotton, who was the church's teacher, and the elders Thomas Oliver and Thomas Leverett. Dated December 16, 1634, the letter stated,

The Case of Conscience which you propounded to our Consideration, ha's been deliberately treated of in our Church Assembled together publicly in the name of Christ. And upon due and serious discourse about the point, it seemed good unto us all with one accord, and agreeable (as we believe) to the word of the Lord, that the Grand-Father may lawfully claim that priviledge to his Grand-child in such a Case.... Though the Child be unclean where both the Parents are Pagans and Infidels, yet we may not account such Parents for Pagans and Infidels, who are themselves baptized, and profess their belief of the Fundimetal Articles of the Christian Faith, and live without notorious Scandalous Crime, though they give not clear evidnce of their regenerate estate, nor are convinced of the necessity of Church Covenant. . . . we do therefore profess it to be the judgement of our Church, and as we believ agreeable to the word of God (such Cautions being observed as hath been mentioned) that the Grand-Father a member of the Church, may claim the priviledge of Baptisme to his Grand-Child, though his next Seed the Parents of the Child be not received themselves into Church Covenant.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, almost as early as the new test of subjective assurance came into existence, the need for extending baptism to the children of baptized-though-not-communing church members was recognized and argued for by at least one of the leading pastors and congregations of New England.

In 1642 Thomas Allen, pastor of the Charlestown church, wrote a letter to John Cotton expressing among other things his views: "About baptising of children of Christian parents, not

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<sup>2</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 250–51.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 251n1.

<sup>4</sup> John Cotton, Thomas Oliver, and Thomas Leverett, letter to the church of Dorchester, December 16, 1634, quoted in full in Increase Mather, John Allin, and Jonathan Mitchel, *The First principles of New-England, Concerning the Subject of Baptisme & Communion of Churches* (Cambridge, 1675), 3–4, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00150.0001.001>.

yet joyned in covenant to any particular church, for some reason, perhaps yt is unwarrantable, as suppose they are vncertain of abiding in ye place where they are, or perhaps ye wife, being godly, would joyne, but ye husband will not suffer her, or ye like.”<sup>5</sup> Joseph Felt, the nineteenth century recorder of the letter, noted, “He argues that such children should be baptised.”<sup>6</sup>

The Massachusetts General Court called in 1645 for the synod that would frame the Cambridge Platform, “observing that ‘the apprehensions of many persons in the country’ with regard to ‘baptisme, and the persons to be received thereto’ were ‘knowne not a little to differ.’”<sup>7</sup>

The record went on to state,

most churches doe only [baptize] such children whose neerest parents are one or both of them settled members in full comunion wth one or other of these churches, therebe some who doe baptize ye children if ye grandfathers or grandmothers be such member's though *though* the imediate parrents be not, & othrs, though for avoydng of offence of neighbors churches, they doe not as yett actually so practize, yett they doe much encline thereto, as thinking more liberty & latitude in this point ought to be yeelded then hath hetherto binn donne ; & many psons living in ye country, who have binn members of the congregations in England, but are not found fitt to be received at ye Lords table here, therbe notwithstanding considerable psons in these churches who doe thinke that ye children of these, also, vpon some condicons & terms, may & ought to be baptized.<sup>8</sup>

Given this context it is not surprising that Richard Mather’s early draft of the Cambridge Platform included the expansion of baptism, which was described in the previous chapter.<sup>9</sup> In 1645 Mather wrote,

When those that were baptized in Infancy by the Covenant of their Parents being come to Age, are not yet found fit to be received to the Lords Table, although they be married and have Children, whether are those their Children to be baptized or no; I propound to Consideration this Reason for the *Affirmative*, viz. That the Children of

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Allen, letter to John Cotton, November 1642, quoted in Joseph B. Felt, *The Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Boston: 1855), 1:480.

<sup>6</sup> Felt, *Ecclesiastical History*, 480.

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Shurtleff, ed. *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, 5 vols. (Boston 1853–54) 3:71, quoted in Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 147–48.

<sup>8</sup> Shurtleff, ed. *Records of the Governor and Company*, 3:71.

<sup>9</sup> See “Chapter Three: A Solution That Created a Problem,” 128–29.



such Parents ought to be baptized: the Reason is, the Parents as they were born in the Covenant, so they still continue therein, being neither cast out, nor deserving so to be, and if so, why should not their Children be baptized, for if the Parents be in Covenant, are not the Children so likewise? . . . If it be said the Parents are not *Confirmed members*, nor have yet been found fit for the Lords Table, I conceive this needs not to hinder their Infants from Baptisme so long as they, I mean the Parents do neither renounce the Covenant, nor doth the Church see just Cause to Cast them out from the same.<sup>10</sup>

This was not just the opinion of a handful of ministers. In the *Preface to the Result of the Synod of 1662* it was noted that

in the Synod held at Cambridge in the year 1648. that particular point of Baptizing the children of such as were admitted members in minority, but not yet in full communion, was inserted in some of the draughts that were prepared for that Assembly, and was then debated and confirmed by the like Arguments as we now use, and was generally consented to ; though because some few dissented, and there was not the like urgency of occasion for present practise, it was not then put into the Platform that was after Printed.<sup>11</sup>

While the framers of the document had a vested interest in making such a claim, they also were able to lay out how many eminent ministers of the first generation argued for the expansion of baptism, citing writings from the 1640s and early 1650s, which made the views of many of the founding generation clear.<sup>12</sup> By the time of the Cambridge Platform, there was an obvious

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<sup>10</sup> R. Mather, “A Plea for the Churches” quoted in Increase Mather, *First Principles*, 10–11, quoted in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 252.

<sup>11</sup> “Propositions Concerning the Subject of Baptism, etc.,” *The Preface to the Result of the Synod of 1662*, (Cambridge, 1662), xii, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 309.

<sup>12</sup> *Preface to the Result*, 305–09. The document cites John Cotton, *Grounds and Ends of Baptism of Children*, London, 1647, 133–34, where he states that though the Israelites “were sometimes kept from the Lords Supper (the Passeover) for some or other uncleanness, yet that debarred not their children from [ix] Circumcision.” Hooker, “Preface,” *Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline* (London, 1648), is cited as stating, “Infants of visible Churches born of wicked parents, being members of the Church, ought to be baptized.” Shepard, the *Preface to the Result*, continues, wrote a letter—still extant at the time—to a friend shortly before his death in 1649 in which he stated, “That as they are Members in their infancy, so they continue Members when they are grown up, till for their wickedness they be cast out; and that they being Members, their seed successively are members also, until by Dissolution or Excommunication they be unchurched: That though they are Members, it follows not that they must come to the Lords Supper, but they must first appear able to examine themselves, and discern the Lords Body: That the children of godly parents, though they do not manifest faith in the Gospel, yet they are to be accounted of Gods Church, until they positively reject the Gospel.” Peter Pruden, pastor of the church at Milford in the New Haven colony until his death in 1656, wrote to a friend in 1651 that “the children of Church-members, are Members, and so have right to have their children baptized, though themselves be not yet admitted to the Lords Supper.” His letter

enough concern over the lack of conversions that many founding ministers had recorded in writing their desire to address the problem by expanding baptism. As historian Williston Walker noted,

the more generally accepted features of the Congregational system were embodied in the Platform, and the vexed points regarding baptism ... were passed over in rather ambiguous phrases. This treatment of the subject was relatively easy in 1648 ... but had the Cambridge Synod been pressed to a vote, the probability is that it would have substantially anticipated the decisions of 1662.<sup>13</sup>

That they did not carry out the debate is a testimony to the extent to which the framers of the Cambridge Platform perceived the Westminster Assembly to be a threat to the New England Way. In the face of such concerns, internal disagreements needed to be tabled so a statement of their uncontested practice in the New England Way could be formulated.

The New England clergy were responding to a cultural context that had come into existence by the 1640s as the children of the founding generation began to mature. Walker summarized it thus:

there arose ... a class of men and women whose parents had been actively Christian, who had themselves been baptized and educated in the Christian faith, were well grounded in the knowledge of Christian truth, were students of the Bible and interested listeners in the sanctuary, who were desirous of bringing up their families in the way in which they themselves had been trained, and who were moral and earnest in their lives; yet could lay claim to no such experience as that which their parents had called a change of heart, and when asked as to any conscious work of God in their souls were compelled to admit that they could speak with confidence of none. It was the rise of this class that thrust the Half-Way Covenant problem upon the New England churches.<sup>14</sup>

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was then cited at length. Finally Nathan Rogers, pastor of the church at Ipswich, Massachusetts until his death in 1655, wrote in a letter to a friend in 1652, saying that "To the Question concerning the Children of Church-members, I have nothing to oppose, and I wonder any should deny them to be Members."

<sup>13</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 244.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 247.

This class had been taught that the proof of their objective assurance—and thus, their right to the means of grace—was their subjective assurance. They were not finding, in their own experience, however, the crisis events that their parents' generation had looked to—their experiences of persecution in England, hardships in crossing the Atlantic, or founding a new society in the wilderness. As this class grew and began to produce offspring, the need to integrate these offspring into the covenant system of New England society began to put pressure on that system.

### **Policies: Reforming the Way to Meet the Need**

#### **Forging Policies: The Ministerial Assembly of 1657**

In this context, with the problem the Cambridge Synod had been called to address unresolved and growing greater with the passage of time, there was a need for the churches to forge new policies for bringing the next generation into the covenants of church and town. To this process of policy formation, I shall now turn. Here, we see that these policies were not a sudden new recommendation undertaken by the ministers in the 1660s but were rather an ongoing adaptation of the New England Way to the situation the colonists had created by the membership test and, more importantly, that these adaptations never questioned the starting assumption of the need for a test. While history has remembered this debate mostly by the actions of the 1662 Synod which would later be called the half-way covenant, it was really the Ministerial Assembly of 1657 which designed the new policies which were intended to correct the growing problem. As historian Stephen Foster notes,

Credit for the Halfway Covenant usually goes to the synod of 1662, not the assembly of 1657, because of its larger size and the more formal and theoretical character of its resolutions. But for all its greater prestige, the synod merely formulated an apology in defense of the institutional arrangements spelled out five years earlier. The call for an assembly in 1656 properly represents the moment at which those in authority, lay and

clerical, summoned up the resolution to address in a concerted way the case of the children of the founding generation.<sup>15</sup>

That moment specifically occurred when the Connecticut colony took action to revisit the issue.

In the Connecticut General Court's session on May 15, 1656, in response to a petition from "severall persons amongst vs," it resolved to deputize the governor and three magistrates as a committee to confer with the clergy "about those things yt are prsented to this Courte as grevances... (and if they judge it nesisary,) to crave their [the clergy's] healpe & assistance in drawing up an abstract from the heads of those things, to be prsented to the Gen: Courtes of the severall vnited Collonyes, and to desire an answer thereunto as sone as conveniently may be."<sup>16</sup>

While the list of grievances delivered to the court has not survived, the nature of the grievances can be surmised from the content of the result of the synod which arose to answer them: some churchmen desired to baptize the children of parents who were not received as full, communing members. The fact that the request for an official answer on expanding baptism to include such children took the form of grievances suggests the urgency and heat with which the issue was perceived. The committee drafted a list of twenty-one questions<sup>17</sup> to be resolved by a synod of the clergy, which it forwarded to the other colonial legislatures. While the original list of questions has not survived, it was "doubtless substantially the XXI Questions answered by the Assembly at Boston in 1657,"<sup>18</sup> which shall be taken up below.

New Haven rejected the proposal, suggesting in their response to Massachusetts' reply, that

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 187.

<sup>16</sup> *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut v.1 1636–1665* (Hartford, 1850), 281.

<sup>17</sup> Foster, *Long Argument*, 186, notes that the number of questions "may represent an attempt to dilute the controversy by fragmenting it." In both colonies the matter had become entwined in various local disputes among parties in several churches that would, in several cases, ultimately lead to splits within congregations. These issues tended to be less complicated in Hartford than Boston.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, 258n1.

the problem warranted no such action:

the court, wth the help of such elders as were present, did seriously consider of as a thing of great weight and moment, and in the issue, considering the removeall and death of some of their elders, saw no cause to send any of the remaining elders of this jurisdiction.... Wee heard of some petitions and questions, at first vnwarrantably procuried and presented at Connecticote, but since, vnder the name of libertie, offensively if not mutinously prosecuted, and that the gen: court for that colony had desired advice or assistanc from yorselues therein.<sup>19</sup>

Taking their lead from Davenport's theological convictions no doubt, the New Haven court found the request for debate on expanding baptism offensive and mutinous. They did not wish to see the Cambridge Platform as an answer to Westminster which had chosen to not take up the question of the expansion of baptism at that time, but as an answer to the expansion question itself. The issue, in the opinion of the New Haven court, had already been resolved:

themselves [the New Haven court] conceive that the elders of Connecticote colony, wth due assistance from their [New Haven's] court, had bine fully sufficient to cleare and maintayne the truth and to suppress the boldness of such petitionrs, (according to a good president you [Massachusetts] gaue ye colonies some yeares since, in a case not much differring,) without calling a synod, or any such meeting.<sup>20</sup>

In the opinion of the New Haven general court, the Cambridge Platform had set forth the will of God for the churches of New England, additional action was not required. Not only that, further action could prove harmful: the magistrates warned the other colonies that such a meeting "in such times may prove dangerous to ye puritie and peace of these churches and colonies." The New Haven court was concerned how drastic the changes brought by such a synod might be:

We heare the petitionrs, or others closeing wth them, are very confident they shall obteyne great alterations, both in ciuill gouermt and in church discipline, and that some of them ... maintayne in writing, (as is conceived,) that parishes in England, consenting to and continewing their meetings to worship God, are true churches, and such persons comeing ouer hether, (without holding forth any worke of faith, &c.) haue right to all church priueledges; and probably they expect their deputie should

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Hoadley, ed., *Records of the Colony of Jurisdiction of New Haven, from May 1653 to the Union* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, 1858), 196, <http://archive.org/details/recordscolonyor01congoog>.

<sup>20</sup> Hoadley, ed., *Records of the Colony*, 196.

imploye himselfe and improue his interest, to spread and press such paradoxes in the Massachusetts, yea at the synod or meeting.<sup>21</sup>

The court reminded the Bay colony legislators that both the general courts and the churches had already framed themselves “according to the rules of Gods most holy word” and that to turn from that framing would invite the same decline that had befallen the church of Ephesus when it had “left and abated in her first loue.” Further, with the removal of two elders and the death of pastor Prudden of Milford, New Haven was not able to spare delegates to the assembly.<sup>22</sup> Davenport did, however, prepare his own answers to the twenty-one questions and send them along. Predictably, given that the Cambridge Platform avoided commenting on the issue in large part due to his opposition, he advised against changes to the existing system. He affirmed that baptized children become true church members only “by their personal ... faith visibly held forth.” Their children were, thus, not eligible for baptism. These baptized adults who had not been admitted to the Table were not members and could not pass along covenant status until “they are grown up to such understanding that the church may look at them as capable of being admitted... by their personal faith and covenanting for themselves and their seed as their parents did for themselves and them.”<sup>23</sup>

Plymouth colony also did not send delegates to the assembly, though this was probably more due to that colony’s being “typically ... incapable of doing anything.”<sup>24</sup> The Old Colony tended to be less strict in its churches’ application of the relation test. They had ten years on the other colonies—in addition to their experience in Holland—in experimenting with admitting

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<sup>21</sup> Hoadley, ed., *Records of the Colony*, 196–97.

<sup>22</sup> Hoadley, ed., *Records of the Colony*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> Davenport, “Rev. Mr. Davenport’s Answers to the 21 Questions,” John Davenport Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA, 2–10, quoted in Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem*, 263.

<sup>24</sup> Foster, *Long Argument*, 186.

people to purified churches before the innovation with regard to subjective assurance was introduced. Evolving along a parallel path to the Bay Colony, more baptized children were admitted to full membership in Plymouth without their subjective assurance being put to as hard a test as in the other colonies. The result was there was less of a felt-need for an expansion of baptism to the children of baptized-but-un-admitted adults, there being fewer people in this class in Plymouth than in other colonies.<sup>25</sup>

New Haven and Plymouth notwithstanding, four delegates from Connecticut and thirteen from Massachusetts met in Boston, June 4–19, 1657. While we have no records of their deliberation, they drew up answers to the twenty-one questions. They could not have been unanimous in their support for these results as Charles Chauncy was of much the same opinion as Davenport and was a delegate for Massachusetts. There was, nonetheless, likely substantial agreement among the body which, in addition to Chauncy, included Richard Mather, John Allin, John Norton, Thomas Thacher, Peter Bulkeley, Zechariah Symmes, John Sherman, Jonathan Mitchell, Edward Norris, Samuel Whiting and Thomas Cobbett from Massachusetts, and John Warham, Samuel Stone, Richard Blinman and John Russell from Connecticut, many of whom had already documented their support for the expansion of baptism in writing.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to note that in the preface “to the Reader” of the assembly’s “Result,” the authors acknowledge the novelty of the Puritan concern for subjective assurance as a positive mark of English Protestantism:

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<sup>25</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 265. Pope stated, “In Plymouth church doors had already opened wider than those in Massachusetts. Although they used testified regenerate membership, the churches generally interpreted conversion so broadly that few people, if any, were turned away.... The reaction of Plymouth churches to the extension of baptism resulted from the colony’s heritage of Separatism, which made church membership more readily attainable and the need for innovation less compelling.”

<sup>26</sup> Later, both Warham and Russell would come out against the Ministerial Assembly’s *Result* in the debates following the 1662 synod.

IT is justly accounted one of the glories of the English Nation, that God hath honoured them with special light in some momentous Truths, above what he hath other Protestant Churches round about them. The morality of the Christian Sabbath, deep and spiritual insight into those secret transactions between the Lord and the soules of his elect at their first conversion, & also in their after walking in communion with God, are usually observed as instances hereof.<sup>27</sup>

Those “deep and spiritual insight into those secret transactions between the Lord and the soules of his elect at their first conversion” created the situation the assembly met to answer. Yet, it does not seem to have occurred to anyone to question the normativity of these things. They were accepted as presuppositions. The solutions to the problems which this practice caused never took into account changing the presuppositions.

In the absence of Davenport, the assembly quickly concluded the opposite of his answer (noted above) on the question of “Whether any Children of confederate Parents be under their Parents Covenant and members with them,” stating that “Some Children of confederate Parents are by meanes of their Parents Covenanting, in Covenant also, and so Members of the Church by divine Institution.”<sup>28</sup> This points to a fundamental distinction between Davenport and his opponents at the Ministerial Assembly. One of the rationales offered by the Assembly stated, “If children were once Church-members and do not continue to be Church-members still, then their Membership must have been repealed by the Lord, who alone could make such an alteration.”<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, Davenport would later write:

There are two sorts of Church-members, and both are accounted holy: 1. Children of Confederates in their minority, whose right to Membership is from their relation to confederate Parents covenanting for them.... Baptized, though in their persons, yet by and for their Parents covenanting for them, being incapable of covenanting for

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<sup>27</sup> *Result of the Assembly of 1657*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 288.

<sup>28</sup> *Result of the Assembly of 1657*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 291.

<sup>29</sup> *Result of the Assembly of 1657*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 293.



themselves... 2. Adult persons, whose Membership is founded in their own personal Faith, made visible to the regular satisfaction of the Church.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, for Davenport, “the sacrament was more a gesture of parental faith than a seal of Church membership in the traditional Puritan sense.”<sup>31</sup> A breach was opening within the Puritan community, but those like Davenport who favored the existing practice were having to depart from traditional Puritan doctrine in order to remain consistent. The Ministerial Assembly was defending traditional Puritan doctrine while advocating for a new practice—one more consistent with that doctrine. Richard Mather had articulated the doctrine when he said,

But we do not believe that Baptisme doth make men Members of the Church, nor that it is to be Administred to them that are without the Church, as the way and meanes to bring them in, but to them that are within the Church, as a seale to confirme the Covenant of God unto them.... Now a seale is not to make a thing that was not, but to confirme something that was before; and so Baptisme is not that which gives being to the Church, nor to the Covenant, but is for confirmation thereof. To bring in Baptisme before the Covenant, and before the Church, with whom God makes the Covenant and then to bring in the Church afterwards, is to make Baptisme a seale unto a Blanke, or to a falshood.<sup>32</sup>

Ensuing answers reinforced this view of membership: the existing covenant in which the children participated by dint of their birth to covenanted parents was affirmed, not created, by baptism. Therefore, “[a]bsent children never brought to the Church” nonetheless covenanted with their parents, so long as they were “in their minority.” Children “Born before their Parents Covenanting.... Yet if in their minority when their Parents enter into covenant, do covenant with them.” Also, the assembly stated, “we do not hereby exclude such as being defective in their intellectuals, are as children in respect of their incapacity.” The Assembly refused to set a

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<sup>30</sup> Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth, in Answer to Two Questions, Concerning I. The Subject of Baptism. II. The Consociation of Churches* (Cambridge, 1663), 35, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00041.0001.001>.

<sup>31</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 175.

<sup>32</sup> R. Mather, *Church-Government and Church-Covenant*, 12.

definite age at which children were no longer “in their minority,” stating instead that “[a]s long as in respect of age or capacity they cannot according to ordinary account, be supposed able to act in a matter of this nature for themselves, ... much is to be left unto the discretion of Officers and Churches in this case.”<sup>33</sup>

While some future adopters of what would become the half-way covenant began to extend baptism to any who could trace their lineage to a full member—and even to the children of any who would “own the covenant” themselves, regardless of their parentage—the assembly recommended limiting the extension to the immediate offspring of members whose parents were full members: “The Gospel by Covenant seed, intends only the seed of immediate Parents in Church Covenant, as appears from *1 Cor. 7.14*. The Parents there spoken of are immediate Parents, their Progenitors were Heathens. The Gospel extends not the external Covenant beyond the immediate Parents.” This did not mean, however, that family lines where an individual was not admitted to the Lord’s Supper were doomed to cease receiving baptism for their children after a generation. In answer to the question, “whether the child of a person joynd in Church-Covenant by means of his or her immediate Parents Covenant, though such a Parent be not admitted to ... full communion” was to be baptized, the logic was consistent: “Infants either of whose immediate Parents are in Church-Covenant, do confaederate with their Parents, and are therefore Curch-members with them.” If a parent “owned the covenant”—whether they were admitted to the Table or not—the child was a church member as the immediate seed of their parent, and so long as that child “owned the covenant”—again, whether admitted to the Table or not—their children were the appropriate recipients of baptism.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Result of the Assembly of 1657*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 293.

<sup>34</sup> *Result of the Assembly of 1657*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 295. Peter Bulkeley, *Gospel Covenant* (London, 1646), quoted in Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 158–59, argued in the 1640s that “God conveyed salvation

The assembly did not seek an expansion of admission to the Lord's Supper; the last question related to the issue asked whether "Historical Faith and a blameless life fit a Members Child for all Ordinances and Priviledges, and he must be examined only about them?" The response of the assembly was that "holding forth of Faith and Repentance, as unto judgement of Charity ... to examine themselves and to discern the Lords body, is requisit to fit a Members child for all Ordinances and Priviledges."<sup>35</sup> It can be seen, then, that the Ministerial Assembly had in 1657 laid out the new practice in full.

Change came slowly in Congregational polity, however, and so the answer that many leading pastors had been articulating for as much as two decades would require further articulation before wide adoption became a reality. While pastors had, from the very start, seen the need for a broader means of including future generations within the covenanted society, it was often the laity that perceived such changes as innovation away from tradition—even if that tradition was only a few years old.<sup>36</sup> The general courts of the various colonies—made up of leading laymen—did not adopt the results of the 1657 assembly. Within both developing

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'by no other way, but by way of Covenant,' which descended from father to children and so continued forever. The efficacy of the covenant would never be 'disanulled,' and baptism was proof of covenant membership.... Bulkeley acknowledged that there could be 'an interruption for a time' in the transmission of covenant membership, but he strongly implied that no parent needed to be unduly anxious about the salvation of a baptized child, not because baptism created the covenant relationship or directly infused grace, but because it confirmed the veracity of God's promises to his covenant people." This strong statement of the doctrine makes clear how early the attitudes of the Ministerial Assembly had settled on New England soil.

<sup>35</sup> *Result of the Assembly of 1657*, in Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, 299.

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 87, notes the inherent tensions of this conflict: "By the 1650s, then, the elders had established conflicting expectations among lay people concerning the future of Congregationalism: ministers demanded that their congregations further the Reformation by refining church government while simultaneously instructing them to avoid sinful 'decline' by resisting innovations in the New England Way. Churchgoers accepted the Platform and the New England Way as sacred and everlasting, while they refused to be bound by canon or tradition. Varying perceptions of the meaning of the Platform and the inviolability of Congregational provisions represented a ticking time bomb, and would eventually come to divide ministers from a substantial proportion of the laity."

Congregational polity and developing New England government authority, broad agreement was necessary for change.

### Formalizing Policies: The Halfway Covenant

This means that the 1662 gathering that has come to be called the “Half-Way Synod”<sup>37</sup> did not mark the moment at which New England shifted from one form of practice and thinking to another. The very nature of the congregational system of church government prevented anything so drastic. The synod’s “Result” was, in fact, not binding in any way on a single church. Because individual churches under the congregational system were entirely autonomous, the synod was merely a discussion among leading ministers and laymen of the region and their advice to the churches as a result of that discussion.<sup>38</sup> Even when its “Result” was adopted by the Massachusetts general court, it was only as a recommendation to the independent churches. It would take several decades for the synod’s delegates to achieve the implementation of some form of the synod’s “Result” in their churches. This reality can be hinted at by the very fact that, despite the recommendations of the 1657 assembly, and despite the majority of clergy siding with the expansion of baptism—many of them for decades—when the 1662 Synod met, there was still vocal, if numerically small, opposition to the expansion. The actions of the synod, while almost entirely anticipated by the earlier assembly, involved prolonged argument.

When the meeting convened in March, there were about eighty delegates, a majority of them lay representatives. To frame their debate, the synod approved seven propositions that essentially summarized the result of the 1657 meeting despite the opposition of eight ministers

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<sup>37</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 8n2. Pope traced what he believes to be the first use of the term “half-way covenant” to Joseph Bellamy’s *The Half-Way Covenant: A Dialogue*, New Haven, 1769. Because the term is so universally used by modern scholars to describe the 1662 Synod’s resolutions, I will use it despite its late origin, and the fact that it was initially a derisive term.

<sup>38</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 132.

and “sundry messengers.”<sup>39</sup> This range of response indicates that, while it was the ministers who primarily made the arguments, it was probably the opinions of the lay representatives that provided an atmosphere in which prolonged debate was deemed useful. This shows that a sufficient number of lay representatives were present who stood opposed to the expansion so as to provide some balance to the clear majority of ministers who stood ready to ratify the position of the 1657 assembly.<sup>40</sup> After eleven days they adjourned until June. In June they delayed debate to pray against a drought—which some attributed to God’s displeasure about the meeting of the synod. When rain alleviated the drought,<sup>41</sup> the synod reconvened debate on the seven propositions. After more than three weeks of debate, the total number of those who stood opposed to the expansion of baptism had dropped to about ten delegates when it approved the proposals in tentative form. The synod adjourned again on July fourth to escape the summer heat, reconvening in September to finalize the written form of the propositions.

The sources available that describe the debates and actions of the synod itself are limited; primarily, correspondence among the ministers most opposed to the expansion is what exists. Charles Chauncy, minister at Cambridge and president of Harvard College, was the most venerable of these. He was joined by relatively junior ministers, Increase and Eleazar Mather. This is surprising because their father, Richard Mather was among the most venerable leaders of

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<sup>39</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 85, noted the difficulty of this dynamic: The ministers had been advising their parishioners to follow the Cambridge Platform and guard against innovation for fifteen years (indeed, they had been warning them against Anglican ways and toward the still-being-forged New England Way for more than thirty years), yet this expansion would have appeared to one untrained in fine theological nuance as a return to the Old English system of baptizing all within a parish, which they had warned against. Cooper states that “when ministers pointed to a new ‘urgency’ that required modifications of baptismal requirements that clearly conflicted with the teachings of the Cambridge Platform and thirty years of Congregational practice,” the laity were unprepared to accept the new ideas; “the hostilities that followed would shatter the harmony within the churches and alter forever the course of lay-clerical relations in Massachusetts Bay” (Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 85).

<sup>41</sup> *Roxbury Church Records*, 200, quoted in Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 45, noted that God “was pleased to bear witness ag[ain]st their rashness; ... the day following God sent showers from heaven.”

the party that supported the expansion, including Increase's mentor John Norton and his tutor at Harvard, Jonathan Mitchel. The Mather brothers and Chauncy kept up a correspondence with John Davenport who, as minister of the church at New Haven, was not part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and was not eligible to participate in the synod. He did attend one of the sessions briefly, but the process of his colony being absorbed into that of Connecticut—which he opposed ardently, though fruitlessly—kept him occupied at home. Davenport was as opposed to the expansion of baptism in 1662 as he had been in 1657 and wrote an essay arguing his opposition, which he entrusted to Chauncy and the Mathers. When Increase attempted to have the essay read on the floor, Norton, who served as moderator of the synod, stopped him. In this spirit, the correspondence between the Mathers and Davenport depicts the actions of the synod as a combination of political machinations on the part of the expansion supporters, and theological arguments that took advantage of the lack of education of the lay messengers.

When it became clear at the summer session that the opposition to expansion had lost supporters since the spring, Eleazar Mather complained to Davenport that “because they would allow everyone his interpretation in debate, & thence sundry inconsiderately voted for that which when it was too late they wished they had not done.”<sup>42</sup> Chauncy would later state that “Divers of the Messengers being no Logitians, and so unable to answer Syllogismes, and discern Ambiguities, were overborn.”<sup>43</sup> The accusations of political maneuvering and abuse of the academic deficiencies of the laity may likely be dismissed as the sort of explanations offered by all parties in such contests. In 1669—shortly after his father Richard died—Increase reversed his

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<sup>42</sup> Eleazar Mather to John Davenport, July 4, 1662, Mather Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA, 192, quoted in Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Chauncy, *Anti-Synodalia Scripta Americana* (London, 1662), 5, quoted in Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 48.

position, an event that seems unlikely if he continued to view the expansion as the result of mere political manipulation and intellectual bullying. It seems, however, that their depiction of the outcomes of the synod as being largely hinged on the opinions of lay messengers, bore more weight. This hinted at the broader reasons why a theological view that appears to have been the opinion of the majority of pastors by the 1640s took almost twenty years to be formally adopted as such, and why it would then take a generation to become the majority practice of the churches. In early New England Congregationalism, while pastors understood their job to be frequently modifying practice in response to their exegetical work as they aimed at greater conformity to Scripture, the laity were hesitant to make changes to existing practice, as such practice was understood to be already in conformity to Scripture and innovation was deeply suspect. Practice had a deeply formative impact on the common understanding of “what the Scriptures principally teach.”<sup>44</sup>

This can be seen in the subtle ways in which New England Puritan theology was dividing by the 1660s in response to the theological context the new test had created. For defenders of the old system, such as Davenport, the meaning of baptism had significant differences from the understanding of supporters of expansion. The propositions adopted illustrate that understanding of baptism well.

In their final form, the seven propositions are as follows: First, “They that according to

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<sup>44</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 121–22, related how, in John Fisk’s congregation in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, when Fisk sought to defend the practice of demanding relations of people wishing to transfer their membership from other churches where they had already given relations, his congregants demanded explicit Biblical warrant for such: “Now, ‘in point of instituted worship,’ [Thomas Adams, the local cooper] asked, rhetorically, ‘is there anything to be owned which can be proved only by necessary consequences,’ such as the ‘well being’ of the church, since ‘under the law everything to the least was expressly prescribed’ in the Bible? The layman’s argument was irrefutable, prompting Fiske to review the Scripture justifications for relations. Adams quickly objected. The question at hand, he reminded his minister, concerned second relations: ‘[W]e find not that they [that] have passed under the rod and measuring rod should pass it a second time.’ The weary pastor provided Scripture grounds for second relations” (Pope, *John Fiske Notebook*, 176-179, quoted in Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 121–22).

Scripture are members of the visible Church., are the subjects of Baptisme.”<sup>45</sup> In this first proposition we note that, in Puritan understanding, Baptism did not create membership; rather, it was applied to those who already were members. While this was a shared assumption between the factions (the first proposition does not appear to have been a matter of much debate, and the idea can be found in the early writings of the founders of the New England Way<sup>46</sup>), applying this principle consistently with different presuppositions would deepen the divergence taking place in New England theology. For supporters of the claim, “baptism was a seal, proof, and guarantee of permanent, personal, and plenary membership in the visible Church; their critics denied this.”<sup>47</sup>

The second proposition stated, “The Members of the Visible Church according to scripture, are Confederate visible Believers, in particular Churches, and their infant-seed, i. e. children in minority, whose next parents, one or both, are in Covenant.”<sup>48</sup> Here it is important to note that “members” are “Confederate visible Believers” and “their infant-seed.” It is apparent from this description and the following propositions that membership in the visible church rests on covenanting with the local church (“Confederate” and “particular”) and that this covenant applies to the one who owns it and their children—and thus baptism may be applied as a sign of this covenant status to all who are in covenant. It does not allow the member access to the Lord’s Supper, or grant the right to vote (as those privileges are not named and as the practice of the churches made apparent). While these are significant privileges to be denied, the logic of the

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<sup>45</sup> *The Answer of the Elders and Other Messengers of the Churches, Assembled at Boston in the Year 1662, to The Questions Propounded to Them by Order of the Honoured General Court*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 313.

<sup>46</sup> Cotton, *The Grounds and Ends of the Baptism of Children of the Faithful Opened* (London, 1646), 38, stated that “conversion unto faith and repentance, is it self given by the Covenant, to the children of the Covenant. And therefore the children of the Covenant, were under the Covenant before their conversion, and so before their faith, even by the faith of their parents.”

<sup>47</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 172.

<sup>48</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 313.



actual status of children becomes more apparent, and the consistency of this logic with that of the previous Reformed tradition increases over that of the position of those opposed to the synod's result. That position—championed by Davenport and Chauncey—was being viewed by many among the laity as the traditional orthodoxy of the New England Way; yet in 1643, Richard Mather had spelled out a “common New England belief”<sup>49</sup> thus:

But we do not believe that Baptisme doth make men Members of the Church, nor that it is to be Administered to them that are without the Church, as the way and meanes to bring them in, but to them that are within the Church, as a seale to confirme the covenant of God unto them.... The nature and use of Baptisme is to be a seale to confirm the Covenant of Grace between God and his Church, and the Members thereof ... Now a seale is not to make a thing that was not, but to confirme something that was before; and so Baptisme is not that which gives being to the Church, nor to the Covenant, but is for the confirmation thereof. To bring in Baptisme before the Covenant, and before the Church, with whom God makes the Covenant, and then to bring in the Church afterwards, is to make Baptisme a seale unto a Blanke, or to a falshood.<sup>50</sup>

For Mather—and for the logic of the synod's result—children have a right to baptism because their parents are their covenant heads, putting them already in the church covenant and, therefore, already are members. As the result argued in its rationale for the propositions, “The Infant-seed of confederate visible believers are also members of the visible Church.”<sup>51</sup>

Opponents of the result saw children's status very differently. As noted above, Davenport stated, “There are two sorts of Church members ... Children of Confederates in their minority” and “Adult persons.” While “both are accounted holy” the children are “in their persons, yet foederally & relatively.”<sup>52</sup> These are mere “mediate” members:

To a Mediate Member ... Membership ariseth, not from his personal Faith made visible to the Church, whereof he is not capable, but from his believing confederate Parents... it is from such Parents covenanting for him. Such an one is a Mediate

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<sup>49</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 144.

<sup>50</sup> R. Mather, *Church-Government and Church-Covenant*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 318.

<sup>52</sup> Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth*, 35–36.

Member, because his Membership, though it is subjectively in himself, yet it is relatively from his Parents. Whence it will follow, that this kind of Membership is peculiar to such infants and children in minority, onely during their non-age.<sup>53</sup>

To Davenport the church is made up of two kinds of members: adult, and mediate. Adult members have demonstrated their genuine faith and regeneration through their experiential assurance. Mediate members are not full members awaiting this experience; they are associates via proxy, and their status will terminate at the conclusion of their “non-age” as they either become full members, or are removed from the covenant. The theological rift beginning to open between the two factions as they attempted to conceptually adapt in different ways to the realities their new practice created begins to become evident. In this context the experiential relation of conversion becomes more important to the discussion, as those who are knowledgeable of the faith and do not live a scandalous life are not considered members with reference to the Lord’s Supper and participation in the governance of the church, because of the lack of testimony of conversion. Yet they are considered members with reference to their ability to bring children to their own state. The creation of a new mediate category of membership clarifies things for the sake of the half-way covenant but complicates things for the adult parents of these children.

The third proposition, however, was a unifying one: “The Infant-seed of confederate visible Believers, are members of the same Church with their parents, and when grown up, are personally under the watch, discipline and Government of that Church.”<sup>54</sup> Both sides saw baptized children—whether they were real members simply waiting external evidence of faith that they might be admitted to the Table,<sup>55</sup> or quasi-members who must either prove themselves

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<sup>53</sup> Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth*, 37.

<sup>54</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 313.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Mitchel, “An Answer to the Apologetical Preface” in *A Defence of the Answer* (Cambridge, 1664), 33, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N00050.0001.001>, demonstrated that the distinction between members who had been admitted to the Table and those who had not was not a distinction between types of membership:

or be dropped from the rolls in adulthood—as being subject to and having the right of church discipline. Chauncy actually formulated the wording of the final version despite Jonathan Mitchel—a supporter of the expansion—believing that the inclusion of this proposition “carried the entire cause.”<sup>56</sup> Expansionists and traditionalists alike wanted to affirm that adults who had been baptized in their infancy remained under the watch, discipline, and government of the church even if some did not consider such people to be properly still members. The logic of their inclusion in discipline and church oversight may have swung some of the lay messengers—in Mitchel’s estimation—to seeing them as still members of the covenant and, thus, as those whose children were properly members of this covenant as well.

This full membership of baptized children in the concept of the supporters of the expansion is explicit in the fourth proposition: “These Adult persons, are not therefore to be admitted to full Communion, meerly because they are and continue members, without such further qualifications, as the Word of God requireth therunto.”<sup>57</sup> They “continue” as full “members”; it is only that they must meet additional qualifications to be admitted to all the privileges of membership. This is a direct contradiction of Davenport’s dual assertion that there are two types of membership, and that “mediate” membership ends at the conclusion of the child’s “non-age.” While the explicit point of the proposition is to make clear that baptized adults who own the covenant but cannot demonstrate subjective assurance are not eligible for admission to the Table, the need to make this point explicit necessarily presupposes the status of such people as full members.

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“Meer Membership (or Membership alone) doth not suffice to render men Subjects of the Lords Supper . . . the meaning is, That full Communion doth not belong to a Member as such, or to a person meerly because he is a Member, for then it would belong to all Members, which it doth not. A person may be a Member (or in memberly Relation) and yet not be in full Communion.” Admission to communion, then, was not the mark of “true” membership, but rather an extension of privileges to people who were already “full” members.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchel, *An Answer*, 3, cited in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 268.

<sup>57</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 314.

The proposition that caused the most debate, and that was really the lynchpin of the entire question, was proposition five:

Church-members who were admitted in minority, understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publickly professing their assent thereto ; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church, their children are to be Baptised.<sup>58</sup>

The rationale offered in the result follows the line of logic stating, “These children are partakers of that which is the main ground of baptizing any children whatsoever,”<sup>59</sup> namely, “interest in the Covenant.” This “interest” meant that those who were in the covenant, whether they had subjective assurance or not, had been given “*the promise or covenant [which] was to them and to their children.*”<sup>60</sup> If a child was in covenant—and therefore baptized—and the children of those who were in covenant were also in covenant, then the children of a child in covenant was also in covenant—and therefore eligible for baptism. It was having an “interest in the Covenant,” not having subjective assurance, that mattered for a person’s status as a member (though not for their access to the Lord’s Supper). The sixth argument of the rationale makes the status of members who have not been admitted to the Table explicit: “*The parents in question are personal, immediate, and yet-continuing members of the Church.*”<sup>61</sup> If the parents are personal and immediate members who do not revoke their membership in the covenant with age,<sup>62</sup> then their “children are *immediate members, (i.e. that they themselves in their own persons are the immediate subjects of this adjunct of Church-membership) though they come to it by*

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<sup>58</sup> *Answer of the Elders* in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 314.

<sup>59</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 328.

<sup>60</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 328 (emphasis original).

<sup>61</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 331 (emphasis original).

<sup>62</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 333, “That their membership still continues in adult age, and ceaseth not with their infancy, appears ... Because in Scripture persons are broken off, onely for notorious sin, or incorrigible impenitency and unbelief, not for growing up to adult age” (emphasis original).

means of their parents covenanting.”<sup>63</sup> Having an interest in the covenant—having “owned the covenant,” i.e., affirming one’s belief in and submission to the doctrines of the church—made one a member, together with one’s children. If those children continued in such belief, they remained members. No additional action was required, the failure of which would expel the children from membership. Richard Mather, defending the result, later wrote,

Membership is a Relation, and therefore admits not of magis and minus, more or lesse: Members are better or worse, and communion is more or lesse; but membership admits not of degrees. Benjamin an Infant, but an hour old, is as truly a son as Reuben, a man of twenty two years of age. The child is baptized by vertue of his own membership, and not by vertue of his Parents membership.<sup>64</sup>

The depth of importance ascribed to covenant inclusion and membership by defenders of the result is clear. Subjective assurance was, for the defenders, merely evidence that the objective reality membership rested upon was indeed present.

For Davenport, writing in response to the synod’s argumentation on this proposition, there was a different understanding of what inclusion in the covenant meant:

The Parents must be fitly qualified before they may be admitted to Covenant with the Lord and his Church for themselves and their children: Else the Covenant will be profaned; and such covenanting cannot regularly give them, and their children, an interest in the Covenant, and title to Baptism. The Parents, or adult persons, regularly admitted to Covenant, must be Believers in Christ, effectually called in the charitable judgement of the Church, judging according to Rule<sup>65</sup>

To be “effectually called in the charitable judgement of the Church” referred to the judgment of the individual’s subjective assurance: the membership test. If one could not pass this test, one was not a member. Further, inclusion in the covenant did not extend to the children of even full members! Davenport went on to argue that “the Covenant was differently administred, in

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<sup>63</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 332.

<sup>64</sup> R. Mather, *Disputation Concerning Church-Members and their Children*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 297.

<sup>65</sup> Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth*, 21.

different times of the Church.” Under Abraham it was familial relation which denoted covenant inclusion; under Moses it was tribal inclusion in Israel. This administration of the covenant was only “according to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, until Christ came.”<sup>66</sup> The differentiation of covenant inclusion not merely by sign (baptism versus circumcision) but also by type (family/tribe versus effectual calling) between the Old and New Testament Church was a radical break from the Reformed tradition, which had always insisted on the continuity of the basis of covenant inclusion between testaments. The rift within New England theology was broadening, despite its being the result of the process of ministers seeking to be consistent in applying the implications of their seemingly very similar presuppositions in the same context. In Davenport’s logic we see an increasingly individual basis of salvation, while the argument apparently drove his opponents in the direction of a more communal appreciation of salvation, leading them back toward the earlier Reformed consensus. This is not Morgan’s vulgar caricature of salvation being “hereditary”<sup>67</sup> but a perspective of the individual’s inclusion in the covenant having real and significant implications for their experience of life and salvation.

Proposition six simply offered practical advice in a particular—and extreme—cases: “Such Church-members, who either by death, or some other extraordinary Providence, have been inevitably hindred from publick acting as aforesaid, yet have given the Church cause, in judgment of charity, to look at them as so qualified, and such as had they been called thereunto, would have so acted, their children are to be Baptised.”<sup>68</sup> Yet here again, the difference between

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<sup>66</sup> Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 126. That Richard Mather and others were moving away from a position they had set up in the New England Way is evidenced by the fact that Morgan’s caricature was pointed at the Cambridge Platform: that to claim full membership, a baptized child of believers had to go through the same test as a new convert, and was expected to relate experiences similar to those of new converts, regardless of experiential differences of the child having been raised in the covenant—and even in a covenanted society.

<sup>68</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 334.

the judgment of charity for synod supporters and for Davenport is significant. Davenport must hear subjective assurance to extend such charity. For the synod, this charity is such that if the person is no longer alive to testify, yet the congregation believes they would have offered such testimony had they not died, their children should be assumed to be within the covenant and baptized accordingly. The sixth proposition is meant to merely apply the fifth proposition in an uncertain particular.<sup>69</sup> It demonstrates, however, that these differing presuppositions regarding the covenant produce differing understandings of the pastoral task.

The seventh, and last, proposition was moving toward the second major question of the synod: whether there should be a consociation of churches. Whether there was a consociation or not, the churches were in communion with Christ, and if a member had the benefits of spiritual union with Christ in one local church, it was only appropriate that he benefit from the same a different local church. Specifically:

The members of Orthodox Churches, being sound in the Faith, and not scandalous in life, and presenting due testimony thereof ; these occasionally coming from one Church to another, may have their children Baptised in the church whither they come, by virtue of communion of churches: but if they remove their habitation, they ought orderly to covenant and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the church where they settle their abode, and so their children to be Baptised. It being the churches duty to receive such into communion, so farr as they are regularly fit for the same.<sup>70</sup>

Clearly the concern was that if a child was born while away from his or her parents' local congregation, in these uncertain times when infancy was so fragile a time of life, it was important that the infant receive the benefit of baptism—signing and sealing his or her position as a member of the covenant—before undertaking a journey back to the parents' local

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<sup>69</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 335, stated, “The terms of the Proposition import that in charity, that is here done interpretively, which is mentioned to be done in the fifth proposition expressly.”

<sup>70</sup> *Answer of the Elders*, in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 314.

congregation when the chances of the child not surviving such a journey were so high. Here again, though, the synod was demonstrating a presupposition about the nature of church membership that was not in accord with the other interpretation of the New England Way. Davenport's reply did not attack specific points of the proposition because he found the proposition "ambiguously expressed" and raised numerous questions: What churches are orthodox? How are churches to "know that such Members are sound in the Faith? ... What they mean by their occasionally coming from one Church to another? whether they take a due course to know that their occasion of coming be approved by the Church whence they come, or not?"<sup>71</sup> While his questions do expose some lack of specificity in the instructions, they also reveal a different attitude toward what the Church is and how it sacramentally serves members of the covenant. For Davenport, the New England Way protected the churches from administering their privileges to those who had not demonstrated their subjective assurance. For the framers of the synod's result, the New England Way ensured that those who are within the covenant receive the sign of the covenant regardless of their immediate circumstances. The soteriological differences emerging between these positions are not made explicit, but can be seen. In Davenport's system—which focuses on the "purity" concern of the Cambridge Platform—the covenant is a matter of individual salvation and is a matter of confidence only when the individual can find experiential evidence of assurance in their lives. In the emerging position of the supporters of the result—which might represent the "charity" concern of the Cambridge Platform—the concern is with ensuring the covenant member receives the outward signs of their status which might better equip them for coming to subjective assurance and confidence in personal salvation. While not a full return to the old Reformed consensus, this position resembles it much more closely than that

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<sup>71</sup> Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth*, 51.



of Davenport.

In late September the propositions, along with their rationales and arguments were “Voted and concluded by the assembly in the particular terms.”<sup>72</sup> The propositions for the expansion of baptism passed “by a vote of more than seven to one.”<sup>73</sup> The synod, having spent long weeks meeting and “wearied of debate”<sup>74</sup> on this question, merely reaffirmed the principles of the Cambridge Platform with reference to the second question that had been put to them, that of a consociation of churches. The entire answer, with affirmations and arguments, took a mere two pages and failed a unanimous vote by only one dissenter.<sup>75</sup> The result was presented to the General Court on October 8. Surprisingly, it was the young Increase Mather, rather than the seasoned and respected Chauncy, who asked to present a minority report. He was denied. The court had chosen to side with the ministers in promoting the synod’s solution to the growing problem created by how the New England Way was being practiced. Yet they did take the unprecedented step of granting permission to publish opposition arguments, a necessity for any publication under Massachusetts’ press censorship. The resulting pamphlet war between Davenport, Chauncy, and the young Mathers on the one hand, against Mitchel, Allin, the elder Mather and other supporters of the result on the other, as noted above, would prove to underscore the division between the ministers and the laity in their dual quests for increased biblical fidelity. These quests, despite their united goal, led in divergent trajectories. The supporters of the result would win out, but it would take nearly a generation for the churches to adopt the result as the

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<sup>72</sup> Mitchel, “The Preface to the Result of 1662,” in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 312.

<sup>73</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 268.

<sup>74</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 268.

<sup>75</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 268.

functional norm for congregations adhering to the New England Way.<sup>76</sup>

The 1662 Synod represented the importance of a trend that had been developing for some time among individual congregations and ministers. This trend, and the shift in baptismal practice that the synod articulated, would result in a change in the attitudes of New Englanders towards the sacraments. Indeed, within a decade the implications of the synod had “redefined the nature of the sacrament.”<sup>77</sup> The practice that John Cotton had made standard carried in it a *de facto* form of half-way membership: in believing the church to be purely the community of gathered regenerate—or presumably regenerate—saints, their baptized children only possessed a quasi-membership. In contrast to this, the supporters of the “Result” were arguing for

a broad view of the church as an institution that not only nourished the regenerate but also dispensed grace to the unsaved. ... Baptized children, though barred from the Lord’s Supper, were accepted as personal and plenary Church members who might receive through the external ordinances sufficient grace to make conversion probable.<sup>78</sup>

These supporters viewed baptism as a permanent seal of membership in the visible church; proponents of the system that had developed from John Cotton’s practices—led by Davenport and Chauncy—viewed baptism as merely a mark placed on children of the elect that carried with it almost no formal significance. In this sense the synod, far from innovating, was taking a step toward the Reformed consensus, which viewed baptism as a seal of church membership. In choosing to reaffirm baptism as a seal of church membership, the synod served to point out the discrepancy that resulted by defining the church and, therefore, regeneration by observable

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<sup>76</sup> Hall, *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather, 1639–1723* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 59–60.

<sup>77</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 169.

<sup>78</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 171.

religious experience.<sup>79</sup>

### **Practices in Response to Pain: Social Trauma as a Catalyst for Subjective Assurance**

In the Puritan religious experience, declining church membership was perceived as a problem, not so much because it was a threat to the life of the churches but because of what it meant for individuals and society. For individuals, it signaled a need for their assurance of salvation. For society, it posed a threat before God, as God could judge the whole society for lack of conversions and faithfulness. We have seen how the policies recommended by the ministers sought to answer the problem of declining church membership. In the generation that followed the recommendation of those policies, the churches did experience a reversal in the membership problem, as many of that generation eventually came onto their rolls as full communicants. To assume this was the direct result of the policies would be an oversimplification of the actual process. In that same period New England experienced a remarkable amount of social pain—which was largely perceived as God’s judgement against New England for their unfaithfulness in producing so few genuine conversions. While the churches only adopted the new policies slowly, there were several practices by which New Englanders processed this pain that seem to have played a more significant role in the reversal. The ministers’ sermons interpreting these circumstances, and the laity’s engagement of that interpretation in their writings and relations, paint a fuller picture of how the condition of the churches changed over the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The practices of the churches that fostered experiences of confession and conversion in relation to divine judgment and favor

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<sup>79</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 172, noted that, “The synodical theologians did not claim that baptism created personal membership, for they still believed that infants of Church members were born into the Church by virtue of the covenant. But they did insist that the sacrament sealed, established and guaranteed a permanent, distinctive, and personal membership in the visible Church.”

were instrumental in using moments of painful experiences as divine catalysts for experiential relations that led to fuller membership.

This actually mirrored the experience of the generation that chose to shift subjective assurance into a prominent role in ecclesiastical practice. That founding generation had lived through social upheavals themselves. Their life as a protest movement within the Anglican church under Charles I and especially under Archbishop Laud was traumatic, as their flight to the New World demonstrated. The transatlantic passage itself, and the experience of carving a new society out of the North American wilderness were frequently cited in their conversion accounts as catalysts of spiritual awakening. Their children's declining instances of seeking full church membership correlated with a period of relative social calm. The outbreak of several traumatic social upheavals in the 1670s—war, plague, fire, and political unrest—correlated with a resurgence of church membership, along with the accompanying conversion accounts. The impact of these social upheavals can be best assessed by examining the practices—sermons, relations, polemics, journals—that the churches produced in responding to and processing these circumstances.

The 1662 Synod set the stage to expand declining church rolls by including a new generation of children of covenant-owning parents into those rolls. The slow process of adoption, however, was overtaken by an unexpected rise in people joining by undergoing the test of subjective assurance. Pope demonstrated that the membership rolls of the churches—which had fallen sufficiently by the 1640s to lead the magistrates to call for the Cambridge Synod, and had fallen precipitously by the time of the 1662 Synod—began to climb back to previous levels over the course of the next several decades, despite it taking several years for any church to adopt the recommendations of the synod, several more years for them to actually be practiced, and more

than a generation for those recommendations to be the standard practice of most churches.<sup>80</sup> This influx of new communing members occurred in the mid-1670s in tandem with the openness of more churches to the expansion of baptism, and the general acceptance of the synod's recommendations as the new orthodoxy of the New England Way. Pope stated, "Personal piety and the need for religious ties increased as Massachusetts society became less secure. The increase in full communicants, the implementation of the half-way covenant, the mass covenant renewals, and the inclusion of formerly unchurched inhabitants in the church covenant are signs of an awakening."<sup>81</sup> Commenting on that decreasing security in Massachusetts society, he stated, "The broad implementation of the half-way covenant that occurred between 1676 and 1692 can only be understood in the context of crisis."<sup>82</sup>

The crescendo of that crisis was that "in 1675 God's judgment fell on New England.... No one could have prophesied the horror of King Philip's War."<sup>83</sup> This war, which came out of nowhere from the colonists' perspective, would cost them fully ten percent of their male population and annihilate their frontier towns and settlements. But the war was only the tip of the spear of the social unrest in the coming decades. Close on the heels of the war, two outbreaks of plague further decimated the population, a massive fire swept through Boston, and the

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<sup>80</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 273, responding to the notion that the seventeenth century was one of steady decline for New England's churches, noted, "Admissions to full communion reached their lowest ebb, not in 1690, but in the middle of the century." He noted that while several churches had already adopted some form of the measures recommended by the 1662 synod before the meeting of that body, the earliest instance of a congregation adopting the measures in response to the synod was the Lynn congregation in 1665, and in that case the "congregation restricted the innovation to those members still subject to its discipline" (Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 141). In cases where individual churches had already adopted such practices before the synod, some did not act on such practices: First Church of Boston adopted Richard Mather—their pastor's—recommendation of the expansion of baptism in 1661, but did not apply it to anyone, and even called anti-expansion Davenport as their pastor in 1667 (Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 139). Or they acted on them very limitedly: Roxbury had "adopted the half-way covenant in 1658" but "only twelve persons took advantage of it in ten years" (Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 138).

<sup>81</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 273.

<sup>82</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 187.

<sup>83</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 186.

ramifications of the Restoration of the Stuart Monarchy—slow in coming to the colonies of New England—would reshape the political and legal landscape under the Dominion of New England and the revocation of the charter.

Throughout the 1660s and early 1670s, church membership continued to decline, and was bemoaned by the ministers who continued to develop the Jeremiad sermon form in response to their perception of the flagging spiritual condition of their congregants—people who appear to have continued attending services and living in obedience to church teachings, but who were nonetheless failing to experience subjective assurance of salvation and become communicant members. As these members produced offspring, they found their children ineligible for baptism under the old form of the New England Way. Some churches hesitantly adopted the new practice of expanded baptism as their official policy, yet even in these churches where baptism for children of non-communicating members was available, few people took advantage of such.<sup>84</sup> The ministers warned that continued religious sluggishness would result in the judgment of God against New England,<sup>85</sup> but membership levels continued to decline as aging saints died and a

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<sup>84</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 138. Note Roxbury's experience, cited above.

<sup>85</sup> Eleazar Mather, *A Serious Exhortation to the Present and Succeeding Generation in New-England* (Cambridge, 1671), 27–28, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N00108.0001.001>, exhorted his congregation in one of his last sermons before his untimely death, “it is time for us to address our selves to this present Generation. . . . Wherefore let my Counsel be acceptable unto you, retain the Lords Presence with you. I know it is a very difficult thing to speak prevailingly unto a Generation that have been brought up under the solemn Warnings of Gods Word, and yet not wrought upon; It's a very difficult thing to do good in a backsliding time, when men have been accustomed to send away the Lord from their hearts: It's now a hard work to perswade men to hold him by main strength, and not to let him go. In times of degeneracy there is not much likelihood of doing much good, Jer. 25.3, 4, 5. Secure hearts that have had many Means, many Warnings, many Years, and not awakened, if one should rise from the dead to such an one he will do little good, Luke 16.31. Yet I will cry once more what the Lord will do, though me-thinks my work is something like Ezekiels, Chap. 37. who was there commanded to prophesie over dead bones: I know I have dead hearts to deal withall, but yet the Lord may breathe the breath of life into them; Therefore, O Generation, see ye the word of the Lord, Jer. 2.31. You that are the succeeding and surviving Generation, whatever you part with, part not with God, keep God with you whatever you keep, or not keep. And to stir up hereunto, let me spread before you these Considerations . . . That the Lord will most undoubtedly leave and forsake you, unless you do to the utmost of what you can do to keep him amongst you. The Lord is resolved on it, he will not abide with you, except you do besiege him with your prayers, tears, cries and groans not to be gone.” Eleazer understood himself to be confronting a generation that was not fulfilling their duty to examine their spiritual experience and testify to it.

younger generation of children were born to covenant-owning but non-communing parents and were not baptized onto the churches' rolls. Then in the mid-1670s the pattern changed. Churches that had adopted the new measures suddenly began seeing covenant-owning members presenting their children for baptism. Churches that had not adopted the measures adopted them, and families began baptizing multiple children immediately. And all churches began to see an influx of new communing members through testimony to their subjective assurance.<sup>86</sup> The change corresponds to the onset of war, but this is only correlation. Causation can be hinted at, however, by the content of these new members' relations: The halfway covenant was not the main driving force of membership in these relations. It was something else that was producing subjective relations and the fact that the increase of membership corresponds to traumatic events that occurred gives us something to look at. In at least two written testimonies—offered long after the fact in the 1690s when written testimonies were replacing oral relations—the catalyst of spiritual awakening was the crisis of war or the loss of significant loved ones to the war.<sup>87</sup>

### The Pain of Combat: King Philip's War

The reason for this shift lies partly in the brutal and pervasive nature of the war itself. The war was an outflow of the complex web of political and social relationships both between the

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<sup>86</sup> Pope, "Their Separate Ways: Four Churches and the Half-Way Covenant," in *Half-Way Covenant*, 206–38, documented how the church records of Roxbury, Charlestown, Dorchester and Third Church Boston, demonstrate a significant rise in new communicants (people being admitted to the Eucharist by congregational examination of their subjective assurance) and what he calls "Half-Way Members" (children of non-communing, covenant-owning members who were received into membership by baptism). He notes that adoption of the synod recommendations would not in itself account for the specific growth patterns displayed. "It is doubtful that the church [Third Church Boston] grew so rapidly because of the half-way covenant. In the same half dozen years [that the church added 153 communicants to its rolls] only fifteen children owned the covenant" (Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 222).

<sup>87</sup> Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), location 12642, Kindle, noted that written testimonies only replaced oral in the 1690s, so few of the testimonies from the growth period of the 1670s are available; yet in those available from the 1690s, numerous adults cite the loss of parents in King Philip's War as the catalyst for the start of their spiritual journey as children.

colonists and Indigenous Americans, but also between the various tribal groups as they competed between themselves and with the colonists for diminishing land and resources. In examining the impact of King Philip's War on the formation of Puritan theology, it is important to remember that, for the purposes of this study, I am not trying to accurately ascertain the causes and course of the war, but rather the Puritans' understanding of what was happening, because it was that understanding that affected their interpretation of their spiritual experiences and the theology and practices that flowed out of those understandings.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The eponymous Philip, a head of the Pokanoket tribe, was pressed into war by a variety of factors. Various agreements with the Europeans had placed him in a compromised position. At the same time, to retain his political leadership of the tribe, he needed to appease his warriors who were unhappy with their ever-more-limited situation. From the colonists' perspective, however, the natives had been so sufficiently cowed by European arms that no threat was perceived. Increase Mather, in *A Brief History of the Warre with the Indians in New-England* (Boston, 1676), 9–10, stated, "That the Heathen People amongst whom we live, and whose Land the Lord God of our Fathers hath given to us for a rightfull Possession, have at sundry times been plotting mischievous devices against that part of the English Israel which is seated in these goings down of the Sun, no man that is an Inhabitant of any considerable standing, can be ignorant. Especially that there have been ... jealousies concerning the *Narragansets* and *Wompanoags*, is notoriously known to all men. And whereas they have been quiet untill the last year, that must be ascribed to the wonderfull Providence of God, who did (as with Jacob of old, and after that with the Children of Israel) lay the fear of the English, and the dread of them upon all the Indians." This demonstrates the colonists' understanding of their position: defending land that had been given them by God. It also shows their understanding that the Indigenous American tribes were so intimidated by European weaponry (which he goes on to describe) that the war was not anticipated.

To the settlers, the war was not the result of their native neighbors having been pressed too far over the preceding two generations, but that they had finally accumulated sufficient European weapons to rise up against their European counterparts. Increase Mather, in *A Brief History of the Warre*, 10, stated, "Nor indeed had they [the Indigenous Americans] such advantages in former years as now they have, in respect of Arms and Ammunition, their bows and arrows not being comparably such weapons of death and destruction, as our guns and swords are, with which they have been unhappily furnished." From this perspective the Indigenous Americans were not exercising their only option in response to abuses but were simply taking advantage of the fact that they had accumulated sufficient arms to challenge the Europeans.

While this cynical understanding of Philip and his Pokanokets was typical of most New Englanders, it should be noted that some at least—including Increase Mather—stood against a common tendency of the colonists to view and treat all native tribes the same: as enemies, regardless of whether they were allied with Philip, the colonists, or functioning as neutrals. This tendency to see all natives the same was true of the prosecution of the war in general. Indeed, one of the largest actions of the war, called the Great Swamp Fight or the Great Swamp Massacre, occurred when Massachusetts raised an army to attack the thus-far neutral Narragansett nation to their south in Rhode Island. Desperate for a victory and concerned that the Narragansetts were too powerful and controlled too many weapons and grain to be allowed to remain so close to Boston, Massachusetts raised "the mightiest army yet put into the field in North America" (Russell Bourne, *The Red King's Rebellion: Racial Politics in New England 1675–1678* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], 152–53), and sent it to attack without warning or notice of their declaration of war. The raid resulted in seizing and destroying a significant Narragansett fortress, which housed a great deal of provisions, but also in the deaths of between 350 and 600 native men, women, and children (Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War* [New York: Penguin, 2007], 279).



In the midst of the brutality of the war, Increase Mather wrote an exhortation to the people of New England.<sup>89</sup> Here, Mather sought to address what he saw as the underlying cause of the war: God's judgment against New England for covenant unfaithfulness. His words—with remarkable detachment for one writing in the thick of the conflict—place the colonists' treatment of the natives as one among many sins of which Mather was calling on them to repent that the war might come to a swift end. The ease with which the bloody massacre of 350 to 600 native men, women, and children<sup>90</sup> is situated among other sins reveals how the judgment of God is the greater spiritual concern of the preachers and how the war is enfolded amid other sins to cultivate a response of repentance from the people. Mather notes,

Another sin which hath been confessed is, that of *Formality in Religion*. These are perillous times which we now live in, when men are getting their Bread with the peril of their lives, because of the Sword of the Wilderness, when they can scarce look out of doors, but they are in danger of being seized upon by ravening Wolves, who lye in wait to shed blood, when men go not forth into the field, nor walk by the way side, but the Sword of the Enemy, and fear is on every side: surely the times are perillous ; and that which brings such times is, the *taking up a form of godliness without the power of it*: and is it not so with us, the *first Generation* which was in this Land, had much of the power of Godliness, but the present *Generation* hath the form, and as to the *body of the Generation*, but little of the power of *Religion*.<sup>91</sup>

For Mather and other pastors, the war was clearly the judgment of God against the sins of a generation declining in outward assurance and experiences of genuine conversion.

The practices of the pastors related to interpreting the war gave occasion for conversions and experiential relations. Increase summarized the ultimate reason of the war in his introduction to *A Brief History* thus: “Nor were our sins ripe for so dreadfull a judgment, untill the Body of the first Generation was removed, and another Generation risen up which hath not so pursued, as

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<sup>89</sup> I. Mather, *An Earnest Exhortation to the Inhabitants of New-England* (Boston, 1676), <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00163.0001.001>.

<sup>90</sup> Philbrick, *Mayflower*, 279 (see footnote 88, above).

<sup>91</sup> I. Mather, *An Earnest Exhortation*, 11.

ought to have been, the blessed design of their Fathers, in following the Lord into this Wilderness, whilst it was a land not sown.”<sup>92</sup> The holy ones of the first generation—who had largely attained to subjective assurance and communing membership—had died off, and the new generations had failed to sufficiently pursue the same attainment to perpetuate God’s blessing on this new Jerusalem. Here again we engage the pastoral concern for the religious decline of their society. In Mather's *Earnest Exhortation*, the war is simply one of a series of acts of God against his people to which they need to attend.

In addition, remarkably, it was not only the Puritans who were guilty of moral decline. In Mather's *Earnest Exhortation*, he attends to the lives of the Indigenous Americans. As he states,

The breach of the fifth Commandment is one of the great and National sins, which the Indians are guilty of: their Children have nor regard no reverence towards their Fathers. If we learn the way of the Heathen, and become like them, God will punish us by them. And it is to me a sad and solemn thought, that this miserable War, hath been raised and fomented by proud and vain young men. The old Indians were very unwilling to engage in a War with the English, but the young men would do it, whether their Fathers would or no, and did at last precipitate you also into it, to the ruine of both Fathers and Children.<sup>93</sup>

In Mather’s mind the Indigenous Americans also were struggling with a falling off of integrity in the present generation. It was not only the Indigenous Americans’ sins Mather was concerned about in connection with the war; he was also concerned for what the colonists’ treatment of the native tribes meant about the overarching mission of God in the land:

More over since this War begun, the Indians have been scandalized by the English: It is well if some English have not the guilt of Indian bloud upon their souls, yea if in their skirts be not found the bloud of the souls of poor innocents. And what could have been done more then hath been done by too many, to prejudice the Indians against the English interest, yea against the interest of Christ in this Land? what madness and rage hath there been against all Indians whatsoever?<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> I. Mather, *A Brief History of the Warre*, 10.

<sup>93</sup> I. Mather, *An Earnest Exhortation*, 13.

<sup>94</sup> I. Mather, *An Earnest Exhortation*, 19.

The actions of the colonists against the Indigenous Americans were a part of the sins for which God was punishing New England; but the weight of these actions was that they were denying the purpose for which the colonists had been brought to North America. The creation of a society—Indigenous American and English—living in primitive holiness and gospel integrity was the goal. The colonists’ mistreatment of their native neighbors was part of what was standing in the way of this and was evidence of the decline of integrity.

As noted above, this had been a mounting concern of the pastors throughout the early 1670s, though, as Stout argues, it was partly based on what they perceived as a lack of respect for their own office. Recalling the deference with which the first generation had treated the founding pastors, a new generation of pastors felt themselves disrespected by their parishioners, failing to “consider the fact that they were not patriarch but young men—often in their twenties and early thirties—ministering to other young people who had grown up with them.”<sup>95</sup> Responding to declining membership, perceived disrespect, and even the unwillingness of congregations to adopt the policies the ministers had put forward to confront the spiritual ills, the rise of the Jeremiad sermon form had warned against coming judgments of God. An example of such a sermon was Increase Mather’s 1674 fast day sermon, *The Day of Trouble is Near*, in which he warned that, “*When God stirs up the Spirits of his Messengers to sound the Trumpet, and to cry an Alarm against his people, that's a sign that the day of trouble is near....* but if that Voice be not regarded, then *Hear the Rod*, Judgements follow.”<sup>96</sup> The horrific devastation of the war seemed a judgment from God, proving the pastors correct in the eyes of the people, and

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<sup>95</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 76–77.

<sup>96</sup> I. Mather, *The Day of Trouble Is near. Two Sermons Wherein Is Shewed, What Are the Signs of a Day of Trouble Being Near. And Particularly, What Reason There Is for New-England to Expect a Day of Trouble. Also What Is to Be Done, That We May Escape These Things Which Shall Come to Pass. Preached (the 11th Day of the 12th Moneth, 1673. Being a Day of Humiliation in One of the Churches in Boston.* (Cambridge, 1674), 10, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00137.0001.001>.

elevating the status of sermons in New England society as New Englanders sought to process their experiences of pain.<sup>97</sup>

These sermons' processing of experiences of pain are largely responsible for much of the modern perspective that the churches were in decline throughout the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Statements by pastors, interpreting the traumatic events of the period as God's judgment against unfaithfulness, have been used as explicit evidence for decline. Yet, as we shall see, these traumas actually correlated with a rise in instances of people joining the churches as communing members—the very condition the pastors were bemoaning the lack of. Why is there a discrepancy between the pastors' perspective and the church records they themselves were chronicling? It may be that their continued experience of the traumas diminished the experiential value of the rise in conversion accounts. The very nature of the psychological impact of the Jeremiad form lends an answer to the question. The Jeremiad sermon maintains a paradoxical state of bemoaning the sins of the present generation and proclaiming the judgment of God even as the present generation is responding to such judgment and the proclamation of repentance. As the preacher processes his experience through the form, he sees more evidence of it. Yet at the same time, as the congregation uses the sermon to process their experience of pain, they respond as the sermon calls them to, correcting the situation the sermon addresses. Edward Bulkeley, in the midst of the conflict, preached a fast day sermon on October 21, 1675 that demonstrates this. He warned his congregation,

It is a very ill Requital not to trust him by resting on his promises: not to rely upon his *wisdome, power, faithfulness* when we have had much Experience of his *Care, Love, Compassion* and *wonderful works* for our good. It is *high Ingratitude*. Hence the Lord was so angry with *Asa* for sending to *Benhadad* for his help, (though there were other evils in it) that he relied not on God, when God had given him such a *glorious victory* over that *mighty Host of the Ethiopians*, 2 Chron. 16:8, 9: Thereby he

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<sup>97</sup> Stout, *New England Soul*, 78.

provoked God from that time to afflict him with Warrs. Learn to trust in God in the most *deadly dangers*: Let him be your Refuge in all Storms: He is able to keep that which is committed to him. To him *belongs the Issues from death*.<sup>98</sup>

With his reference to God’s bringing “Warrs” on Asa as punishment for unfaithfulness, Bulkeley was alluding to the conflict that surrounded his congregation and implying that it was a Judgment of God against their failures to rely on God. The answer to this problem of judgment was to “Let him be your Refuge.” As the congregation processed the conflict as a judgment of God, and sought to answer the problem by responding to the call of the sermon, they would perceive their context as one of decline, while reversing the numeric evidence of decline by their response.

Finally, with reference to the perception of decline, while the ministers kept records, there is no evidence of these records being treated as “data” in the modern sense, and it is very likely that comparative analysis of numbers of conversion accounts being processed as compared to population growth was never a part of the assessment. This is, of course, speculation, as the actual answers for the discrepancy—if such answers are even possible—are beyond the scope of this study.

It is worth noting that the pastors’ indictment of moral decline was not universally accepted even in their own day. Mather dined with Governor John Leverett after his turn preaching the Thursday lecture in January of 1676, in which he denounced the magistrates’ failure to enforce morality laws. At their dinner, Hall relates that “Mather talked about the growing drunkenness in the colony. Leverett, who should have known [given he had been active in the life of the colony

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<sup>98</sup> Edward Bulkeley, “Sermon on Psalms 116:12,” published in Thomas Wheeler, *A Thankfull Remembrance of Gods Mercy to Several Persons at Quabaug or Brookfield: Partly in a Collection of Providences about Them, and Gracious Appearances for Them: And Partly in a Sermon Preached by Mr. Edward Bulkley, Pastor of the Church of Christ at Concord, upon a Day of Thanksgiving, Kept by Divers for the Wonderfull Deliverance There*, Cambridge, 1675. <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00167.0001.001>.

since 1635], growled out that there had been more drunkenness in the early years than there was now.”<sup>99</sup> In his diary Mather recorded the incident and denounced that Leverrett “Hath bin ye principle Author of ye multitude of ordinaries [taverns] wch be in Boston, giving licenses wn ye towns-men wld not doe it. No wonder that N.E. is visited, when the Head is so spirited.”<sup>100</sup>

Another aspect of the war’s social upheaval was the way in which prosecuting it necessarily broke up isolated towns and colonies with separate identities. Many colonists had actually immigrated to North America together with their pastor and community in order to found a new town made up of people they had grown up with in their English village. While this settlement pattern was not the rule, the isolated New England towns had developed insular cultures, now in their second generation of individual identity. With the war, the populations of destroyed frontier towns relocated en masse. Armies were raised, drawing men from surrounding towns; those armies were then marched to distant parts of other colonies where they were quartered near other portions of the colonial population. Relationships and romances developed, marriages took place, and new families then settled with trans-colonial roots. A new New England identity was being shaped. As Hall noted, “the defensive strategy of Massachusetts perhaps did more than the devastation of the Indian attacks to dissolve the homogeneous, tradition bound, self-governing Puritan communities .... Thus did the Indian war undermine the city on a hill.”<sup>101</sup> This cultural shift and its challenge to the old norm would have underscored the pastors’ perception of moral decline, at the same time that it deepened the personal sense of

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<sup>99</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 113.

<sup>100</sup> I. Mather, Diary, January 27, 1676, in Charles C. Smith, William S. Appleton, Andrew McFarland Davis, Abner C. Goodell, Samuel A. Green, and Albert B. Hart. “December Meeting, 1899. Senatorial Biography; Sewall’s Mnemonic Lines; Diary of Increase Mather,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 13 (1899): 358, [www.jstor.org/stable/25079839](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25079839).

<sup>101</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 106.

unsettledness among congregants looking to their faith for stability in the midst of the growing instability of their personal lives.

The war also played a positive role in identity formation. The people had been regularly told of their unfaithfulness in the Jeremiads leading up to the war. As ministers processed the war in their sermons, they not only interpreted the war to their congregations as God's judgment against an unfaithful people; they also interpreted fighting the war to win their safety as the work of God's Church militant. In the artillery election sermons in particular, the image of the churches of New England as the "souldiers" of Christ in both spiritual and physical warfare was common. This would have offered the people a new perspective of themselves, not as those apart from God, but as those doing the work of God. In a 1775 artillery election sermon, John Richardson exhorted those assembled that

you may be called to be in good earnest; thou knowest not how soon Orders may come from the Lord of Hosts for thy suddain March, and then there will be no time to get any skill to defend thy self; You are now as it were in *Garison*, but you may very quickly bee in the Field, not in a naked field, but in a field of Warr, yea perhaps in *Acheldama*, a field of Blood, where thou shalt not want for an Enemy, but find one, not one it may be, but many.<sup>102</sup>

Richardson equates their work as a commonwealth militia with the work of the church militant: "Believe it, the work is the Lords, it is his Ordinance, and you have a great account to give, or you are greatly accountable according to your well or ill management therof; The Lord is your Supervisour, You that are in the Front, have not only mens but Gods eye upon you."<sup>103</sup> Similar sentiments continued in artillery election sermons after the war. Samuel Nowell told his listeners in 1678,

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<sup>102</sup> John Richardson, *The Necessity of a Well Experienced Souldiery, or, A Christian Common Wealth Ought to Be Well Instructed & Experienced in the Military Art Delivered in a Sermon, Upon an Artillery Election June the 10th, 1675* (Cambridge, 1679), 14–15, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A57233.0001.001>.

<sup>103</sup> Richardson, *Necessity of a Well Experienced*, 11.

There are our Rights both as Men, and as Christians, our civil Rights and Libertyes as Men and our religious Liberties and Rights as Christians; both which we are to defend with the sword, as far as we are able, or to commit our selves to God in the way of duty in doing of it. There is such a thing as Liberty and Property given to us, both by the Laws of God & Men when these are invaded, we may defend our selves. God hath not given great ones in the world that absolute power over men, to devour them at pleasure, as great Fishes do the little ones; he hath set Rulers their bounds & by his Law hath determined peoples libertyes and property.<sup>104</sup>

The identity being forged in the sermons coming out of the war included Jeremiad calls to repent so that such judgment might be averted, but also included identifying the audience, by their experiential practices, with the work of God. Such imagery would have helped individuals struggling with their place in the church to bridge the gap from outsider to participant.

This can be seen in the processing of the war in accounts of the laity. In his account of the raid on Brookfield, Thomas Wheeler frames his tale as “a thankful remembrance of God’s mercy” and depicts the colonists both as receiving God’s action against them, but also as receiving his mercy toward them, and even functioning as his agents in fighting off the natives whom He used to chasten them. He summarizes the experience with these words:

Thus I have Indeavoured to set down and declare both what the Lord did against us in the Loss of several persons Lives, and the wounding of others, some of which wounds were very painful in dressing, and long ere they were healed, besides many dangers that we were in, and fears that we were exercised with; and also what great things he was pleased to do for us in frustrating their many Attempts, and vouchsafing such a Deliverance to us. The Lord *avenge the Blood that hath been shed* by these *Heathen who hate us without a Cause*, though he be most Righteous in all that hath befallen there, and in all other parts of the Country; He help us to *humble our selves* before him, and with our *whole hearts to return to him*.<sup>105</sup>

Wheeler’s processing of the war demonstrates that he accepted the ministerial interpretation that the war was God’s action against the colonists, and it was righteous for Him to act so. Yet the

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<sup>104</sup> Samuel Nowell, *Abraham in Arms; or The First Religious General with His Army Engaging in a War for Which He Had Wisely Prepared, and by Which, Not Only an Eminent Victory Was Obtained, but a Blessing Gained Also. Delivered in an Artillery-Election-Sermon, June, 3. 1678* (Boston, 1678), 10, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00197.0001.001>.

<sup>105</sup> Wheeler, *A Thankfull Remembrance*, 13.



war had the desired effect: it helped the colonists to humble themselves and return to the Lord. This form of processing would likely lead many people to respond as their ministers were calling them to by examining their penitence and finding sufficient subjective assurance to offer relations. Wheeler offers as much with his conclusion:

*Oh that we could praise the Lord for his great goodness towards us. Praised be his Name, that though he took away some of us, yet was pleased to spare so many of us, and adde unto our dayes; He help us whose Souls he hath delivered from Death, and Eyes from Tears, and Feet from falling to walk before him in the Land of the Living till our great Change come, and to sanctifie his Name in all his wayes about us, that both our Afflictions, and our mercies may quicken us to live more to his glory all our dayes.*<sup>106</sup>

Similar to Wheeler's account, Mary Pray wrote in a letter, "we ... know not what to do; but our eyes are upward."<sup>107</sup> While these demonstrate this kind of processing, actual conversion relations of the sort used in applying for access to the Lord's Supper would be an invaluable source for understanding the religious impact of the war on individual lives. Unfortunately, no written records of such accounts exist for the period. Until the 1690s oral accounts were standard, and the written examples we have were primarily anomalies where a pastor chose for his own reasons to record the oral testimonies, as in the case of Thomas Shepard, with only rare instances of written accounts being prepared by the applicant for submission to the congregation. This shifted, however, in the 1690s and written accounts became standard.<sup>108</sup> While this shift may seem too late for our period, there are, nonetheless, a few adult accounts offered in the 1690s in which the impact King Philip's War had on these adults' spiritual formation as children or teens in the crisis is evident. Here we find that the war played a prominent role for these adults. Mary

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<sup>106</sup> Wheeler, *A Thankfull Remembrance*, 10 [mis-numbered in the original, actually 14].

<sup>107</sup> Mary Pray to James Oliver, October 20, 1675, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th ser., 1 (1871): 105, quoted in Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 99.

<sup>108</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Falls*, loc. 12642.

Rockwood was in her late teens at the time of the war and married Josiah Rockwood, a soldier in the war, in 1677. She offered her relation later in life when she applied to receive full communion at the Medfield, Massachusetts church in 1697. According to her relation, her spiritual journey began with the death of her father, Benjamin Titchwell, in an Indian raid on Medfield at the start of King Philip's War. While she did not make her confession for many years, her reflections on her father's death and what it meant set her on a long internal path that sounds remarkably similar to many of her ancestors' personal deliberations in the context of the Atlantic crossing and early settlement.<sup>109</sup>

Samuel Smith married his wife Elizabeth in 1695, and served as a member of the board of select men for Medfield for twenty-one years before his death in 1742, but his account is otherwise undateable. He began his relation, "When I was young God did wonderfully preserve me when my mother was knoct in head by the Indians. I was in her arms. I had no hurt by them. I desire to give God alone the praise of it."<sup>110</sup> He goes on to offer a typical Puritan account of his growing in the knowledge of the faith through his grandfather, who raised him after his mother's death, and eventually coming to subjective assurance of his faith, with the whole narrative flowing from this shocking instance of God's providence in his mother's death. It is not unreasonable, given the trend in increasing numbers of people being admitted to the Lord's

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<sup>109</sup> Relation of Mary Rockwood [Rocket], August 1, 1697, Miscellaneous Church Records, 1693–1857, Medfield Historical Society, Medfield, MA, quoted in Winiarski, *Darkness Falls*, loc. 12672–12698. Medfield minister Joseph Baxter composed Rockwood's relation on the inner sides of a large folded sheet of paper. His notation on the front side reads, "The Relation of Mary Rocket the wife of Josiah Rocket., who was received to full communion August 1st 1697." Mary stated, "In my youthful days my Parents were often instructing of me, and exhorting me to love, feare, and serve God. But I was apt to set light by their counsels, and Exhortations, thinking that I was young, and it would be time enough hereafter to mind the concerns of my soule.... After this it pleased God to take away my Father suddenly by death, without giving me leave to heare anything from him which Sorely troubled me because the words of dying Persons, and especially of dying relations doe usually take impression on those that doe survive. Hereupon I was sorely troubled thinking that God was angry with me."

<sup>110</sup> William S. Tilden, *History of the Town of Medfield, Massachusetts, 1650–1886: With Genealogies of the Families That Held Real Estate or Made Any Considerable Stay in the Town during the First Two Centuries*, (Boston: Ellis, 1887), 481, <https://archive.org/details/historyoftownofm00tild>.

Supper correlating to the period of King Philip's War, to assume that similar factors were at play among the earlier oral accounts as is seen in these later written accounts. It is worth noting that, while two accounts are insufficient for a quantitative study, those two accounts represent all the extant recorded relations that document this period that this author could find.<sup>111</sup> That means that in the data we have, King Philip's War was seen as a significant event in the spiritual formation of the applicant for full communion. Mary Rowlandson was captured and held by natives for a time during the war. While not giving her account as part of application for church membership, she nonetheless evidences similar attitudes in her processing of her captivity during the war in her published account of the experience. The account was "Written by her own hand for her private use," but "made public at the earnest desire of some friends, and for the benefit of the afflicted."<sup>112</sup> In summarizing the lessons of her captivity she reflects,

I have seen the extreme vanity of this world: One hour I have been in health, and wealthy, wanting nothing. But the next hour in sickness and wounds, and death, having nothing but sorrow and affliction .... I should be sometimes jealous lest I should have my portion in this life, and that Scripture would come to my mind, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth" (Hebrews 12.6). But now I see the Lord had His time to scourge and chasten me .... Affliction I wanted, and affliction I had, full measure (I thought), pressed down and running over. Yet I see, when God calls a person to anything, and through never so many difficulties, yet He is fully able to carry them through and make them see, and say they have been gainers thereby .... The Lord hath showed me the vanity of these

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<sup>111</sup> This may seem odd but, as noted, recorded relations did not become common until twenty years after the conflict. That we have a body of relations to examine from the first generation stems almost entirely from the oddity that one pastor, Thomas Shepard, liked to record relations as they were made verbally. For a written relation to touch on King Philip's War the relation would have to have been the new relation of a person who was old enough at the time of the war for it to have some effect on their spiritual development, but who then put off making a relation for at least two decades, when the churches adoption of the practice of giving written relations would make it possible to leave a record for posterity. The rise in people making relations began in the mid-to-late 1670s, when relations were only given verbally. So most people affected by the war to process their experiences into subjective assurance would have made their relations at a time when such relations were not recorded.

<sup>112</sup> Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed, Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Commended by Her, to All that Desires to Know the Lord's Doings to, and Dealings with Her. Especially to Her Dear Children and Relations* (Cambridge, 1683), in Richard Slotkin and James K. Folsom, *So Dreadfull a Judgment: Puritan Responses to King Philip's War 1676-1677* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 317.

outward things .... That we must rely on God Himself, and our whole dependance must be upon Him.<sup>113</sup>

Rowlandson's testimony was not a relation offered for church membership, yet it seemed she processed the experience of captivity in the war in a way which increased her subjective assurance in the way many before and after her would articulate their appeals for church membership.

The ministers seem to have anticipated this response in their preaching. Urian Oakes, in an artillery election sermon the year after the war ended, warned his audience,

Who sees not that God's Design is to humble proud New-England? Therefore admit I beseech you, an humbling Discourse in an humbling Time and suffer this word of Exhortation, the drift whereof is, not to discourage from the use of Means, or take off your edge from military Exercises; but to press you to get & keep a due Sense of your own Insufficiency in your several Capacities, to do any Exploits, or accomplish any good Purposes of your selves.<sup>114</sup>

Here we see the sermon processing the experience of pain and calling for the old practice of relations to be the solution to that pain. Church records indicate that many made that exact response.

### The Pain of Natural Disaster: Fire and Plague

The war was not the only experience that caused instability. In November, close following the end of the war, a great fire broke out in Boston, destroying the second meeting house (North Church), and consuming seventy to eighty homes, including Increase Mather's. Reflecting on the

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<sup>113</sup> Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, 365–66.

<sup>114</sup> Urian Oakes, *The Sovereign Efficacy of Divine Providence; Over Ruling and Omnipotently Disposing and Ordering All Humane Counsels and Affairs, Asserted, Demonstrated and Improved, in a Discourse Evincing, That (Not Any Arm of Flesh, but) the Right Hand of the Most High Is It, That Swayeth the Universal Scepter of This Lower World's Government. Oft Wheeling about the Prudentest Management of the Profoundest Plotts, of the Greatest on Earth; Unto Such, Issues and Events, as Are Amazingly Contrary to All Humane Probabilities, and Cross to the Confident Expectation of Lookers on: As Delivered in a Sermon Preached at Cambridge, on Sept. 10. 1677. Being the Day of Artillery Election There* (Boston, 1682), 28, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00257.0001.001>.

tragedy the next day, Mather recorded in his diary,

This morning bef I rise, ys thought came into my mind, Is Judgt begun at ye House of God! Must it begin wth me? And is this all? Shall ye cupp pass away from me so? My hrt was melted bef ye Ld. Surely, I see yt God is a Loving e tender hrtd Father, inasmuch as Hee is pleased to afflict me Correct me wth so much gentleness. Time taken vp in distractns by reasn of desolations wch made yesterday.<sup>115</sup>

With the impact of the fire causing such thoughts in Mather’s own internal dialogue, it is understandable that his congregants would interpret the war, fire, and other traumatic events in similar ways, respond to their pastor’s urging to contemplate their experience and spiritual state, and—applying the rubric they found in other conversion experiences in Puritan New England—begin to find reason for subjective assurance.

Less than two years later—indeed, starting in 1677—New England faced a threat that had not been seen by any colonists since leaving Europe: smallpox. The epidemic came on European ships, and so hit the coastal towns and villages, and particularly the port cities, hardest. Mather recorded the daily death tolls—and little else—in his journal throughout 1678. Filling in after more than a month gap in his entries, he wrote, “Aug. 8. a Fast in ye old meeting house because of ye small pox. Within 2 days after 7 persons died. The next Sab 19 prayed for in ye meeting house.

“The latter end of Augt & beg of Sepr the small Pox spread much in Boston

“This new Moon 150 Persons fell down by ye small pox. above 30 taken in a day.”<sup>116</sup>

Mather’s son, Cotton—a fifteen year old boy at the time who suffered only a mild case of smallpox—recorded the experience of the epidemic in a letter:

Never was it such a time in Boston. Boston burying-places never filled so fast. It is easy to tell the time when we did not use to have the bells tolling for burials on a Sabbath morning by sunrise; to have 7 buried on a Sabbath day night, after Meeting.

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<sup>115</sup> I. Mather, *Diary*, November 28, 1676, in *MHS Proceedings*, 2:13, 374.

<sup>116</sup> I. Mather, *Diary*, August, 1678, in *MHS Proceedings*, 2:13, 406.

To have coffins crossing each other as they have been carried in the street; — To have, I know not how many corpses following each other close at their heels, — To have 38 dye in one week, — 6, 7, 8 or 9 in a day. Yet thus hath it lately been; and thus it is at this day. Above 340 have died of the Small Pox in Boston since it first assaulted this place. To attempt a Bill of mortality, and number the very spires of grass in a Burying Place seems to have a parity of difficulty and in accomplishment.<sup>117</sup>

Michael Hall estimates that ten percent of Boston’s population died in the epidemic, “a terrible mortality.”<sup>118</sup> David Stannard places the death toll at twenty percent.<sup>119</sup> In the context of such suffering—something the New England colonists had not confronted in two generations—Increase turned to imagery from the Book of Revelation in his introduction to a timely publication, Thomas Thacher’s *A fast of Gods chusing*, a fast day sermon from 1674, published in response to the epidemic. Thacher was carried away by the epidemic later that year as Mather recorded in his diary on October 15:<sup>120</sup>

The Lord knew that Boston, yea, that New-England would have cause for many dayes of Humiliation, and therefore stirred up the heart of his Servant, before hand to give instructions and Directions concerning the acceptable performance of so great a duty.... if my Conjectures fail not, the dayes are at hand when New-England will have as great cause as ever to attend Humiliations and supplications before the most High. There is no general Reformation visible in New-England, nor so much as an heart to comply with the Scripture expedient for that end We have seen the red Horse amongst us, even bloody judgements and desolations, but are not bettered thereby: Now there is a pale Horse come, and his Name that sits thereon is Death; Stars are falling, our Heaven, and our Earth are shaking; What will come next, who can say?<sup>121</sup>

Mather saw King Philip’s War as the red horse, and he now identified the epidemic as the pale

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<sup>117</sup> C. Mather to John Cotton, November 1678, in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, 4th series, VIII (1868), 383–384, <https://archive.org/details/collectionsmass27socigoog/page/n7/mode/2up>.

<sup>118</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 147.

<sup>119</sup> David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 55.

<sup>120</sup> I. Mather, Diary, October 15, 1678, in *MHS Proceedings*, 2:13, 406.

<sup>121</sup> I. Mather, “To the Reader” in Thomas Thacher, *A Fast of Gods Chusing, Plainly Opened, for the Help of Those Poor in Spirit, Whose Hearts Are Set to Seek the Lord Their God in New-England.... Preached on a Fast Called by Publick Authority, on 26.1.74* (Boston, 1678), no page number, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00198.0001.001>.

horse bearing death. Interestingly, Mather's next next line begins, "Stars are falling." He recorded in his diary in August of the following year, "a blazing star seen in England" in the entry after recording another significant fire in which "The greatest part of ye riches of ye town thought to be consumed in this conflagration. £150,000 loss."<sup>122</sup> Mather saw the events around him as portended in the stars, in accordance with biblical prophecy.

In 1668 Thomas Vincent had published in Cambridge an account of the London plague of 1666. Describing the arrival of the plague, he pictured it entirely as a response to sin:

Now secure sinners begin to be startled, and those who would have slept at quiet still in their nests, are unwillingly awakened. Now a great consternation seizeth upon most persons, and fearful bodings of a desolating judgement. Now guilty sinners begin to look about them, and think with themselves into what corner of the Land they might fly to hide them. Now the prophane and sensual, if they have not remorse for their sins, yet dread and terrours, the effect of guilt, they could not drive from them.<sup>123</sup>

This perspective would have been one of the resources pastors drew on as they interpreted the events with their congregations in their sermons, and that laypeople would have reflected on in their personal processing of their experiences. Cotton Mather would exhort his congregation in a later pastoral letter that, "Certainly, it becomes a Family to lie very Low before God, when He shall send Sickness into it."<sup>124</sup> In a similar way, in writing a report of a later outbreak of epidemic in New Hampshire, Jabez Fitch reflected,

We know not what the Designs of Providence may be, but by what we hear of the spreading of this Distemper in other parts of the Country, it seems as if the Lord *were risen up out of his holy Habitation* and coming forth in this awful manner against the whole Continent. It therefore concerns all Places and Persons to *prepare to meet the*

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<sup>122</sup> I. Mather, Diary, August 8 and 30, 1679, in *MHS Proceedings*, 2:13, 407.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas Vincent, *Gods Terrible Voice in the City of London Wherein You Have the Narration of the Two Late Dreadful Judgements of Plague and Fire, Inflicted by the Lord Upon that City; the Former in the Year 1665. the Latter in the Year 1666* (Cambridge, 1668), 5, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00083.0001.001>.

<sup>124</sup> C. Mather, *Wholesome Words. A Visit of Advice, Given Unto Families that Are Visited with Sickness; By a Pastoral Letter, Briefly Declaring the Duties Incumbent on All Persons in the Families, that Have Any Sick Persons in Them* (Boston, 1713), 4, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N01375.0001.001>.

*Lord in the way of his Judgments, by unfeigned Repentance and humble Supplication, that He may turn from the fierceness of his Anger.*<sup>125</sup>

As pastors applied the events to their congregations in this way, it is easy to see why congregants paid more attention to their spiritual state, and began to find in their experience sufficient assurance to seek the comfort of the Lord's Table and the church's affirmation of the reality of their being numbered among the elect.

### The Pain of Political Instability

Throughout this period the political position of New England became increasingly tenuous, as the Restoration brought Charles II to England as the head of state in 1660. Under Oliver Cromwell's government, England had been decidedly friendly to the Puritan administration in New England. True, parliament had authorized the Presbyterian Westminster Assembly to direct polity for the Church of England, but it was nonetheless a Puritan state. Indeed, Cromwell and his army were distinctly Congregational in their church polity preferences, and in the decade following the Westminster Assembly, Congregationalism became a balancing force to Westminster Presbyterianism. The New Englanders, certain that the Puritans under Cromwell "were destined by divine providence to succeed... had denied their allegiance to Charles I, listened with approval to John Cotton preach in support of the king's execution, and recognized the legitimacy of the Commonwealth and Protectorate,"<sup>126</sup> even sheltering several of the regicides. With the return of the Stuart Monarchy, Puritan New England was suddenly on unstable political footing. Charles II, however, busy consolidating power in England itself, was

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<sup>125</sup> Jabez Fitch, *An Account of the Numbers that Have Died of the Distemper in the Throat, Within the Province of New-Hampshire, with Some Reflections Thereon* (Portsmouth, 1736), 13, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N03300.0001.001>.

<sup>126</sup> Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 143.



slow to turn his attention to the colonies.

The colonies were also struggling through growing internal factionalism: in Massachusetts a royalist party emerged, which wished to embrace Charles II. Made up of Anglicans who had emigrated for reasons of business, this group saw in closer royal oversight greater freedoms from the Puritan state. Opposing this group were the commonwealth men who wanted to insist on the Bay Colony's independence under the original charter. In the middle were the moderates, who wished to approach the king in a conciliatory fashion, while seeking to preserve as much independence as possible.

The petition the General Court drew up attempted to walk a middle line, but was far less conciliatory and fawning than Charles would have been used to, but it was sent with two representatives who were from the moderate faction. Charles was cool in his reception of Massachusetts's initial petition that he acknowledge the charter, but he did acknowledge it in a letter, together with instructions that they "repeal all laws derogatory to the monarchy, administer oaths of allegiance and justice in the name of the sovereign, allow freedom of worship for Anglicans, and eliminate church membership as a condition for the franchise."<sup>127</sup> This was not received well.

New Haven followed suit, slow to acknowledge the new king and demanding in tone in its entreaties to him while opening talks with New Netherland about relocating the colony to modern New Jersey. Meanwhile, Rhode Island and Connecticut made swift and polite appeals to the monarch. Connecticut had always been on shaky ground constitutionally and was seeking a new and solid charter for its existence. Its governor, John Winthrop Jr., played the circumstances well and ended up having Connecticut's borders redrawn to encompass neighboring New Haven

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<sup>127</sup> Bremer, *Puritan Experiment*, 145.

and part of Rhode Island. With Connecticut swallowing up its neighbors, Massachusetts dissolving into factionalism, and New Haven making overtures to the Dutch, a Royal Commission was sent in 1664 with troops to address the situation. In Boston, when news of royal troops en route to New England was received, it was assumed the troops were aimed at the Bay Colony and preparations were made for armed conflict. The troops, however, turned out to be aimed at New Netherland, and their attack sparked the Second Anglo-Dutch war, the prosecution of which consumed Charles's attention for several years, and gave the volatile situation in New England a chance to cool.

At first, Charles had placed the colonies under the Council of Foreign Plantations, with Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, as its president. Shaftesbury was sympathetic to English Dissenters and parliamentary law, and changed little of how things were administered in New England. His politics and policies, however, placed him in opposition with the royal prerogative party in England, and in 1675 Charles II replaced the Council of Foreign Plantations with the more loyal Committee of the Privy Council for Trade and Plantations, which came to be called the Lords of Trade and supervised the American colonies for twenty years. This placed the colonies under greater scrutiny than they had experienced since the Restoration began, and this scrutiny revealed how far afield they had strayed: Massachusetts had only admitted non-church members to freemanship in a very modified form, had ignored the remainder of Charles's stipulations, and was even sheltering regicides.<sup>128</sup> Consequently its charter was rescinded by royal writ in 1683. The writ specified, however, that if the colony resigned its charter without a court trial, the king would make minimal changes to it. If the colony contested it, however, he would hold the men behind the decision personally responsible. Called on to speak to a town

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<sup>128</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 190.

meeting in which Boston's response was being debated, Increase Mather said,

As the Question is now stated, (viz. whether you will make a full submission and entire Resignation of your Charter and priviledges of it, to his Majesties pleasure) wee shall sin against God if wee vote an Affirmative to it. The scripture teacheth us otherwise. Wee know that Jephthah said. That which the Lord our God has given us, shall not we possess! And Naboth, tho he ran a great hazard by the refusal, yet said, God forbid that I should give away the Inheritance of my Fathers. Now would it be wisdom for us to comply. Wee know that David made a wise choice, when He chose to fall into the hands of God rather than into the hands of men. If wee make a full submission and entire Resignation to pleasure, we fall into the hands of men immediately. But if wee do it not, we keep ourselves still in the hands of God, and Trust ourselves with his providence and who knoweth what God may do for us? Moreover, there are examples before our eyes, the consideration whereof should be of weight with us.<sup>129</sup>

The freemen chose to contest the writ and lost. Mather recorded in August of 1684, "I likewise hear that the great ones in England are offended at what I spoke to the Freemen in Boston. In England things are sad. As for New England the charter is condemned by a *Scire facias*."<sup>130</sup>

Mather continued to interpret these events as actions of God's judgement or mercy. In his *Autobiography* he recorded,

I have thus Recorded in my diary. Feb. 6. 1684. "This day spent in my study, in prayer and Meditation, with Fasting. As I was praying that God would deliver New England I was much moved and melted before the Lord, not being able to speake for some time. But then I could not but say, *God will deliver New England! God will deliver New England! God will deliver New England*. So did I rise from my knees with much comfort and assurance that God had heard me. Those things I think were from the spirit of God. Before I prayed, I was very sad and dejected in my spirit; but after I had prayed, I was very joyfull and cheerfull. I will then wayt for Gods salvation."

This very day King Charles II dyed, by whose death Kirk's coming as Governor to New England was prevented, and New England was that day delivered.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> I. Mather, *The Autobiography of Increase Mather*, ed. Michael G. Hall (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1962), 308.

<sup>130</sup> I. Mather, *Autobiography of Increase Mather*, 311.

<sup>131</sup> I. Mather, *Autobiography of Increase Mather*, 313. Mather's dating of the diary entry as 1684 when Charles II died on February 6, 1685, is due to the transition period from dating the new year on January 1 to dating the new year on April 1. During this period Mather uses the years interchangeably. "Kirk" was Colonel Piercy Kirke

These events were not only affecting ministers. Samuel Sewall recorded in his diary the arrival of news from England of the execution of Lady Lisle—whose daughter, Madam Usher, was a resident of Boston—for the crime of sheltering men who were later convicted of being involved in Monmouth’s rebellion. He listed others executed and punished together with the note, “Is a Rumor that the Government will be changed, this Fall or Winter, by some Person sent over, or a Comission to some here.”<sup>132</sup> Sewall notes in the same entry, “This Friday night began to read the Revelation in Course, having begun Pareus just about the same time though not on purpose.”<sup>133</sup> While he insists his readings were matters of “course” and “not on purpose,” it is clear he saw ties between these readings and was considering their relation to the events unfolding before him. A few days later he recorded, “Mr. Mather Preaches from Numb. 25.11. Shewed that Love was an ingredient to make one zealous: those that received good People, received Christ, Mat. 25. Said that if the Government of N.E. were zealous might yet save this people 2d. Part of 79th Ps. sung. Madam Usher, her Daughter and Husband in Mourning.”<sup>134</sup> It appears from Sewall’s inclusion of Madam Usher’s mourning that Mather was likely targeting his sermon at responding to the injustice of her mother’s execution. The second part of Psalm 79 is an entreaty to God not to remember former iniquities, and to allow the groaning of the prisoners to come before God and to preserve those doomed to die. A few weeks later an acquaintance with whom he attended court informed him, “that the Court proceeded upon a Law made since the vacating the Charter,

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of Tangier who would hunt down the rebels who had supported the Duke of Monmouth in his ill-fated rebellion against Charles II’s successor, James. By the time Mather was compiling the autobiography, Kirke’s bloody work was known in New England and led the colonies to take a more conciliatory tone with James.

<sup>132</sup> Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall: 1674–1729* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878), 104–5.

<sup>133</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 105. Pareus was a German theologian who fell into disrepute with monarchists in England for his belief that rulers should be called to account for their actions.

<sup>134</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 106–7.

and therefore he should not attend: so that this Monday we begin palpably to dye.” It seems clear that New England was very gripped by the danger of their political situation and perceived it in terms of God’s judgment and mercy.

It would not be until the following December that the “Person sent over” to change the government actually arrived. Sir Edmund Andros came with two companies of soldiers not only to take over governing Massachusetts, but to command a new entity called the Dominion of New England, which was intended to stretch from modern-day Maine to Delaware. Andros’s title was not to be Governor, but Governor-General, as the Dominion was to be governed by a military officer who answered directly to London without any form of legislature whatsoever. The long-feared political outcome had arrived. In the sermon for December 19, the day Andros’s ship arrived in Boston, Sewall recorded, “Mr. Willard said he was fully persuaded and confident God would not forget the Faith of those who came first to New England, but would remember their Posterity with kindness. One Doct. Faith usually reaps the greatest Crops off the barrenest Ground.”<sup>135</sup> Clearly, Willard was holding out hope in what he perceived as bleak times.

Upon his arrival Andros asked to use the North Meeting House for worship according to the Prayer Book. The congregation refused. After several more entreaties, Andros simply commandeered the building. Sewall noted on March 29, “Last Sabbath-day, March 27, Governour and his retinue met in our Meeting house at Eleven: broke off past two because of the Sacrament and Mr.Clark’s long Sermon; now we were appointed to come 1 hour past one, so ‘twas a sad Sight to see how full the Street was with people gazing and moving to and fro because had not entrance into the House.”<sup>136</sup> Both Mather and Sewall recorded throughout this

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<sup>135</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 159.

<sup>136</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 172.

period the encroachment of English customs and Church of England practices into Puritan New England. The end of April and beginning of May were particularly dismal for Mather:

23. This Sabbath night was greatly profaned by bonfires, fireworks &c under pretence of honor to ye King's Coronation.

27. Sword playing was this day openly practised on a Stage in Boston & that immediately after ye Lecture, so yt the Devil has begun a Lecture in Boston on a Lecture-day wh was set up for Christ.

May 1. A May pole was set up in Charlestown<sup>137</sup>

In the experience of those who identified most closely with the New England Way, the waning of New England's political independence, and the growth of English cultural and religious practices throughout the 1660s–1690s were producing a situation that would have mirrored—or at least reminded them of—the experience of their ancestors in England in the early 1600s. Indeed, Pope demonstrated that, in the Roxbury, Charlestown, and Boston Third Church, the 1680s marked the highest point of the re-invigoration of the churches that occurred in the last third of the seventeenth century, both in numbers of parishioners entering into full communion and in owning the covenant.<sup>138</sup> In a sermon preached to the General Assembly on election day in 1685, William Adams bemoaned the unfaithfulness of New England, which would bring God's judgment, saying:

*We have not been subject to Order and Government, civil, ecclesiastical or domestical. We have been a Corporation that have lived too much in the violation of our own Laws ... There has been too much of a lawless, ungovern'd spirit. And for the true Order and Government of Christ in His Church, that hath been in some places little practised, in some much withstood, and in others quite overthrown, whilst power and Government hath been fixed in those that should be ruled, and only a liberty to lift up their hands left to the Rulers, and together therewith other Ordinances of Christ have been undervalued and abused.*<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> I. Mather, *Diary*, April 23, 27, May 1, in *MHS Proceedings*, 2:13, 410–11.

<sup>138</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, see graphs 1, 2, 3, pp. 210, 216 and 221 respectively.

<sup>139</sup> William Adams, *God's Eye on the Contrite: or A Discourse Shewing that True Poverty and Contrition of*

Adams demonstrated the results of such unfaithfulness:

God hath drawn out His sword against us, and hath given it a charge to devour round about our Coasts, and many have fallen down slain by it. God hath blown upon the Labour of our hands, by Blastings, Flouds, Droughts, and losses by Ship-wrecks and otherways; and of what hath remained he hath found out continual waies for disbursment, to make and keep us empty. God hath sent sore Sicknesses and Pestilential diseases upon us which have sorely wasted us. God hath again and again contended by terrible Fires, which have eat up a great part of our pleasant Enjoyments. He has also frustrated our expectations and hopes many ways.<sup>140</sup>

This list is almost an exact catalogue of the pains of the preceding decade, with an allusion to the frustration of New England's political hopes and expectations—these could, of course, not be published overtly after the Restoration. As the people experienced these things, their pastors held out to them that such pain was the judgement of God and that the remedy, as the title of the sermon states, was to acknowledge one's poverty of spirit with contriteness.

In the summer of 1687, with Anglican worship and Anglican customs taking place in Boston, James Allen preached a sermon, warning that “because the House of God lies waste, it is the neglect of upholding and maintaining Gods Holy Institutions, and the Ordinances of his House” God was being “provoke[d] ... to inflict such Judgments as we are now under.”<sup>141</sup> It seems that the experience of becoming a dominated political entity as their grandparents had been in England carried with it similar implications for people's experience of subjective assurance, and for their desire to bond themselves to the church with or without such assurance (i.e., the increase of instances of people owning the covenant). Sermons interpreting Andros'

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*Spirit and Trembling at God's Word is the Infallible and Only Way for the Obtaining and Retaining of Divine Acceptation. As it was Made in the Audience of the General Assembly of the Massachusetts Colony at Boston in New-England; May 27. 1685. Being the Day of Election There* (Boston, 1685), 24, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00304.0001.001>.

<sup>140</sup> Adams, *God's Eye on the Contrite*, 27.

<sup>141</sup> James Allen, *Neglect of Supporting and Maintaining the Pure Worship of God, by the Professing People of God: Is a God-Provoking and Land-Wasting Sin. And Repentance with Reformation of It, the Only Way to Their Outward Felicity: Or, The Cause of New-Englands Scarcity: And Right Way to Its Plenty* (Boston, 1687), 8, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00349.0001.001>.

actions as parallel to those of the persecutors of Old England would have to have been quite circumspect. Sewall noted on May 5, 1687, “Mr. Mather preaches against Covetousness. Text, Thou Fool, &c. Speaks against neglecting Prayer, pressing the Instance of Daniel. It seems was no Prayer last County-Court.”<sup>142</sup> Sewall’s tying Mather’s exhortation to the lack of prayer in government proceedings seems no coincidence.

The growing presence of Anglicans—and their more favored political position under Andros’s administration—no doubt produced social circumstances that, at least in the understanding of those committed to the New England Way in the 1680s, would have seemed very like the experience of their ancestors. This is suggested by the printing in Boston of a thanksgiving sermon which was preached in the House of Commons upon William’s ascension by Gilbert Burnet, his chaplain. The sermon alludes to the New Englanders when, depicting the dangers of Roman Catholic influence in the monarchy, Burnet described how,

*All the Happiness we could have expected was that which was the Portion of some of our persecuted Brethren, that abandoning their Countrey, their Estates, and their Families, thought themselves but too happy if they could escape with their Lives in their Hands, and their Consciences undefiled .... A long and dangerous Navigation to the East or West-Indies was all the hope that seemed left*<sup>143</sup>

Burnet was explicit that God was saving England from “popery” as well as “arbitrary power,” a reference to the Stuarts, and likely the reason for the sermon’s being reprinted in Boston.

### Conclusion

On the whole, the various social disturbances of the 1670s and 1680s—war, epidemic, political

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<sup>142</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 176.

<sup>143</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *A Sermon Preached before the House of Commons, on the 31st of January 1688 [i.e., 1689, n.s.]. Being the Thanksgiving-Day for the Deliverance of This Kingdom from Popery and Arbitrary Power. By His Highness the Prince of Oranges Means* (Boston, 1689), 12–13, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00378.0001.001>, emphasis original.



uncertainty and perceived repression—appear to have addressed the decline in church membership even while the ministers continued to bemoan the falling away of their contemporary generation. Their preaching, the diary entries of ministers and parishioners, and the recorded religious experiences available indicate that the uncertainty and unrest created a climate in which more people began to identify in their experiences the things they understood from their pastors were necessary to have subjective assurance and pursue admission to the Lord’s Supper. The experience of trauma these various tragedies produced seems to have created similar enough circumstances to those of the first generation—political repression in England, transatlantic passage and deprivation in the New England wilderness—to produce similar experiences of subjective assurance. It appears that the “half-way” measures which churches were so unwilling to adopt in 1662 were aided in their adoption even as the need for them was mitigated somewhat by the increase in applications for admission to communion. At the same time, the debates surrounding the 1662 Synod had hammered out an understanding of church membership which viewed children as full members even if they had not been granted all the privileges of membership which accompanied subjective assurance. It was this theology, and the effect it had on people’s understanding of the relationship between subjective assurance and participation in the Lord’s Supper which set up the primary debates of the 1690s. These debates over who should participate in the Lord’s Supper and what the Supper was for would reshape Congregational polity towards church membership and the understanding of conversion and subjective assurance; and create the context for the Great Awakening of the 1740s. It is to these debates we shall turn in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PROBLEM EVOLVES

In this chapter we shall consider the development of the doctrine of subjective assurance from the late 1690s to the beginning of the eighteenth century. Here, our attention is focused upon a particular controversy. Earlier, we considered the broader picture of the contextualization of the doctrine of assurance. This involved the official policies that churches began implementing to confront the difficulty with assurance—like the half-way covenant—and the tragedies and practices that offered some correction to the problem in the last quarter of the seventeenth century—such as war, fire, epidemic, political turmoil, and the processing of those experiences in sermon and private reflection. Now, I shall consider an argument that concerned assurance and the role that the sacraments, specifically the Lord’s Supper, played in cultivating subjective assurance.

While the argument would have many participants, the primary public faces of the argument were Solomon Stoddard on the one hand, and Increase Mather and later his son Cotton Mather, on the other. An issue that must be addressed because it is the most prominent feature of the argument and distracted both the opponents and modern scholars, is Stoddard’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper as a converting ordinance. I will argue that this doctrine was far less radical than it was perceived to be, either by Stoddard’s contemporary opponents or by modern scholars. Despite misperceptions, Stoddard was not proposing that nonbelievers outside the church be brought to the Lord’s Supper as a means of converting them to faith. He was speaking to the age-old problem the Puritans were aware of that, no matter how scrupulous they were in fencing the Lord’s Table, some unregenerate people may participate in the Lord’s Supper. Stoddard’s response, as he advocated a less rigorous approach to Table-admission, was that the Supper itself

could convert those who came to it who were not already regenerate. While this issue became the focus of the debate, the more important aspect of the argument for my purposes is how the debate refined, clarified, and further developed the doctrine of assurance. In order to engage this long argument, we begin by considering the context that gave it birth.

Coming out of the 1662 Synod, it appeared that New England theology was fracturing into two camps. One, a majority position among the pastors, held that membership was for those who had demonstrated their subjective assurance through verbal relations and their children, who were full—though non-communing—members in perpetuity. Richard Mather, John Norton, and Jonathan Mitchell were some of the most notable proponents of this view. The other camp held great sway among the laity of New England, but was a minority position among the clergy. Davenport and Chauncy headed this group, which included Richard Mather's sons Eleazer and Increase. In this camp real, full membership was limited to those who had demonstrated their election by their subjective assurance in verbal relations. Their children were only mediate members who would lose their membership if subjective assurance did not manifest itself in adulthood.

One might anticipate that ensuing debates would continue along these lines. Yet such was not the case. Within ten years both leaders of the minority camp were dead; and Increase Mather changed sides of the debate even as he assumed the mantle of one of New England's most prominent pastors and theologians. The minority position, as far as Congregationalism was concerned, dissipated as its lay proponents were absorbed into the majority practice of the ministers during the upheavals of the last quarter of the century. Yet the tension created by continuing to hold external experience and subjective assurance as a normative aspect of faith would cause the question to morph in new directions as new elements emerged. The pastors'

continued perception of moral decline would lead to a concern for covenant renewal ceremonies, which would contribute to a heightened interest in the sacraments. With this interest—and increased Eucharistic celebration and focus—new disagreements arose over how to address the tensions of having baptized but non-communing members often making up a majority of congregants. As Increase Mather came to champion the perspective of his father, another man of his family, Solomon Stoddard, would champion a new perspective on the matter, and this divide would dominate debates among Congregationalists for the coming half-century.<sup>1</sup>

### **Old Problem, Somewhat New Solution**

The first signs of this new conflict began to appear in the mid-1670s as Stoddard began to work out answers to the problem of assurance in the life of his congregation. Considering Stoddard's personal experience as a child, one sees how, at this early stage in the argument, the issue is not so much built upon an understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as it is built upon a response to the practice of the half-way covenant.

Stoddard was born and grew up in Boston, thoroughly immersed in the New England Way's rooting of church membership—and thus, community endorsement of one's election—in subjective assurance. As a non-communing child in John Cotton's congregation,

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<sup>1</sup> It must be remembered how much the evolution occurring in New England theology was a family discussion: an argument taking place among friends, neighbors, colleagues and, indeed, family members. Increase and Eleazar Mather had disagreed with their father when they stood with Davenport and Chauncy at the 1662 synod. Seven years later, in the wake of Richard's death, and then Davenport's being exposed as having misrepresented the circumstances under which he took leave of the New Haven church to come and pastor First Church of Boston, Increase changed sides of the debate. At around the same time—upon Eleazar's premature death—Increase helped his brother's church in Northampton install a new minister, Stoddard, who would later marry Eleazar's widow, Esther Mather. When the continuing evolution of the argument led Stoddard to begin framing radical practices, Increase would side against his sister-in-law's new husband and with Stoddard's neighbor, Edward Taylor—a young clergyman Increase had mentored—in a new generation of debates. While Increase and Stoddard were publishing pamphlets and sermons arguing against each other, Stoddard was raising three of Increase's nephews and nieces as his stepchildren. The interwoven nature of the lives of the participants in these debates made them not academic exercises, but issues that had real consequences for real people they knew and cared about.

The terrors of the unconverted state as the Reverend John Cotton exposed them to tender minds must have been strong *Milk for Babes*, indeed, and the catechism probably made a lasting impression on Solomon. As he gradually matured, he failed, as did most of his friends, and all of his brothers and sisters, to give a relation of his religious experiences to the Boston congregation. Throughout their youth the Stoddard children, although part of a Puritan dynasty in the Bay, never took communion with their parents. Understandably, the Lord's Supper became somewhat of a terrifying obstacle.<sup>2</sup>

This terrifying obstacle must have been a great burden—both emotionally and to some extent vocationally—to Stoddard as he was educated for the ministry at Harvard; he served first as a fellow and then as librarian of the college, then briefly as a chaplain to dissenters in Barbados, before being called to pastor the church in Northampton sometime after preaching there in 1669. In 1670, shortly after taking the call, Stoddard married Esther—his predecessor Eleazer Mather's widow—who, according to oral traditions about Stoddard's early years in Northampton,<sup>3</sup> believed her new husband was unconverted and organized prayer meetings among women in the town to pray for his conversion. Stoddard became aware of these meetings and was pressed back into the anxiety of his youth.

At some point after this—the source is explicit in noting that the tradition “was somewhat indefinite as to times and seasons”<sup>4</sup>—Stoddard was conducting a celebration of the Lord's Supper when he had a fuller experience of conversion than he had known before, and which apparently answered Esther's concerns:

one Sabbath as he was at the table administering the Lord's Supper, he had a new and wonderful revelation of the gospel scheme. He caught such a full and glorious view of Christ and his great love for men as shown in his redemptive work, that he was

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph J. Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), 27.

<sup>3</sup> David Paul McDowell, *Beyond the Half-Way Covenant: Solomon Stoddard's Understanding of the Lord's Supper as a Converting Ordinance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 34. McDowell suggested this information may have come from Pastor Lathrop of West Springfield. See I. N. Tarbox, “Jonathan Edwards as a Man and Ministers of the Last Century,” *The New Englander*, 43, (1884): 624, cited Lathrop as the source of the information, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044092671163>.

<sup>4</sup> Tarbox, “Jonathan Edwards,” 625.

almost overpowered with emotion, and with difficulty went forward with the communion service. By reason of this peculiar experience of his he was led to think, that the place where the soul was likely to receive spiritual light and understanding was at the Lord's table,—that there, in a special manner, Christ would be present to reveal himself, in all his fullness of love to the souls of men.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to see why such an experience would lead Stoddard in the direction he would eventually go, though it does raise the question of how apocryphal is the link between the experience itself and Stoddard's thought developments upon it. Assuming the veracity of the account, this experience may well have served as a catalyst for Stoddard's developing a new perspective on the role of the Lord's Supper in conversion.

The first indication of this new perspective has been dated to November 5, 1677.

According to Ralph Coffman, a biographer of Stoddard, on this date, “silently and without warning, the first revolution in American history began. On that day Stoddard simply stopped recording whether his parishioners were either full or Half-Way members of the church in Northampton.”<sup>6</sup> How Stoddard's thoughts progressed during the period between his arrival in

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<sup>5</sup> Tarbox, “Jonathan Edwards,” 625–26. The timing of this tale is unclear. McDowell stated that the event took place before April, 1672, and Coffman implied the same, apparently because it was on April 6 of that year that Stoddard was admitted to full communion at the Northampton church, and the tale itself is assumed to be the relation that he offered to be admitted. However, given he was actually administering the Lord's Supper at the time of this experience, it does not seem likely that the experience could precede his admission to the table at Northampton. Stoddard was admitted to communion at the Northampton church on April 6, 1772 and ordained probably on September 11 of that year (*Northampton, Mass. First Church of Christ records, 1661–1846*, 29, 147–48, <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/series1/NorthamptonMAFirst5314>), so it is likely that the event was not the basis of Stoddard's admission to full communion, so much as it was an experience resulting from his reflections on Esther's concerns. As such it probably took place after his admission to full communion. Stoddard would not have been administering communion if he had not yet been admitted to the communion table or ordained as the church's pastor. The uncertainty in Stoddard's ordination date comes in that on page 29 of the church records it is noted, “Sept: 11<sup>th</sup> 1672. Solomon Stoddard was ordained pastor to the church at North-Hampton...” while in the grid in page 147-48 in the column “ordained” for Stoddard's row the date “11.7.1672” is noted. As this could be “11 July” or “November 11,” and the eleventh already factors in the September date on page 29, I assume the “11” to be accurate and the “7” to be a mistake for “9.”

<sup>6</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 43. Though Coffman does not cite how he arrived at this date, it must be derived from the Northampton church records. For the period from the church's gathering with Eleazar Mather as its pastor in 1661 to 1679 the records are kept on a grid—unusual for the period—with each baptized individual named on his or her own row, and with columns for his or her family association, date of baptism, personally taking the covenant, admonition, excommunication, readmittance, admission to full communion, and then columns for admission, excommunication, and readmittance again. Coffman must not have found anyone admitted to full

Northampton and 1677, and how he arrived at his “revolutionary” action—or non-action to be more precise—can only be pieced together from limited sources, namely the Northampton church records, as the period precedes his prolific publishing career.

Stoddard had stepped into a congregation that was seeking change. The congregation had been very interested in adopting the half-way covenant while their founding pastor, Eleazar Mather, had opposed the majority of clergy—and his father—to stand against the expansion of baptism. The antagonism became so heated that “when Eleazar lay on his deathbed in July 1669 his parishioners presented him with their resolution to institute Half-Way practices despite his continuing opposition: Mather died before this petition was brought to fruition, and the congregation eagerly awaited his replacement who, hopefully, would be sympathetic to their religiosity.”<sup>7</sup> Shortly after Stoddard’s ordination in September, 1672, the church adopted a catechetical statement for baptized, non-communing members who wished to be admitted into a “state of education”:

Nov. 5, 1672, “a form of Words express<sup>g</sup> the sum of the Cov<sup>t</sup>. to be used in the admission of Members into a state of Education—You do here publicly take hold of the Cov<sup>t</sup>. of the Lord as a Grace-bestowing Covenant, subjecting yourself to the Teachings & Govt. of J. X. in this Chh., & engage accord<sup>g</sup>. to your place & power to promote the Welfare of it: and we do here publicly acknowleg you a Member of this Chh. of X in a state of Education, promis<sup>g</sup> to watch over you for the good of your soul, to take care of your Instruction & Gov<sup>t</sup>. in the Lord, & to make you partaker of all such privileges as by the Rules of X belong to you.” A form of words to be used in admissions to full Communion: “You do here pub<sup>y</sup>. take hold of the Cov<sup>t</sup>. of the Lord, giv<sup>g</sup> up y<sup>t</sup>self unto him to be one of his, submitt<sup>g</sup> y<sup>t</sup>self to the Teach<sup>g</sup> & Gov<sup>t</sup>. of J. X in this Chh. & engage accord<sup>g</sup> to your place & power to promote the Welfare thereof.” And we do publicly, &c.<sup>8</sup>

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communion after November 5, 1677. This author did find one admission to full communion from “31.6.1679,” but the records for not only admission to full communion, but even for baptism become remarkably sparse in 1677, and 1679 is the latest date recorded before 1734. It appears that as Stoddard’s views progressed, he found that carefully tracking the exact status of a person’s relationship to the local church was less important.

<sup>7</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 58–59.

<sup>8</sup> *Northampton, Mass. First Church of Christ Records, 1661–1846*, 29,

This may sound like Stoddard was quick to begin experimenting and innovating from an early date, though defining a “state of education” is not a large innovation, so much as a reframing of the language of “owning the covenant.” In light of the congregation’s long-held desire for changes, the actions of November 5, 1672 appear to have simply been Stoddard and the congregation taking formal steps to adopt the half-way covenant in accordance with what Stoddard and the congregation had together been working out informally over the previous several years of his ministry in Northampton.

The adoption of the half-way covenant, however, did not correct the problem for which the congregation was seeking an answer. Nor did it seem to solve the issues of assurance Stoddard himself had wrestled with. In the first five months following the adoption of the new “state of education,” 104 members were admitted to that state. In the next seven years only six more people were added to the rolls, and of that total of 110 members who had owned the covenant, only fourteen were eventually admitted to full communion under the old system. “In Stoddard’s experience at any rate, the assumption of the members of the 1662 Synod—that the partial inclusion of individuals would lead more readily to a saving experience—had proved to be unrealistic.”<sup>9</sup> At some point during this period, likely in response to the failure of the new “state of education” to bring more into the condition of assurance he himself had found, it seems that Stoddard began to make public his views concerning a policy of more open admission to the Table. On May 23, 1677, Increase Mather preached an election day sermon entitled *A Discourse Concerning the Danger of Apostasy*, which he opened by acknowledging that an unnamed someone—likely Stoddard—had been discussing the need to open the Supper more widely than

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<http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/series1/NorthamptonMAFirst5314>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas M. and Virginia L. Davis, eds. *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard: The Nature of the Lord’s Supper*, vol. 2 of *The Unpublished Writings of Edward Taylor* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 4.



either the Cambridge Platform or the half-way covenant allowed. Mather continued, “Yet I wish there be not Teachers found in our Israel, that have espoused loose, Large Principles here, Designing to bring all Persons to the Lords Supper, who have an Historical Faith, and are not scandalous in Life, although they never had Experience of a work of Regeneration on their souls.”<sup>10</sup> While it is difficult to know what Stoddard was saying and doing, it was making an impression as far away as Boston.

In addition to his becoming irregular in his recording of membership details according to the previous recordkeeping system, Stoddard was recording large numbers of “Names of the members of the Church that are in full communion: July 30: 1677.”<sup>11</sup> Of the list of 222 people, at least forty “had not even fulfilled the provisions of the Half-Way Covenant” and “at least as far as this list is concerned, the distinction between full church members and half-way ones has been abandoned.”<sup>12</sup> With his views being publicly decried in Boston, Stoddard had apparently begun to take some sort of action in his own congregation, though it is unclear how far his practice had progressed at this point.

One further source for understanding what exactly Stoddard was advocating for in his developing views is the Foundation Day Sermon that Edward Taylor—the pastor in the neighboring town of Westfield and “then America’s greatest living poet but secretly so”<sup>13</sup>—preached at the organization of the Westfield church in 1679. The sermon Taylor recorded in the Westfield Church Record is fifty folio pages in length. When he prepared the sermon for

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<sup>10</sup> I. Mather, *A Discourse Concerning the Danger of Apostasy*, 84, quoted in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Northampton, Mass. First Church ... Records*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> James A. Goulding, “The Controversy between Solomon Stoddard and the Mathers: Western Versus Eastern Massachusetts Congregationalism” (Claremont Graduate School, 1971), 348, quoted in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 149.

publication more than ten years later as a disputation against Stoddard, he lengthened it by twenty-four pages, to address Stoddard's new practices and arguments. Thus, a comparison of the two versions of the sermon gives some hint as to what Stoddard was advocating for, which the new record keeping indicated. In the first version of the sermon, Taylor essentially defended the tenets of the New England Way as modified by the 1662 Synod. What he implicitly warned against was extending the enlargement of the Lord's Supper along the same lines as the synod enlarged baptism: he noted the examples in both the Old and New Testaments of "Publick Confession of Repentance & Faith to be made before men," concluding from his examination that "to Come to such Scriptures as warrant this Relation upon the Person entering into a Church State... I shall not stand to adde any more judging this sufficient to Confirm the truth."<sup>14</sup> Stoddard was present to hear the sermon that day and may well have greeted Taylor coldly afterwards.<sup>15</sup>

Taylor's context—the organization of the Westfield church—must be kept in mind in any reading of these materials, particularly the Foundation Day Sermon in its first version. When Taylor spends time establishing the importance of relations for joining the church, it must be remembered that his audience is not only his pastor-neighbor Stoddard, but also the people of the town of Westfield whom he would like to see take the step of making relations and becoming full communing members of the Westfield church. Every time he emphasizes the importance of making a relation, he is not only potentially condemning Stoddard's practice, but also exhorting

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Taylor, "The Foundation Day Sermon," in Davis and Davis, eds., *Edward Taylor's "Church Records" and Related Sermons*, vol. 1 of *The Unpublished Writings of Edward Taylor* (Boston, Twayne, 1981), 132–33.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Rowe, *Saint and Singer: Edward Taylor's Typology and the Poetics of Meditation* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 173, points out that "Taylor's note in the 'Church Records' that Stoddard's ceremonial words offering the 'Right hand of Fellowship' were 'not altogether approved on' by the attending elders' hints perhaps at Stoddard's frosty reception" of Taylor's implicit rebuke of Stoddard's position.

his fellow townspeople to take the step of making a relation.

Nearly a decade and a half after the Westfield foundation sermon, sometime in 1692–1693, Taylor revised the sermon in light of new interactions with Stoddard. At this time, while he expanded his arguments on the importance of public relations, he focused on Stoddard’s claim—from his sermon on Gal. 3:1 in October 1690—that the “Lords Supper is appointed by Jesus Christ, for the begetting of Grace as Well as the Strengthening of Grace.”<sup>16</sup> While I will examine in more detail what Stoddard meant by that statement when I come to the 1690s, it is worth noting that this articulation of Stoddard’s position was not mentioned in Taylor’s 1679 sermon, though it became the focus of his 1692–93 revisions—seeming to indicate that, had he been aware of Stoddard articulating his position in this way in the 1670s, it would have drawn at least some comment in the Foundation Day Sermon. This suggests that the change in record-keeping in 1677 was not advocating a policy of open communion as a converting ordinance for those outside the church, but rather—at most—a preparation for the expansion of communing membership to those who had been included in baptism by the 1662 Synod.

A picture of what was happening in Northampton in the 1670s begins to emerge. The congregation and their new pastor adopted the half-way covenant, using the language of entering into a “state of education” This term indicated that they expected the new policy to have the effect intended by the 1662 Synod: Children would be baptized and grow up officially within the church covenant where they could be nurtured in their subjective assurance until such time as they were admitted to the Lord’s Supper. This innovation failed to produce the desired result, however, as no great movement of half-way believers into full-communing status followed. In

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<sup>16</sup> Stoddard, “Sermon on Galatians 3.1, October, 1690,” quoted in Davis and Davis, *Church Records and Related Sermons*, xxv.

this context, Stoddard began speculating about expanding admission to the Lord's Supper along the same lines as those specified for baptism by the half-way covenant. This speculation alarmed his neighbors. It had very different results within the Northampton congregation, however. While the only direct evidence of the changes Stoddard was articulating were reflected in his changes in recordkeeping, we know that eight men and fourteen women were admitted to communing fellowship in a "harvest" or "awakening" of spiritual sensitivity in 1679.<sup>17</sup> By their inclusion of so many into full communion in the record notation of 1677, and by their ceasing to keep membership records later that year, the Northamptoners, it seems, were testing the boundaries of practicing an expansion of communion.

### **The Reforming Synod**

Stoddard and the Northampton congregation were not working through these ideas in a vacuum. They were participating in a struggle which could be seen across the region: the difficulty of integrating subjective assurance into congregational life; and of helping baptized individuals discern sufficient subjective assurance to come to personal confidence in their election. Ministers and congregations were making various attempts to address this struggle, even if their perceptions of it varied, until finally, in the late 1670s, the ministers called for a reforming synod to address the problem.

Samuel Sewell and his experience in Third Church, Boston offers an example of the difficulty of assurance to which the ministers were responding. Sewall was a printer, merchant, and eventually chief justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court who had immigrated to North

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<sup>17</sup> Cauffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 81. Cauffman attributed this awakening to the actual expansion of communion to all half-way members. It is clear, however, from Stoddard's later correspondence with Taylor that the expansion was not made for more than another decade.

America as a boy in 1661. His journal, which included his spiritual struggles, gives us an insight into the struggle at the individual level. Sewall wanted to join Third Church in 1677 but was uncertain of doing so as he was “exceedingly tormented” in mind “lest the Third church should not be in God’s way in breaking from the old.” He was also troubled by his own “unfitness and want of Grace.” Desiring, however, that when he had children they should be baptized,<sup>18</sup> he resolved to join. The turmoil of his mind on this momentous decision is evident in his journal:

I began to be more afraid of myself. And on Saturday Goodman Walker came in, who used to be very familiar with me. But he said nothing of my coming into the Church, nor wished God to show me grace therein, at which I was almost overwhelmed, as thinking that he deemed me unfit for it. And I could hardly sit down to the Lord's Table. But I feared that if I went away I might be less fit next time, and thought that it would be strange for me who was just then joined to the Church, to withdraw, wherefore I stayed. But I never experienced more unbelief. I feared at least that I did not believe there was such an one as Jesus Xt., and yet was afraid that because I came to the ordinance without belief, that for the abuse of Xt. I should be stricken dead; yet I had some earnest desires that Xt. would, before the ordinance were done, though it were when he was just going away, give me some glimpse of himself; but I perceived none. Yet I seemed then to desire the coming of the next Sacrament day, that I might do better, and was stirred up hereby dreadfully to seek God who many times before had touched my heart by Mr. Thacher’s praying and preaching more than now. The Lord pardon my former grieving of his Spirit, and circumcise my heart to love him with all my heart and soul.<sup>19</sup>

Sewall’s record of all the various possibilities of condemnation—taking the sacrament while in unbelief; failing to take the sacrament when actually in a state of belief; making the wrong choice in church affiliation; deciding whether or not to baptize his children; determining his fitness for the sacrament in the estimation of other individuals or of the church—demonstrates the rising uncertainty brought about by basing Eucharistic participation on subjective assurance. This wrestling occurred in the context of the social upheavals discussed in the last chapter which

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to his other misgivings on both church and self, Sewall apparently was also uncertain if it was appropriate to accept the result of the 1662 synod and have his children baptized if he was not a communing member himself yet.

<sup>19</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 47.

ministers interpreted as God's judgment against the sinfulness of the new generation of New Englanders, departing from the morality and zeal of the founding generation. The social upheavals, the homiletical jeremiads, the unbalanced condition created by basing inclusion in the Lord's Supper on subjective assurance the external affirmation of election it entailed, all make it easy to understand the growing inner turmoil sincere congregants like Sewall experienced.

Seeking to address the problem, ministers began to look for another external sign that could reverse the situation. In 1677 Increase Mather preached a sermon at Dorchester calling for the institution of regular covenant renewal ceremonies. In the sermon, he stated that "In the Lords Supper the Covenant is renewed both on the Lords part and on ours."<sup>20</sup> Using the Lord's Supper as a covenant renewal ceremony, however, would necessarily limit who could participate. Those who had not been admitted to the table could not participate in the covenant renewal. So, Mather pictured a broader ceremony, involving the whole church in renewing their faith and repentance in the face of "eminent danger and distress" and "cases of Apostacy from God,"<sup>21</sup> which seemed to be confronting New England in the later 1670s. Mather's solution of church-wide participation in a ceremony of covenant renewal was looking both to assuage God's wrath and also to resolve the problem of assurance. Mather understood assurance as coming only from God, so the lack of assurance—and of people coming to full communing status—was an example of "Apostacy from God."

In his sermon, Mather offers a call to repentance and gives us a glimpse of how his call to greater participation is anchored in more intentional preparation that would lead to more experiential relations. Mather preaches that,

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<sup>20</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty Incumbent on Decaying or Distressed Churches* (Boston, 1677), 6, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00180.0001.001>.

<sup>21</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty*, 7–9.

It is a sad thing that there should be found in the midst of thee New-England, whole Plantations of men that will call themselves Christians, and yet have lived all their dayes like heathen, without any Sacraments or instituted Worship of God. Wofull to be spoken! many have been born in New-England that never saw a child baptized in their lives, and that know not what the Lords Supper meaneth. Yea amongst our selves many that content themselves to live in a careless neglect of that Ordinance, not being conscientious in endeavours to prepare themselves for, and in an orderly way to come to the enjoyment of that blessed Ordinance. Our Fathers came into this Wilderness on purpose that so they might build an house for God, and walk with him in all his holy Institutions; and therefore there are none in the World, in whom neglects of that kind are so evill and provoking to the most High, as in the Children of such Fathers.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly Mather's purpose was to bring more people to the Table as those who have "inwardly and sincerely enter[ed] into Covenant with God" and thus have overcome the inward turmoil of someone like his friend Sewall, as well as the outward deprivation he saw as responsible for the social upheaval. The "careless neglect" he faults is that church members are failing to "prepare themselves" for the Supper. This failure of preparation applies both to full communing members who failed to partake, as evidenced in Sewall's situation, but also to half-way members who failed to put in the reflection necessary in Mather's system to come to subjective assurance and be admitted to the table.<sup>23</sup> Seeking to understand what, specifically, Mather is picturing by his

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<sup>22</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> This is explicit in C. Mather, *A Companion for Communicants. Discourses Upon the Nature, the Design, and the Subject of the Lords Supper; with Devout Methods of Preparing For, and Approaching to that Blessed Ordinance* (Boston, 1690), 80, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00426.0001.001>, when he hopes that, "Those that are found having in them the savors of Regeneration, may be advised immediately to apply themselves unto our Churches for a confirmation of their Church-Membership, in a Full communion with them. Those that are found under a more discouraging and undesirable Character, may have particular Instructions and Awakenings bestowed upon them, which they may not look for the priviledges of Adult-Members till they have hearkened unto Such a method as this maintained by our Churches, would perhaps fetch into our Fellowship, many Hundreds of devout persons, whose Modesty has hitherto concealed them from it; and it would Excite and Quicken more to a due preparation for the holy things of the Lord Jesus."

In a similar way, Stoddard's insistence that participation in the sacrament was a spiritual duty did not assume a sort of mindless participation, but such insistence was always made in the context of calling the unworthy to pray, hear the word, and participate in the sacraments as a means of participation in sanctification, which action would make them more able participants. (Stoddard, *The Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship of God, Under a Pretence of Being in an Unconverted Condition: Shewed in a Sermon Preached at Northampton, the 17th Decemb. 1707, Being the Time of the Sitting of the Inferiour Court* [Boston, 1708], 4–7, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N01152.0001.001>).

call for covenant renewal ceremonies, we see that worship itself, and participation in the sacraments are implicit covenant renewal ceremonies for, “Whenever God is worshipped the Covenant is renewed implicitly,”<sup>24</sup> and “*The Truth is further evident, in that the Lord hath appointed Seals of his Covenant....* and we know that Baptisme and the Lords Supper are the Seals of the New-Testament.”<sup>25</sup>

Mather, however, was looking for a more specific, and more broadly-participatory renewal of covenant than something merely implicit in ordinary worship, or limited to those admitted to the Table. After many arguments for the appropriateness and benefits of covenant renewal, he offers a few points “By way of Direction”: first, “In renewing Covenant with God, special Sins should be confessed, and Reformation thereof solemnly ingaged.” Next there is a giving up “your selves to God in Jesus Christ. As for the[m] that are come to years of understanding, and fit for such a work, they ought with their own mouthes to ingage subjection to the Lord; for so it was when this people renewed their Covenant, their sons and their daughters, every one having Knowledge, separated themselves unto the Law of God.” Next the covenant renewers must make sure they are sincere for, “the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thought.” Next, the covenant renewer must “keep covenant with the Lord” for “It were better not to Covenant then not to make Conscience of keeping Covenant when we have done.” Recognizing the difficulty here, Mather asks, “And what shall we doe that we may keep Covenant?” answering, “*Whatever you doe, doe all in the Name of Christ.*”<sup>26</sup> Thus, while the covenant renewal ceremony may take place in a worship service simply by explicitly verbalizing that is what the participant is doing, it is also a way of living all of life that Mather is

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<sup>24</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty*, 18–21.



seeking to impress by his calls for covenant renewal. Explicit covenant renewal would restore the churches—and their individual members, whether communing or non-communing—to correct practice in their covenant relationship with God.

In this light we can see a parallel to Stoddard's new program. Stoddard viewed his plan to expand communion to half-way members as a form of church-wide covenant renewal that would also restore New England's churches to correct practice in their covenant relationship to God—that is, the visible saints would fulfill their requirement to keep the sacrament and receive the blessing of assurance from God.<sup>27</sup> Stoddard's new program, however, would require reforming the New England Way's system for admission to the table. Mather meanwhile, was seeking to create a new ceremony that would function within the confines of the New England Way.<sup>28</sup> For both men a lack of participation in the Lord's Supper was a concern.

This lack of participation was a concern both for the individuals who were not experiencing conversion, but also for the society as a whole as the pastors continued to interpret negative events in New England's corporate life as God's judgment against the unfaithfulness of His people. And this unfaithfulness was evidenced in their lack of conversions. The ministers believed that change could only come from God, yet how to foster such change was illusive. Mather suggested in his *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty* that "Christ sometimes judgeth of

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<sup>27</sup> Stoddard argued this most clearly in *Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship*, 17, stating that "The Covenant People of God are bound to attend Covenant duties." However, we need not look thirty years into his future to find strong evidence of his belief that covenant-keeping through participation in the sacrament was a duty for every visible saint. In *The Safety of Appearing at the Day of Judgement, in the Righteousness of Christ: Opened and Applied* (Boston, 1687), 310, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00357.0001.001>, he states, "you must live upon Christ for acceptance all your dayes: you ought to be alwayes in a believing frame, and never to put forth any act contrary unto the act of Faith, and very often to be renewing of the acts of Faith for your acceptance: there are many special occasions, when it is duty so to do, as when God is setting the offers of this grace before you in his Word, and in the Sacrament of the Lords Supper."

<sup>28</sup> Mather had already critiqued Stoddard's program—though not by name—the previous year in his election day sermon, *A Discourse Concerning the Danger of Apostacy*. So understanding *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty* as, at least in part, his alternative solution to the same problem seems appropriate.

his Churches by the Gold that He seeth in them If a few Golden sincere members in a Church Renew, and keep their Covenant with God; the Societyes and Towns, whereto they belong, shall fare the better for them.”<sup>29</sup> This suggested that covenant renewal might be the vehicle of change.

Another suggestion for how a society could experience spiritual transformation came from further afield. In 1678 Mather received a suggestion from an English correspondent, Thomas Jollie, minister of a Puritan congregation in Lancashire, that the answer to the social ills Mather was describing to him—and their corresponding judgments from God—might be found in a synod:

The advice I humbly offer for your awakning to duty in the reforming of your manifest evils and for preventing of threatening ruin is, that a Synod bee gathered to that purpose.... (I) suppose your Magistrates are Church-members, ... and soe may bee present at such a Synod as Magistrates or as Messengers of the churches. There will the Teaching Elders be present to stir up one another, and to stir up the Magistrates to their duty. <sup>30</sup>

Mather began advocating for a synod to address the situation and enlisted eighteen fellow clergymen—Stoddard among them—to petition the General Court to call for one. The synod met in the fall of 1679 to answer two questions of the General Court: “What are the Evils that have provoked the Lord to bring his Judgements on New-England?” and “What is to be done that so these Evils may be Reformed?” It met again in 1680 to assemble a confession of faith. As one examines the conversations at this synod, one sees that the synod adopted wording that enabled Mather and Stoddard to pursue two different approaches to addressing the difficulties of the New England Way so that, once again, the tensions of requiring experiential relations for church membership was addressed but not resolved.

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<sup>29</sup> I. Mather, *Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty*, preface, unnumbered.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Jollie to Increase Mather, January 18, 1678, *Mather Papers*, 320, quoted in Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 148.

Information is limited on the actual flow of business and debate at the synod: we are mostly reliant on the journal entries of Peter Thacher, later pastor of Milton, Massachusetts, and limitedly on Stoddard's own recollections published some thirty years later. The ministers seem to have been united in their response to the first question. It is noteworthy that among the list of evils that concerned them, the synod was explicit in their concern with the failure to embrace Christ "in all the Offices and Ordinances as ought to be." —This would in part be a concern that people were failing to partake in the Lord's Supper. In *Danger of Apostacy*, Mather had expressed his concern with Stoddard's position. He feared that people would partake profanely. This, however, was not perceived by the gathered ministers as a sufficiently significant problem to warrant explicit mention. Instead, by 1679, the ministers were united in their concern for a growing population of non-communicant members, many of whom they thought should be communing.

When it came to the second question—what was to be done to address the evils—there was more difficulty. Stoddard later recalled,

The words of the Synod are these, *It is requisite that Persons be not admitted unto Communion in the Lords Supper without making a Personal and Public Profession of their Faith and Repentance either Orally or in some other way, to the just Satisfaction of the Church, and that therefore both Elders and Churches be duely watchful and circumspect in this matter.* I shall give the World an Account how the matter was acted. Some of the Elders in the Synod had drawn up a Conclusion, That persons should make a Relation of the work of Gods Spirit upon their hearts, in order to coming into full Communion. Some others of the Elders objected against it, and after some discourse it was agreed to have a dispute on that question, Whether those Professors of Religion as are of good Conversation, are not to be admitted to full Communion, provided they are able to Examine themselves, and discern the Lords body. Mr. *Mather*, held the Negative; I laboured to make good the Affirmative; The result was, That they blotted out that clause of Making a Relation of the work of Gods Spirit, and put in the room of it, *The Making a Profession of their Faith and Repentance*; and so I Voted with the Rest, and am of the same judgment still.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Solomon Stoddard, *An Appeal to the Learned. Being a Vindication of the Right of Visible Saints to the*

In Stoddard's recollection, we see a clear contrast between him and Mather. Stoddard objected to “a relation of the work of God’s spirit,” arguing instead for “making a profession of faith and repentance.” To Stoddard it seems clear that the “relation” was the problem. For Mather, however, limiting the statement to a profession of faith and repentance was insufficient. In the end, the synod agreed with Stoddard. While this account is Stoddard’s own view, and published thirty years after the fact, it comports with Thacher’s journal that,

Y<sup>e</sup> day y<sup>y</sup> discoursed y<sup>e</sup> remidy<sup>e</sup>s & debated at y<sup>e</sup> End of Each Paragraph; y<sup>er</sup> was much debate about persons being admitted to full Communion & <sup>r/m</sup> Stodder y<sup>e</sup> Minister offered to dispute against it & brought one arguem<sup>t</sup>. <sup>r/m</sup> Mather was Respondent <sup>r/m</sup> Oakes Moderat<sup>r</sup> but after some time y<sup>e</sup> rest of his arguem<sup>ts</sup> were deferred & at present It was Eased, y<sup>e</sup> Evening what was drawn up by y<sup>e</sup> comittee & corrected by y<sup>e</sup> Synod in answer to both questions was Unanimously uoted.<sup>32</sup>

Not only does Thacher bear out Stoddard’s account, but Mather’s original committee report, in Mather’s own hand, reads,

That both Churches and Elders be most watchfully and strictly circumspect in admission unto full communion in the Lord's Supper, [illegible;] that none be admitted but upon satisfactory account given unto the Church of their knowledge, faith, and experience as a sufficient ground (in the judgment of charity) to hope that they are sincere converts and are able to examine themselves and to discern the Lord's body according to Direction, I Cor. 11. 28, 29. That persons may not come in their unregeneracy and so be hardened, judicially sealed, and shutt up in their Hypocrisy and Apostacy, eating and drinking judgment unto themselves. And that the Table of the Lord be kept pure, and not be polluted and profaned by unworthy communicants.<sup>33</sup>

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*Lords Supper, Though They be Destitute of a Saving Work of God’s Spirit on Their Hearts: Against the Exceptions of Mr. Increase Mather* (Boston, 1709), 93–94, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N01201.0001.001>. Recounting this episode, Walker notes, “To this statement of Stoddard the anonymous writer of the Appeal of Some of the Unlearned replied, p. 17: ‘The Story told of the blotting out a Passage in the result of the Synod, we are upon good Information from the Moderator [Increase Mather] himself, who drew up that Result, assured it is a mistake, and a gross one.’ But the definite statement of Stoddard over his own name is to be preferred to the hearsay of a nameless writer (Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 280).

<sup>32</sup> Peter Thacher, journal, quoted in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 419.

<sup>33</sup> Increase Mather’s corrected manuscript copy of the actions of the synod, Mather Papers, American Antiquarian Society, printed in William G. Joyce and Michael G. Hall, “Three Manuscripts of Increase Mather,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 86, no. 1 (Apr. 1976): 115–16.

The difference between the document Stoddard objected to and the final wording that he approved is, primarily, the word “experience.”<sup>34</sup> It seems clear that Stoddard’s objection was to the relations of subjective assurance based on experiential conversion. Knowledge and faith were still important to him; indeed, they were more important because they were the basis of knowing if a person was a visible saint or not, regardless of their ability to articulate an experience. Despite the opposition of one of the foremost ministers of the day, Stoddard was able to convince the body to craft language that allowed him to vote with the majority. Not only that, but he also was able to convince the synod that it was reasonable to admit people to the table without first hearing their relation of experiential conversion. The specific wording of the synod is as follows:

It is requisite that persons be not admitted unto Communion in the Lords Supper without making a personal and publick profession of their Faith and Repentance, either orally, or in some other way, so as shall be to the just satisfaction of the Church; and that therefore both Elders and Churches be duely watchfull and circumspect in this matter, 1 Cor. 11.28, 29. Act. 2. 41, 42. Ezek. 44.7, 8, 9.<sup>35</sup>

Here, the actual language is not quite what Stoddard remembered thirty years later. The “personal and publick” nature of the profession focuses attention on something that could be understood to be a relation. Yet the synod reinforces the injunction that “Elders and Churches” be careful who is allowed to commune with a citation from Ezekiel. The Ezekiel citation is a warning against admitting strangers—defined as those uncircumcised in heart and flesh—into the sanctuary of the Lord. This is significant, because Stoddard would later be accused of opening the Supper to all. Here, the passage used to reinforce the wording he argued for warns

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<sup>34</sup> The clause following the verse references of course deepens the concern of the statement for protecting against unregenerate communicants; but the wording adopted (see below) is explicit in warning against that, and includes further Scripture citations warning against it as well.

<sup>35</sup> “Result of 1679,” in Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, 433.

against Israel allowing those into their worship who are not inwardly and outwardly members of the people. The new practice Stoddard was advocating appears to have been simply removing the experiential relation requirement. If it had been otherwise, it would have been inconsistent with this injunction.

Stoddard was ensuring that the wording he was voting for would not be opposed to his expansion which was based on not requiring experiential relations as an examination of subjective assurance. In arguing for the practice, he seems to have convinced the assembled ministers that the objective basis of assurance—the faith and repentance—so long as it was personally claimed, was more important than the relation of how the individual had come to hold that objective doctrine. The synod met because they perceived that the New Englanders’ lack of participation in the Lord’s Supper was threatening their society’s position before God, and Stoddard proposed a system that would bring more members to the Table. For some, this was probably perceived as little more than a liberal application of the rational charity the Cambridge Platform had advocated for.

An unpublished manuscript by Mather reinforces this interpretation of the events. Stoddard had made available to Mather a document stating his position. From that document, Mather composed his “Mather’s Confutation of the Rev. Mr Stoddard’s Observations respecting the Lords Supper 1680”<sup>36</sup> Mather, having lost the verbal debate, used this manuscript to organize his thoughts as though for publication. While Mather’s manuscript was never published, it provides a picture of what Stoddard was proposing at this point in his development. As its editors note, “the importance of this treatise rests not so much in what it contains, since many of the

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<sup>36</sup> Everett Emerson and Mason I. Lowance, “Increase Mather’s Confutation of Solomon Stoddard’s Observations Respecting the Lord’s Supper 1680,” *AAS Proceedings* 83, no. 1 (1973): 41–65.

arguments were to be used again in the printed controversy of 1700–1710, but in the date it has been assigned.”<sup>37</sup> Everett Emerson and Mason Lowance, who have published extensively on the Stoddard/Mather debate, conclude that Stoddard’s—and Mather’s—mature positions were essentially the same as they were in their original debate. Mather began his argument in response to Stoddard’s position with the premise “none but such as are in the judgment of rational charity, truly gracious, ought to be admitted unto the Lords Table,” and acknowledges, “objections against that principle so fully answered, as that it is wholly needless to add any thing more . . . . Nor doth my brother [Stoddard] directly oppose or deny it.”<sup>38</sup> At least at the time of the synod Mather claimed that Stoddard was still advocating that only those who were in a state of grace should commune.<sup>39</sup>

This incident is significant because it demonstrates both the extent to which Stoddard’s new position was in keeping with the New England Way, and the extent to which it was a modification. Mather was arguing for the Cambridge Platform and the traditional New England Way’s insistence on relations: “such as are admitted thereto, as members ought to be examined & tryed first; whether they be fit & meet to be received into church-society, or not.”<sup>40</sup> The 1662 Synod had not modified this: “‘severity of examination is to be avoyded,’ but examination there should be.”<sup>41</sup> While Hall claims that this meant that “examination for admission, no matter how

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<sup>37</sup> Emerson and Lowance, “Increase Mather’s Confutation,” 37.

<sup>38</sup> I. Mather, “Mather’s Confutation of the Rev. Mr Stoddard’s Observations” in Emerson and Lowance, “Increase Mather’s Confutation,” 42.

<sup>39</sup> According to Emerson and Lowance the manuscript does not add to the debate, but demonstrates that Stoddard and Mather were advocating their later positions as early as the Reforming Synod (Emerson and Lowance, “Increase Mather’s Confutation,” 37). Mather does state, “Inasmuch as my brother amongst all his qualifications fitting to partake at the Lords Supper, saith not a word about regeneration, one would think that he looketh upon the sacrament as a converting ordinance.” Yet, he notes that the argument need hardly be made, and seems to only bring up the concern as a possible implication of Stoddard’s argument, not something he was actually advocating for.

<sup>40</sup> Cambridge Platform, Chapter XII in Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, 222.

<sup>41</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 151. The citation is from the Cambridge Platform, Chapter XII, in Walker,

much it avoided severity, seemed inappropriate,”<sup>42</sup> Stoddard was not stripping the New England Way so far. He was not advocating against examination; the adopted wording called for “a personal and publick profession of their Faith and Repentance, either orally, or in some other way, so as shall be to the just satisfaction of the Church,” which clearly involves a form of examination. What he was advocating against was the examination of subjective assurance. And the examination of subjective assurance was almost the essence of the New England Way.

The synod published its result as *The Necessity of Reformation*, which the General Court adopted and commended to the churches and also appointed a committee, “to consider our lawes already made, that may neede emendation, or may not so clearly be warranted from the word of God.”<sup>43</sup> The evils it sought to address were many of the same concerns as had sparked the 1662 Synod, and the Ministerial Assembly of 1657 before that, and, indeed, the Synod of 1648 before that. Neither the endorsement of the General Court, nor its reconsideration of its legislation would produce a change in public morality, at least according to the jeremiads of pastors in succeeding years. The rise in church membership that continued during this period may well have been related to the relaxing of the requirement of experiential relations the synod advocated—bearing in mind that the recommendations of the synod would have to be adopted by each church individually before any began to practice those recommendations—but that rise is also explained by the responses of people to the social upheavals documented in the previous chapter.

Two important things came out of the synod. First, it gave synodical endorsement for a

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*Creeds and Platforms*, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 151.

<sup>43</sup> *Records of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay*, V: 244, quoted in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 420.



practice that could be interpreted as what would later be called “Stoddardeanism.”<sup>44</sup> Second, it spread a heightened interest in covenant renewal ceremonies and other external forms of worship that might have a positive impact on subjective assurance including, explicitly, the Lord’s Supper.

The germ of this second development had actually flowed out of the theological implications of the 1662 Synod. Supporters of that synod’s “result” viewed baptism as a permanent seal of membership in the visible church. With such a view of the importance of the seal, the proponents of the synod’s “result” naturally centered their sacramental theology on the promise that baptism entailed. Meanwhile their opponents, proponents of the system enshrined in the Cambridge Platform and led by Davenport and Chauncy, focused on the obligations that baptism carried—namely regeneration as identified by personal conversion—which recipients of baptism who did not experience a conversion failed to fulfill. This difference of focus led pastors in agreement with the synod to hold out baptism in their sermons as a comfort to their congregations, while the antagonists of the 1662 Synod, focusing on the obligations, moved in an increasingly Baptist direction.<sup>45</sup>

With the arguments of the two groups taking them in increasingly disparate directions, Increase Mather, as noted above, had seen the implications of the dissenters’ positions and switched sides in the debate. His reasoning took him past both the synod and the traditional New England Way of thinking about baptism, to claim that it logically preceded the church covenant. The Congregationalist view of the church’s covenant saw individual churches not as branches

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<sup>44</sup> The slow process of adopting the synod’s recommendations or, at least, of interpreting practice in a more “Stoddardian” way—and what, specifically that meant—will be taken up below.

<sup>45</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 176–82. We have noted above that this party largely disappeared as its leaders—always a minority among the ministers—died off or changed sides, and as its lay-adherents were slowly persuaded into the majority view of the ministers.

participating in a universal church covenant, but as institutions with separate covenants.<sup>46</sup> For them, the covenant of the individual church must exist prior to anyone's being able to be baptized into such covenant. Mather's father, Richard, had stated in 1653 that, if a group of Indians were converted, they must first be organized into a covenanted particular church and then baptized into that church. Increase Mather, however, pointed out that such a situation would, for a time at least, create an, "Instituted Church, and not one baptized member in the Church. A thing never known in Apostolical days." This led Mather to distinguish between "the Church Visible" and the "particular Church strictly taken."<sup>47</sup> Thus baptism was beginning, in Mather's thinking, to be not just entrance into the covenant of the local particular church, but entrance into the covenant of the visible Church universal. This was clearly a larger and more powerful covenant.

As such reasoning took hold among more ministers, they began to increasingly use baptismal imagery in exhorting their congregations to take hold of grace, and also to have increasing confidence in the power of the covenant that baptism sealed to produce godly saints. As the results of the Half-Way Synod were slowly adopted into the churches, some churches began opening baptism to any who wished it, based only on their orthodox doctrine and pious behavior, and without either examination for conversion experience or concern that their parents had been full church members. This practice represented a shift to viewing the sacrament as "baptismal evangelism"; a visible, tangible gospel that functioned as a means of uniting people

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<sup>46</sup> See Everett Emerson, *Puritanism in America, 1620–1750* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 49–51 for a discussion of the centrality of the individual church covenant to the New England Way. Also Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America, Religion and Life in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 71–73 and Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 161–86 for the way this view led to a form of "tribalism."

<sup>47</sup> I. Mather, *A Discourse Concerning the Subject of Baptism Wherein the present Controversies, that are agitated in the New English Churches are from Scripture and Reason modestly enquired into* (Cambridge, 1675), quoted in Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 183.

to the covenant, from which position they would more likely come to regeneration. Thus, “a sacramental rite became one of the mainstays of New England piety, not because of any innovative doctrines of baptismal grace but rather through sermonic reflection on the symbolic meaning of the ‘visible gospel.’”<sup>48</sup> While Mather was uncomfortable with opening baptism so broadly, he was a participant in a process that changed the meaning of baptism in ways that both created a climate of renewed popular baptismal devotion and also drastically altered the role of baptism in the theology of many pastors. Baptism under this new conception, particularly in the context of social upheaval, also took on the role of being a source of assurance. Pastors began to cite their congregants’ reception of this “visible gospel” as a source of comfort and assurance in times of spiritual uncertainty or social turmoil.

### **The Sacramental Renaissance**

It is easy to see how, in this atmosphere of looking to baptism as a reasonable source of assurance, the Lord’s Supper would begin to function similarly. In the mid-1670s, as Mather began thinking through ceremonies of Covenant Renewal that would eventually lead to his advocating for the Reforming Synod, he preached a series of sermons on the Lord’s Supper. He began drawing these sermons together into a book in 1675, but the start of King Philip’s War and other writing put the project on hold. When the book of eight sermons—seven of them dating from the 1670s, one of these as early as 1672—was finally published under the title *The Mystery of Christ* in 1686 it both drew on and fed the growing sacramental fervor of that decade. It was a fervor Mather’s preaching and advocacy had helped to shape. Hall notes that “Scholars have misread the character of New England Puritanism during the 1670s either by focusing on the

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<sup>48</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 187.

language and content of the Jeremiad to the exclusion of other kinds of sermons, or by believing mistakenly that Mather's sacramental sermons in *The Mystery of Christ* represent a change of outlook after 1680."<sup>49</sup> The tenor of sacramental interest of the latter quarter of the seventeenth century was an organic development of the sacramental conversation that had been going on in response to congregants' need for subjective assurance. Awareness of this problem was indeed one of the factors that led to the call for the Reforming Synod, and one of the evils Mather and the other ministers would decry in its "result" was that, "Many of the Rising Generation are not mindfull of that which their Baptism doth engage them unto, viz. to use utmost endeavours that they may be fit for, and so partake in, all the holy Ordinances of the Lord Jesus."<sup>50</sup>

Already in the 1670s Mather had been seeking to speak to this need in his monthly sacramental sermons, collected in *The Mystery of Christ*. He reminded his congregation,

As for the Elect, He has bought every one of them, body and soul, 1 Cor. 6. 20. Yea, and he hath bought *Heaven* for them too, which is therefore called the *purchased Possession*, Eph. 1. 14. And Christ is now *Interceding* in Heaven through the Merit of his blood. Hence his Blood is said to *speak*; so sayes the Apostle here, It speaketh *better things than the bloud of Abel*. It hath a loud Cry with it; a louder than that of *Abel's* blood; and yet *that* cryed so as that it was heard from earth to heaven. *Abel's* blood cryed for *Vengeance*, Christ's Blood cries for *Pardon*. The blood of Christ cries louder than the Law, or than *Sin* the *strength of the Law*; which if it were not for *Sin* would be able to hurt no man. The Law cryeth and sayes, This is a poor guilty sinner, let him be *condemned* for ever. But if he be a *believing* sinner, the blood of Christ cries *louder* and sayes, All his sins are satisfied for, and therefore let him be *pardoned*, and his soul live for ever.<sup>51</sup>

The whole goal in such passages is to deepen the assurance of those who wrestle with their fitness with the imagery of the cry of Christ's blood triumphing over the cry of the law, and the

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<sup>49</sup> Hall, *Last American Puritan*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> "The Result of 1679," in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 428.

<sup>51</sup> I. Mather, "Jesus Christ is the Mediator," in *The Mystery of Christ Opened and Applied. In Several Sermons, Concerning the Person, Office, and Glory of Jesus Christ* (Boston, 1686), 150–51, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00342.0001.001>.

reality of Christ's active protection and intercession—not the individual's experiences—  
guaranteeing the status of the elect sinner-turned-saint. Mather goes farther:

By Him we have Access *unto the Father*. Jesus the Son of GOD does as it were take the believing soul by the hand, and leadeth him into the *Presence-Chamber*, He opens the door for him, and presents him before the Father of Glory; and sayes, Behold O Father, Here is a soul that I dyed for, this soul is washed in my blood, and therefore do thou look upon him with a favourable eye for my sake.<sup>52</sup>

There is nothing here of the individual's experience. There is only the objective reality of Christ's ongoing action offered to the believer for their assurance. These passages of assurance come in the context of a discussion of preparation for the Lord's Supper—yet, significantly, the only subject of preparation in that discussion is Christ Himself:

In order to Consummat[e] sacred Office Relation, *Consecration*, and solemn *Separation* is necessary. *Aaron* and his Sons were to be *consecrated to the Lord, that they might minister in the Priests Office*.... There is a Sanctification in respect of Consecration and Separation to the Service of God: which glorious Mystery is indeed declared in the Administration of the Lord's Supper. For when the Elements are separated and solemnly consecrated, we are thereby taught that Christ hath been set apart as the *Mediator of the new-Covenant*.... *The Father has committed the Work of Redemption to the Son of God: who hath accordingly undertaken that Charge*.... I say the, Father has *committed* that work of Christ. God has said to his Son, As for the work of *Redemption*, I leave that to thee do thou take care of that matter.<sup>53</sup>

To the soul wrestling with the sinner's fitness to come to the table, Mather focuses all his attention here on the work of Christ at the table, not the sinner's sufficiency.

In another sermon, having explained that Christ has made and kept the covenant, the "use" Mather offers is, "*Let it be a word of CONSOLATION to those that are concerned in this Covenant.*" This is then placed in the context of the Lord's Supper:

Hence thy Salvation is Certain. As sure as the Covenant of Redemption, as sure as that Christ hath *made his soul an offering for sin*. This is a suitable meditation to be [on] the heart at the time of *Receiving*, when we are at the Lord's Table. Is there Bread and Wine here? As sure as this is Bread and Wine so sure is it that Christ has

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<sup>52</sup> I. Mather, "Jesus Christ is the Mediator," in *Mystery of Christ Opened*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> I. Mather, "Jesus Christ is the Mediator," in *Mystery of Christ Opened*, 123–24.

died, and so sure it is that thou shalt be saved, and behold the Glory of Christ in Heaven, if thou art one Concerned in this Covenant of Redemption.<sup>54</sup>

He asks the obvious question, “You will say, This is Comfortable if I did but know that this belongs to me; How shall I know that?” and answers himself with several rhetorical questions: “*Dost thou believe on Jesus Christ?*” Here the listener can simply examine their beliefs. “*Are you the Seed of CHRIST?* Are you become His Children in respect of spiritual Regeneration? ... *Hast thou felt the blessed Power and Efficacy of the Death of Christ in thy own soul?*” Here the listener must make some subjective judgments about where they stand. But Mather continues to offer direction on how to determine this with further questions: “Is Sin mortified in thy soul Through the blood of Christ? And is thy soul mortified to the world thereby? then this belongs to thee.”<sup>55</sup> The question of mortification of sin is focuses on observable externals: the individual may ask, “do I sin less now than formerly?” “do I perceive as sin things which I would have ignored formerly?” Looking to observable things to answer inward issues of subjective assurance is moving to the *sylogismus practicus*: sanctification as evidence of the reality of faith, as noted in chapter two. Granted, this is what the magisterial reformers saw as the third ground of assurance, not the first. Notably, however, the elements are used as imagery of assurance. The Supper is being held up not as an action of commitment on the part of the participant, as might be expected from the minister bemoaning people’s failure to partake, but rather as a source of comfort and assurance. This is consistent throughout the sermons in *The Mystery of Christ Opened and Applied*: whenever the Lord’s Supper is mentioned it is in the context of identifying it with the action of Christ on behalf of the believer, generally as a source of assurance for the believer. For example, in “Jesus Christ the Son of God, is Man as well as GOD,” Mather writes.:

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<sup>54</sup> Mather, “There is a Covenant of Redemption,” in *Mystery of Christ Opened*, 17–18.

<sup>55</sup> Mather, “There is a Covenant of Redemption,” in *Mystery of Christ Opened*, 19–20.

As there was no entering into the *Holy of Holies* but by the *Veil*; so there is no entering into Heaven but through that Sacrifice of the *flesh*, i. e. the *humane nature* of Christ. And this Truth is still mysteriously signified by that Ordinance of the *Lord's Supper*. The bread signifies the *Body* and the Wine the *Bloud* of Christ: And that Sacramental Action of *Taking* the Bread in order to the *Consecration* thereof, puts us in mind of Christ's taking our nature. That's a Meditation which should be in our hearts, as we see the Minister take the bread in order to the *Blessing & Breaking* of it, we should then think of Christ's *Incarnation*, that the Son of God has assumed our nature, that so he might *dye* for our sakes.<sup>56</sup>

The one exception to this in the sacramental sermons is in “There is a personal Union between the two Natures of CHRIST” where, reflecting on the human nature of Christ, Mather states,

*To abuse humane nature especially the humane Nature of Christ, may needs be a very great evil. The Son of GOD has dignified humane nature, and therefore for any to abuse or abase it, must needs be an horrid thing. This sheweth us how great an evil it is to wrong any man. ... hence it is, that Coming unworthily to the Lords Table as such a dreadful evil ... What, Shall men disregard such a Body as is personally united to the Son of GOD! Do we not Discern that it is the LORD's Body? Hee that doth not is guilty of the Bloud of the Lord; yea of Him who is the LORD of Heaven and Earth. To be guilty, of the bloud of any man is a sad thing, much more to be guilty of the bloud of a worthy person: But what is it then to be guilty of the LORD of Life & and of Glory, and [who] is God and man in one Person!”<sup>57</sup>*

We might say this is the “exception that proves the rule” in Mather’s sacramentology as he generally only holds out the sacrament as an objective source of assurance.

In the 1670s with his preaching, and in the 1680s with his publications, Mather was both participating in and helping to foment a renewed interest in the sacraments, particularly the Lord’s Supper, that would sweep New England in the coming decades. Ten years after the Reforming Synod of 1679–80, his son Cotton Mather would publish the first communion manual to be produced on a North American printing press.<sup>58</sup> It would be followed by others, totaling

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<sup>56</sup> Mather, “Jesus Christ the Son of God, is Man as well as God,” in *Mystery of Christ Opened*, 85–86.

<sup>57</sup> Mather, “There is a personal Union between the two Natures of Christ,” in *Mystery of Christ Opened*, 112–14.

<sup>58</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 197.

twenty-one manuals in the forty-eight years between 1690 and 1738.<sup>59</sup> That Cotton Mather was concerned about the “paucity” of communion manuals in New England,<sup>60</sup> as he commented in the preface to his manual, indicates a growing interest in the subject—particularly among the pastors—in the 1680s. This output of publishing was echoed in the sermons of the pastors, and even in private devotion, as Edward Taylor’s poetry—unpublished in his life—attests.<sup>61</sup>

### The Sacramental Controversy Begins

It was in this context of heightened sacramental awareness and reflection that Stoddard’s new practice and thinking continued to unfold, and that Mather and Taylor began to critique Stoddard’s developments. While the “result” of the Reforming Synod was adopted unanimously, the argument between Stoddard on the one side and Mather and Taylor on the other, that had been hinted at prior to the synod and debated at the synod, would remain on the level of private correspondence for almost another decade. As noted above, Stoddard provided a manuscript of his arguments to Mather, and Mather prepared a manuscript rebutting this, but the rebuttal was neither sent to Stoddard nor published. The next salvo of the debate came in 1685 when Stoddard was preparing to publish a book entitled *The Safety of Appearing at the Day of Judgement*<sup>62</sup> and approached both Mather and Samuel Willard asking one of them to write an introduction but was

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<sup>59</sup> Holifield, “The Renaissance of Sacramental Piety in Colonial New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 29:1 (Jan. 1972): 48. This is as compared to only eight manuals published in the fifty-two years between 1739 and 1790.

<sup>60</sup> Cotton Mather, “Preface,” *A Companion for Communicants: Discourses Upon the Nature, the Design, and the Subject of the Lords Supper; with Devout Methods of Preparing for, And Approaching to that Blessed Ordinance* (Boston, 1690), n.p., quoted in Holifield, “Renaissance of Sacramental Piety,” 33.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor penned some 217 poems—the largest portion of his poetic output—called the *Preparatory Meditations*, between 1682 and 1725 as private reflections in preparation for celebrating the Lord’s Supper. See Edward Taylor, *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

<sup>62</sup> Stoddard, *Safety of Appearing*.



refused by both.<sup>63</sup>

The Northampton church had experienced two awakenings of townspeople being gathered into the church under Stoddard's preaching, one in 1679 and another in 1683, and these had attracted some attention and begun Stoddard's reputation as an evangelist. *The Safety of Appearing* was intended to explain some of the theology Stoddard was preaching that had resulted in the awakenings, and explicitly confronts the problem of inward assurance so prevalent in New England's churches as it presents arguments of assurance drawn from Christ's work for the believer. The work looks to the Lord's Supper as a source of assurance for believers, though not in a context Mather would have objected to. By 1685 Stoddard was beginning to advocate more publicly for an expansion of communion along similar lines as the expansion of baptism the 1662 Synod had recommended. His reason for doing so was to confront the problem of subjective assurance. This can be seen from a manuscript of Stoddard's arguments, which Taylor had copied.<sup>64</sup> In his eighth argument for admitting those to the Lord's Table who have claimed the covenant and who live unscandalous lives, Stoddard states that,

the Deniall of Full-Communion is a Censure. They are in effect Excommunicate Persons.... And what should such persons be Censured for? Not for unbeliefe: for they are visible Believers. Nor for Scandall in Conversation for they carry holily. Not for gross Ignorance: for they have knowledge. The persons have the same qualifications, as are required in most Churches of the World; & as the Scriptures require of any Churches.<sup>65</sup>

Essentially he is describing believers who have objective assurance but lack subjective

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<sup>63</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> It seems the manuscript is the same document which Mather had been responding to in 1680, but more fully preserved in Taylor's hand. The manuscript, titled "Stoddard's 'Arguments for the Proposition,'" is reproduced in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 67–86. It appears the manuscript postdates a letter exchange Taylor and Stoddard had made in 1688 but predates Stoddard's "Sermon on Galatians 3.1" of 1690.

<sup>65</sup> Stoddard, "Arguments for the Proposition," in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 80–81.

assurance. This is a group limited by their knowledge for he excludes “Ideots: because they have not knowledge to fit them for this Ordinance” and also “such Adult persons, who are Believers, but have not the opportunity to be sufficiently instructed for the Lords Supper.”<sup>66</sup> So their belief, holiness and knowledge seem to fulfill a fairly rigorous standard of objective assurance; but they are still not admitted to the table. Stoddard did not use the subjective/objective distinction so his discussion is confusing in a similar way to Calvin’s, noted previously as introducing a tension. This tension is maintained throughout the sacramental controversy because the distinction that subjective assurance is based on the objective work of Christ and not the subjective ability to offer a narration of one’s conversion was never explicitly contrasted when theologians discussed assurance.

Norman Grabo characterized the debate between Taylor and Stoddard as “bring[ing] the fight for the New England Way from Boston to the Frontier.”<sup>67</sup> Taylor wrote to Stoddard in “1687/8,” when he heard a report that Stoddard was “about to cast off Relations, & to bring all above 14 years of age, that live morally, & have Catechistical knowledge of the Principalls of Religion, to the Lord’s Supper: & for that end hath held one day of Debate with his Church, & hath fixt upon an other.”<sup>68</sup> Taylor took a conciliatory tone, stating, “I like not meddling in other mens matters” and explicitly saying “I design not Disputation; nor to trouble you that way: but earnestly to entreat you... whether the thing be warrantable, or not Warrantable” and offers his

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<sup>66</sup> Stoddard, “Arguments for the Preposition,” in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Norman S. Grabo, ed., *Edward Taylor’s Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966), xix.

<sup>68</sup> It seems that sometime between 1677 and about 1688 the Northampton church went from having lax membership standards which did not differentiate between communing and non-communing adults, to adopting an official policy that everyone over 14 who met the standards required by the half-way covenant for baptism were also to commune.

reasons, seeking to convince a friend, not invite public debate.<sup>69</sup> The founders' intentions weigh heavy and frequent among his reasons for asking Stoddard to reconsider: "It seems to turn the Stream, & swim the Interest of... those Eminent ones, that brought [the church] hitherto, & hither in this Wilderness, just back again, & this is not pleasant.... It is not according to the Foundation, nor Expectation of your Church... It will greatly reflect upon those that led this people into the Wilderness."<sup>70</sup> Not only this, the matter is so serious to Taylor because it will further the judgement of God against New England. Indeed, "in a Word, Gods faithfull Ones in following ages will be ready to date the beginning of New Englands Apostacy in Mr. Stoddard's Motions."<sup>71</sup> This means that for Taylor, Stoddard's new practice was not only a concern of abandoning the founders' system, but that system embodied the primitive purity of God's plan for the church, and turning from the system was not further reform toward the primitive idea, but moving farther from the ideal, and inviting God's judgment.

Stoddard replied to the letter some months later, apologizing for the slowness of his reply and saying he had received Taylor's letter as, "a Fruite of your Zeale for the Caus of God, & love to mee."<sup>72</sup> He refers to the change he was advocating only as "some Endeavours to make some Alterations as to the way of admitting persons to Full-Communion."<sup>73</sup> He declined to engage Taylor's arguments, hoping to see him in person and discuss the matter then. He did comment on Taylor's overarching concern with Stoddard's apparent breach with the founders, indeed confirming it.

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<sup>69</sup> Taylor to Stoddard, 1687/8, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 63–64.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor to Stoddard, 1687/8, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 64.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor to Stoddard, 1687/8, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 65.

<sup>72</sup> Stoddard to Taylor, June 4, 1688, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 66.

<sup>73</sup> Stoddard to Taylor, June 4, 1688, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 65.

I shall give you this brief account of the Reason of what I did. I have been abundantly Satisfied these many years, that we did not attend the Will of God in this matter: & that our neglect therein is the occasion of the greate Prophaneness, & Corruption that hath over spread the Land & therefore thought it both necessary for myselfe, that I might be found doing the Will of God; & necessary for the Country, that we might not go on further to forsake God.<sup>74</sup>

To Stoddard, the founders' method of setting up admission to full communion was not attending the will of God. This must refer to the test of subjective assurance as the means of knowing if a person can be admitted to the table, as that is precisely what Stoddard was seeking to alter, and what Taylor was appealing against based on the founders' intentions. Stoddard accepts the prevailing view of the ministers that they live in a time of declining piety—and of God's judgment against New England—but sees the test itself as the very reason for the problem.

Taylor saw Stoddard as not just being in conflict with Taylor's understanding of biblical precedent, but also of the founders' practice, while Stoddard explicitly finds the founders' practice to have been the departure from biblical precedent. Their controversy was, thus, over the founders' new test. As Davis and Davis assess Stoddard in his conflict with Taylor, they note his, "intense desire to bring the conversion experience, if at all possible, within the reach of every man.... Conversion is clearly 'the heart of the matter.'"<sup>75</sup> In Taylor's copy of Stoddard's "Arguments for the Proposition" this point is more explicit in Stoddard's anticipation of possible objections. The first is that "This Opinion is New, Contrary to the Received Practice of the Churches." Stoddard answers himself, "The Contrary Opinion is New, & unheard of in the Churches till of late years as may appear by abundant evidences." He quotes several authors from the European Reformed tradition, demonstrating their adherence to the idea that confession of faith and profession of obedience to the church's teaching combined with an unscandalous life

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<sup>74</sup> Stoddard to Taylor, June 4, 1688, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 66.

<sup>75</sup> Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 48.

were sufficient for admitting people to the Lord's Supper. He then cites Cotton, Allen and Shephard where they make statements about admission to the table that seem very similar to Stoddard's standards, concluding "The like is well known to be the judgment of severall others of the First Elders, tho' they have not left such a Testimony in Print."<sup>76</sup>

Taylor's and Stoddard's exchange in the 1687/8 letters was cordial, despite their disagreement. Taylor was seeking to persuade a friend and Stoddard, unpersuaded, stated that if he could not enact his change "in away of Peace, & according to a Rule, I am willing to submit to the will of God" concluding, "The good Lord guide me, & you, that we may further the Worke of his kingdom."<sup>77</sup> The letters are recorded in Taylor's "Commonplace Book" and precede Taylor's copy of Stoddard's arguments, which Taylor interacted with in his "Animadversions." The tone changed markedly upon Taylor's reception of Stoddard's "Sermon on Galatians 3.1." It was at this point that Stoddard made the formal change in the Northampton congregation's practice of receiving members into full communion, as Taylor notes in his Commonplace Book:

Mr. Stoddard having preached up from Gal. 3.1 that the Lord's Supper was a Converting Ordinance . . . & urged till on an occasion of the ruling elder's absence by reason of Sickness, & many if not almost all the Ancient members of the Church were dead then he calls his Church to New Covenanting & among other Articles presented gains a major part to this Article to bring all to the Lord's Supper that had a knowledge of Principle[s] of Religion, & not scandalous by open Sinfull living. This done in the Winter of 1690.<sup>78</sup>

While Taylor saw Stoddard's change in practice as a manipulative act of church politicking, it should hardly be received as such. As Thomas and Virginia Davis summarize the action:

for the better part of twenty years he attempted to persuade the ministers of New England to address themselves realistically to the unresolved problems of the decline

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<sup>76</sup> Stoddard, "Arguments for the Proposition," in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 82–84.

<sup>77</sup> Stoddard to Taylor, June 4, 1688, in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 66.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, "Taylor's Anti-Stoddard Syllogisms" in David and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 149.

in church membership. He proposed that the half-way procedures be modified to eliminate the exclusiveness of admission to the Lord's Table. Then, at the end of at least a decade of attempting to convince his peers, he moved to effect the practices in his own congregation.

His official change of practice followed long consideration and discussion, and even—as it seems to have taken place in late 1690—fell more than two years after he had begun the congregational debates that prompted Taylor's letter.

The larger change—the one that seemed to garner the most opposition in Taylor's response—is a change of language, however. The Gal. 3:1 sermon itself, preached October 5, 1690, marks the first time Stoddard referred to the Supper as a “converting ordinance.” Thomas Davis and Jeff Jeske state that in doing so, Stoddard was “abandoning the views he had expressed in the ‘Arguments.’”<sup>79</sup> They explain the timing of Taylor's interactions with Stoddard's “Arguments for the Preposition” relative to their letter exchange and Taylor's reception of Stoddard's sermon, concluding, “Stoddard's view had changed rather suddenly.”<sup>80</sup> This would be rather remarkable, though, for Stoddard to make so radical a jump so quickly after years of holding the same position consistently. Is it appropriate to understand Stoddard's new terminology as a radically new position, or should it be seen as a new articulation of his long-standing position, complicated by the failure to differentiate between subjective and objective conversion? This will require closer examination of Stoddard's collected statements on the Lord's Supper as a converting ordinance.

As noted, the “Sermon on Galatians 3.1” in 1690 is Stoddard's first statement of this principle. When he first introduces the idea in the sermon he phrases it, “The Lords Supper is

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas M. Davis and Jeff Jeske, “Solomon Stoddard's Arguments Concerning Admission to the Lords Supper,” *Proceedings* 86 (April 1976): 81.

<sup>80</sup> Davis and Jeske, “Solomon Stoddard's Arguments,” 81.

appointed by Jesus Christ, for the begetting of Grace as Well as the Strengthening of Grace” explaining, “Its universally acknowledg’d that the Lord’s Supper is for the Strengthening, & encrease of Grace. But all are not so well satisfied that its for the begetting of Grace.”<sup>81</sup> Stoddard presented the idea not as new, not as his own correction to a long misunderstanding, but as an argument for a position others had already held. So whatever he means by “begetting of Grace” he must understand it to be a view others have held. He equates this phrase with the term “conversion” and defines the nature of this conversion:

Conversion is taken two wayes in the Scripture. Sometimes its taken for the Conversion to the Christian Religion, Acts 15.3.... And Participation in the Lord’s Supper is not appointed to work this Conversion: but for the building up of them that are already converted to the Christian Religion.... But sometimes Conversion is taken for a Saving Turning of the Soul unto God, & Participation in the Lords Supper is a means to procure this. The Ordinance as well as others is a means to make up the match between Christ, & the Soul.<sup>82</sup>

This seems to be the difference between objective assurance (“Conversion to the Christian Religion”) and subjective assurance (“Turning of the Soul unto God”). Later statements affirm this perspective: “If the Lords Supper be only for the strengthening of grace & not for the begetting of it, then men must know that they are converted before they come to the Lords Supper.” His focus on their knowing they are converted—as opposed to their knowing what they are celebrating in the Supper, or knowing that Christ died to save sinners—is clearly a matter of subjective assurance. He continues, criticizing the contemporary view, “Upon this supposition they must forbear coming to the Lords Supper till they know their conversion & every time that they loose the knowledge of their conversion.”<sup>83</sup> This possibility of a participant losing and regaining knowledge is, again, a matter of subjective assurance. Stoddard makes this distinction

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<sup>81</sup> Stoddard, “Sermon on Galatians 3.1,” 131.

<sup>82</sup> Stoddard, “Sermon on Galatians 3.1,” 132.

<sup>83</sup> Stoddard, “Sermon on Galatians 3.1,” 134.

not only in the context of discussing the Lord's Supper, but also, much later in his career, when discussing conversion itself. In that case he starts with the observation, "People are said in *Scripture* to be converted, when they are turned from *Heathenism* to the Profession of the Truth; so they are said to be turned when there is some notable *Reformation* made among them."<sup>84</sup> There seems to be a distinction between turning from "Heathenism" and having a "reformation" made, as the two ideas are placed in contrast in several places in the treatise.

That subjective assurance is in view becomes more explicit in the Galatians sermon when Stoddard argues, "If the Lords Supper be not appointed for the begetting of grace then such as are admitted into churches, & afterwards discern that they are not converted must forbear partaking of it, for they would take God's name in vayne by coming for they could never use it to that end it is appointed for."<sup>85</sup> For an admitted member to later "discerne that they are not converted" yet for it to remain appropriate that they partake of the Supper must not mean that they have ceased to believe the doctrines of the church—i.e. that they have lost their objective ground of assurance—but that they are struggling with their subjective assurance. He addresses this in his third "use": "direction to those that would fain be converted... tho' no man can have any sincere desires to be converted till hee is converted yet many of you, from a conviction of your danger in your present condition may be earnestly desirous to be converted: the advice to such is to come to the Lord's Supper."<sup>86</sup> With his statement that "no man can have any sincere desires to be converted till hee is converted" it seems clear that Stoddard is describing here the

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<sup>84</sup> Stoddard, *A Treatise Concerning Conversion: Shewing the Nature of Saving Conversion to God, and the Way Wherein It Is Wrought; Together with an Exhortation to Labour after It. To Which Is Added, a Lecture-Sermon Had at Boston, July 2. 1719. Wherein the Way to Know Sincerity and Hypocrisy Is Cleared Up* (Boston, 1719), 1, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N01749.0001.001>.

<sup>85</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 135.

<sup>86</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 144.



person who has objective assurance but lacks subjective assurance.

There are other statements, however, which suggest Stoddard does indeed see the Supper as intended to regenerate those who are outside the faith. Postulating objections to his thesis, Stoddard's second objection is the question, "why should food be given to them that are spiritually dead."<sup>87</sup> Stoddard answers that the congregation of Israel received the spiritual food when many were spiritually dead. "Spiritually dead" then, describes many who are part of the visible church. Stoddard was looking to subjective assurance, in the same way Mather was, for evidence of "spiritual life" but saying the signs of participation in the visible church are to be shared with all those in the visible church—which means those who affirm objective assurance.<sup>88</sup> As Stoddard turns from his arguments for his doctrinal proposition to the "uses"—the applications of the doctrines to the lives of the listeners—his statement in "Use 4" is an "Exh[ortation] to such unconverted persons, as doe come to the Lords Supper to use this ordinance for your conversion; improve this ordinance for that end, that you may be savingly brought home to God"<sup>89</sup> this clearly goes beyond the idea that the addressee is merely lacking subjective assurance, but actually is unregenerate.

In "Use. 1" Stoddard made a similar assumption about the condition of some of the visible saints: "There be many such in the Churches of Christ, abundance of men that have had Church communion, & yet have not proved, they have turned profane or hereticall or continued to be

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<sup>87</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 138.

<sup>88</sup> This is similar to his point, noted above, that "Ideots: because they have not knowledge to fit them for this Ordinance" and also "such Adult persons, who are Believers, but have not the opportunity to be sufficiently instructed for the Lords Supper." So those who have the knowledge to constitute objective assurance should partake (Stoddard, "Arguments for the Preposition," in Davis and Davis, *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard*, 80). He makes a similar point in the "Sermon on Galatians 3.1" in "Obj: 4" and his "Ans" when he notes that the Supper is not for the wicked, but for visible saints (Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 140). This is because those who are outwardly saints may or may not be saints inwardly, but the church has no means of accurately knowing the difference, given the inaccuracy of testing subjective assurance.

<sup>89</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 145.

formall... many eat & drinke in Christ's presence, yet will be rejected at the last day."<sup>90</sup> If the person in question is a member of the visible church yet shall be rejected in the last day, they are not just saints who lack subjective assurance even though they outwardly meet the criteria of having knowledge and living unscandalous lives; rather they are not true believers. Yet such cannot be known about them from outward examination by the church. Stoddard's point is that, no matter what test the church institutes, there will be some in the visible church, and admitted to the Lord's Supper, who are not truly saints.

His first argument for his thesis begins with the statement that the Supper is "appointed to be administered to many that are not really Saints, its to be administered to none but visible Saints: but to many that are not indeed saints." Here he is clearly not describing someone who is a saint but lacks subjective assurance of this fact: the subject here is not a saint inwardly, though he or she is one outwardly. Stoddard continues, "Some churches are more lax in their admissions than others; but let them be as strict as any rule will allow; & yet the Lords Supper will be given to many that are no Saints."<sup>91</sup> As Stoddard confronts the problem that will exist in his system, he counters that it already exists, indeed, cannot be avoided. The argument he is building is that the very nature of the Supper already confronts this realty that cannot be avoided anyway.

The New England Way called for strict application of a subjective assurance test to prevent those from communing who were not truly saints; but this could not succeed with perfect accuracy, as the founders had always known and lamented. Stoddard answered this problem by arguing that the church should commune those who are visible saints that they might be converted by the Supper, given the church cannot tell from subjective assurance whether they are

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<sup>90</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 140.

<sup>91</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 132.

truly converted or not: “How many there be that are in such a condition God only knows but there is great reason to feare that there be some such.”<sup>92</sup> The argument that the Supper is a converting ordinance is, for Stoddard, an answer to the otherwise unanswerable problem that admitting all visible saints to the table without proof of their assurance would inevitably involve admitting unregenerate people. This is not, however, a problem unique to his system: it is a problem inherent in any system. Because the true state of the soul is not knowable to observers, any system, no matter how harsh in limiting access to the Supper, will inevitably admit some who are unregenerate. Since the church cannot test sainthood with perfect reliability, the unregenerate will be admitted no matter what.

Stoddard’s answer is that the ordinance itself will be useful for converting those who are visibly members of the Church, yet are not regenerate, and will work conversion in them, at the same time that it works subjective assurance in others who are regenerate but lack full assurance. Stoddard was not advocating bringing the known unregenerate person to the table; he was just acknowledging that beyond examining their objective assurance it cannot be known whether they are regenerate or not. If they are outwardly saints—i.e. they know and affirm the covenant and live unscandalous lives—they should receive the sacrament without the church trying to discern the undiscernible, so that the sacrament might work conversion if necessary and deepen subjective assurance if not:

2 Use. Of advice to the Church not to be backward to admit orderly professors to the Lords Supper, tho’ you may fear they are not savingly converted.... I speak not a word for men of loose cariage, I wish you were more strict then you are with respect to them; but bee not backward to accept of such as have a good conversation, don’t say you fear that they are unregenerate, for if so, they have the more need to come. The Apostles readily accepted those that made a profession of the gospell: bee not you over scrupulous & difficult: don’t discourage them from coming as if it were dangerous & possess them that they shall be damned if they come unconverted, don’t

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<sup>92</sup> Stoddard, “Sermon on Galatians 3.1,” 140–41.

hang back & shew an unwilling spirit to accept of them, don't clog their admissions with any needlesse impositions<sup>93</sup>

Stoddard was not innovating against traditional orthodoxy, he was seeking to answer the question that had always been unanswered: since the church cannot test the sincerity of a visible saint's election, how are the unregenerate to be kept from the Supper? The traditional answer was that they could not. The New England Way had attempted to gain greater accuracy with its test of subjective assurance, but this clearly did not guarantee perfect accuracy. Further, Stoddard could see that it was creating a growing crowd of visible saints who did not have access to the grace of the Supper, and this—in his estimation—was the reason for the growing godlessness pastors had been complaining of for more than a generation. So, Stoddard's solution was to commune visible saints who could attest to their belief in the gospel and godly life. Thus, true saints would receive the sacrament and be strengthened in their subjective assurance, and unconverted, visible saints might be converted by the grace of the sacrament.

That Stoddard was not seeking to change the fundamental conception of the Eucharist, but rather to confront a nagging question about how to correctly apply it is evidenced by the nature of the change his sermon helped to create in his own church. As noted above in Taylor's account of Stoddard's changes, Northampton responded to the sermon by officially adopting Stoddard's requests to expand communion along similar lines as the 1662 Synod had expanded baptism; essentially, that adults who had owned the covenant and lived unscandalous lives, and whose children would be eligible for baptism, would themselves be eligible to commune. This was not a radical revisioning of communion, but answering the question of how communion affects outward-and-visible, though not inward-and-real saints who receive it. It seems likely that, since

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<sup>93</sup> Stoddard, "Sermon on Galatians 3.1," 143.

the 1677 expansion of the records of who were communing members, and the accompanying inattention to differentiate between communing and non-communing members in the church record, this system had been unofficially guiding the practice of the Northampton church but was now being officially adopted as its policy.

Had the practice been more radical than this it seems it would have provoked a more rapid response. For the next decade, however, the response was muted. As noted above, Taylor railed against the sermon in his revisions of his Foundation Day sermon, and even worked the controversy into some of his *Sacramental Meditations*,<sup>94</sup> but these were private responses that never saw public expression. Increase Mather, in England on a diplomatic mission at the time, did not want to expose disunity in the New England ranks. Cotton Mather published *A Companion for Communicants*—noted above—sparking the wave of sacramental manuals that would continue until tapering dramatically in the Great Awakening fifty years later. While the book was primarily a response to the sacramental renaissance and a solution from Mather’s perspective to the problem of non-communing members not seeking to become communing members through the relations of the New England Way, he alluded to Stoddard when he voiced concerns about “a sort of man who tells us that a bare *profession* of Dogmatical or Historical *Faith* (which *Faith* and *Profession* they themselves they find it hard enough to describe) together with submission to the *Government* of the Visible church will entitle a man to the *Sacraments!*”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 97, notes the lines,

But lest this Covenant of Grace should ere  
Be held by doubting Saints al violate  
By their infirmities as Adams were  
By one transgression and be so vacate  
It’s Seal is food and’s often to be used  
To seal new pardons freshening faith, missused.

Taylor, *Poems of Edward Taylor*, 243, quoted in Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 97.

<sup>95</sup> Cotton Mather, *A Companion for Communicants* (Boston, 1690), 29,

Mather posited instead that a, “probable and credible profession of saving faith (and no less than that)” was necessary for admission to the Lord’s Table. To Stoddard’s claims that his doctrine is a return to the ancient position Cotton Mather states that the Supper “is not Ex Instituto, a converting ordinance... this ordinance has never by accident been sanctified for the first conversion of them that had never been brought home to God before... Indeed, this dogma is a new thing; the assertions run counter to the common sense of the church in all ages and have an army to man against them.”<sup>96</sup> In 1697, in the introduction to Cotton Mather’s biography of Stoddard’s mentor at Harvard, Jonathan Mitchell, Increase was able to make a more open statement of his opinion. While Coffman claims their primary concern was with Stoddard’s doctrine of the Supper as a converting ordinance, it was not just the “converting ordinance” idea, but his whole doing away with the test of subjective assurance that the Mathers objected to.<sup>97</sup>

### **Other Objections to Relations**

The Mathers concerns were not limited to Stoddard and the western frontier, however. In Boston, in 1698–99, a group of merchants began building a new church on Brattle Street to challenge what they saw as the Mathers’ hegemony over New England Congregationalism. As

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<http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00426.0001.001>.

<sup>96</sup> Cotton Mather, *A Companion for Communicants*, 30, 43, quoted in Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 98.

<sup>97</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 98. Coffman stated that “Increase denied the value of membership requirements for New England churches, even denied that public profession should be required, conceding that it was enough for a church to “know for a man can judge that person whom they admit to the Lord’s Supper are fit and have a right to be there” (citing Increase Mather, *Ecclesiastes or the Life of the Reverend and Excellent Jonathan Mitchel* [Boston, 1697], 1–3). In its context, however, the statement is actually that “The Church ought to know, as far as men can Judge, that the Persons whom they Admit to the Lords Table are fit, and have a right to be there” (Increase Mather, “The Epistle Dedicatory. To the Church at Cambridge in New-England, and To the Students of the Colledge there” in Cotton Mather, *Ecclesiastes. The life of Jonathan Mitchel*, 13, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00651.0001.001>). Far from a concession of the unimportance of relations so long as the Supper is not understood to be a converting ordinance, this is part of Mather’s argument for the importance of relations. His statement is the heading of an argument, and in the following paragraph Mather states, “How shall the Churches know, that the Persons who offer themselves to their Communion are such, unless they pass under their *Trial*” (Increase Mather, “Epistle,” 14).

they sought a minister to serve their new pulpit, they were explicitly looking for two departures from New England Way practice: “the Holy Scriptures might be publicly read every Sabbath in ye Worship of GOD, & that they might lay aside ye Relation of Experiences which were imposed in the other Churches in the Town, in order to ye Admission of Persons to ye Lords Table”<sup>98</sup> They chose Benjamin Coleman, a Boston native, educated for the ministry at Harvard, who traveled to England and served in several ministerial capacities before agreeing to become the pastor of the new church. When he accepted the position, he was instructed to seek Presbyterian ordination before returning to Massachusetts, as it was expected that opposition from the Mather-dominated Boston Congregational establishment would otherwise prevent his ordination to the pastorate of the new church. This ordination was also, however, a statement about some of the polities and practices that the new church sought to challenge. Coleman, it is believed, upon his arrival in Boston, wrote up a “manifesto” of beliefs and stances for the new church, seeking not only to establish what innovations the church would make, but also to anticipate objections that would no doubt be leveled against it.<sup>99</sup> “We think it Convenient, for preventing all Misapprehensions and Jealousies, to publish our Aims and Designs herein, together with those Principles and Rules we intend by GODS Grace to adhere unto.”<sup>100</sup> The opening of sixteen articles reads, “First of all, We approve and subscribe the Confessions of

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<sup>98</sup> Church in Brattle Square, Church in Brattle Square. *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square, Boston, with Lists of Communicants, Baptisms, Marriages and Funerals, 1699–1872*. (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 1, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100322984>. This public reading of the Scriptures in worship meant without comment, a style perceived as too Anglican in other Puritan congregations (Thomas S. Kidd, *The Protestant Interest: New England After Puritanism* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004], 32).

<sup>99</sup> Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 476, notes that the authorship of the manifesto which would give the new church its nickname, “The Manifesto Church,” “is uncertain, but has been usually attributed to Coleman.”

<sup>100</sup> Coleman, *A Manifesto or Declaration, Set Forth by the Undertakers of the New Church Now Erected in Boston in New-England, November 17. 1699* (Boston, 1699), 1, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N00713.0001.001>.

Faith put forth by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster.”<sup>101</sup> The innovators were clearly seeking to confront any accusation that they were engaging in heterodoxy.

By claiming their adherence to Westminster, they placed the Mathers in an awkward position. During Increase’s time in London as an agent of the colony he had helped with the *Heads of Agreement* of 1691, a document that sought to establish the basic articles of faith that Presbyterians and Congregationalists held in common to improve their standing in post-restoration England. Indeed, in 1700 Cotton Mather would publish “that English nonconformists ‘have needlessly been sometimes Distinguished into Presbyterian and Congregationl.’ But he hoped they would unite in essentials under ‘that more Christian Name of United Brethern.’” The Mathers would extend “no such warm feelings for the new Presbyterian church in their own backyard,” however.<sup>102</sup> It must be remembered that, however much the *Westminster Confession of Faith* might be regarded as an acceptable standard of orthodoxy in the transatlantic world of 1699, it was this very document to which the *Cambridge Platform* was a nervous response. And the *Cambridge Platform* represented a version of New England Congregationalism with which the Mathers identified as its champions. The new church, founded on concerns about worship style, like reading Scripture without comment from the minister, was also very much founded on concerns about inclusion in the sacraments and confronting the growing issue of non-communicant adult members. In seeking to address this concern its leadership was looking in a similar direction to that of Stoddard. Article five states,

we further Declare, that we allow of Baptism to those only who [illegible] their faith in Christ and Obedience to him, and to the Children of such; yet we dare not refuse it

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<sup>101</sup> Coleman, *A Manifesto*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Kidd, *Protestant Interest*, 34, quoting Mather, as quoted in Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York, 1984), 140.



to any Child offered to us by any professed Christian, upon his engagement to see it Educated, if God give life and ability, in the Christian Religion.

But this being a Ministerial Act, We think it the Pastors Province to receive such Professions and Engagements; in whose prudence and conscience we acquiesce.<sup>103</sup>

Baptism was no longer a greatly divisive issue, though the breadth of the inclusion was disagreeable to the Mathers. Increase objected that, taken literally, the *Manifesto* allowed for the baptism of heretics who professed faith in Christ.<sup>104</sup> Despite his objections, however, Brooks Holifield notes, “apart from his fondness for covenants Increase Mather’s admission requirements did not greatly differ from those of the new church, which presumably did not intend to baptize heretics.”<sup>105</sup> The Mathers had actually softened even further in their attitude toward the expansion of baptism since Increase had reversed himself on the half-way covenant. In 1692, in light of the Salem witch trials, Cotton had expressed to John Richards that he wished to expand baptism as far as possible to protect against those who were baptizing miserable souls into witchcraft: “I would mark as many as I should, that the destroying angels may have less claim unto them.”<sup>106</sup>

On the matter of admission to the Lord’s Supper, the Brattle Street Church was clearly going beyond the Mather’s practice. In articles seven and eight they stated,

We judge it therefore fitting and expedient, that whoever would be admitted to partake with us in this Holy Sacrament, be accountable to the Pastor to whom it belongs to inquire into their knowledge and Spiritual State, and to require the Renewal of their Baptismal Covenant....

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<sup>103</sup> Coleman, *A Manifesto*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Increase Mather, *The Order of the Gospel, Professed and Practised by the Churches of Christ in New England, Justified, by the Scripture, and by the Writings of Many Learned Men, Both Ancient and Modern Divines; in Answer to Several Questions, Relating to Church Discipline* (Boston, 1700), 8, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00779.0001.001>.

<sup>105</sup> Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 186.

<sup>106</sup> Silverman, *Selected Letters*, 46–50, quoted in Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 185.

But we assume not to our selves to impose upon any a Publick Relation of their Experiences; however if any one think himself bound in Conscience to make such a Relation, let him do it.

For we conceive it sufficient, if the Pastor publicly declare himself satisfied in the person offered to our Communion, and seasonably Propound him.<sup>107</sup>

These churchmen were concerned that the public relations were keeping back from the table those who should rightly commune. However, they were not merely removing the public aspect of the relation: they were limiting the pastoral examination to the “knowledge and Spiritual State” that specifically excluded concern for the subject’s “Experiences.”

### **A Battle among the Printing Presses**

The Mathers’ response to the new practices in their own backyard would also take aim at Stoddard’s practice. This resulted in a battle in print, the opening salvos of which came in Increase’s *Order of the Gospel* and Stoddard’s *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*. It appears that the manuscripts of each of these were known to their opposing authors who may have reworked their own manuscripts before publication in response to their opponent’s yet-unpublished work. *Order of the Gospel* was published in Boston in March of 1700, while Stoddard could not get a publisher to print his work in Mather-dominated Boston and so published in London sometime between March and July.<sup>108</sup> Following this, Increase and Cotton together penned a response to which they gave the brief title “A Defence of Evangelical Churches, In A Soft Answer to What May Offend the Churches of New-England in an Hard Attempt Against Them, Under the Title of, The Doctrine of Instituted Churches. And, A Short Account of the Discourse About, A Claim

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<sup>107</sup> Coleman, *A Manifesto*, 2. This last provision that the pastor would hear professions is the same practice Stoddard would recommend in his *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, which would be published the following year (see below).

<sup>108</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 108.

to the Lords Table, Here Published and Commended, as a Treatise Worthy of Great Acceptance in the Churches,” inserted as the preface to John Quick and Cotton Mather’s *The Young Mans Claim Unto the Sacrament of the Lords-Supper*, yet another book participating in the sacramental renaissance. There followed a respite of almost eight years, before Stoddard published his next major exposition of his position, *The Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship of God, Under a Pretence of Being in an Unconverted Condition*, in 1708. Increase Mather quickly answered with, *A Dissertation, Wherein the Strange Doctrine Lately Published in a Sermon, the Tendency of Which, is, to Encourage Unsanctified Persons (While Such) to Approach the Holy Table of the Lord, is Examined and Confuted* that same year. The following year, 1709, Stoddard shot back with, *An Appeal to the Learned. Being a Vindication of the Right of Visible Saints to the Lords Supper, Though They be Destitute of a Saving Work of God's Spirit on Their Hearts: Against the Exceptions of Mr. Increase Mather*. A truce was officially reached in print, however, with Increase Mather’s penning of the introduction to Stoddard’s, *A Guide to Christ. Or, The Way of Directing Souls That Are Under the Work of Conversion. Compiled for the Help of Young Ministers: and May Be Serviceable to Private Christians, Who Are Enquiring the Way to Zion*, published in 1714. In considering each of these documents, we will see that a close reading of this controversy demonstrates how a lack of distinction of objective and subjective assurance caused the writers to misunderstand each other even as they used the same language but with different meaning.

For Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, was taking on what he saw as very similar problems on his local and western front in one major effort. For Stoddard, *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, was a public explanation of his new system; and not just his new sacramental system, but the accompanying church polity he propounded. While he had much in common with Brattle Street,

he was also offering his corrections to their views. Both writers agreed that there was a problem of godlessness in the land. The point at issue, however, was how to address that godlessness. For Stoddard, baptized people's lack of assurance was keeping them from coming to the Supper where they might become more sure of their conversion and produce godliness in them. For Mather, the sacrament was reserved for those who could demonstrate their godliness by relating their subjective assurance, and communing those who could not do this was moving further from primitive purity and inviting more godlessness. Stoddard was explicit in that he was making his changes to address the problem of people not finding assurance and saw the ills of his society as the result of this unfulfilled search. The Brattle Street churchmen were seeking to confront a similarly conceived problem. Yet Mather saw the problem as actually lying in his opponents: in his "Epistle Dedicatory" he wrote that,

The *First Generation* of his Servants whom he brought into this Wilderness are gathered to their Fathers. And many of the *Second Generation*, such of them as are yet living are now in years, and soon will be all gone. The *Third Generation* are coming to take their turn: Some of them are great Blessings to the Churches, as inheriting the Principles, Spirit, and Grace of their Fathers and Grand-Fathers, but many of them do not so. On which account, it is not at all to be wondred at, if *they Dislike the Good Old way of the Churches*; yea, if they Scoff at it, as some of them do; or if they are willing to *depart from what is Ordinarily Practised in the Churches of Christ in New-England*. For the *Congregational Church Discipline*, is not Suited for a Worldly Interest, or for a Formal Generation of Professors. It will stand or fall as Godliness in the Power of it does prevail or otherwise.<sup>109</sup>

For Mather, the very problem that was producing the ungodliness was variance from the "good old way" of what was "ordinarily practiced" in New England's churches.

In reading Mather's *The Order of the Gospel*, one notices that Mather set up his work correcting this failing by starting with the question of whether churches should be comprised of visible saints and claiming that they should. Then he asked whether there should be a trial to

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<sup>109</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 10–11.

determine if one is fit for admission to communion. He argued that there should be a trial, and that “The tryal to be used should be such as may make it appear to the Judgement of rational Charity, that the persons be so qualified as all Church-Members ought to be.” Since “*Church Members* ought to be *Believers, Saints, Regenerate persons*” then “the Church should put the persons, who desire Admission into their Holy Communion, to declare and show whether it be thus with them, whether they have truly Repented of their Sins, and whether they truly Believe on Christ.” In doing this “A rigid Severity in Examination is to be avoided, and such tenderness and Charity ought to be used as that the weakest Christians if Sincere may be encouraged and gladly admitted.”<sup>110</sup> It should be noted that this argument sounds like arguments made during the formation of the Cambridge Platform more than half a century earlier, but at that time it was inclusion through baptism that was being discussed. While Mather was arguing stridently against Stoddard’s and the Brattle Street Church’s decision to remove public relations, he was deeply concerned for the condition of the believer who lacked a strong subjective assurance: “Church Communion and the Ordinances of God belonging thereto, being of special use for Confirmation and growth in Grace, such Christians that are the weakest have the most need thereof, and therefore by no means should be Excluded there-from.”<sup>111</sup> It is remarkable how little difference there is between Mather’s position and those of his opponents. The lack of distinction between objective and subjective assurance makes the difference in their arguments difficult to see.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 20.

<sup>112</sup> There are differences. A few years earlier, Cotton Mather focused in his *Companion for Communicants* on the importance of self-examination. “*First*” he said, “is an *Examination of our State*” in which the communicant is to “*Examine your selves, whether ye be in the Faith.*” “The Reflection of our *Conscious* upon our own motions, *Comparing* them with the *word* of God, and *Concluding* from them, our being either the *Heirs of Life*, or the *Sons of Death.*” In this examination the communicant is asking if they are indeed regenerate. “*Secondly,*” says Mather, “There is an *Examination* of our *Wayes*, under which we are to bring our selves.” By this examination is meant the particular sins the communicant should confess as he prepares to come to the table: “That is a Question that we

Mather enlists patristic fathers and the Geneva Discipline to his cause, and specifically cites the twenty-ninth of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles: “That in the use of the Lords Supper, such as are void of a Lively Faith, to their Condemnation Eat and Drink the Sign and Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.” To Mather this “Lively Faith” is juxtaposed elsewhere with an “historical” or “doctrinal” faith, by which he means the mere objective doctrine. Yet he cites the context in the Thirty-Nine Articles that proves the historic consensus is exactly what the Anglican framers had in mind: “if any man be in Malice, or in any grievous Crime, Let him not come to the Holy Table, but let him Repent truly of his Sins past, and have a lively Faith in our Saviour Christ.”<sup>113</sup>

Mather rejects the suggestion that the pastor or elders alone can admit people to communion without the consent of the body as a whole and claims this is the view of Presbyterians as well.<sup>114</sup> He asks, however, “Whether is it necessary that persons at their Admission into the Church, should make a publick Relation of the Time and Manner of their Conversion?” and answers in two ways: first, in the negative, stating that, “Nor do the Churches of New England impose this: nor ought this to be required or desired of every one that joyns to

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should often Examine our selves withall, What have I [been] doing of? What have I done, that ha’s been prevoking [to] my God, and pernicious to my self?” (C. Mather, *Companion for Communicants*, 85, 93). Stoddard, in contrast, focuses primarily on the need for knowledge: “Three things are requisite in order to admission to the Lords Supper; First, Visible Saintship... all professors walking blamelesly are Visible Saints... A second requisite is, that they be not scandalous... A third requisite is, that they have knowledge to examine themselves and discern the Lords Body; for the want of this Infants are denied the Lords Supper.... if any of them should not understand the Nature of that ordinance, they may soon be sufficiently informed” (Stoddard, *The Doctrine of Instituted Churches Explained and Proved from the Word of God* [London, 1700], <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A61661.0001.001>). This understanding seems limited to knowing what is happening in the ordinance, not their subjective preparation.

<sup>113</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 21. Mather is no doubt quoting this context in support of his argument because of the pairing of the need for the communicant to “repent truly” and have a “lively faith.” However, Stoddard would not object to the claim that the communicant must truly repent, only to the claim that the observer might know the veracity of that repentance apart from the communicant’s own knowing.

<sup>114</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 23–26.

our Communion.”<sup>115</sup> He offers several reasons for his answer, concluding, “These things considered, we shall readily concede unto those who are Scrupulous about Relations, that A Formal Relation is not absolutely necessary in order to Admission into Church Fellowship.”<sup>116</sup> He then reconsiders the question, stating, “The practice of the Churches in New England as to this particular, is Lawful, Laudable, and Edifying. It is Lawful for Churches to desire those that offer themselves to their Holy Fellowship, to give an account of their Faith and Repentance: And when a Church desires it, no capable person ought to refuse it.”<sup>117</sup> Here we see the nuance of Mather's argument. He wanted such trials to serve as benefits and sources of assurance both to their subjects and to their audience. The fact that he denied the need for a saint to know the time and manner of their conversion and allowed that “a formal relation is not absolutely necessary” suggests that he was looking in the relation more for objective assurance than subjective, though he wanted a more personal engagement with the belief than mere knowledge of it. He wanted communicants to believe the doctrine applied to them! This view is clearly not far distant from Coleman or Stoddard. Yet the lack of a subjective/objective distinction in their language for defining assurance perpetuates the argument. Their primary disagreement is one of polity—whether a minister may judge without the input of the congregation, or whether the congregation must admit to communion as a whole—yet because of the lack of nuance in their language, the debate was carried out as primarily a difference of soteriology, rather than a nuance of ecclesiology.

This would bear out across the remainder of the debate. A decade of experiment with Northampton's new practice of the expansion of communion had not led to significant changes

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<sup>115</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Increase Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 32.

in Stoddard's doctrine. As alluded to above, he placed the discretion of who was to commune solely in the hands of the teaching elder—the minister of the church—not in the hands of the “presbytery” of the individual church—its ruling or lay elders and teaching elders together—or of the congregation at large: “The Teaching Officer is appointed by Christ to Baptize and Administer the Lords Supper, and therefore he is made the Judge by God, what Persons those ordinances are to be Administred to, and it is not the work either of the Brethren or Ruling Elders, any ways to intermeddle in that Affair or Limit him.”<sup>118</sup> It may be that his decade of experimentation had led him to distrust the populism of the congregation. Or, it may simply have been that under the expanded system the decision of when an individual was to be admitted to the table was easier if it was carried through the pastor rather than through the formality of a gathered meeting that had only one likely outcome. Whatever his reasons for the polity, it must be recognized that it was an issue of polity, not a new insight into the issue of testing subjective versus objective assurance.

In introducing the topic, Stoddard stated, “all such Professo[rs o]f the Christian Faith, as are of blameless Conversation, and have knowledge to exa[mine] themselves and discern the Lords Body, are to be admitted to the Lords Supper.... Three things are requisite in order to admission to the Lords Supper; First, Visible Saintship, and that is found in such Persons; all professors walking blamelesly are Visible Saints.”<sup>119</sup> The remaining requirements given are “that they be not scandalous” and “that they have knowledge to examine themselves and discern the Lords Body.”<sup>120</sup> The first requirement, then, is not focused on the blameless walk, but on the fact that the visible saint is a “professor”; i.e. that they believe and profess the doctrine of the church.

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<sup>118</sup> Stoddard, *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Stoddard, *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, 18–19.

<sup>120</sup> Stoddard, *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, 19.



This is virtually identical to Mather's requirement for admission! Stoddard defended this claim with the words,

There never was any such Law in the Church of God, that any should be debarred Church Priviledges because they did not give the highest evidence of sincerity, nor for want of the Exercise of Faith; it is unreasonable to believe Men to be visible Saints from their Infancy till they be forty or fifty years of Age, and yet not capable of coming to the Lords Supper, for want of the Exercise of Faith; they are not to be denied because of the weakness of Grace, they that have the least Grace need to have it Nourished and Cherished.<sup>121</sup>

Again, this sounds very much like the Mather's concern that people with weak assurance receive the Supper. In *A Companion for Communicants*, Cotton Mather, urging people to come to the table, had argued,

But the most common and usual Objection with which men Apologize for their not coming to the *Lords Supper*, is, *I fear, I am not fit for the Supper of the Lord; and it is a dangerous thing to come unworthily thereunto*. Now there are these things to stop the mouth of this Objection.

First, It may be that you are *Fit*, when you do not imagine so. Those that have most *Jealousies* and *Suspitions* of themselves, are least likely to be, *The Devils among the Twelve*. We read in Isa. 50.10 about, *A Child of Light in Darkness*. Your *Darkness* about your Estates, is no sign of your Hypocrisy. *A Spirit with much Fear*-argues rather a *Spirit without Guilt*.<sup>122</sup>

What Stoddard is identifying as a "weakness of Grace," Mather identifies as a "Spirit with much Fear." For both men, the answer is to encourage admission to the Lord's table, since "you are *Fit*, when you do not imagine so." In addition, Increase Mather, in a later treatise in his argument with Stoddard, stated, "that Ordinance is appointed for true tho' weak Believers, that so their Faith may be Strengthened. And there are many weak but true Believers, who have not Assurance, and for them with due Preparation to attend upon the Lord in this holy Institution, is

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<sup>121</sup> Stoddard, *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, unnumbered [20].

<sup>122</sup> Cotton Mather, *Companion for Communicants*, 76.

the way to obtain Assurance.”<sup>123</sup> It seems clear that all three men are concerned with the same problem of people who need subjective assurance from communion not receiving communion due to concern that they are not fit to come to the table—they just have different solutions for the policy by which such people should be admitted to the table.

Increase and Cotton Mather acknowledged the similarity of the arguments in their treatise, “A Defence of Evangelical Churches,”<sup>124</sup> published in Boston in John Quick’s *The Young Mans Claim Unto the Sacrament of the Lords-Supper*. Because there was not clarity on the distinction between subjective and objective assurance, however, they saw this similarity as evidence that Stoddard was conceding their point:

Inconsistences does the *Truth* compel our Friend unto, [Tis the Revenge of *Truth* upon him, for striking at it!] That when he comes to tell us, *Who are the Visible Saints, that are to be Admitted unto the Lords Supper*, he lets all these words, which do at once give up all: *Such a Profession, as being sincere, makes a man a Real Saint, being morally sincere, makes a man a Visible Saint*. Behold, a Concession of all that we ask for!<sup>125</sup>

Stoddard could define a visible saint as one with a sincere profession, by which he meant they had owned the covenant. Mather could seize on this as conceding his own point because to him profession meant relation; but such a relation did not mean the time or manner of the person’s

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<sup>123</sup> Increase Mather, *A Dissertation, Wherein the Strange Doctrine Lately Published in a Sermon, the Tendency of Which, Is, to Encourage Unsanctified Persons (While Such) to Approach the Holy Table of the Lord, Is Examined and Confuted. With an Appendix, Shewing What Scripture Ground There Is to Hope, That Within a Very Few Years There Will Be a Glorious Reformation of the Church throughout the World* (Boston, 1708), 2, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N01147.0001.001>.

<sup>124</sup> Subtitled, to make the project explicit, “In *A Soft Answer* to What May Offend the Churches of New-England in an *Hard Attempt* against Them, Under the Title of, *The Doctrine of Instituted Churches*. And, a Short Account of the Discourse About, *a Claim to the Lords Table*, Here Published and Commended, as a Treatise Worthy of Great Acceptance in the Churches” (emphasis original).

<sup>125</sup> Increase and Cotton Mather, “A Defence of Evangelical Churches, In *A Soft Answer* to What May Offend the Churches of New-England in an *Hard Attempt* against Them, Under the Title of, *The Doctrine of Instituted Churches*. And, a Short Account of the Discourse About, *a Claim to the Lords Table*, Here Published and Commended, as a Treatise Worthy of Great Acceptance in the Churches.” In John Quick, *The Young Mans Claim unto the Sacrament of the Lords-Supper. Or, The Examination of a Person Approaching to the Table of the Lord* (Boston, 1700), 48, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00788.0001.001> (emphasis original). Their quote of Stoddard is from *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, 19.

conversion. Indeed Mather could even concede that the relation was not essential. Apart from their differences of polity, the two men seem to hold a remarkably similar position. Yet the lack of nuance to their discussion of assurance meant they did not recognize the way forward out of the argument and into a common practice. The Mathers actually identified the problem when they wrote,

Possibly, that which may have betray'd our Friend into these Hallucinations, is, a peculiar *Exactness* in his Thoughts about a Work of *Regeneration*. In the *Experience* of his own Religious and Regenerate Soul, there may have been such and such notable Operations of the Holy Spirit upon his mind; and it is natural for such good men, to make their own *Experience a Rule* for others. If *others* have not perceived all the *same Operations*, in the *same Measure*, and in the *same Order*, with themselves, their trembling Apprehensions of *Gods Righteousness*, and of *Mans Deceitfulness*, not making a due Allowance for the *Variety* used in the *Way of the Spirit*, cause them to fear that such are not yet Regenerate.<sup>126</sup>

The implication is that they find in Stoddard's view that the people he was urging to the table to gain conversion must have already experienced such conversion but are the weak in faith noted above.

This passage enlightens our understanding of what the Mathers must have been looking for in a profession. They faulted Stoddard for having experienced some moving of the Spirit—here the perhaps-apocryphal story of Stoddard's conversion while serving the Lord's Supper comes to mind—and then, not finding that same moving of the Spirit in a visible saint who lacks subjective assurance, Stoddard would compel that person to the table that they might find the same experience. Meanwhile the Mathers' advice to the same person would apparently be to realize that they are already converted and so come to the table. To the individual in question, the resulting action is the same. In both cases the person becomes a communing member. In the

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<sup>126</sup> I. Mather and C. Mather, "A Defence of the Evangelical Churches" in Quick, *The Young Mans Claim*, 46–47.

Mathers' system the person is understood to be converted, but weak and needing the grace of the sacrament to grow in strength. In Stoddard's system the person is presumed to be converted, but lacking assurance, which they will gain from the sacrament. Stoddard spends a great deal more time, however, on the inevitability of individuals who are not in fact converted being admitted, no matter the system, and building the argument for why this is not a flaw but a feature of the sacrament, which can produce conversion in these individuals. In fact, by his later writings it seems that Stoddard is seeing the lack of assurance more and more as a need for conversion. He states that it is bad preaching to say, "that *Faith is nothing else but a Perswasion that the Gospel is true,*" rather, "is the very way to make many Carnal men hope that they are Converted. It makes other Preaching very ineffectual: It makes them think that it is needless to strive for Conversion. Such Preaching hardens men in their Sins."<sup>127</sup> Instead, he wants people to experience conversion, and from that experience to know assurance: "Conversion may increase by degrees, men grow more and more holy by degrees, but Conversion is wrought at once; the first act of Grace makes a man a Convert."<sup>128</sup>

The tone of this exchange should be noted. While the Mathers call their unnamed opponent—Stoddard, as this treatise was their response to *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*—their Friend, they are very direct in quoting the opponent and in claiming he has the "Revenge of Truth visited against him;" strong, fighting words by eighteenth century standards. This treatise would be the first salvo in a bitter pamphlet war, touched off by Stoddard's official publication of his system in *Doctrine of Instituted Churches*. The content of the argument, however, would not change much across that war. Stoddard's explanations that those who could testify to their

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<sup>127</sup> Stoddard, *The Defects of Preachers Reproved in a Sermon Preached at Northampton, May 19th. 1723* (New London, 1724), 26, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N02171.0001.001>.

<sup>128</sup> Stoddard, *Treatise Concerning Conversion*, 5.

objective assurance should not allow the lack of subjective assurance to prevent them from coming to the table became bolder, as did his insistence that even if they were not converted, their visible saint status meant that they ought to come to the Table that they might be converted by it. The explanations were always couched in the language of the person having a sincere profession of faith while lacking “Sanctifying Grace” or some other expression of the visible saint’s awareness of their inward reception of the doctrines that they outwardly professed.<sup>129</sup>

Increase Mather would caricature Stoddard’s position as believing “That Persons who know themselves to be in an Unregenerate Estate, may & ought to approach unto the Holy Table of the Lord, whilst they remain in their Sins.”<sup>130</sup> This caricature was in response to a sermon Stoddard had preached in 1707, and published the following year, in which he urged that those with external faith were required to come to the table whether they knew themselves to be regenerate or not. He criticized Mather’s position and sought to show what he saw as the logical inconsistency of those whom Mather thought ought not to commune: “there is another sort that [Mather says] should forbear, viz. Such Godly men as do not know that they are Converted.” Yet, Stoddard argues, “If a man be Godly, yet how can he with a good Conscience come to an Ordinance, peculiar to Godly men, when he don’t know himself to be Godly.”<sup>131</sup> Stoddard’s point was not that those who know themselves to be unregenerate should come to the table, but that human self-knowledge is insufficient to determine accurately whether one is regenerate or unregenerate; so if one has objective assurance, that person should come to the table. They may

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<sup>129</sup> Stoddard, *Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship*, 3. Stoddard states “Sanctifying Grace is not necessary unto the Lawfull attending of any duty of Worship” and seeks to demonstrate that—as under the old covenant, so under the new—the duties of worship are not removed by the participant’s unfitness for them. This was building out Stoddard’s argument that the unconverted people who must necessarily be admitted to the table under any system are not a problem for the sacrament.

<sup>130</sup> I. Mather, *A Dissertation*, 2.

<sup>131</sup> Stoddard, *Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship*, 22.

be regenerate and get subjective assurance from the sacrament; they may be unregenerate, but coming in that state the sacrament may be the means of their conversion. Stoddard's system was not intended to admit all people to the Lord's Supper, but to admit those who met the outward criteria.<sup>132</sup> He insists that no matter the system, some who are "unregenerate" will be admitted, and it is on this point that all his arguments for the Supper as a converting ordinance focus. This is because he was seeking to overcome the problem he was observing that public relations produced too high an emotional-social barrier and many who should participate in the Supper were refraining from doing so for fear of unworthy participation. The Mathers' solution was to convince more people they were worthy to come; Stoddard's solution was to convince them to come regardless as the sacrament could make them worthy even if they weren't regenerate.

In Stoddard's reply to *A Dissertation*, he used a distinction between "them that are Unregenerate and have no right [to the Eucharist] before God, though they have before men," (and therefore should commune) and "those who are not so far as men can judge in a Regenerate Estate" (and therefore should not commune).<sup>133</sup> The latter are those scandalous or unbelieving people who are not in covenant with God; the former are those who have done all that outwardly gives them claim to the Supper but who yet are unregenerate. He is critical of Mather for failing to distinguish that there can be unregenerate men who are in covenant as the church is only able to examine the externals.<sup>134</sup> He then focused his argument on why unregenerate individuals who are in covenant should commune and how the sacrament can be used to work faith in them.

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<sup>132</sup> Stoddard, *Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship*, 11, stated "No Scandalous person may be admitted to Baptism, neither may any Scandalous person be admitted to the Lords Supper; but those that are not Scandalous may partake of it, tho' they are not Regenerate. Such persons as might lawfully come to the Passover, may also if they have Knowledge to discern the Lords-body, lawfully come to the Lords-Supper, for they are alike figures."

<sup>133</sup> Stoddard, *An Appeal to the Learned*, 20.

<sup>134</sup> This was always a point understood in the New England Way.

Stoddard was not telling everyone to come to the table, just the visible saints who have objective assurance. We can see the usefulness of Stoddard's doctrine in actually bringing people to the table: in his system if a communicant was wrong about their state, they are helped to become right by their communing. In Mather's system, if someone is wrong about their state, they are pushed further into judgment by communing. It is important to note here that we are not dealing with a program of outreach (converting the lost by giving them the Lord's Supper) but rather with a matter of preparing people for the Lord's Supper and addressing their fears about preparation.

### **Moving Toward Consensus—The Sacramental Controversy Concludes?**

As bitter as the conflict was, both the Mathers and Stoddard were aiming at the same problem: the growing numbers of people who did not believe they belonged to Christ, and the societal degeneration they perceived as flowing from that problem. Both parties had the same ultimate goal: that more people would become communing church members. Whether it was Stoddard's system, or his pastoral style, or his preaching abilities, Stoddard experienced—over the course of his career—five “harvests” or “awakenings,” in which large numbers of the population of Northampton experienced some form of conversion that, regardless of the nuances between Stoddard and the Mathers, all accepted as genuine turning to faith. These awakenings shall be examined briefly in the next chapter to see what they contribute to our understanding of the role the controversy over assurance played in the intellectual path to the Great Awakening. It seems, however, that the awakenings and Stoddard's evangelistic zeal, evident in the sermons he frequently preached by invitation in Boston, did much to end the controversy and reconcile the parties, even if they did not reconcile their intellectual differences. In 1714 Mather agreed to write the preface to Stoddard's *A Guide to Christ*, which he concluded by stating,

It is known, that in some points (not Fundamentals in Religion) I differ from this beloved Author; Nevertheless, (as there was a difference of Opinion between *Jerom[e]* and *Au[gu]stine*) *Jerom[e]* said for all that *I cannot but love Christ in Au[gu]stine*; so do I say concerning my Brother *Stoddard*. And I pray the Lord to bless this, and all his holy Labours for the Conversion, and Salvation of many of God's Elect.<sup>135</sup>

Despite the fact that they differed in polity and that they never officially resolved what they perceived at one time as deep theological differences over soteriology, they had come to the point where they were willing to overlook what had once seemed not merely error, but near-heresy. Since their arguments had not changed, this matter was more of an issue of nuance than of substance.

That the arguments had not changed can be seen in two publications of Stoddard's, both in the fifteen-year window between his reconciliation with the Mathers, and his death. The first sought to set forth Stoddard's doctrine of conversion and bears the apt title, *A Treatise Concerning Conversion*. In this Stoddard spends an entire chapter on the claim that "conversion may be known," a claim that speaks directly to subjective assurance. Stoddard states, "The knowledge that other men have of it is uncertain; because no man can look into the heart of another, and see the workings of grace there: Yet men may know that they are godly." He qualifies this, however, with the statement that "All converted men don't know that they are converted."<sup>136</sup> In this post-controversy statement the idea that conversion may be known—essentially a definition of subjective assurance—is always qualified by the acknowledgement that, while it is possible to know one's own converted status, it is not essential or normative that one know one's own status. Ultimately, the way in which one might know of one's conversion,

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<sup>135</sup> Increase Mather, "To the Reader" in Stoddard, *A Guide to Christ. Or, The Way of Directing Souls That Are under the Work of Conversion. Compiled for the Help of Young Ministers: And May Be Serviceable to Private Christians, Who Are Enquiring the Way to Zion* (Boston, 1714), xii, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N01446.0001.001>.

<sup>136</sup> Stoddard, *Treatise Concerning Conversion*, 78.



Stoddard argues, is not by reasoning nor by faith, but “*by Intuition or seeing of grace in their own hearts.*”<sup>137</sup> Even in this intuition, “There may indeed be something of more difficulty in it, because many actings of grace are low and weak; on that account it may be hard to see it; as it is hard to see the motion of water in a river, when it moves very slowly; and upon that account, because grace is much counterfeited; and there be many actings that do look like the actings of grace that are not so.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, the knowledge of one’s own conversion—subjective assurance—is not, for Stoddard, essential to salvation and is not the result of reason or faith, but of experience. As such, it may be helpful and comforting, but is not viewed as essential. It can be cultivated by the means of grace: “Communion is reciprocal. When God draws nigh to his People, that mightily stirs up a spirit of holiness; it doth not only strengthen assurance, but it stirs up all grace.”<sup>139</sup> His most definitive statement of the idea that conversion is an event that would be known to most converts—and therefore his closest statement to an endorsement of subjective assurance as a normative proof of election—came in a sermon in 1723, printed in *The Defects of Preachers Reproved*. There he states that, “*If any be taught that frequently men are ignorant of the Time of their Conversion, that is not good Preaching. Some are of that Opinion, and its like they may drink it in from their Ministers. This is a delusion, and it may do them a great deal of hurt; it hardens men in their Natural Condition.*”<sup>140</sup> As sure as this statement is, he does allow that it is normal, not absolute: “Ten to one but Conscience will take notice of it.”<sup>141</sup> Far from being an advocacy that all should be allowed to commune that some might be converted by it, however,

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<sup>137</sup> Stoddard, *Treatise Concerning Conversion*, 85.

<sup>138</sup> Stoddard, *Treatise Concerning Conversion*, 86.

<sup>139</sup> Stoddard, *Treatise Concerning Conversion*, 78.

<sup>140</sup> Stoddard, *Defects of Preachers*, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Stoddard, *Defects of Preachers*, 11.

Stoddard's whole project in this work is to teach preachers how they might better bring assurance to their congregations. He continues to insist that grace cannot be judged with any reliability by externals:

Signs of Grace are of two sorts: Some are Probable, and they must be spoken of only as Probable; a Score of them may make the thing more Probable, but don't make it Certain: Probabilities make no Demonstration; Probable Signs are not Conclusive.... There is no infallible Sign of Grace, but Grace. Grace is known only by intuition: All the External Effects of Grace may flow from other Causes.<sup>142</sup>

Indeed, after so strong a statement of his expectation that most converts will remember their conversion, a great deal of effort is given to knocking down false means of identifying one's conversion. In 1723, in teaching how to preach to produce conversions a mere six years before his death, Stoddard did not advocate bringing all and sundry to the Lord's table to promote conversions. Nor had he begun to advocate using subjective assurance as proof of salvation. He was still seeking to bring about subjective assurance in those who were without it.

### Conclusion

Stoddard ended his critique of preaching in New England on a note that underscores the confusion that plagued the entire debate. Summarizing his points, he states, "To tell men that ... *Faith is nothing else but a Perswasion that the Gospel is true*, is the very way to make many Carnal men hope that they are Converted."<sup>143</sup> "A Perswasion that the Gospel is true" seems a reasonable definition of objective faith. And yet Stoddard claims it is dangerous to suggest such a persuasion is a basis of subjective assurance as, apparently in his view, men may believe it and still be "Carnal." While some might argue that this is a change from his earlier belief, I contend that it is an expression of the lack of clarity of the long argument over conversion without the aid

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<sup>142</sup> Stoddard, *Defects of Preachers*, 16–17.

<sup>143</sup> Stoddard, *Defects of Preachers*, 26.

of a distinction between subjective and objective assurance. Elsewhere in this sermon Stoddard gives further definition to the idea of “perswasion”:

Faith in Christ is said to be only a Perswasion of the truth of the Christian Religion. This is the way to make multitudes of Carnal men secure, and to flatter themselves as if they were in a good Condition: They say they are no Heathens, nor Turks, nor Papists, nor Jews, but they believe that Jesus Christ is the Eternal Son of God, they hope they are Believers; but multitudes of People have such a Faith that will fall short of Eternal Life.<sup>144</sup>

Here Stoddard is fleshing out a space between the belief that the Christian Religion is true—what Mather may call “historical faith”—and what we have been calling objective assurance. The person in this condition is not regenerate, they “fall short of Eternal Life.” Yet they seem to have the outward marks of the believer: they believe the Christian religion is the true one, they believe Scripture’s claims about Christ’s person. Yet, they lack “justifying faith,” which Stoddard describes thus: “Justifying Faith is set forth in the Scripture by many figurative Expressions; Coming to Christ, Opening to Him, sitting under his Shadow, flying to Him for Refuge, building on Him as on a Foundation, feeding on Him, &c. These Expressions do imply not only an act of the Understanding, but also an act of the Will, accepting of Him, depending on Him.” There is a personal engagement with the external reality. While this personal engagement is often marked by an experience, it is not the experience Stoddard is concerned with, but the reception of God’s converting or saving grace. This is, however, a highly nuanced condition he is calling parishioners to engage. It is more than the historic markers of membership for he is saying that knowledge and unscandalous life by themselves are not sufficient to evidence saving grace, even if they are all that can be outwardly observed.

Stoddard was calling the church to limit its membership tests to only that which is

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<sup>144</sup> Stoddard, *Defects of Preachers*, 15.

outwardly observable—knowledge and unscandalous life—while at the same time calling individual parishioners to continue pressing to an act of will; accepting, depending. These things were not only not outwardly observable but were confusing to the person trying to discern inwardly if they had taken place. How this confusion played out in the coming decades as Stoddard’s awakenings prepared the way to the Great Awakening would continue the process begun by the founding generation. While pastors may have sufficiently nuanced their arguments, the nuance proved too subtle for lay reception, and the Puritan confusion of conversion and subjective assurance would give enormous shape to the development of American theology ever after.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION: THE GHOST OF THE FOUNDERS' TEST HAUNTS THE GREAT AWAKENING

#### **A Pattern Begins: Flight, Arrival, and Enshrinement**

When the Puritans arrived in North America in 1630, they instituted a new test of church membership to solve a problem they perceived with the membership practices of the Anglican churches they had left behind in England. Those English churches participated in a broader Reformed tradition of including in the communion of the church those believers who claimed to believe what the church taught, and who demonstrated their submission to that teaching by their unscandalous lives. The North American Puritans perceived that, by this standard, too many people who were not actually regenerate were being welcomed to the Lord's Table and thus both defiled the Table and were themselves given a false assurance of their spiritual status. So, they instituted a new membership test of this very assurance, aimed at purifying the churches and preventing the churches from granting false assurance to their members. This new test would begin to produce difficulties almost immediately, however. Children growing up in Puritan-designed New England social order did not see a difference between themselves and the broader society as their parents had in England; they did not have dramatic differences with the hostile majority culture which their English parents had experienced and which provided fertile sources of what might be called persecutory imagination from which to draw subjective assurance. A later generation of North Americans had not chosen to cross a dangerous ocean or face the hostile wilderness as their immigrant predecessors had done. These offspring did not find sufficient persecution in their own experience to grant subjective assurance with the tools their tradition had equipped them and thus there were not prompted to pursue communing membership. Seeking to explain this problem, Pope looked to a change in generational character:

“The visibly holy ... rarely sustain their fervor in succeeding generations. Spontaneity is lost, and experiential piety becomes routinized. Children cherish the past, imitate it, but cannot recapture it.”<sup>1</sup> As has been seen in this study, the problem was not a change of character, but a change of context. The founding generation had looked for experience that would enable them to articulate assurance and, in the trauma of European persecution, Atlantic crossing, and wilderness survival, they had found the basis of such experience. Succeeding generations, however, looked for such experiences in the stability of a new, covenanted society, and could not find them. It was not until war, plague, and political upheaval provided fresh trauma, that the new generation could wrestle assurance from their new experiences. After stability returned, the struggle began afresh until the concept of what constituted an experience sufficient for subjective assurance itself evolved into a form that could be found more easily in new contexts.

A careful reading of the sources in this period reveals a recurrent cycle. Stability produced a lack of material for the persecutory imagination to form experiences that could produce subjective assurance sufficient to inspire congregants to pursue communing membership. Ministers interpreted this lack of new membership as apathy or they recognized their congregants’ anxiety over their own lack of experience. In response, they constructed policies aimed at correcting the problem. They also altered their practices, developing new forms of sermons and encouraging reflection that could produce subjective assurance from their congregants’ experiences.

### **A Pattern Emerges: Responding to Stability, Recovering through Crisis**

In the first generation, crisis provoked the great migration, which itself produced sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 278.

persecutory imagination for leaders to enact the policy of the test. When stability began to hinder the power of the persecutory imagination and stagnate religious experience, the ministers responded by calling the Cambridge Synod to enact new policies to address the problem. Yet, the crisis of a political threat from Presbyterianism in England forestalled this policy solution.

This meant that the problem of declining church membership, produced by the stability of the 1650s had to be dealt with by a new generation, through new policy solutions: The Ministerial Assembly of 1657 and the Synod of 1662. The new policy—later called the half-way covenant—was implemented slowly because the very stability that necessitated the policy fostered the intricacies of congregational governance in Congregationalism. In the dynamic context of crisis, the community needed its members for support. In the stagnant context of stability, the community began to exercise review and control in new ways,<sup>2</sup> even as individuals found less material for the persecutory imagination to spur bids for membership. Despite the slow adoption, the problem the new policy was crafted to resolve began to resolve itself. Church member rolls began to grow, and a new generation of colonists began to be admitted to full communing membership.

While this reversal took place alongside the slow adoption of the half-way covenant, it seems to have been based more on the painful events of the last quarter of the seventeenth century than on the half-way covenant. During this period Congregational churches saw a marked rise in memberships, both “half-way” memberships and full communicants. While this may have been in part the impact of the expansion of baptism advocated by the 1662 Synod—by

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of the Liberties*, 173, noted the dizzying variety of ways in which various churches implemented the half-way covenant. “Significantly, many churches that dispensed with public testimony still limited full membership to regenerates, and required the pastor to summarize private meetings between candidates and the officers.” This hesitant relocation of review and control from the congregation to the pastor would be seen again and again as pastors sought to confront the problem.

definition all of the “half-way” memberships were a direct result of that expansion—this dissertation has argued that the rise was largely due to an increase in subjective assurance as the social turmoil of the period, combined with the pastors’ preaching in response to such circumstances, provided growth in subjective assurance sufficient to equip people to pass the relation test and become full members. The development of the Jeremiad and the imagery of the Church militant in the artillery election sermons were significant examples of this in the second generation.

### **A Pattern Calcifies: Sacrament and Sermon During Uneasy Peace**

In the last decade of the seventeenth century and first quarter of the eighteenth century, the growth of people in the “half-way” class of membership—whether through the application of the half-way covenant, or simply children baptized according to the Cambridge Platform who never came to sufficient subjective assurance to warrant making a relation—prompted a number of pastors to begin experimenting with expanding communion along the same lines as those proposed for baptism by the 1662 Synod. For churches that followed this innovation, membership requirements essentially returned to those of the earlier Reformed consensus. For churches that did not follow this expansion, many began altering the relation requirement to soften the difficulty of the test. As we have seen from the arguments of Increase and Cotton Mather, the debates of the Sacramental Controversy caused them to refine their understanding of the test to the point that they were mostly looking for objective, as opposed to subjective, assurance.<sup>3</sup> This should have had the effect of moving them towards the membership

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<sup>3</sup> While Mather had essentially come to testing for objective assurance, he was taking a highly nuanced position. He was perceived as having been arguing for the old New England Way all along, so his contemporaries received his arguments as more of the Cambridge Platform. In Mather’s context this would not bring about an influx of new people into the congregation, because the congregation itself seemed to be the problem.



requirements of the earlier Reformed consensus.

### Mixed Results

Under these similar conditions, however, different churches experienced very different results with respect to membership growth. James Cooper documents a rise of contentious discipline cases that eventually led to a general apathy across this period.<sup>4</sup> Douglas Winiarski finds a similar situation, describing growing spiritual angst and apathy across the period leading up to the Great Awakening.<sup>5</sup> In times of stability the Congregational system—developed so that the community could provide support in crisis—seemed to begin to tear itself apart. There was a growing apathy in early eighteenth-century Congregationalism as the North American Puritan quest for individual spiritual awakening was not being realized through the methods of the Cambridge Platform. Indeed, the traditional application of the New England Way was mostly producing infighting and contention.<sup>6</sup>

While it seems like Congregationalism was withering away in general by the 1730s, it was a diverse picture. Some churches adopted Stoddardianism. Some simply loosened admission

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<sup>4</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 132, notes that “Clifford K. Shipton has estimated that the period from 1721–1740 witnessed more than three times the number of serious church divisions than the period from 1680–1720.” Further, he states “many clergymen had come to agree with the ‘innovators’ [at the Manifesto Church] belief that lay disorder threatened Congregationalism far more than modest procedural modifications in a handful of local churches. Indeed, within a few years, many ministers dismissed the Manifesto Church’s procedural changes and violations of sola scriptura as largely insignificant, and joined with Colman and Brattle in an effort to seek institutional changes designed to strengthen clerical authority” (Cooper *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 159).

<sup>5</sup> See Winiarski, *Darkness Falls*, loc. 937.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 196, writes, “by 1740, Congregationalism had lost much of its force and had ceased to serve many of its functions, often standing as an obstacle on the path toward salvation rather than a means to grace. At last acknowledging, as Benjamin Colman observed, the degree to which church government had “hindered the growth of the Church and the Success of the Gospel among them,” ministers finally understood that problems of contention and apathy could not be addressed simply through institutional change. Instead, they would seek to restore harmony in the churches by rekindling the power of the spirit among their followers. While the elders would exceed all expectations in reviving spiritual vigor in Massachusetts, they would also come to question whether the Congregational Way of their forefathers could continue to occupy a central place in the religious life of Massachusetts.”

practices by instituting written relations while keeping to a form of the half-way covenant.<sup>7</sup>

According to Winiarski, these written relations became increasingly formulaic.<sup>8</sup> He states that the formulaic nature of these relations, “reflected an important shift in the meaning of church membership, as New England towns evolved from zealous gathered communities of visible saints into the comprehensive, territorial parishes of the provincial era.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet, in other churches, growth and even events of “awakening” or “harvests” were experienced. For example, there were five such in-gatherings at Northampton during the course of Stoddard’s ministry there. The first three of these harvests took place during the last quarter of the seventeenth century<sup>10</sup> when many churches seemed to be benefiting from social turmoil inducing greater spiritual inquiry and subjective assurance. The remaining harvests, however, in 1712 and 1719, took place in the midst of the period when contentiousness, apathy, and anxiety were growing in most churches. These awakenings did not take advantage of social upheaval, as

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<sup>7</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Fall*, loc. 826–39, gives an example of this process with Sarah Eastman’s relation at Haverhill in 1724. She delivered a written relation to her pastor who “discussing the contents of the relation and inquiring further into Eastman’s theological knowledge,” “propounded” her to full communion in the church. Then, “For the next two weeks, she remained in this probationary state, as existing church members scrutinized her testimony. Then, on March 8, 1724, the Haverhill minister read her relation aloud, called for a vote, and admitted Eastman to full communion.” Even with this easier process the difficulty of assurance is evident: the last sentence of her written relation is, “I daiser [desire] to Cum depending apon Christ for davin [divine] asistence and bagging your prayers for me that I May not Cum unworthily.”

<sup>8</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Falls*, loc. 847–55, writes, “Early-eighteenth-century church admission narratives composed in parishes from the northern frontier to coastal Connecticut adhered to a common structure derived from six interchangeable components. Candidates typically began their narratives with several interlocking statements that established their family’s religious pedigree. After acknowledging that they had failed to improve the means of grace offered to them as children, applicants chronicled various awakening events—illnesses, Indian raids, natural disasters, or, as in Eastman’s case, family deaths—that they interpreted as the providential voice of God calling loudly for them to perform their sacramental duty by affiliating with the church and participating in the Lord’s Supper. Most expressed concern and even terror at the prospect of consuming Christ’s body and blood unworthily, but they also quoted or alluded to one or more encouraging scripture verses that buttressed their decision to join the church.”

<sup>9</sup> Winiarski, *Darkness Falls*, loc. 855.

<sup>10</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 81–82, notes the dates of these awakenings as 1679, 1683, and 1696 with the result that “eight men and fourteen women were admitted to fellowship” in the first and “fourteen men and thirteen women being admitted” in the second and an unspecified number in the third.

the decade was a relatively uneventful and prosperous time in New England. Yet, the 1712 awakening, “occurred simultaneously with Hampshire Association’s lecture series. In other churches in the Council and beyond similar awakenings occurred, with flocks of new converts being admitted.”<sup>11</sup> These awakenings occurring throughout the association Stoddard helped to create came at a point in Stoddard’s career which Coffman calls his “Evangelical Phase.” Of this period, Coffman notes, “In the writings after 1712 the figure of Christ in Stoddard’s thought ceased to be peripheral. No longer was participation in Christ restricted to visible saints’ communion. Rather, Paul’s Christ-mysticism became the center of the Evangelical experience”<sup>12</sup> This points to a possible solution to the question of why Congregationalism was experiencing such mixed results in the early eighteenth century: preaching.

#### Sermons as Solution?

The policies the church had been pursuing looked for a sacramental answer to an emotional problem created by their focus on the membership candidate’s sense of subjective assurance.<sup>13</sup> In his early career Stoddard sought to solve the continuing problem by essentially extending the half-way covenant policy from baptism to the Lord’s Supper. By his late career, however, he was seeking to correct the problem—from within his new system—by a different policy: a change in preaching.

Stoddard was always seeking an experiential response, which made the engagement with subjective assurance more private and individual. This focus functionally took affirming

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<sup>11</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Coffman, *Solomon Stoddard*, 144.

<sup>13</sup> I say “emotional problem” because of the anxiety and emotional stress which features so prominently in relations. Stoddard’s whole quest seems to have been seeking to overcome this anxiety—which he experienced himself and saw in the struggles of his congregants—by bringing parishioners to a subjective state of assurance.

subjective assurance out of the realm of the church and the gathered community's collective experience. In Stoddard's system conversions began functioning as immediate events, usually in response to sermons and acknowledged primarily in the private experience of the believer, whereas the Puritan conversion experience had previously been conceived as something worked out over a long period of time reaching its climax in internal reflection, reviewed and authenticated by the community. In Stoddard's system, access to the Lord's Supper was granted to all who could propound objective assurance but the goal was still an event of conversion that would offer subjective assurance. Thus, communal accountability was absent. In Stoddard's articulation, the goal remained essentially the same as it had for the first generation of New England Puritans but it was independent of review and control by the corporate body. This was because the individual had already been admitted to the Supper based on their owning the covenant—testified privately to the pastor—and living an unscandalous life. Their experiential conversion and subjective assurance were to be the products of their reception of Word and Sacrament, and were matters of personal, not community, discernment.

Both Stoddard and the Mathers were preparing the groundwork for the Great Awakening, but they did so in very different ways: Stoddard by cultivating individualized expression and the Mathers by trying unsuccessfully to reinforce communal accountability but doing so in a way that increased apathy. The result was a context where individual experience was placed in contrast to a “dead orthodoxy.” In the Great Awakening, we see Stoddard's vision that conversions are immediate events swelling to include the practice of churches throughout the region.

Previously, the relations focused on the inward spiritual thought process over a long period. It may have been influenced by sermons but tended to culminate in a private realization of one's

regenerate status. In the Great Awakening, the conversion experience began to truncate into an event that could happen in a public setting, as a direct response to preaching.<sup>14</sup> This is because the goal of both Stoddardianism and the Mather-style New England Way was perceived by the laity as an experiential form of assurance. The revival sermon could produce the sort of micro-traumatic experience previous generations had only found through macro-traumatic experiences like early ocean crossings, wilderness survival, war, and plague.

### **Looking to the Future**

As the sermon began to function more and more as a vehicle for producing the conversion experience, a new generation was rising. Stoddard's grandson and successor at Northampton, Jonathan Edwards, would continue to expand on his system for the sermon and become a significant leader of the Great Awakening. At the same time, Edwards began to critique the other side of Stoddard's practice, and with it even the expansion of baptism under the half-way covenant.<sup>15</sup> Edwards, who was focused like his grandfather on the arrival of the soul at subjective assurance through a personal experience of conversion, saw a purity to the original practice of the New England Way. Yet the immediacy of conversion that Stoddard worked out made the founder's vision more attainable. Limiting full church membership to those who had already

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<sup>14</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89, notes a similar pattern to the conversions of English leaders of the Great Awakening: "The experience of conversion for these influential leaders can be described as parallel, for there was remarkable similarity in the way that each passed through a crisis of moral and spiritual insufficiency that led to the brink of despair, before the crisis was resolved by an intense experience of spontaneous spiritual joy.... This was, for example, the experience of Howell Harris ... [on] 18 June [1735] ... when he suddenly felt his heart melt like wax during private prayer, his soul filled with the assurance that he was loved as a child of God. The experience was not always pinpointed to the day, as it was for Harris, or to the minute, as it was for John Wesley (at 'about a quarter to nine' on 24 May 1738), but there was typically a marked contrast drawn between one's spiritual state before and after conversion."

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Compleat Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church* (Boston, 1749), <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N05035.0001.001>, explains his position on both the expansion of communion, and also the expansion of baptism, positioning himself against his grandfather and also against the 1662 synod.

found subjective assurance through experiential conversion was an effective system if conversion could be found more simply.<sup>16</sup> Jerald Brauer notes,

in Edwards ... conversion no longer occurs within the context of covenant. Though the term “covenant” is still employed in the Great Awakening and in Revivalism, it no longer represents the firm doctrinal structure on which the Christian faith is built. Historic modes of thought developed by centuries of Christian history, both symbols and discursive thought patterns, were subsumed under the centrality of the conversion experience. It became the touchstone in terms of which all doctrines, traditions, offices, and institutions were to be tested. This represented a further shift in goal from concern for the covenantal community with its modes of thought and action and from the holy commonwealth, to a primary concern for the individual’s conversion.<sup>17</sup>

Since individual conversion was easier to achieve in this structure, Edwards saw even greater results than Stoddard. He had inherited a system that had to simplify experiential conversion because of the normative focus it had placed on it. This system has become the bedrock of American theology ever since. This new form of viewing conversion, however, was not sufficient to remove the anxiety from the conversion experience. Pope noted that even in the heart of the Great Awakening most new members joined the churches as “half-way” members.<sup>18</sup> This meant that these new members wanted greater connection to the churches but had not experienced what Edwards and others said they should be experiencing.

The push for an experience to produce subjective assurance had affected Edwards himself, as noted earlier in his reflection that, “the chief thing, that now makes me in any measure to question my good estate, is my not having experienced conversion in those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to

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<sup>16</sup> This would explain why modern Baptists—with almost exactly the expectation of the early Puritans—have survived quite successfully for several centuries.

<sup>17</sup> Jerald C. Brauer, “Conversion: From Puritanism to Revivalism,” *Journal of Religion* 58, no. 3 (July 1978): 242.

<sup>18</sup> Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 276.

experience it.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the movement he helped to direct, apparently did little to alleviate such anxiety. For example, consider the relations of Ruth Holbruk in the 1750s.

Speaking of herself and her husband, she noted

I with Him but a Little before his death made a profession of Christ & his religion; & both joined together in giving up our Children to God in Baptism yet I am sensible that I ought not to stop there; but to come to the other ordinance even that of the Supper of the Lord: & which indeed was the advice & Council my Deceased Husband gave me when on his death bed giving me it in charge then not to neglect my duty in this respect: & lamented his neglect of duty in this particular.<sup>20</sup>

Having seen her husband go to his grave with such uncertainty, her own hope did not seem much more certain: “I trust He hath not left off striving with me nor left me to perish without hope; I hope God hath opened my eyes, and awakened me to see my sin & misery, bro’t me to Consider my ways that have not been right in His sight.”<sup>21</sup> The simplification of experiential conversion as the vehicle of arriving at subjective assurance was not foolproof. Having made it normative, however, the Puritan vision left many who had not had the overwhelming experience doubtful of their status before God, regardless of their beliefs in the objective truths assurance is based on. While the truncation of conversion expectation may have been sufficient to produce more experiences of conversion, fueling the Great Awakening, it was really a return to the founder’s original vision, with its too-precise expectations of a normative path through specific experiences to subjective assurance.

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, ed. Edward Hickman (London, 1835), 1:lxviii, quoted in Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 163. While Edwards made this observation half a century after the institution of the Half-Way Covenant, he still felt the demands of his ancestors’ conception of conversion, and illustrates the tension such a culturally-bound conception created.

<sup>20</sup> George H. Haynes, *Historical Sketch of the First Congregational church, Sturbridge, Massachusetts* (Worcester MA, 1910), 39, <http://archive.org/details/historicalsketch01hayn>.

<sup>21</sup> Haynes, *Historical Sketch of the First Congregational Church*, 39.

### Further Direction and Final Thoughts

Examining the evolution of this expectation of conversion as a normative path in successive generations provides fertile ground for future scholarship. Further understanding of how preaching in particular created rubrics for understanding individual personal experiences according to a persecutory imagination would be invaluable to understanding the evolution of American theology. Scholarship specifically applying this thesis to the First and Second Great Awakenings, as well as later periods of American religious history should give deeper understanding of the impact which the doctrines of experiential conversion and subjective assurance has had on contemporary theology.

The impact of this American theology on traditions outside the Reformed tradition would also be a useful area for further study. For example, in 1849 Dr. Walther's central ninth thesis of his seminal *Law and Gospel* was extensive and explicit in its rejection of revivalistic influences. Yet less than seventy years later, as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod transitioned from a German-speaking (and preaching) denomination to an English-speaking one, almost overnight it became common to hear revivalistic, experiential-conversion-focused sermons in its pulpits. It would be valuable to examine how participation in the English-speaking theological tradition of American theology produced this result so quickly.

Within the confines of the periods I have examined there is much room for further study as well. I noted the importance of the development of the Jeremiad and the imagery of the Church militant in the artillery election sermons as significant examples of pastors' preaching in response to traumatic circumstances in the second generation which provided congregants tools and rubrics for interpreting their experiences sufficient to enable them to pass the test of subjective assurance and become full members. This pastoral response would be a fruitful field for further study. How pastors used the social circumstances in their preaching to help people



process the crises spiritually and grow in subjective assurance would offer helpful insights to both scholarship and homiletical practice. It would help us see how preaching fueled and formed the persecutory imagination that fostered subjective assurance. The same is true of the last two revivals during Stoddard's later career. I noted that during this period the revival sermon could produce the sort of micro-traumatic experience previous generations had only found through macro-traumatic experiences like early ocean crossings, wilderness survival, war, and plague. The development of the revival sermon in the 1720s-30s and the new type of conversion it was seeking to produce through creating "micro-trauma" instance of the persecutory imagination as the basis of an immediate experience of conversion is a promising field for further study.

We can better understand now, the scene with which we opened. When Nehemiah Bull put to the Westfield congregation, "Whether such persons as come into full communion may not be left at their liberty as to the giving the church an account of the work of saving conversion,"<sup>22</sup> he was speaking to a congregation that had inherited almost a century of anxiety over their status with God. If they were like other Congregational churches that had stood by the half-way covenant interpretation of the Cambridge Platform, they had watched for close to half a century as the gains of the revivals following King Philip's War were slowly swallowed by arbitration in the church courts as congregations came to function as venues for airing contentiousness and mediating the problems that arise in human community. They little resembled the pure ancient communities the founders had envisioned. Then, in neighboring Northampton a new vision had arisen, and seemed to prove itself by continuing the revival harvests into the new century. Just what the source of those gains were was unclear: Stoddard's sacramental system, his preaching, or his personality (he tended to tout the former two options in his published arguments). Their

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<sup>22</sup> Grabo, *Edward Taylor*, 39.

pastor had long warned them of the dangers rejecting the founder's system would bring. Yet those dangers did not materialize in Northampton. And so the Westfield congregation, with their old pastor looking on (though, perhaps, unaware due to senility<sup>23</sup>), responded to their new pastor's plea for a change that might improve the situation. Perhaps they did so with reticence. Perhaps they did so eagerly—they had, after all, called Bull who seemed eager for the change. No doubt they acted with many a self-reproving and apologetic glance at the old man who had served them so long. But respond they did, adopting Stoddardianism and joining the majority of churches in the Connecticut valley who sought a corrective to the problem the founders had bequeathed them. They continued in their new system, however, still holding an expectation that both Stoddard and the founders had held: that an experience of conversion was a normative aspect of the believer's journey to subjective assurance, whether or not such experience should affect one's status as a communing member. And so the problem would continue forward, shaping future iterations of American—and with it, Western—theology to the present day.

In Westfield, as in congregations across New England in the early decades of the eighteenth century, the expectation that experiential conversion was the basis of subjective assurance left the churches teetering in an evolutionary process that could not seem to find stability. The founders' expectations, and their disregard for how their context shaped those expectations, set a future generation's children's teeth on edge.

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<sup>23</sup> H. Taylor, "Edward Taylor," in William B Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (New York, 1857), I, 178, as noted before, stated that Taylor had "continued to labor diligently and faithfully for a period of nearly sixty years; although, for the last three or four years of his laborious and self-denying life, he had become imbecile through extreme old age."

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