

2013

New Perspectives on the Northampton Communion Controversy I: David Hall's Diary and Letter to Edward Billing

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Recommended Citation

Winiarski, Douglas L. "New Perspectives on the Northampton Communion Controversy I: David Hall's Diary and Letter to Edward Billing." *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 282-94.

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*NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE NORTHAMPTON COMMUNION
CONTROVERSY I:
DAVID HALL'S DIARY & LETTER TO EDWARD BILLING*

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Series Introduction

Jonathan Edwards' fateful decision to repudiate the church admission practices of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, provoked a bitter dispute with his parishioners that led to his dismissal in 1750. Scholars have long debated the meaning of this crucial turning point in Edwards' pastoral career. For early biographers, the Northampton communion controversy served as an index of eighteenth-century religious decline. More recent studies situate Edwards' dismissal within a series of local quarrels over his salary, the "Bad Book" affair, conflicts with the Williams family, and the paternity case of Elisha Hawley. This essay is the first in a series that reexamines the tangled religious context of the communion controversy through newly discovered historical documents. The first installment explores the conflict from the perspective of David Hall, a little-known clergyman from central Massachusetts who participated in the dismissal proceedings. Hall's unwavering support for Edwards during the communion controversy stemmed, in part, from his own struggles to discipline a combative group of radical separatists within his own congregation.¹

The author wishes to thank Christopher Grasso, Philip Gura, Kenneth Minkema, and Mark Valeri for commenting on earlier drafts of this essay.

¹ Essential scholarship on the Northampton communion controversy includes Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 241-267; Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 215-233; Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 147-194; Gregory H. Nobles, *Divisions Throughout the Whole: Politics and Society in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1740-1775* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 59-74; Kevin Michael Sweeney, "River Gods and Related Minor Deities: The Williams Family and the Connecticut River Valley, 1637-1790" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1986), 429-457; Kenneth Pieter Minkema, "The Edwardses: A Ministerial Family in Eighteenth Century New England" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1988), 311-356; Christopher Grasso, "Misrepresentations Corrected: Jonathan Edwards and the Regulation of Religious Discourse," in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 19-38; Ava Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys: The Transformation of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Northampton, Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 75, (2002): 179-203; George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 340-374; Chamberlain, "Jonathan Edwards and the Politics of Sex in Eighteenth-Century Northampton," in Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Caleb J. D. Maskell, eds., *Jonathan Edwards at 300: Essays on the Tercentenary of His Birth* (Lanham, cMd.: University Press of America, 2005), 111-122; and Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 135-164. David D. Hall addresses the broader ecclesiastical context of the controversy in "The New England Background," in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61-79. The approach that I have adopted in this series builds upon Hall's suggestion that scholars "reclaim the full spectrum of opinion among evangelicals in the 1740s" and place the conflict within "a wider

David Hall, the Congregational minister of Sutton, Massachusetts, ranked among Jonathan Edwards's most stalwart defenders during the Northampton communion controversy. He served as a replacement delegate to the ecclesiastical council that voted to dismiss Edwards on June 22, 1750. One year later, Hall returned with a group of prominent eastern Massachusetts clergymen to consider Timothy Dwight's proposal to install Edwards over a separate church in Northampton. The Sutton minister remained keenly interested in the theological issues raised by the qualifications debate long after Edwards had departed for Stockbridge. After signing a published letter of protest against the dismissal proceedings, he worked to gather subscriptions for Edwards's rebuttal treatise, *Misrepresentations Corrected*. Hall was also the recipient of the famous 1760 letter in which Joseph Hawley, one of Edwards's chief antagonists, apologized for his role in fomenting the conflict.²

Born into a "very Godly, Pious Family" on Cape Cod, Hall graduated from Harvard College in 1724 and was ordained at Sutton five years later. His central Massachusetts parish, which he served for more than six decades, placed him in a key position to promote the religious revivals that surged across New England during the 1740s. Hall welcomed a number of prominent itinerant preachers into his pulpit, including Edwards, who delivered a rousing sermon on Psalm 18:25 to a large and "much revived" assembly on February 1, 1742. Hall noted in his diary that he had seldom witnessed as graceful a preacher, and he prayed that he might "have a housefull of Gold" equal to Edwards's radiant countenance. More than four times the annual number of new communicants joined the Sutton church in 1741 and 1742; and yet Hall, like Edwards, remained wary of "Irregularities" and "Imprudences" that were promoted by "some high Pretenders to the Work of Conversion in this remarkable Day." After sparring in print with a newspaper critic who questioned the account of the Sutton awakening that he had published in the *Christian History*, Hall turned away from the controversial revivals. During the fall of 1747, he briefly emerged as a leading candidate to become the first president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). The following year, Hall energetically promoted Edwards's Concert of Prayer among neighboring ministers and colleagues in the Mendon ministerial association.³

understanding of religion, culture, and society in the eighteenth century" (Hall, "Editor's Introduction," *WJEO*, vol. 12, *Ecclesiastical Writings* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994], 85).

² David Hall, diaries, 1740-1789, May 26, 1751, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Jonathan Edwards to Joseph Bellamy, n.d. [April 1751], Edwards to Thomas Foxcroft, June 30, 1752, *WJEO* 16: 368, 487; Timothy Dwight, "Request for a Council from the Northampton Minority," n.d. [ca. 1750-1751], *WJEO* 38, *Dismissal and Post-Dismissal Documents*; *The Result of a Council of Nine Churches Met at Northampton, June 22, 1750* (Boston: n.p., 1750), 2, 8; *Boston Gazette*, June 16, 1752; Joseph Hawley to David Hall, May 9, 1760, *WJEO* 32, *Correspondence by, to, and about Edwards and His Family*. Edwards did not nominate Hall for the June 1750 council, although the Sutton minister and one of his parishioners represented one of the nine churches that eventually participated. See Edwards, "Narrative of Communion Controversy," *WJEO* 12: 618-19.

³ "Extracts from the Diary of Rev. Samuel Dexter, of Dedham," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 14 (1860): 37; Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (1842; reprint, Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1976), 204; Hall, diaries, Feb. 3, 1742, Sept. 24, 1744,

By the time the communion controversy exploded in February 1749, Hall had been engaged for several years in a fierce struggle with a vocal cabal of “*Antinomian*” separatists in his parish. The troubles began when Thomas Marsh, a former deacon and radical lay exhorter from eastern Connecticut, visited Sutton in 1745. Stirred by Marsh’s incendiary preaching, Hall’s parishioners began railing against their minister, contesting his sermons, and condemning the Sutton church as an “Image of the Beast.” Twenty church members withdrew from communion and gathered an illegal separate church. During the next several years, Hall filled his diary with reports of the “ruff Treatment” and “sore abuse” that he received from his “Contentious neighbours.” He was appalled by the “wild Delusions” that he witnessed during their tumultuous worship exercises. The noisy meetings featured peculiar sermons that, according to Hall, perverted the true meaning of the scriptures. Women preached and exhorted in public, while other separatists prophesied future events and recounted their visionary conversion experiences. The Sutton dissenters were led by Ezekiel Cole, a zealous Native American revival convert from the neighboring town of Grafton who claimed to be the typological descendant of the “Captain of the Lords hosts” described in Joshua 5:14. Soon, rumors were circulating that the “separating Brethren” had rejected their infant baptisms and embraced “*familistical*” errors, including the controversial practice of spiritual wifery. During the same month that Edwards was dismissed in Northampton, the Sutton church censured four additional church members. Hall referred to this troubled period in his ministry as the “winnowing time.”⁴

Nov. 7, 1747, July 2, 1748; Sutton, Mass., Congregational Church Records, 1720-1825, microfilm, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass., 111-114; Hall to Thomas Prince Jr., June 30, 1743, *Christian History* 1 (1744): 185; Hall, “Revival of Religion at Sutton in the County of Worcester,” *Christian History* 2 (1745): 162-172; *Boston Evening-Post*, Oct. 15, 1744; Hall, “To the Publisher of the *Christian History*,” *Christian History* 2 (1745): 415-416; Jonathan Edwards to William McCulloch, May 23, 1749, *WJEO*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. Claghorn, 272; Francis G. Walett, ed., *The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, 1703-1782* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1974), 193. The standard biography of Hall remains Clifford K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes 1722-1725, with Bibliographical and Other Notes*, vol. 7, *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1945), 345-356. For an early example of Hall’s cautious approach to revival innovations, see Hall to Eleazar Wheelock, Sept. 23, 1741, no. 741523, microfilm, Papers of Eleazar Wheelock, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. On Edwards and the Concert of Prayer, see Stephen J. Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” *WJEO* 5: 29-38.

⁴ Hall to Prince, June 30, 1743, 186; Hall, diaries, July 5, 1745, Aug. 28, Nov. 12, 1748, Jan. 17, 25, 30, Feb. 27, June 6, July 15, Aug. 17, 1749, Jan. 6, May 27, 1750; Sutton Congregational Church Records, 17-23; Sutton, Mass., Separate Church to Canterbury, Conn., Separate Church, Sept. 28, 1752, no. 99, James Terry Collection, 1733-1815, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn. On Marsh, see James H. and Esther D. Barnett, *On the Trail of a Legend: The Separatist Movement in Mansfield, Connecticut, 1745-1769* (Storrs, Conn.: Mansfield Historical Society, 1978), 53-55. For the perfectionist controversies that roiled Sutton and the towns of central Massachusetts, see Francis G. Walett, “Shadrack Ireland and the ‘Immortals’ of Colonial New England,” in Frederick S. Allis Jr., ed., *Sibley’s Heir: A Volume in Memory of Clifford Kenyon Shipton*, vol. 59, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982), 541-550; and Ross W. Beales Jr., “The Ecstasy of Sarah Prentice: Death, Re-Birth and the Great Awakening in Grafton, Massachusetts,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 26 (1997): 101-123.

Hall's June 24, 1750 diary entry provides a rare eyewitness account of the Northampton dismissal proceedings and the only known description of Edwards's unusually calm demeanor during the heated church council. The strident tone of the Sutton minister's report reflected his friendship with Edwards as well as his mounting frustration with the "destructive s[ch]isms" that wracked his parish. In contrast to his "unshaken" colleague, Hall was a passionate clergyman who struggled to guard his tongue during ecclesiastical debates. He assumed a leading role at the Northampton council. Joseph Hawley later apologized for provoking the church to "Silence and Stop you" during a spirited speech in which the Sutton minister exhorted the assembly to remember the "former affection and harmony that had Subsisted between them" and Edwards. The following year, Hall fulminated against the "Strange spirit of Allienation" exhibited by the Northampton parishioners against their former pastor during a second church council held on May 16, 1751.⁵

In a recently rediscovered letter written earlier that winter, Hall attempted to bolster the flagging spirits of Edward Billing, the beleaguered minister of Cold Spring (now Belchertown), Massachusetts. Billing was one of Edwards's closest allies in the Hampshire County ministerial association. Although he also served as a delegate during the dismissal proceedings, Billing had done so without the support of his church. Northampton was "tohu" and "Bohu"—in total confusion, or, literally, "without form, and void"—he reported in his diary, quoting a Hebrew phrase from Genesis 1:2. "The orator stands in a slippery place," he complained, "his old Friends alienated." A staunch proponent of Edwards's restrictive church admission standards, Billing soon found himself embroiled in a similar dispute with his parishioners at Cold Spring. Hall returned to western Massachusetts a third time in April 1752 to participate in the ecclesiastical council that removed Billing from his pastoral office. The Sutton minister declined to comment on the council in his diary, but another delegate, Stephen Williams of Longmeadow, described the affair as "much Entangled" with "heat & warmth."⁶

Hall's December 27, 1750 letter to Billing restates several key ideas that Edwards had outlined in *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*, his published defense of his revised church admission standards.

⁵ Hall, diaries, Dec. 28, 1748, Apr. 28, 1749, Mar. 11, 1750, May 26, 1751; Hawley to Hall, May 9, 1760. For another first-hand account of the 1750 dismissal proceedings, see Samuel Hopkins to Ezra Stiles, June 23, 1750, in Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., 1755-1794, with a Selection from His Correspondence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1916), 501-503.

⁶ Edward Billing, diaries, 1743-1756, May 1750, Henry N. Flynt Library, Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Mass.; Stephen Williams, diaries, 1716-1782, typescript, vol. 4, Storrs Library, Longmeadow, Mass., 188 (available online at <http://longmeadowlibrary.wordpress.com/>). The evidence that Hall attended the Billing council is conjectural, but see Timothy Dwight to Thomas Foxcroft, Oct. 13, 1750, and, especially, Hawley to Hall, May 9, 1760, WJEO 32, *Correspondence by, to, and about Edwards and His Family*. On Billing's career and dismissal, see Nobles, *Divisions Throughout the Whole*, 73-74; and Sweeney, "River Gods and Related Minor Deities," 481-488.

Hall assumed that the “Puritan Doctrine of Church Membership” required a “Gospel Confession”—a public statement in which candidates professed their “Saintship” rather than their “Historical knowledge of Christianity,” “visibly Regular Life,” or inherently sinful natures (what Hall alternately called a “Confession of Enmity” or being “destitute of Supreme Love” to God). He gathered support for his position from the Bible, particularly the salutations invoked in Romans 1:7 and 1 Corinthians 1:2. Hall also rejected the sacramental evangelism associated with Edwards’s grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. For the Sutton minister, the Lord’s Supper remained an “Emblematical” seal of “visible Christians” rather than a converting ordinance, as Stoddard had proclaimed earlier in the century.⁷

How the theological position outlined in the Billing letter squared with established practices in Hall’s home parish at Sutton remains unclear. Well into the eighteenth century, most churches in central Massachusetts continued to require prospective church members to submit a written statement, or “relation,” of the candidate’s religious beliefs and experiences. Sutton did not abandon the practice until 1804. During the middle decades of the eighteenth-century, however, few prospective communicants professed what Hall and Edwards called the “great things in religion.” Extant church admission testimonies composed during the middle decades of the eighteenth century emphasized the candidates’ knowledge of Reformed doctrines, family upbringing, and providential afflictions. When Hall closed his letter to Billing with the bold assertion that admitting church members solely on these grounds would “prostitute sacred mysteries” to those who were “professedly unclean,” he may well have been thinking about his own parishioners.⁸

Although he supported Edwards’s new church admission standards, Hall appears to have made one significant modification to the Northampton clergyman’s theological arguments. In his diary account of the 1750 church council, Hall initially wrote that Edwards had been dismissed “because & for no other reason, but his Insisting, that persons Admitted to the Communion of saints should profess saintship.” Reflecting further on the controversy, Hall decided to cross out the word “saintship” and replace it with the phrase “Sanctity or Sanctifying grace.” Hall returned to the language of “Saintship” in his letter to Edward Billing, but this earlier attempt to summarize Edwards’s position represented a subtle but important shift in emphasis. To be sure, Edwards regularly addressed the fruits of saving grace in his theological writings during the late 1740s. Sanctification, or what he alternately called a “holy life” or the outward behaviors associated with “Christian practice,” was the twelfth and culminating sign in his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, as well as a key component of his “Directions for Judging of Persons’ Experiences.” In *An Humble Inquiry*, however, Edwards placed greater emphasis on “visible,” “real,” and “true” “saintship.” Confront the chaotic, seemingly antinomian activities of the Sutton separatists,

⁷ David Hall to Edward Billing, Dec. 27, 1750, Sutton, Mass., Records, ca. 1683-ca. 1868; 1869-1883; 1940, American Antiquarian Society. On “Stoddardeanism,” see Hall, “Editor’s Introduction,” WJEO 12:38-43.

⁸ Sutton Congregational Church Records, Oct. 13, 1804; Hall to Billing, Dec. 27, 1750. A selection of relations composed by or on behalf of lay men and women who joined churches that supported Edwards during the Northampton communion controversy will be the subject of the next article in this series.

Hall recast the Northampton communion controversy as a debate over the more practical aspects of holiness and godliness.⁹

In the wake of the revivals of the 1740s, both Hall and Edwards struggled to steer a middle course between the extremes of what they perceived to be unchecked religious enthusiasm and stultifying religious formalism. While Edwards retreated to Stockbridge, Hall continued to battle with his parishioners in Sutton for nearly a decade. Eventually, the conflict simmered down; a few of the separatists confessed their error in withdrawing from communion and returned to church fellowship. Exhausted from the conflict, Hall turned his attention to political events and broader theological controversies. “Tis a very Dead Time respecting Religion,” he wrote to a New Jersey colleague shortly before Edwards’s untimely death in 1758, “and Errors I fear on the Prevailing hand, viz. the arminian and the arian.” In later years, Hall described himself as a staunch “Calvinist,” and yet he rejected several controversial theological doctrines associated with Samuel Hopkins and a younger cohort of Edwardsean New Divinity ministers. More than a thousand people attended his funeral in 1789. Eulogists remembered him as an “able orthodox divine” and a “pungent zealous preacher.” Portraits painted late in his life, however, display the careworn lines of a rural clergyman who had struggled through decades of pinching poverty, physical pain, political upheaval, and ecclesiastical unrest. “Surely this world is a wearisome place,” Hall noted in a melancholy diary rumination. “Tis a place for wayfaring men. I have a Large portion of Labours and sorrows, cares and fears. Sometimes I am ready to sink, and Imagine I shall fall and rise no more.”¹⁰

⁹ Hall, diaries, June 24, 1750; Hall to Billing, Dec. 27, 1750; Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (Boston: Samuel Kneeland and Thomas Green, 1746), WJEO 2: 406-407; Edwards, “Directions for Judging of Persons’ Experiences,” WJEO 21: 522-24; 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: Samuel Kneeland, 1749), WJEO 12: 189, 191-92.

¹⁰ David Hall to Jacob Green, Aug. 30, 1757, box 22, Simon Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Dexter, ed., *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles*, 402; *Thomas’s Massachusetts Spy: Or, the Worcester Gazette*, May 21, 1789; Hall, diaries, July 5, 1761. For additional portraits of Hall, see William A. Benedict and Hiram A. Tracy, *History of the Town of Sutton, Massachusetts, from 1704 to 1876* (Worcester, Mass.: Sanford, 1878), facing page 309; and Edith G. L. Pecker, “Biography of Rev. David and Elizabeth (Prescott) Hall,” *Genealogical Advertiser: A Quarterly Magazine of Family History* 3, no. 4 (December 1900): frontispiece.



Anonymous, portrait of Rev. David Hall, c. 1800, pastel on paper board lined with canvas.
Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

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The documents below are published with the permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society and the American Antiquarian Society. Transcriptions follow the expanded method described in Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 157-158, 161-164, and Samuel Eliot

Morison, “Care and Editing of Manuscripts,” in Frank Freidel, ed., *The Harvard Guide to American History*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 28-31. Conjectural readings and missing words appear in square brackets. The accompanying notes describe significant cancelled and interlineated phrases, as well as points of comparison with Edwards’s *An Humble Inquiry*.

EXTRACT FROM THE DIARY OF DAVID HALL, JUNE 24, 1750

June 24th 1750. I have been the last weak at North Hampton [a] member of an Ecclesiastical Council, and (Grievous to be Seen) have there found the Church in Generall sett to remove Mr. Edwards their Reverend, and worthy Pastor from his relation to them, (which also a Majority of the Council present advised too); because & for no other reason, but his Insisting, that persons Admitted to the Communion of saints should profess Sanctity,¹¹ or Sanctifying grace¹² or the great things in religion,¹³ [pertaining] to Godlyness. The Church insisting they could in Conscience have no other person for their Teacher than one that would teach them & their Children that it was not necessary that any one should be converted or profess Supreme love¹⁴ to God, in order to come to the Sacrament of the Lords supper, that it was a Converting Ordinance,¹⁵ & a means to beget men to Christ and therefore prevailing Enmity¹⁶ was not what unfitted men there for¹⁷ nor the reigning power of their Lusts. These things Mr. Edwards must believe & teach or be no Minister for them. Yea tho’ he had Spent the main of his life with them he must go off with his family to subsist as he could, if he could not thus believe & teach. [Thus],¹⁸ did they treat him who [*one word illeg.*] they were ready to signify, they apprehended him one of the [foulest] Ministers in the world, saying only his being in [an]¹⁹ Error in the Above Mentioned they supposed, but wherein I am perswaded he was fully in the right. That faithful Witness, received the Shock unshaken. I never saw [the] lest symptoms of displeasure [in] his Countenance,²⁰ the whole weak, but he appeared like a man of God,

¹¹ Deleted: “~~saintship.~~”

¹² Cf. Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:187, 190.

¹³ Cf. Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:180.

¹⁴ Cf. Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:211.

¹⁵ For Stoddard’s earliest argument in defense of the Lord’s Supper as a “converting ordinance,” see Thomas M. and Virginia L. Davis, eds., *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard: The Nature of the Lord’s Supper*, vol. 2, *The Unpublished Writings of Edward Taylor* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 129-151. Cf. Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO, vol. 12, *Ecclesiastical Writings*, ed. Hall, 183, 187, 189, 287, 303.

¹⁶ Cf. Edwards’s concept of “reigning enmity” in *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:191, 211, 218-219,

¹⁷ Hall deleted “for the Lords supper” and replaced it with the more awkward phrase “men there for.”

¹⁸ Deleted: “~~Barbarously, as I think I may say.~~”

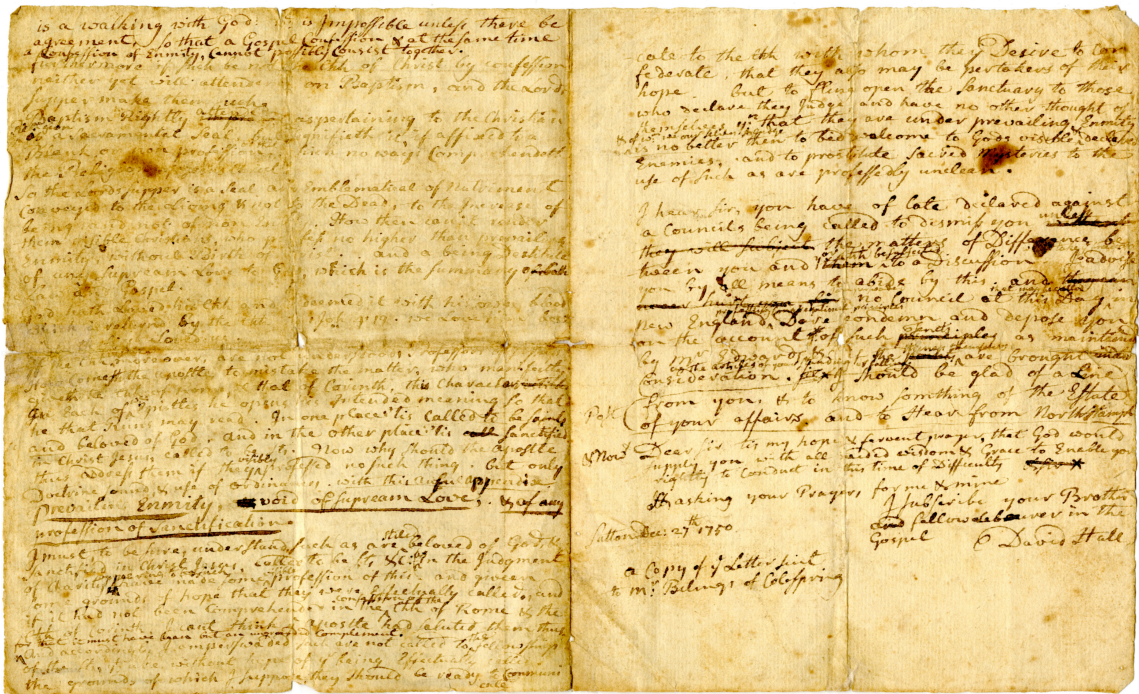
¹⁹ Tight binding renders the final word of each line on this page difficult to read.

²⁰ Interlineated: “Countenance” above “face.”

wh[ose] Happiness was out of the reach of his Enemies, and whose treasure was not only a future but a present good, overballencing all Imagined Ills of Life, even to the Astonishment off many who could not [be] at rest without his Dismission [as] it manifestly apperd to me. Seven of the Council²¹ protested Against the proceadure (of the Church & majority of the Council), with good reason, I apprehend. I was one of them.

²¹ The seven dissenting members of the council included Hall and his parishioner, Jonathan Hale, Edward Billing, ministers Robert Abercombie of Pelham, Mass., and William Hobby of Reading, Mass., and their respective parishioners, Matthew Gray and Samuel Bancroft. See Chester Williams, “The Result of a Council of Nine Churches Met at Northampton, June 22, 1750,” *WJEO* 38, *Dismissal and Post-Dismissal Documents*, JEC.

DAVID HALL TO EDWARD BILLING, DECEMBER 27, 17



David Hall to Edward Billing, Dec. 27, 1750, Sutton, Mass., Records, c. 1683-c. 1868, 1869-1883, 1940.
Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

Revd and Dear sir,

I expected a line from you but have hitherto faild of it. And Oppertunity presenting I once more let you know that I frequently bear your case at the throne of Grace. And percieving your Diffeculties remain I would²² Contribute, of my small ability, to strengthen your hands in God.

I have laid down this as a ground of argument for the Puritan Doctrine of Church Membership, That the Visibility of the Church of God Depends upon a Gospel Confession.

The assertion is supported from Romans 10:10, with the Heart man believeth unto Righteousness, and with the Mouth Confession is made unto salvation. & Ephesians 2:20, Are built upon the foundation of the Apostles & prophets Jesus X himself the Chief Corner stone, & Matthew 16:18, upon this Rock I will build my Church: namely²³ Peters Confession.

The visibility of the Church of Christ then, (the subject treated of) depends upon a Gospel Confession.

Now this Gospel Confession necessarily²⁴ comprehends the Faith and Hope of its members. Whence 'tis absurd to suppose the Basis of the visible Church should be otherwise than a professing of saintship,²⁵ which is only visibly Evidential of Title, for to Confess that which hath not the Promise of salvation, hath no ground of Hope, and accordingly cannot possibly Comprehend the visible Church of God in the world. Those things are so Enwrapped, in the Inserted text, that no man can separate them.

Wherefore to assert persons may be admitted into Christs visible Church, on account of Historical knowledge of Christianity, and a visibly Regular Life,²⁶ Tho' Declaring themselves to be destitute of Supream Love and under prevailing Enmity; In the way Lyeth this Difficulty, as I concieve of it.

As is the Declared Confession of members upon admission, such is that which Denominates the Body.

Even thus it is undeniably; A Church hath its Characteristick from the Confession of its Individual members, (or what Each one confesseth upon his [admission] to membership) that is [Essentially] [the] Confession of the Church, & no more.²⁷

Now 'tis Impossible that a society of People, be they never so well Thought in the Doctrines, yet Professing nothing Higher than consists with being under Prevailing Enmity

²² Deleted: "~~once more~~."

²³ Interlineated: "namely" above "~~meaning~~."

²⁴ Interlineated: "necessarily" above "~~supposes~~."

²⁵ For a brief discussion of the distinction between the "visible" and "invisible" church, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), 3-4. Cf. Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:184-185, 189, 191-192, 194-195, 199, 219, 245, 272, 285, 289.

²⁶ For Edwards' critique of "historical faith" and "doctrinal knowledge," see *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:210, 219, 233-234, 260-261, 285, 311-312.

²⁷ Written sideways along the fold of the letter and marked for insertion with an asterisk.

against God Should be by Confession, the visible Church of Christ, for that it no ways comprehends the truth of the thing.

The Truth of the thing is a walking with God, which is Impossible unless there be agreement, so that a Gospel Confession & at the same time a Confession of Enmity, Cannot possibly Consist together.

Furthermore if such be not the Church of Christ by confession neither yet will attendance on Baptism, and the Lords supper make them such. Baptism Rightly attended as pertaining to the Christian Religion is a Sacramental Seal, but signifieth it, if affixed to a Blank or non profession [as] that which no ways Comprehendeth the Religion of Jesus Christ.

So the Lords supper is a Seal and Emblematical of Nutriment Conveyed to the Living & not to the Dead, to the Increase of being and not of non [Entity].²⁸ How then can it render them visible Christians, who profess no higher than prevailing Enmity, without Birth of [Christ],²⁹ and a being Destitute of any supream Love to God, which is the summary of both Law and Gospel.

God hath Loved his Church and redeemed it with his own blood which is return'd by the Church 1 John 4:19, we Love him bec[ause he first]³⁰ loved us.

If the Church visible moreover, are not understood, Professors of saintship How Comest the apostle to mistake the matter, who manifestly giveth the Church of Rome, & that of Corinth, this Character, In Each of which Epistles he opens his Intended meaning so that he that Runs may read.³¹ In one place: 'tis Called to be saints and beloved of God. And in the other place: 'tis sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.³² Now why should the Apostle thus address them if they visibly professed no such thing, but only Doctrine sound, & use of ordinances, with this awful appendix: prevailing Enmity, void of supream Love, & of any profession of Sanctification.

I must, to be sure, understand, such as are stiled beloved of God, & Sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, &c. as in the Judgment of Charity³³ supposing to be such have made some visible profession of this, and given some grounds of hope that they were Effectually called. And if it had not been Comprehended in the confession of the Church of Rome & the Church at Corinth, I cant think the apostle had saluted them thus, for that it

²⁸ Conjectural reading: manuscript creased.

²⁹ Conjectural reading: manuscript creased.

³⁰ Conjectural reading: manuscript creased.

³¹ An allusion to Hab. 2:2, which reads "And the Lord answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it."

³² Here and in the paragraph that follows, Hall alludes to the salutations in the Pauline epistles to the churches in Rome and Corinth. See Rom. 1:7 ("beloved of God, called to be saints") and 1 Cor. 1:2 ("sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints"). Cf. Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:246-248.

³³ For a detailed discussion of this important concept, see Baird Tipson, "Invisible Saints: The 'Judgment of Charity' in the Early New England Churches," *Church History* 44 (1975): 460-471.

must have been but an unguarded Complement. And accordingly I am perswaded such are not called to the fellowship of the saints that are without hope of their being Effectually called, the grounds of which I suppose, they should be ready to communicate to the Church with whom they Desire to Confederate, that they also may be pertakers of their hope.

But to fling open the sanctuary to those who declare they Judge, and have no other thought of themselves than that they are under prevailing Enmity & of whom we our selves so Judge is no better then to bid welcome to Gods visible & declared Enemies, and to prostitute Sacred Mysteries to the use of such as are professedly unclean.

I hear sir, you have of late declared against a Councils being called to dismiss you unless³⁴ the matters of Difference between you and your Church be subjected to a Discussion. I advise you by all means to abide by this, and I am perswaded³⁵ no Council at this Day that may be called in New England professing Congregational principles Dare condemn and depose you on the account of such Tenets,³⁶ as maintained by Mr. Edwards &c. if the things themselves³⁷ are brought under Consideration as the articles of your standing or falling.

& Now Dear sir tis my hope & fervent prayer, that God would supply you with all needed wisdom & Grace to Enable you rightly to Conduct in this time of Difficulty.

I should be glad of a Line from you, & to know somthing of the Estate of your affairs. and to Hear from North Hampton.³⁸

Asking your Prayers for me & mine

I subscribe your Brother and fellow labourer in the Gospel

David Hall

Sutton December 27th 1750

A Copy of the Letter sent to Mr. Bilings of Colespring

Amen³⁹

³⁴ Deleted: “~~they will subject.~~”

³⁵ Interlineated: “I am perswaded” above “~~they can never hurt you for.~~”

³⁶ Interlineated: “Tenets” above “~~principles.~~”

³⁷ Interlineated: “things themselves” above “~~points.~~”

³⁸ Hall circled this sentence, marked it with an “X,” and wrote the word “Post” (posterior) in the margin to indicate that it should be moved to an insertion point here.

³⁹ Written sideways along the fold on the back of the letter.