

1995

## Preserving a Pure Gathering of Saints: A Study of a Seventeenth-Century New England Church

Jonathan David Brand  
*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>



Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brand, Jonathan David, "Preserving a Pure Gathering of Saints: A Study of a Seventeenth-Century New England Church" (1995). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539625998.  
<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-ek54-es80>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

PRESERVING A PURE GATHERING OF SAINTS:  
A STUDY OF A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND CHURCH

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts

---

by

Jonathan D. Brand

1995

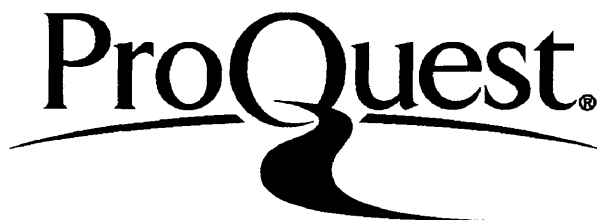
ProQuest Number: 10629462

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10629462

Published by ProQuest LLC (2017). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

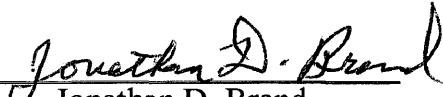
This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

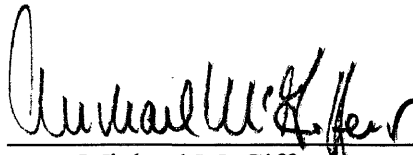
APPROVAL SHEET

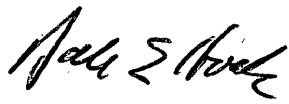
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

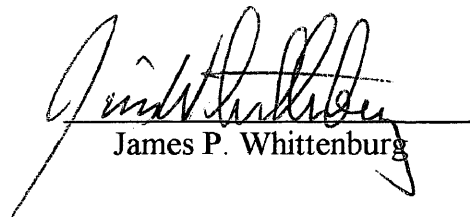
Master of Arts

  
Jonathan D. Brand

Approved, December 4, 1995

  
Michael McGiffert

  
Dale E. Hoak

  
James P. Whittenburg

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
PART ONE: THE PURITAN QUEST FOR PERFECTION	
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND--THE PURITAN MOVEMENT AND THE MAKING OF THE NEW ENGLAND WAY	12
CHAPTER III. THE WENHAM/CHELMSFORD CHURCH. 1644-1675	18
PART TWO: THE PURITAN PREDICAMENT	
CHAPTER I ESTABLISHING A PURE CHURCH	21
CHAPTER II. ENLARGING THE CHURCH COVENANT	42
CHAPTER III MAINTAINING PEACE AMONG THE SAINTS	59
PART THREE: CONCLUSION	81
BIBLIOGRAPHY	86

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express his appreciation to Brian T. McCarthy, a fellow graduate student who first suggested examining the Fiske notebook and offered helpful insights and references throughout the project, and to Professor Michael McGiffert, whose constant guidance and criticism were invaluable at every stage of the study. The writer is also indebted to Dr. Gilbert B. Kelly, Managing Editor of Publications at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, for his advice and thorough training in English grammar and usage and to David C. Brand, father and mentor, without whom the thesis would have been neither undertaken nor completed.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a case study of a representative church in seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay. From 1644 to 1675, the Reverend John Fiske kept a detailed record of the business of his church, which was founded at Wenham and later moved to Chelmsford. Edited by Robert G. Pope and published by the Massachusetts Colonial Society in 1974, this document provides abundant evidence of the church's activities and concerns. There is no fuller or richer account of its kind for Puritan New England.

Drawing on Fiske's record, the thesis highlights themes of purity, preservation, and peace. Puritans were committed to churches composed exclusively of visible saints. They were also committed to perpetuating those churches over time--that is, over generations--and the two goals were often in tension. The drive for purity was exemplified by the church's refusal to admit members by letter of dismissal from other churches; instead, it insisted on a rigorous admissions test for all applicants. The need for preservation was uppermost when, with the move to Chelmsford, that test was temporarily suspended in order to let in large numbers of new members. The dedication to visible sainthood was sharply challenged by the Half-Way Covenant. The church could ill afford to neglect its children; its existence depended on bringing new saints into the fold. Yet it could not bring them in on terms that compromised its sense of purity. Likewise in disciplinary cases, the church had to balance the competing claims of purity and preservation. Overall, the thesis finds that the stresses were severe but that the church met them with remarkable success, attributable to members' strong desire for peace, their pragmatic spirit of accommodation, and their minister's effective leadership.

The greatest crisis resulted from the failure of grown children to experience conversion and their reluctance to seek membership. Late in Fiske's tenure, the commitment to purity--implemented primarily through the strict admissions test--threatened the Chelmsford church's very continuance.

The thesis focuses upon the laity. Fiske's record shows an institution operating on congregational principles in which laymen had significant responsibilities and powers. They elected the minister, tested applicants for membership, disciplined offenders, and determined policies and practices, sometimes resisting synodical pressure as in the case of the Cambridge Platform. Adhering tenaciously to local autonomy, members and minister worked out their church's problems on their own ground and terms. At the same time, the strains the Wenham-Chelmsford church experienced, and the resolutions it accomplished, can be called characteristic of the Puritan experiment in New England.

Preserving a Pure Gathering of Saints:  
A Study of a Seventeenth-Century New England Church

*The Church . . . is universal, i.e. it desires to cover the whole life of humanity. The sects, on the other hand, are comparatively small groups; they aspire after personal inward perfection.*

-- Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 1 (Chicago, Ill., 1981 [first German edition, 1911]), 331-49, esp. 331. Over the past eighty years, Troeltsch's church-sect typology has wielded enormous influence among historians of religion. For many, including Perry Miller, Patrick Collinson, and Stephen Foster, it captures to a large extent the essential Puritan problem.



## PART ONE: THE PURITAN QUEST FOR PERFECTION

### CHAPTER 1

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1637, the Reverend John Fiske, together with his family, migrated to New England. Trained in Reformed theology--probably at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, a great producer of Puritan divines--Fiske had taken up the practice of medicine after having been forced by the anti-Calvinist party in England to abandon his pastoral vocation. In the New World, he settled in Cambridge and worked as a physician and a teacher, though hoping to join the colony's ministry. His first opportunity to do clerical work came in 1642, when he moved to Salem and assisted the Reverend Hugh Peter. Two years later, with Peter's help, Fiske became minister of the first church in the newly established town of Wenham, just outside Salem.<sup>2</sup> Until his death in 1677, he served as minister of the Wenham church, guiding it through an uncertain start, a move to the neighboring town of Chelmsford in 1655, and a period of growth and dissension in the later years of his tenure.

Little more is known about Fiske than can be taken from Mather's hagiographic sketch in *Magnalia Christi Americana*. The son of "pious and worthy parents," he was a

---

<sup>2</sup>Adeline P. Cole, *Notes on Wenham History, 1643-1943* (Salem, Mass., 1943) 19-24.

devoted father, an able minister, an honorable and generous townsman, and a “useful preacher of the gospel.” He was well known for his catechizing work, which, with his long record of dedication to his church, earned him a place among Mather’s “First Good Men” of New England.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Mather’s praise, as one of nearly one-hundred ministers who crossed the Atlantic during the Great Migration Fiske would probably have been largely forgotten by historians had it not been for the notebook he left. In this document, he recorded in detail the business of his church from 1644 to 1675. Written in a “cramped hand” and filling nearly 150 pages in a leather-bound volume, the manuscript has survived in its entirety, though not without suffering the wear and tear of time.<sup>4</sup> Nineteenth-century scholars began the arduous task of transcribing the notebook, which was edited by Robert G. Pope and published by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts in 1974. In this edition, the document fills 233 pages, with 285 entries, varying in length from a few lines to several pages. Throughout his ministry, Fiske remained remarkably consistent in recording the affairs of the church. When divided into three roughly equal periods, the notebook reveals a balanced number of entries: 1644-1654--94 entries; 1655-1664--101; 1665-1675--89. On a yearly basis, the notebook is uneven. For instance, Fiske made 25 entries in 1645 (covering 23 printed pages) and only three in 1652 (2 pages). The average number of entries for each year is just under nine. The bulk of the notebook consists of summaries of

---

<sup>3</sup>Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (New York, 1967 [orig. publ. 1702]), 477, 479, 235.

<sup>4</sup>Robert G. Pope, ed., *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske, 1644-1675* (Boston, Mass., 1974), xli. The original manuscript is held at the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts.

conversion narratives, baptismal records, disciplinary measures, notes on church meetings, letters to other churches, and financial statements.

Except for a few poems and a short catechism, the notebook is the only surviving document left by Fiske. Its value lies in the fact that only a few such seventeenth-century records remain extant. As far as we know, most other Puritan ministers did not keep an account of ecclesiastical proceedings. If they did, their records are lost.

Apart from its rarity, Fiske's notebook merits a close study for two reasons. First, it affords an opportunity to consider the concerns, activities, and operation of a church in seventeenth-century New England. The Puritans who crossed the Atlantic in the Great Migration carried with them a congregational form of church polity that had been developed over the course of sixty years. Resistance by the established church in England had, with few exceptions, confined this system to the realm of theory, and therefore it was not fully worked out by the 1630s. It did, however, provide New Englanders with such guiding principles as congregational autonomy and lay discipline. This thesis uses Fiske's notebook to explore how these principles were applied, how the system worked in practice, and how members contributed to the church's functioning. It gives special attention to the ways in which the laity shaped the church and the church shaped them. The thesis is thus, in part, a study of lay religious activity.

Popular religion--religion as believed and practiced by the laity--is explored in recent works by David D. Hall, Stephen Foster, Charles Lloyd Cohen, George Selement, and Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe. Their studies suggest that the clerical elite and the common people shared a religious culture informed both by the ideas disseminated in sermons, pamphlets, and books and by the laity's own ways of applying them to their

particular needs and concerns.<sup>5</sup> That many, if not most, lay people took their religion seriously, bound themselves to its injunctions, and found strength and sustenance from its message is demonstrated by Cohen's study of Puritan spirituality and Hambrick-Stowe's of Puritan devotional practices.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, as Hall persuasively argues, even among the elite, an eclectic form of Christianity--one that mixed orthodox belief with pagan superstition and magic--was prevalent in seventeenth-century New England.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis seeks to illuminate the institutional, more than the devotional, aspect of lay religion. Wenham/Chelmsford communicants engaged in most aspects of the church's activities and proceedings. By virtue of high status in the community, some members figured prominently, yet participation was open to all the brethren. (As in the civil government, women neither took part in public discussion nor voted in meetings.) Laymen expressed opinions in meetings, debated points of doctrine, questioned applicants for admission, disciplined transgressors of the moral law, and voted on all important matters. Although written from Fiske's perspective, the notebook gives voice to many

---

<sup>5</sup>David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1972); idem., "The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England," in John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1979); idem., "Toward a History of Popular Religion in Early New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 49-55; idem., *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); George Selement, *Keepers of the Vineyard: The Puritan Ministry and Collective Culture in Colonial New England* (New York, 1984); idem., "The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638-1645," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 32-48; Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>Cohen, *God's Caress*; Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982). See also George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley, eds., *Thomas Shepard's Confessions, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections* vol. LVIII (Boston, Mass., 1981); Michael McGiffert, ed., *God's Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard's Cambridge*, rev. and exp. ed. (Amherst, Mass., 1994); Stephen Foster, "The Godly in Transit: English Popular Protestantism and the Creation of a Puritan Establishment in America," in David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen, eds., *Seventeenth-Century New England* (Boston, Mass., 1984).

<sup>7</sup>Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*.

members of the congregation and reveals the important roles played by the laity in the life of the church and, more broadly, in the development of New England congregationalism.

Fiske's notebook deserves a thorough study for a second reason. Spanning four formative decades in New England's history, the notebook allows one to examine the evolution of the congregational way. This can best be done by tracing the two concerns of the Wenham/Chelmsford faithful that, as the notebook illustrates, dominated the life of the church. One was to ensure, as far as humanly possible, the purity of the church by limiting its membership to the certifiable elect. The other, no less important, was to maintain and perpetuate the institution itself. These two goals were not always in harmony: they stood in tension, if not contradiction, in ways that were built into the system and challenged the ingenuity of minister and laity alike. Their task was not simply to preserve the church but to preserve it in purity. The present study considers the strategies, improvisations, and compromises used by the Wenham/Chelmsford church to achieve this end.

To promote purity, Fiske and the church adhered to a rigorous admissions policy and applied exacting disciplinary measures to wayward members. Membership was limited and voluntary. Individuals had to seek it, and only "visible saints"--those who could give evidence of God's redemptive grace in their lives--were received into full church fellowship. In order to gain admission, applicants had to pass a series of tests: they met privately with the minister and deacons, proved themselves morally upright in speech and conduct, demonstrated their knowledge of the Reformed faith, related the experience of the work of Christ before the gathered congregation, and answered any questions or objections. The members scrutinized their testimony and comportment for signs of grace such as a contrite heart, an afflicted conscience, a resolute mind, and a

determined (though imperfect) will. Discipline involved not just correcting behavior but ensuring a change of heart. The church insisted that offenders confess their sins with unfeigned remorse and true humility. The right spirit in living the Christian life mattered as much as right actions, and the saints believed they could detect the condition of one's inner feelings. Persons who refused or failed to give evidence of saving faith were excluded from the Lord's Supper, and those who fell short of the high standards of behavior were expelled from the church. In short, only those who convincingly testified to God's grace and continuously walked in His ways qualified for fellowship.

To perpetuate itself, the Wenham/Chelmsford church strove to draw its children fully within the fold. Marked by the special seal of baptism, which made them direct heirs of the covenanted people, the sons and daughters of the faithful grew up in a privileged position. Yet faith did not come automatically by birth or inheritance: salvation was not guaranteed. Although God was ultimately responsible for choosing His elect, the church served as an instrument divinely appointed to instruct His people in Christian doctrine and chasten them for their sins and follies. Fiske and his communicants accordingly required their children to attend catechismal classes regularly and to apply themselves diligently to the study of the Bible. As obedience was a means to faith, the church expected them to hold fast to the laws of God. When they neglected to follow these laws, they were taught by discipline to conform their thoughts, words, and deeds to the scriptures. Most important was the children's spiritual development, for only when they experienced grace and embraced the faith for themselves were they admitted as full members. Preservation, then, meant transmitting the Christian message to the next generation and that generation's acceptance and experience of it.

The tension between the two ideals of purity and preservation resulted from conflicts inherent in the system. According to Puritan doctrine, the church was a gathering of the chosen few, called out of the world to pursue godly lives in an exclusive community. Even with the elaborate admissions procedure, designed to distinguish the inwardly converted from those merely externally conformed, the church on earth could never quite replicate the society of God's elect known as the invisible church. Yet perfection had to be the goal. If admitted into fellowship, the unredeemed might vitiate or pervert the saving faith (the defining mark of a true church), and, since Puritan sacramental ecclesiology limited participation in communion to the regenerate, they would certainly desecrate the Lord's Supper. Purity, however, became a problem when it distracted the church from its responsibility of evangelizing the unregenerate and drawing them into the fold. If admission standards were too high or discipline too severe, sinners burdened by an excessively scrupulous conscience or an overly timid disposition might be reluctant to commit themselves to an endeavor for which they felt unsuited. Such practices rendered the church irrelevant to the wider community and jeopardized the existence of the institution itself. On the other hand, to enlarge the entrance in order to gain more converts and thereby preserve the institution risked opening the church and its sacraments to corruption. Although compassion, forgiveness, and even leniency could be extended to persons weak in faith, the church dared not blur the distinction between God's elect and the reprobate. In all their actions, pastor and flock had to take sedulous care to involve nonmembers without defiling the church.

Compounding the tension in maintaining these ideals was the problem of peace-- the difficulty in preserving consonant relations among the saints. According to Reformed

theology, God created the world orderly and harmonious, with all things designed for His glory. When the fall of man introduced sin into the divine arrangement, humanity sought earthly pursuits and pleasures instead of the service of God. Disorder and strife entered into the world. The gift of grace promised to restore selected persons to the pre-fallen state, and it also provided the means to attaining peaceful relations. Although the peace of the church was ultimately dependent upon God's grace, human initiative played a critical role. The Wenham/Chelmsford folk sought to secure order by establishing rules for their meetings, and they sought to promote harmony by holding covenant renewals and days of fasting and prayer. Such methods and devices were not ends in themselves but were intended to sustain the church's dual mission. Peace in the church was a precondition of purity and a requirement for preservation.

The Puritan preoccupation with perfection is a theme long considered by historians of colonial New England. It was introduced by Perry Miller in what he called "the Puritan dilemma" and developed by Edmund S. Morgan as "the problem of doing right in a world that does wrong."<sup>8</sup> As described by Miller, the problem arose in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England when Puritans felt compelled to retain both loyalty to the king and allegiance to their version of church polity. After years of compromise, many found a solution by coming to America--a wilderness, they believed, where the principles of the Protestant Reformation might be fulfilled--and practicing "Non-separating Congregationalism," a carefully devised system that professed uniformity with the Church of England while forming churches whose government and discipline were derived solely

---

<sup>8</sup>Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Gloucester, Mass., 1965 [orig. publ. 1933]), 51; Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1963), 114.



from Scripture (and looked nothing like the establishment). According to Miller, the fundamental difficulty that followed was maintaining these pure churches with a newly created government and in the face of the distractions of the colony's commercial success, the interference of England, and the formidable, if not impossible, challenge of transmitting the founders' vision to the children.<sup>9</sup>

Morgan, Robert G. Pope, and Stephen Foster have contributed studies built around this basic Puritan problematic.<sup>10</sup> In his work on the visible saints, Morgan traces the Puritan attempt and failure to realize the invisible church in a fallen world. His conclusion is restated in his study of the seventeenth-century New England family, which argues that Puritan "tribalism" protected the purity of the church, but at the cost of having a future.<sup>11</sup> In his portrait of John Winthrop, Morgan reveals how the Massachusetts governor effectively moderated separatist tendencies--excessive zeal for purity and isolation from the world--within himself and within the colony. Pope's analysis of the adoption and implementation of the halfway covenant shows how this device was designed to bridge the widening gulf between the elect and the unregenerate and thereby preserve the Puritan's dual mission of forming pure churches and a godly society. Finally, in his grand study of Puritanism, which encompasses its emergence in late sixteenth-century England to its dissolution in mid-eighteenth-century New England, Foster demonstrates

---

<sup>9</sup>Miller, *Orthodoxy*, esp. 73-101; *idem.*, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982 [orig. publ. 1939]), esp. 463-70; *idem.*, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982 [orig. publ. 1953]).

<sup>10</sup>Morgan, *Visible Saints*; *idem.*, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, rev. ed. (Westport, Conn., 1966 [orig. publ. 1944]); *idem.*, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston, Mass., 1958); Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, N.J., 1969); Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991).

<sup>11</sup>Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 168-86.

that the Puritan program was characterized by a determined commitment to establishment and an equally strong tendency toward sectarianism. These works treat an idea, a person, a covenant, a society, and a movement; the present study focuses on a particular church and its struggle to resolve the dilemma--or set of dilemmas--that was the pivot of its being.

Each year of Fiske's tenure brought new trials to the church, demanding that the saints adapt to changing circumstances and reconcile competing principles. Purity and preservation constituted the most pressing concerns, and accommodating them, in peace, proved an ongoing ordeal. In short, then, this brief study of one New England congregation analyzes how its members and minister together sought to harmonize their ideals of purity and preservation over thirty-one years of John Fiske's ministry.

CHAPTER 2  
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND--THE PURITAN MOVEMENT AND  
THE MAKING OF THE NEW ENGLAND WAY<sup>12</sup>

Church polity first emerged as an issue among English Puritans during the 1570s when Thomas Cartwright declared that Scripture prescribed one particular form of ecclesiastical government. Until this time, Puritan reform in religious affairs had chiefly consisted of eliminating ritualism and strengthening the preaching ministry and thus had been confined to changes within the structure of the established church. Cartwright's assertion, endorsed by John Field, Thomas Wilcox, and other influential Puritans, called for a radical reorganization of the church itself. Most important was the abolishment of such Catholic residue as bishop ordination and church courts. In their place, Puritans sought to invest local congregations with the power to ordain and to give elected elders the power to discipline. Lay involvement in the church, according to these men, was necessary for the success of the gospel. An elected minister would have a better relationship with his people, and discipline centered in the congregation would impress upon the laity the seriousness of sin and the need for personal reform. Moreover, these reformers sought to make the church more selective by requiring all candidates for

---

<sup>12</sup>The following synthetic overview is informed in large part by several works, including Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*; Morgan, *Visible Saints*; Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford, 1967); Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*; and, most important, Foster, *Long Argument*.

membership to undergo a test administered by a group of ministers. In all their deliberations, the Bible constituted their only acknowledged authority. At the same time, it is significant that most these men served as lecturers, a position that freed them from larger parish responsibilities and enabled them to minister solely to the most fervent individuals. Such experience gave Puritans glimpses of perfection and deeply influenced the direction of their thought.<sup>13</sup>

Led by William Bradshaw and Henry Jacob, Puritan calls for the reform of ecclesiastical government continued in the early seventeenth century. These men embraced the concepts of lay ordination and congregational discipline as advanced by their Elizabethan predecessors, and they used the same arguments to justify their cause, contending that the participation of the laity was crucial if the church was to remain pure and the gospel message to be effective. In order to retain respectability and to deflect charges of Separatism, they affirmed that the Church of England, despite its elaborate hierarchy, was a valid institution by virtue of the existence of saints fully converted and implicitly covenanted together. Although the church included hypocrites, this saving remnant represented God's elect and thereby legitimated the establishment.<sup>14</sup>

While asserting their allegiance to the crown, Jacobean Puritans also made their own contribution to congregational theory. To this point, its major flaw was that the removal of the ecclesiastical hierarchy left the system without a means of maintaining uniformity. The Elizabethan radicals had suggested erecting ministerial synods that would

---

<sup>13</sup>Collinson, *Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, 27, 38-44, 101-21; Foster, *Long Argument*, 43-51; Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 24-28, 37.

<sup>14</sup>Foster, *Long Argument*, 58-64; Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, 81-94.

supervise the local churches, but since the establishment had suppressed these, an alternative was needed. To fill the void, the state was recommended, a pragmatic step but one that enabled Puritans to remain in the center of the struggle to direct national policy. Most important, this Erastian solution enabled Puritans to salvage an otherwise anarchic and seditious system.<sup>15</sup>

While Puritan divines were striving to reform the establishment, lay activity tended to drive the Puritan movement into sectarianism. The so-called saints were held together by a shared commitment to “practical divinity”--those religious ordinances that translated “formal instruction into true, that is, ‘operative’ or ‘lively’ understanding.” Preaching, teaching, Sabbath-keeping, prayer and fasting, Psalm singing, maintenance of domestic government, godly living, and devotional reading served collectively as a “matrix of means” for building an ardent faith in individuals.<sup>16</sup> Reinforcing the belief in their divinely elected status as children of God, these activities also fostered a sense of spiritual elitism among the faithful that led them to withdraw from the corrupting elements of society into Christian conventicles. The godly were steeped in literature explaining the morphology of conversion and the proper procedures for self-examination. Their exclusive gatherings provided occasions to search each other’s souls, to apply the prescribed conversion formula to personal experience, and to learn to recognize the marks of unmerited grace. In words equally descriptive of the laity, Charles Lloyd Cohen writes that Puritan divines “spent more time dissecting the marrow of individual piety than in celebrating the

---

<sup>15</sup>Foster, *Long Argument*, 58-64.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 73, 95.

Redeemer's sacrifice."<sup>17</sup> It was this devotion that in large part thrust the Puritan movement toward a perfectionist stance.

Accompanied by these highly zealous lay people, the Puritan clergy brought with them to New England the congregational theory developed during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. They too were preoccupied with the local congregation and lay participation, and their enthusiasm for these principles was heightened by the persecution of William Laud's regime following his rise to power. A committed High Churchman, Laud had increasingly little sympathy for the methods and aims of the Puritans, whom he believed posed a threat to England's political and social order. In an effort to minimize their influence, the archbishop of Canterbury initiated policies that repudiated Calvinist theology, silenced nonconformist preaching, and elevated the place of ceremony and ritual in the church. These actions so profoundly affected the founders of the New England colonies that they all but formally severed relations with the established church.<sup>18</sup>

The New Englanders' newly gathered congregations bore little resemblance to the parishes of the Church of England. Rejecting a hierarchical structure, they based their churches on a covenantal, or contractual, relationship between minister and members that made them accountable to one another and freed them to a large extent from outside interference. The covenant, believed to be the implicit bond in all true churches, was made explicit in a formal document and provided the symbol by which each new society of the faithful bound itself in Christian charity, peace, and unity. Lay people served as the

---

<sup>17</sup>Cohen, *God's Caress*, 14; Foster, *Long Argument*, 65-107, 163.

<sup>18</sup>Foster, *Long Argument*, 138-63; Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, 102-47; Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 72-75.

vehicle through which divine authority was transmitted to the clergy, and, as they could hire, so could they dismiss. Disciplinary responsibilities were delegated to the laity as well. After years of compromise, the New World opened the possibility for total reform; it was an opportunity not to be squandered.

The critical moment in the making of the congregational system that became known as the New England Way came in the 1630s when the churches adopted the policy requiring applicants to give a conversion relation. For years, as theorized by Puritans divines and practiced by Separatist gatherings, membership in congregational churches depended on godly behavior, knowledge of doctrine, and consent to a church covenant. An innovation first introduced in the colonies, the relation trial went a step further than former requirements by admitting members only after they stood before the congregation and successfully testified to the work of God's saving grace in their lives. Anyone, New Englanders believed, might easily possess knowledge of doctrine, but it would be much more difficult to claim and prove a transformation of the heart. Although it is not known who introduced this test, the strong reaction to Laudian persecution and the favorable conditions in New England certainly played a role. Moreover, since the lay people were already accustomed to exclusive gatherings of the elect and were familiar with the process of probing one another's hearts for signs of grace, it is likely that they were influential in its acceptance.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the case, the clergy had the support of the laity, and New Englanders forged ahead in their drive to establish churches that closely, if imperfectly,

---

<sup>19</sup>Morgan's long accepted view that the test was introduced by John Cotton and formally set in place by 1636 has recently been challenged by Michael G. Ditmore, who argues that Thomas Shepard was chiefly responsible and that it was established no earlier than 1638 as a response to Antinomianism. See Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 64-112; Ditmore, "Preparation and Confession: Reconsidering Edmund S. Morgan's *Visible Saints*," *New England Quarterly* LXVII (1994), 298-319; Foster, *Long Argument*, 96-97, 163.

embodied God's covenant of grace with the elect. By restricting membership, they hoped to make their churches true fellowships of the redeemed.

The New England Way, then, had three major components. Membership was limited to the certifiable elect, ultimate authority was vested in the laity, and the local congregation functioned largely as an independent institution. Conceived in old England, clarified and enacted in New England, these principles would continue to develop as the saints adjusted to new conditions and unforeseen circumstances.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE WENHAM/CHELMSFORD CHURCH, 1644-1675

In the autumn of 1644, a small group of English Puritans, led by Fiske, came together at Wenham, Massachusetts, to found a church after the manner of the developing congregational way. Gathering a covenanted society of saints, far from the corrupting influence of old England, was always a serious occasion in New England. For the Wenham folk, the solemnity of the undertaking was heightened by a previous failure. Eight years earlier, in an effort to ensure ecclesiastical uniformity throughout the colony, the General Court passed a law requiring a majority of the colony's magistrates and ministers to supervise and approve the establishment of new churches. At Wenham's first attempt, the leaders of the Bay denied the candidates, declaring them "not sufficiently prepared."<sup>20</sup> Although details of their failings are nowhere recorded, it is likely that at least one could not prove himself a truly, that is, inwardly converted saint. In a similar way, Richard Mather's church at Dorchester had to wait to be officially recognized until its candidates were found resting wholly on Christ's saving work instead of their own abilities.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Joseph B. Felt, *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1855), 529.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 100-01; Foster, *Long Argument*, 161-62; Ditmore, "Preparation and Confession," 311-16.

Whatever the cause of the church's failure, three months later Fiske and his flock demonstrated their bona fides and received the blessing of the colony's officials. The final measure establishing the church was left to the people themselves. Although Massachusetts law required official approval by the civil and religious leaders, no such sanctions could give legitimacy to a new congregation. Rather, the clergy, following their interpretation of Scripture, delegated this authority to the laity, who organized churches by voluntarily uniting and selecting a minister. In Wenham, this day came on October 12, 1644, when eight men "agreed by unanimous consent" to attend faithfully to this new "work of God."<sup>22</sup>

In winter of 1648, when an economic recession made New England seem more a barren wilderness than a refuge for God's elect, Fiske's notebook recounts dissatisfaction with the settlement at Wenham. It appeared that "the hand of divine Providence" had withdrawn its blessing, for "within a short space of time" many people were "deceased, many also removed, and divers appearing sometimes somewhat unsettled."<sup>23</sup> Not only did the numbers of men and women migrating to the colony decrease dramatically after the English Civil War erupted in 1642, but the events taking place in England were so compelling that many settlers returned to their home country.<sup>24</sup> The Wenham church felt this sudden change. So few people established homes in Wenham during the 1640s and 1650s that the church's membership did not exceed twenty people in 1655.

---

<sup>22</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 3, 4.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>24</sup>Foster, *Long Argument*, 189.

While at least fourteen of his colleagues became disillusioned with the New World and returned to the Old, Fiske sought ways to buttress his ministry by looking within the colony.<sup>25</sup> In the early 1650s, he began negotiations with several men who were engaged in founding the town of Chelmsford twenty miles west of Wenham. In summer 1654, these colonists invited Fiske and the church to join them there. The Wenham members promptly inspected the site and voted on the matter. With the opportunity to live in a more promising area of the colony and to increase church membership, they decided to relocate. By the next year, seven families left Wenham and joined settlers from Woburn and Concord to form the Chelmsford church. Although the church under Fiske remained small, it had some thirty members, including the leading men of the town, in 1655 and more than seventy-five children two years later.<sup>26</sup> And though financial struggles persisted for twenty years after its founding, by 1660 the church raised enough funds to build Chelmsford's first meetinghouse.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 171.

<sup>26</sup>The lack of a church register and demographic records makes it impossible to determine exactly what percentage of the townspeople were church members. Estimates for New England have varied from twenty percent in the colony to seventy percent in particular towns. The Wenham/Chelmsford church most likely fell about midway between these figures. Whatever the case, it is important to distinguish between full membership and weekly attendance, for it is highly probable that most people had sympathy for the church and that many people, especially later in the century, regularly attended services without becoming full communicants. (See James Truslow Adams, *The Founding of New England* (Boston, Mass., 1921), 132; Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston, Mass., 1930), 339-46; Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630-1649* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1965), 142-47; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town, The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*, exp. ed. (New York, 1985; 1970), 31; Richard P. Gildrie, *Salem, Massachusetts, 1626-1683: A Covenant Community* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1975), 64, 163-64; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 57-62; Foster, *Long Argument*, 178.)

<sup>27</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 104-105, 113-115; Cole, *Wenham History*, 25; *Chelmsford, Massachusetts: Proceedings of the Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town*, Wilson Waters, ed., (1905), 42-44.

## PART TWO: THE PURITAN PREDICAMENT

### CHAPTER 1

#### ESTABLISHING A PURE CHURCH

*And he set the porters at the gates of the house of the Lord, that none which was unclean in any thing, should enter in. -- II Chron. 23:19<sup>28</sup>*

*Be thou diligent to knowe the state of thy flocks, and looke well to thy herds. -- Prov. 27:23*

*Beloved, beleeve not every spirit, but trie the spirits, whether they are of God: Because many false prophets are gone out into the world. -- I John 4:1*

“A church meeting,” Fiske wrote in his first entry in the notebook, dated October 18, 1644. “There was a meeting upon the Lord’s day before, after the afternoon exercises, in which divers questions were propounded touching the setting in order the occasions of the church.”<sup>29</sup> By “the occasions of the church,” Fiske meant the affairs, or business, of the godly community. Like all the elect in the Massachusetts Bay, the Wenham folk brought from England basic principles that guided them in ordering their church, but the details were left for the saints themselves to develop as they saw fit. During the first ten years of the church’s existence, then, the minister and members

---

<sup>28</sup> Taken from the First Edition of the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible (1611), the epigraphs in the next three chapters can be found in either Fiske’s notebook or the Cambridge Platform.

<sup>29</sup> Pope, *Notebook*, 3.

endeavored to lay a firm foundation for their community by establishing rules and procedures that would promote stability, harmony, and purity among God’s chosen few. What was the proper method for admitting new members into the communion? Should admission trials be held in a private meeting of the elect or a mixed company of regenerate and unregenerate alike? Was it appropriate for women to stand before the church and relate their conversion experience themselves? How were members dismissed from other churches to be brought into the community? How long should the church wait before casting out a wayward member from the community? Was the church subject to ministerial synods or free to operate as an independent body? With deliberation and ardor, the Wenham faithful turned their attention to these and other questions between 1644 and 1655 in an attempt to found a church in the New England Way. It was not always easy: Fiske’s opening entry noted that the “divers questions” had been subjects of “much agitation.”<sup>30</sup>

Every church must begin with identifying its own membership. That the Wenham church would require candidates for admission to make a public profession of saving faith seems to have been a foregone conclusion, for Fiske recorded no discussion of the propriety of adopting this New England innovation. Instead, the church focused on the proper administration of this rite. In December 1644, the brethren “[r]esolved that it would be neither safe, comfortable, or honorable” for Fiske alone to present new candidates to the congregation for church membership “upon a sole or single trial.”<sup>31</sup> Rather, by vote of the church, the minister and deacon should screen candidates before

---

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 17.

presenting them first to the private company of the elect and then to a mixed meeting of the saints and the unregenerate. This three-step procedure enabled Wenham's communicants to test the seriousness and character of applicants before they appeared before the congregation to narrate their accounts of saving grace

By establishing this involved process, the Wenham group followed the example of other churches in the Bay, but this did not prevent it from devising its own justification for adopting the process. The brethren argued that a private meeting between candidate and officers followed by a trial before the elect would provide a means of protecting "the good name of the party" seeking admission as well as "the honor of the gospel" and "the great peace and safety of the church." Privacy was important in such personal and holy matters. The church also wished to create an environment in which there would be a "freedom of speaking" for all involved, an opportunity for members to discuss openly the sins of candidates and for the candidates to defend themselves against criticism. To do otherwise would "give occasion to others to speak reproachfully of the church."<sup>32</sup> A "second propounding," a trial in which nonmembers and members from other churches participated, served further to safeguard the purity of the church. According to the Wenham folk, because even the unregenerate could detect an individual's moral failings, noncommunicants should be invited to report a candidate's unchristian behavior that had escaped the attention of the communicants. While helping to preserve an undefiled communion of saints, the participation of nonmembers also enabled the church to involve outsiders in the life of the community. In this limited role, the unregenerate gained first-

---

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 17, 5.

hand experience of the responsibilities attendant upon entering into fellowship as full members.

“A fortnight’s time” after the “second propounding,” a candidate was “called forth to the relation of a public trial”--the profession of experiential faith or conversion relation.<sup>33</sup> Except for the sermon, no event was more important in the life of New England churches than this narrative of grace; certainly, it constituted the most significant step along a candidate’s path into the church. In this ceremony, people were tested and proved themselves true saints, touched by the hand of God and thereby assured of salvation, and not just civil citizens, outwardly honest and upright in conduct but corrupt and selfish at heart.<sup>34</sup> Fiske’s record of twenty-one of these public relations provides a glimpse of the ritual as it was held at Wenham.<sup>35</sup>

The narrative of grace was both contrived and spontaneous. Candidates had to rely on personal experience and real-life events; at the same time, they were expected to conform their story to the models prescribed by Puritan divines in devotional manuals. Indeed, common elements present in all the relations suggest an unspoken formula. Most saints passed through three stages.<sup>36</sup> Inspired or troubled by a particularly moving sermon, people first became convicted of their sin, recognized their total helplessness in overcoming it, and humbled themselves before God. They then received God’s call to

---

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>34</sup>On the later development of the Puritan preoccupation with such categories, see Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679-1749* (University Park, Penn., 1994).

<sup>35</sup>In addition, over fifty conversion relations from the Cambridge church have survived. See Selement and Woolley, eds., *Thomas Shepard’s Confessions*, and Mary Rhinelander McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Relations of Religious Experience, 1648-1649,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLVIII (1991), 432-66.

<sup>36</sup>According to Fiske, there were three “things required to be declared” in a conversion narrative: “repentance from sin, faith unfeigned, and effectual calling.” (Pope, *Notebook*, 145.)

forsake the petty pursuits and vain activities of the world in exchange for the gift of Christ's redemption and promise of a new life. Finally, God's grace and strength proved faithful in delivering them, time and time again, from the many temptations encountered on the journey to salvation. Hanging on this familiar formula were the candidates' particular troubles and tribulations as well as their ultimate victory in Christ, which infused the ritual with special meaning for narrators and listeners alike.<sup>37</sup>

The narrative of Anne Fiske (the minister's wife) provides a typical example of the content expected in Wenham conversion relations. In November, 1644, she "was called forth to declare what God had done for her salvation in bringing her to Christ." Upon listening to a sermon at the age of twelve, Anne became "convinced" of her ungodly ways, her "particular sins" being "foolishness, vanity, and pride." She endeavored by her own strength to overcome these sins until, seven or eight years later, she had another spiritual awakening. The preaching of John Rogers of Dedham, a noted Puritan, caused her to undergo a full conversion experience: "pressing the necessity of believing in the Lord, [he] opened her heart to choose by faith in Christ (whereas before she rested on performances)." Yet several trials hindered her walk with God. Striving for salvation, she found herself given to pride and contentment in her own efforts. With the counsel of Rogers and the writings of two other ministers, she subdued her false confidence and became convinced that her salvation came by faith rather than works. She also was plagued by the feeling that "she should not persevere" as one of God's chosen, but again Rogers provided instruction, directing her to Scripture and assuring her that "he that hath

---

<sup>37</sup>McGiffert, ed., *God's Plot*, 135-48.



begun” a good work “will persist” to the end. Finally, when believing herself “a hypocrite because greatly afflicted” in her heart, Fiske found comfort and peace in Psalm 73 “whereby it appeared affliction was not . . . [the] note of hypocrisy” but, in fact, a sign of election.<sup>38</sup>

Following the narrative of grace came a time of questioning before the congregation. Members did not simply listen passively to the relations but, drawing on the spiritual insight that came with sainthood, carefully considered and judged what they heard in an effort to ensure that the story was fact rather than fabrication and that it manifested true signs of grace. They had always to be on guard against dissemblers. In most cases, Fiske failed to record the communicants’ questions and wrote only that acceptance followed the examination, which suggests that candidates who included the requisite elements were granted a smooth entry into the church. Yet Fiske’s notebook bears evidence that the process was not a mere formality. One woman had to answer at least eight questions about her conversion, and another was faced with the question, “In discovery of effectual calling, how is it known?” Most inquiries were not so theologically technical but required that candidates clarify a point or support the narrative with a passage from scripture, and they almost always did so to the members’ satisfaction.<sup>39</sup> Apart from quoting the Bible, the surest way of proving oneself a saint was to follow the example of an applicant who, when asked about her “experience of growth” in grace,

---

<sup>38</sup> Pope, *Notebook*, 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> At the same time, one must wonder whether Wenham’s stringent standards of admission discouraged individuals from seeking membership in the first place. As one candidate explained in her relation, she “was willing to come” to Wenham even after having “heard oft that the church was more strict about receiving members” than were other churches. It is likely that others were not so confident. (Pope, *Notebook*, 7.)

“bewailed the want of it.”<sup>40</sup> Doubt, uncertainty, despair, and weakness were sure signs of authentic faith, since they demonstrated the sinner’s total reliance on Christ’s saving power.<sup>41</sup>

After the members voted on the matter, the final step in the admissions process formally brought the candidate within the church covenant. New communicants stood before the congregation and promised to live in love and harmony with the church, to submit to instruction and discipline, and to keep watch over others within the fold. Membership in the communion of saints entailed specific duties and obligations as well as special privileges.

What is most unusual about Wenham’s early admissions practice is that candidates were not tested for their knowledge of Reformed doctrine but only for their “saving faith.” In November 1644, Fiske recorded in the notebook the congregation’s decision to require all candidates to undergo a trial to ascertain whether their understanding of Christian belief “was proportionable to their faith as freshly professed.” It appears that the church, while adopting without discussion the requirement of a conversion relation, introduced the practice of testing a candidate’s knowledge as an afterthought. In fact, the church adopted this further requirement because it feared that newcomers might be “corrupt with such errors or tainted with such opinions” circulating in the colony. In order to guarantee that each new member held orthodox views, the Wenham brethren resolved that the “confession of faith of this church should be read distinctly to them and time given them to

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 44, 150, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 69-70.

return their answer.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the church endeavored to ensure that applicants' experiential faith was rooted in an understanding of the "historical faith."

In its admissions policy, the Wenham church devised special rules for two groups of people. The first was women. The practice in many New England congregations was for an officer to meet privately with a female candidate, take down her narrative of grace in writing, and then read the relation to the congregation in place of the candidate.<sup>43</sup> This arrangement made Wenham uneasy since it attenuated the role of the members and seemed to increase the risk of an impostor slipping through the doors. As Fiske wrote, women "should make their relations personally in public . . . because the whole church is to judge of their meetness which cannot so well be if she speak not herself." The church most certainly would have forged its own path on this matter without discussion had it not been for St. Paul's seemingly unequivocal instructions to the Corinthians: "Let your women keepe silence in the Churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speake." Although the Apostle's words seem plainly to restrict the participation of women, the church easily justified the decision requiring them to give their relations before the congregation themselves. Paul's words did not apply to narratives of grace, the church insisted, because "this kind of speaking is by submission where others are to judge" and so does not place women in a position of authority over men.<sup>44</sup> Candidates relating their experiential conversion did not so much teach, preach, or prophecy as open themselves to the judgment of others. Having dismissed Paul's command with such arguments, the

---

<sup>42</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 10.

<sup>43</sup>Cohen, *God's Caress*, 143-44.

<sup>44</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 4; I Cor. 14:34 Authorized (King James) Version; Pope, *Notebook*, 4.

communicants proceeded with a clear conscience as well as the assurance that holding men and women to the same requirements would protect the integrity of the church.

The other group of people was dismissed members. In the New England Way, before moving to another town, members in good standing received a “letter of dismission” from their old church to take to their new one. The question plaguing Wenham was whether such persons could enter by letter alone or should be required to go through the admission trials like all other candidates. In the first entry in the notebook, Fiske recorded the church’s resolution that dismissed members “should make a declaration of the work of grace” before being received into full fellowship. He explained that “we could not else answer our conscience in exercise of the trust Christ hath reposed in us of receiving in such only as be meet,” for “[w]e are to judge by our own light and not others’.” For all the resolute tone of this statement, the decision met enough resistance that discussion of the matter continued for several weeks. The most troubling reservation came when it was argued that such scruples went beyond reason and demonstrated a lack of trust in other churches. To this objection, the brethren responded that, because “tis known that men are liable to mistakes,” precaution in admitting members was necessary. The church also appealed to private judgment and to personal, or corporate, responsibility: “tis not in our own but another’s matters and upon another’s account. We being only as stewards put in trust for Christ and by Him and thus must do that which may discharge our consciences before Him. Which we cannot do if we take them upon trust and mean testimony of others.” With these and similar arguments, Fiske and the saints “agreed

(according to our present light) . . . to receive none in without a relation.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, the church preserved its perfectionist policies while remaining open to spiritual enlightenment that, presumably, might permit a change of practice in the future.

The church also worked to define the place of the unregenerate in the life of the community. In 1646, the Massachusetts General Court passed a law that required all persons to attend Sunday worship, but their participation beyond that was determined by their personal interest and the churches’ particular policies. In almost every church, the Lord’s Supper, the sacramental sign and seal of God’s covenant with the elect, was restricted to the exclusive community of saints, and so nonmembers were dismissed from the meeting house just before the enactment of the sacred ceremony. The question troubling the Wenham church was whether noncommunicants should be dismissed before or after the prayer and blessing that followed the sermon and preceded the Lord’s Supper. In other words, were the prayer and blessing a part of the regular service or specifically linked to the sacrament?

Members advanced several reasons to include nonmembers in the prayer. They conceded that since “not all communion members are believers”--that is, hypocrites present among the elect--the church was already guilty of communing “in that ordinance with unbelievers.” In an apparent gesture of sympathy, they argued that, just as Christ had mercifully extended the gift of grace to them, they should take pity on those outside the church and invite them to participate in the prayer. Finally, they noted that including nonmembers in the precommunion prayers “may be a means of convincing some of them

---

<sup>45</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 3, 5, 6.

standing out of church state.”<sup>46</sup> These arguments proved insufficiently convincing, for after much debate the issue was deferred to a later date.

The continuation illustrates the church’s great concern with maintaining its identity as an unblemished community of saints. When one member urged that the unregenerate be present for the prayers since God’s blessing should be applied to all who sit under the minister’s preaching, another questioned whether they were “inwardly taught,” suggesting that nonmembers deserved the church’s prayers only if they had not just heard the sermon but taken it to heart. The church dismissed this objection by declaring that persons were indeed “inwardly taught” even before joining the church covenant. In another exchange, one member argued that “many are out of the Church which we in charity judge to be such as Christ died for” and they are to “be prayed for,” to which another answered, “true, but to pray with them?”<sup>47</sup> The strain inherent in the church’s dual commitment could hardly be better expressed.

In the event, the church averted extreme sectarianism and adopted a more inclusive stance by voting to include nonmembers in the prayers and blessings. As Fiske recorded, prayer was deemed essential for “the dispensing of the word”: since “the efficacy of that ordinance is only from Christ, tis not only expedient but necessary to adjoin prayer” to the sermon. In taking this position, the church asserted its “dependence upon Christ and His spirit for the enlivening and quickening virtue of the word.” The prayers could benefit the unregenerate inasmuch as they made efficacious the preaching of the gospel. Fiske wrote, “Because we are expecting to receive mercy’s morsels from God tis meet we should be

---

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 12.

disposed to mercy's morsels and this is a special act of mercy." As for allowing nonmembers to participate in the blessing, the brethren decided that, "if a prayer of faith may be used with them, then a blessing may be pronounced over them."<sup>48</sup> The church thus provided an example of Christian love and exhibited a qualified willingness to include nonmembers in this important aspect of the life of the community. This inclusive position is evidence that the Wenham members chose to view the unregenerate as potential saints and fellow members--still unredeemed but quite possibly redeemable. By giving them a taste of the benefits members received in full, the church no doubt intended to arouse their interest in things spiritual and to draw them more closely into the fold.

While inviting the participation of nonmembers in the precommunion prayers and blessings, the church continued to guard the purity of the communion table itself with great vigilance. Visitors from other churches, particularly when strangers to the Wenham folk, presented the greatest problem, since their status as godly church members could not be conclusively confirmed. In an attempt "to avoid miscarriages," the church resolved that all visitors have express permission before receiving communion and that a letter of recommendation alone would not suffice. The matter, however, remained in doubt. Several weeks after making this resolution, exhibiting a sort of de facto presbyterianism, Wenham sent a letter to its mother church in Salem requesting advice. Salem responded that persons should not receive the sacrament "upon letters, testimonials, or recommendations only" since "such letters may be counterfeited and the church ordinances both abused and profaned."<sup>49</sup> Having confirmed Wenham's decision, Salem

---

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 12, 13.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 13, 18.

recommended that visitors without letters be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper only on condition that they are known to be members at another church. That Fiske recorded no further discussion of this matter suggests that Salem's endorsement laid doubts or dissenting views to rest.

Although the church looked to Salem for advice, it did not take lightly its independent status and the freedom of its members, as evidenced by its response to letters from the nearby congregation at Newbury. Much more socially and economically stratified than most New England towns, Newbury was home to the colony's sole presbyterian church, whose hierarchical structure and more inclusive admissions policy put it at odds with the New England Way.<sup>50</sup> In January 1645, Newbury's minister, Thomas Parker, and teaching elder, James Noyes, sent the Wenham church letters of dismissal formally releasing three members and entrusting them to its care. Consistent with their presbyterianism, Parker and Noyes addressed the letters to Fiske alone and signed them without making reference to the rest of the Newbury members. The letters created a stir because they challenged Wenham's very definition of a church. Fiske and his congregation held that because members themselves, not any hierarchy, constituted a community of saints, "none but the whole church" had authority to carry out such business as dismissing members to other churches. By claiming to represent the "whole church," the elders at Newbury had usurped the role of the laity, which was nothing less than "an impeachment of the church's liberty." The violation had practical implications. As Fiske recorded, regarding admissions procedures, some candidates "are under offense and the

---

<sup>50</sup>David Grayson Allen, *In English Ways: The Movement of Societies and the Transferal of English Local Law and Custom to Massachusetts Bay in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), 89-92.



offense is known only to some” communicants but not known by the “elders; some are of corrupt judgment; maybe the elders are corrupt too.”<sup>51</sup> If left to the judgment of elders alone, unfit candidates could more easily slip in.

Yet it was far easier privately to denounce the letters than to disregard them. By ignoring them, the church risked abnegating its responsibility to the dismissed members as well as isolating itself from other churches in the colony. At the same time, a strong stand on the issue would thrust the fledgling congregation into the divisive presbyterian-congregationalist debate about church government that was splintering the Puritan movement in the mother country--a position the church preferred to avoid. The brethren temporized. In a statement confined to the privacy of the meetinghouse, they acknowledged that the letters gave the dismissed members from Newbury the liberty to join their communion but decided “that it was not yet a season to give so full and final resolution.”<sup>52</sup> In the meantime, the letters were to be kept hidden from nonmembers.

The “season” arrived six months later, when the church received one of Newbury’s dismissed members, another Anne Fiske. The wife of a member and John Fiske’s sister-in-law, she had been associated with the church for some time and had even participated in the Lord’s Supper at Wenham. Faced with her request for admittance, the Wenham congregation took a definitive stand on the controversy generated by the Newbury letters. It registered an objection to the letters’ form (because signed by the elders only) but acknowledged that “from the substance of them they contain a dismissal.” In the following weeks, Anne Fiske gave her conversion relation before the church and was

---

<sup>51</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 20-21.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

accepted into fellowship. By providing justification for receiving Fiske, the church's statement enabled it to accommodate in practice what it condemned in principle.<sup>53</sup>

The case demonstrates that the church made decisions only after much careful consideration. This tendency also manifested itself in actions against wayward saints. When members were accused of wrongdoing, great effort was made to verify the charge and, if it was found true, to punish and reform the transgressor. During its first ten years, the church had few serious disciplinary problems. Most cases involved either petty lying or personal disagreements and were easily resolved. One, however, occupied the church for a considerable time. In spring 1648, on the testimony of four witnesses, the church charged George Norton, who had joined the church three years earlier, with lying to members and claiming that he could clear a woman who had stolen some lace when he knew she was guilty of the crime. Two weeks after denying the charges, Norton stood before the church and repented, though with little of the desired effect. Because his inability to remember his "evil ways and doings" suggested "a neglect of the spiritual watch," the church found his confession wanting.<sup>54</sup> His was a formulaic confession that fell far short of true repentance. Moreover, he appeared to justify his words and condemn the members who testified against him.

Over the course of fourteen weeks--and over thirty pages in Fiske's notebook--Norton occupied center stage in the life of the congregation. The church held long meetings, offered prayers, and listened to Norton make confessions. Members visited Norton at his home and pleaded with him to repent. The church even declared a day of

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 32-34, 37.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 60.

public humiliation on his behalf, where again “the brethren labored with him, some even with much affection and tears.” Just often enough Norton displayed a hint of genuine remorse that gave the congregation hope of his fully repenting and prompted it to “wait yet a little longer.”<sup>55</sup>

They waited in vain. Norton proved incorrigible. The initial charges of deceiving the church became secondary to “the frame of his spirit.” First he lied; then he manifested haughtiness and insolence, which “were conceived inconsistent with the nature of true repentance and humiliation.” In addition, Norton failed to request the prayers of the members--a sin of omission that added to his guilt. Finally, after weeks of pleading with him to change his ways and offering him yet one more chance for repentance, the brethren ended matters by “casting him out.”<sup>56</sup>

Six months later, under criticism from at least one nearby church for wrongly excommunicating Norton, the Wenham congregation drafted a letter justifying its disciplinary action. They described the extended measures taken with Norton and stated that they had acted to preserve “the purity of God’s holy ordinances and of our holy fellowship.”<sup>57</sup> While this conclusion explicitly states that the matter of purity was the church’s principal concern, the body of the long letter attests to the church’s desire to keep Norton within the fold. Before removing him, the Wenham members endeavored to convince him of his wrong and offered him numerous opportunities to repent, reform, and be restored to their good graces. If a contrary member proved tractable, “purifying” him, just as much as excommunication, contributed to the perpetuation of an undefiled

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 77, 66.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 65, 70, 82.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 88.

gathering of believers.<sup>58</sup> To the dismay of the congregation, Norton remained unyielding and so brought upon himself the most severe disciplinary measure the church could exercise. Accepting the tension involved in maintaining purity and preserving the church, the Wenham members stood firm as well.

During the 1640s and 1650s, the perfectionism of the Wenham church was matched by its commitment to local autonomy and lay authority. The most significant threat to these principles came in 1648, when many of the colony's ministers, including Fiske, convened at Cambridge and drew up a platform of order for the churches. The New England clergymen asserted their commitment to the Reformed theological tradition by including in the Cambridge Platform's preface an affirmation of the Westminster Confession. In the platform itself, they set forth hitherto-undefined principles of church government, addressing issues that ranged from the admission of members and the maintenance of officers to the role of magistrates in ecclesiastical matters. The platform also gave expression to the growing ministerial disfavor with extensive lay participation in church affairs. To be sure, the laity retained an important role, most notably as the source of the elected ministers' powers and as the body that admitted and removed members. Yet, granted a new veto power, which enabled the clergy to block lay motions during church discussions, the ministers emerged from the Cambridge synod with increased authority.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>On the origin, development, and uses of Puritan discipline, see David C. Brown, "The Keys of the Kingdom: Excommunication in Colonial Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly*, LXVII (1994), 531-63.

<sup>59</sup>Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 108-15.

The Cambridge Platform also gave considerable authority to church elders and synods. It declared that church members are obligated to obey their elders and to submit “themselves unto them in the Lord” as taught by Scripture. In particular, members were required to attend meetings called by the elders; they were not to speak or leave without the elders’ permission; they were not to oppose the elders’ judgments without good cause. Further, elders were granted authority to examine candidates requesting admission, as well as members accused of wrongdoing and persons seeking office, before presenting them before the church for trial. As for synods, the Cambridge Platform gave these bodies advisory responsibility for settling ecclesiastical controversies and for maintaining sound doctrine, good government, and proper worship in New England’s churches. Although synods were denied disciplinary power, which was considered the sole property of local congregations, the platform asserted that the “directions and determinations” of synods “are to be received with reverence and submission” by individual churches.<sup>60</sup>

Wenham objected to these changes. When the Massachusetts General Court distributed the platform to the churches and instructed them “to returne their thoughts and judgments touchinge the particulars thereof,” the Wenham brethren gave their approval, though not without first discussing the contents with “some agitation and debate” and rejecting several of the sections that impinged upon lay authority. Most notably, the church, guarding the powers of the laity, objected to the restriction placed on members’ ability to oppose “the judgment or *sentence* of the Elders.” In a brief statement, Fiske recorded that the church “freely assent[ed]” to the platform but made clear that “this our

---

<sup>60</sup>*The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Williston Walker, ed. (Philadelphia, Pa., 1960), 219, 235.

assent extends not itself to every particular circumstance in every chapter and section.”<sup>61</sup>

Some three years later, the church drafted a fuller statement to be sent to the General Court. It accepted without qualification the affirmation of the Westminster Confession of Faith included in the preface but expressed serious reservations about several ambiguous expressions in the platform itself. For instance, the brethren denied that instructions from a synod should be considered an “ordinance of God” as stated in the platform.<sup>62</sup> Such language, the church believed, came too close to blurring man-made proposals and God-breathed Scripture.<sup>63</sup> The Wenham brethren also qualified the platform’s statement that synods and councils had the right to determine matters of faith and worship. This right, according to the church, was not the exclusive privilege of synods or councils but also belonged to individual congregations.

Wenham’s chief concern with the Cambridge Platform hinged on the matter of authority. Fearing that the platform would open the door for a synod to displace the authority of local churches and to threaten the supremacy of Scripture, the brethren declared that no canon, confession, or church platform could be definitive for all time, simply because such documents were ultimately the product of human endeavor and therefore subject to error. They also sought to attenuate the power of the platform by distinguishing, again, between “the imperfect drafts of frail man” and “the perfect canon of holy scripture” made authoritative by the “infallible inspiration of God.” Moreover, to safeguard its autonomy, Wenham reserved for itself “the liberty of interpreting” the

---

<sup>61</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 90; *Creeds and Platforms*, 219; Pope, *Notebook*, 90.

<sup>62</sup>*Creeds and Platforms*, 234.

<sup>63</sup>On Puritan biblicism, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), esp. 13-50.

platform “in our own sense” so that “we may enjoy our own interpretations.”<sup>64</sup> For the Wenham folk, the platform did not belong to the learned clergy but was subject to their own understanding, and the Bible--presumably as they understood it--stood over and above any earthly authority.<sup>65</sup>

The church complained throughout its statement to the court that the platform contained numerous “dark” expressions and passages that should have been “more fully explained.” Yet its own statement proved as equivocal and vague as the wording of the platform itself. In a sentence that seems purposefully obscure, the Wenham brethren gave their “ready acceptance and approbation” to “the substance” of the Cambridge Platform but reserved their “good liking” only to “what we are able hitherto to judge.” The church believed “there will be a more clear and full understanding of the whole scriptures in the things appertaining to the kingdom of Christ,” and so it remained wary of anything, especially a document challenging the primacy of the Bible, that might “forestall any further light which it may please God to cause to break forth.”<sup>66</sup> It is not clear what kind of continuing revelation Wenham’s communicants had in mind. Whatever they meant, it is certain that they would go to great lengths to prevent encroachment on their autonomy, lay power and local control being essential to the maintenance of purity. While the authors of the platform sought to define and systematize congregational church polity, Fiske and his flock resisted those parts of the platform that seemed to interfere with their efforts to be a perfect communion of God’s elect.

---

<sup>64</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 97, 96.

<sup>65</sup>On the power of lay literacy in Puritan New England, see Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 21-70.

<sup>66</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 97.

During its first ten years, the Wenham church remained a small but committed gathering of saints. Proceeding largely on its own, it found ways to cope with the tensions inherent in its mission but, most important, refused to break free from these tensions. It refused to compromise its guiding principles. Of first importance was purity. To ensure it, the church adopted a rigorous admission policy. It exercised harsh disciplinary measures, including excommunication. It vigilantly guarded lay authority against other churches and ecclesiastical synods. At the same time, Wenham mitigated its perfectionist tendencies and proved itself more than an exclusive group of the redeemed. It allowed nonmembers to participate in the trial of candidates for admission. It went to great lengths to reform the wayward. It permitted the unregenerate partial access to the sacred mysteries. In short, by striving for perfection among the saints while remaining somewhat inclusive to the unregenerate, it demonstrated a willingness to accept the challenges and strains imposed by its dual commitment.



## CHAPTER 2

### ENLARGING THE COVENANT

*And I will establish my covenant betweene me and thee, and thy seede after thee, in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to bee a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.*

-- Gen. 17:7

*Yee are the children of the Prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.*

-- Acts 3:25

The move to Chelmsford in 1655 brought new problems, concerns, and opportunities for Fiske's congregation. During the next five years, the church's main focus shifted from purity to preservation, though the two remained in tension; and, more than ever, the pressure of circumstances and the lack of external guidance impelled the faithful to rely on deliberation and consensus among themselves. The move itself added significantly to the congregation's numbers but required it to compromise several well-established practices. The adoption of what later became known as the Halfway Covenant enabled the church to widen its scope of influence among the unregenerate. Finally, the increasing number of children under its watch obliged the church to give special attention toward disciplining and educating these potential saints in the ways of the Lord. If the

Chelmsford church were to persevere as a pure and upright people of God, its children would have to be chiefly responsible.

The church faced a perplexing situation during its move to Chelmsford. On the one hand, the Wenham faithful were merely relocating farther into the New England interior; on the other, a brand new church was forming by the convergence of primarily three groups--the Wenham core and a large number of settlers from Woburn and Concord. Seven heads of households, including Fiske, made the move from Wenham and represented the original church, while nearly twice that number joined the group from the other towns. The proper procedure for melding these saints--whether by sharing conversion relations, accepting letters of dismission, or taking the church covenant--was by no means clear. Nor was it evident that the Wenham group should dictate terms simply because of Fiske's presence.<sup>67</sup> With no model to follow, the groups reached an accommodation by which new members could forgo giving a conversion relation and enter the church on letters of dismission alone. The policy that required a narrative of grace was suspended. As Fiske recorded the event, the Woburn-Concord folk "being the greater number"--the crucial point in congregational polity<sup>68</sup>--the settlers proceeded "in a way of mutual compliance" in which relations were shared on a voluntary basis.<sup>69</sup> Thus the church's earlier strong resistance to accepting members from other churches into full communion by letter and without conversion relations--its commitment to purity--was set

---

<sup>67</sup>According to the definition in the Cambridge Platform, a church did not necessarily include a minister: "A Church being a company of people combined together by covenant for the worship of God, it appeareth thereby, that there may be the essence and being of a church without any officers." (*Creeds and Platforms*, 210.)

<sup>68</sup>At another time, despite the absence of several prominent members, Fiske explained that the church should proceed with the meeting since "the greater number" had assembled. (Pope, *Notebook*, 171.)

<sup>69</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 105.

aside in order to accommodate the demands of “the greater number.” This decision proved effective for the occasion, but it was a compromise that the church would later regret, for, though it aided the peaceful and swift union of the saints, it brushed aside a principle that had been deeply held among the Wenham folk. The church continued, however, to require the unregenerate and children to make a profession of experiential faith before being received into fellowship.

Within months, the Chelmsford church altered two admissions practices brought from Wenham. First, women were no longer permitted to stand before the church and relate their religious experience themselves; instead, church officers would read a written statement on their behalf. Fiske’s failure to record an explanation for this decision makes it impossible to determine what prompted the change. Although the Cambridge Platform made the same allowance for any persons who “through excessive fear, or other infirmity, *be unable* to make their personal *relation* of their spirituall estate in publick,” it avoided potential controversy--as well as a difficult passage in Scripture--and made no explicit reference to women. The second alteration of Wenham practice excluded nonmembers from participating in the trials of applicants seeking admission into the church.<sup>70</sup> Fiske again left no rationale for this decision, and the platform, likewise silent, provided no direction. In all probability, the Chelmsford church adopted both these positions in order to conform to the majority of churches in the colony.

Amid these changes, the members’ dedication to preserving a pure gathering of believers continued at Chelmsford. In early June 1656, after a general public fast, the

---

<sup>70</sup>*Creeds and Platforms*, 223; Pope, *Notebook*, 106-07.

church covenant was “renewed and repeated and voted by the brethren.”<sup>71</sup> Anticipating the mass covenant renewals initiated by Increase Mather later in the century, this ritual offered members an occasion to examine their spiritual and moral condition and to rededicate themselves to God and one another. As many persons were received into church covenant, it also marked the official entry of several members (mostly wives) from the Concord and Woburn churches.

The most pressing issue facing the church shortly after settlement in Chelmsford was one that for nearly twenty years ministers and congregations throughout New England had been discussing with increasing interest. Ever since the 1630s, when most churches began requiring candidates to relate the work of God’s grace in their lives, ministers had debated how to deal with children who failed to follow the example of their parents and remained outside church communion as baptized adults. The issue gained in importance during the 1640s and 1650s, as high birthrates prevailed and many children neglected to seek admission to the church upon reaching adulthood. Led by Richard Mather, a few ministers made an effort at the Cambridge Synod of 1648 to devise strategies the better to accommodate the churches’ children, but most saw no urgency in the matter and allowed those opposed to innovations to carry the day.<sup>72</sup>

By the 1650s, the situation at Chelmsford had become urgent. In January 1657, with more than seventy-five children under its care, the church took independent action and adopted a statement whose principles were later embodied in the Halfway Covenant of 1662. Foundational to this statement was the assertion that “all they that are in church

---

<sup>71</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 106.

<sup>72</sup>Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 13-18.

covenant are church members” and so have the “right” to baptism, which is “the initiation seal of the covenant.” Here the church recognized the existence of persons who had merely “owned the covenant”--proven knowledgeable of the faith and obedient to God’s commands--without ever having testified before the church concerning God’s redemptive grace in their lives. These “halfway” members were to receive new privileges in the coming years. The decision to adopt this statement in 1657, “voted unanimously” by the communicants, made Chelmsford one of the first churches in the colony to give formal approval of the practice of baptizing the children of members who, though themselves baptized, had not made a public relation of grace and were thus not in full communion.<sup>73</sup> Chelmsford’s “Halfway Statement,” as it will be called here, preceded not only the Halfway Synod of 1662 but also the ministerial assembly of 1657, at which a majority voted in favor of the halfway propositions.

With the adoption of this measure, Chelmsford did more than allow the baptism of children whose parents had taken the covenant but were not full members. Looking to the next generation, it extended its reach over the children within the fold and clarified its responsibilities to them. Its Halfway Statement expressed plainly the church’s obligation to discipline the children in accordance with the scriptures and to instruct them in the ways of the Lord. Further, if found sufficiently knowledgeable in the faith and free from scandal in their speech and conduct, the statement declared that the children “are to be encouraged to lay hold on and so own their parents’ covenant personally,” as they make their way toward becoming saints in full communion.<sup>74</sup> That the church continued to require

---

<sup>73</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 109-115; Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 25-26.

<sup>74</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 110.

conversion relations before accepting applicants, including its children, as full members reveals that its commitment to purity remained strong. Yet the driving motivation behind the Halfway Statement was not perfection but a concern with preserving the institution. With the implementation of this measure, great expectations were placed on the children, the seed of a covenanted people and the presumptive heirs of the high calling of their parents.<sup>75</sup>

Given the comprehensiveness and innovative nature of this statement, it should come as no surprise that the Chelmsford church adopted it only after much debate--the "agitation" lasting "for about a quarter of a year," according to Fiske.<sup>76</sup> The most persistent opponent was Thomas Adams, a selectman and sergeant in the militia. Adams presented his propositions in the form of questions, and so it is difficult to determine his exact position on the issues. It is clear, however, that his primary purpose was to clarify the differences, if any, between the covenant of grace and the church covenant and between their respective internal and external parts. Fiske gave considerable attention to these questions. A brief examination of the central issues reveals the theological rationale for adopting the Halfway Statement as well as the nature of the church the Chelmsford folk sought to perpetuate.

According to Fiske, because the covenant of grace referred to God's special relationship with His elect and the church covenant merely to the agreement that bound the visible communion, the two were not the same. Nor could the latter be divided into

---

<sup>75</sup>On the justification, development, and implications of Puritan "tribalism," see Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 161-86.

<sup>76</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 109.

internal and external parts. To suggest otherwise, he argued, would be to grant that “the churches [are] endowed with, and enabled to act by, an infallible and unerring spirit” because it presumed that the church’s visible ordinances corresponded directly with the invisible ways of God, that they always conveyed saving grace.<sup>77</sup> Experience alone proved this was not the case, for Puritans knew all too well that baptized adults fell into apostasy, yet the theological justification was no less convincing. Affirming two parts to the church covenant implied that human institutions could take the place of the omniscient Creator and Judge and that the covenanted gathering of saints--the visible church--determined the soundness of doctrine and the status of souls--things belonging to God alone. It would be equivalent to saying that the church on earth is a perfect representation of the invisible church. As for the question about an inner and outer part of the covenant of grace, Fiske made the paradoxical assertion that this covenant can be so distinguished. For he simultaneously asserted that the church covenant is the external part of the covenant of grace and denied that the covenant of grace is the internal part of the church covenant. Although inconsistent and illogical, this position had the virtue of protecting the doctrine of God’s sovereignty from human manipulation and from the presumption that outward means or behavior reflected the true inner condition of a believer.<sup>78</sup> In short, the distinctions between the covenants and their parts provided a theological explanation for what the Chelmsford folk surely knew: that among them were at least a few hypocrites.

These distinctions provided a framework and justification for adopting the Halfway

---

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>78</sup>For a fuller explanation of the parts of the covenant in Puritan sacramental theology, see E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven, Conn., 1974), 92, 96, 100-01, 153-59.

Statement. In Puritan sacramental ecclesiology, baptism constituted the sign and seal of the covenant, the visible confirmation of God's promise of redemption to His people. Since it was part of the external covenant, however, it contained no intrinsic spiritual efficacy: it did not in itself guarantee access to Heaven. For the elect, it was truly the seal of the covenant of grace, marking them with a visible sign of grace; for all others, it was an empty sign, sealing nothing.<sup>79</sup> Because the sacrament had meaning only on condition that God had already chosen the recipient, which no human could ever know, let alone dare try to control, Fiske and his congregation could extend baptismal privileges to children of halfway members without presuming to ascertain the inscrutable mind and will of God. The visible church could be preserved without pretending to control the economy of salvation. Most significantly, the Chelmsford folk implied that purity was rightly the ideal to which a church should strive, but that, in practice, preserving the institution sometimes took precedence, even at risk to purity.

Fiske nowhere recorded Adams's reaction to the explication of his propositions, a fact suggesting either that Adams was persuaded by Fiske's arguments or that his voice was muffled by the overwhelming majority of members who endorsed the Halfway Statement. Whatever the case, the Chelmsford church proceeded to carry through the measure. Reverting to a de facto presbyterianism, Fiske's congregation sent copies of the statement to its mother churches at Woburn and Concord with a request for their approval. Concord returned a letter stating that the halfway "propositions . . . shall not be offensive to them," but Woburn asked for the scriptural basis for the innovation.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup>Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 139-59.

<sup>80</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 115.



Chelmsford responded by drafting a document in which each proposition contained in the Halfway Statement was supported with a biblical rationale. On the matter of infant baptism, the church turned to the typological argument popular among Puritan divines, arguing that baptism under the new covenant had replaced circumcision under the old. Just as the people of Israel had circumscribed their infants, Christians were obligated to baptize theirs.<sup>81</sup> The church also appealed to scriptural passages that gave households the responsibility of training their children in godliness. Drawing on a New Testament metaphor, Chelmsford declared that “the lamb [the child] is as well in danger of the wolf as the sheep; the lamb may as well need the benefit of the shepard’s staff and rod too as the sheep,” and it argued, borrowing a passage from the Psalms, that “those olive plants [the children] in the Lord’s garden which is His church” are in special need of being trained, disciplined, and nurtured.<sup>82</sup> ✓

Fiske did not record Woburn’s response. A letter endorsing the explanation certainly would have encouraged the church to forge ahead, but given the independence of local congregations, Woburn’s disapproval would probably have been immaterial in Chelmsford’s final decision. At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that Chelmsford proceeded without caution. On the contrary, from the very start and throughout its deliberations, it realized the significance and the potentially disastrous consequences of the Halfway Statement. As Fiske wrote, “We apprehend this way of baptizing grandchildren hath no stop and may (we fear) lead to the prophanation of the ordinance.” By extending baptismal privileges to children whose parents were not full

---

<sup>81</sup>Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 179-82.

<sup>82</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 116, 117.

members of the church (and not complete Christians), the Chelmsford congregation recognized that it risked opening itself to corruption in the form of unregenerate members. Hypocrites might more easily slip through the church's door, profaning the fellowship and the Lord's Supper. As a safeguard, the church borrowed an Old Testament precedent that gave it authority to withhold "this token of God's covenant on that seed whose immediate parents can in no wise be hoped or judged such."<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, Fiske and his flock had responsibility for ensuring the proper administration of the sacrament and could deny it to unworthy persons, and it was incumbent that they do so. For, more than any other issue, extending baptismal privileges threatened to loose the tension between maintaining purity and perpetuating the institution.

Chelmsford's Halfway Statement, however, should not be viewed as compromising principle. Rather, it signified renewed commitment to the generation of potential saints rising within the fold. After adopting it, parents presented seventy-five children to the church in an act of formal dedication. Fiske recorded that the children's names were placed beside the names of their fathers, an arrangement symbolic of the central place of men as the spiritual heads of their households, charged with the responsibility of instructing and disciplining their families in accordance with the scriptures. Yet, as a ritual carried out in the company of all the saints, this dedication was an emblematic gesture that more importantly affirmed the children's place under the church's care and protection. Fathers retained their role as the immediate and personal

---

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 118, citing Exod. 20:6.

guide of their children: the church now stepped in to support and encourage faithful fathers and to fulfill the duties of delinquent ones.

Given the Puritans' dim view of human nature, it is certain that the Chelmsford folk harbored no illusions as to the difficulty of transmitting the faith to their children. Central to their task was discipline. Although children were born totally depraved, with the help of God's grace they could at least partially overcome their evil tendencies, learn to restrain their unruly impulses, and practice good habits. It was the duty of both family and church to encourage these traits.

During the 1640s and 1650s, few New England churches had clear rules defining their disciplinary responsibilities to children over the age of fifteen, and Chelmsford was no exception. Even young people who had been baptized but never received into full communion were not formally under the church's watch after turning sixteen years of age.<sup>84</sup> The unique pressures, demands, and distractions of growing up made teenagers the most difficult group to evangelize, and their responsibility of filling their parents roles in church and society also made them the most critical.<sup>85</sup> The Chelmsford church recognized the importance of protecting the rising generation when, in 1661, fearing "the danger that our youth should be corrupted by him," it rejected a William Newman's request to settle in the town.<sup>86</sup> A more positive, aggressive step was the adoption of the Halfway Statement, which declared the church responsible for disciplining all the children in the congregation,

---

<sup>84</sup>Foster, *Long Argument*, 187.

<sup>85</sup>Some eighty years later, Jonathan Edwards could hardly restrain his excitement when Northampton's young people converted in mass and led the town in religious revivals. See Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God . . ." in *The Great Awakening, Works*, IV, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, Conn., 1972).

<sup>86</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 157.

even those of halfway parents. By making explicit its obligation to discipline its rebellious sons and daughters, Chelmsford sought to preserve a pure church into the second and third generations.

Chelmsford's first opportunity to put into practice its newly defined authority came in 1658, when the church charged Nathaniel Shibly with lying. Although eighteen years old in 1658, Shibly had been baptized at age ten when his mother was received into the church. Brought before the congregation, he confessed his sin with seemingly great conviction, "justifying God and the church and condemning himself as worthy of the censure and or hell itself." Nonetheless, since he could not explain "how he came to be convinced lying was a sin," several members found his confession insufficient (merely formal). The church decided to "respite him one month longer" during which time he might evince a truly penitent heart. At the next meeting, Shibly attempted to demonstrate the strength of his conviction by including scripture references in his admission of sin, but to no avail. One month later, he again appeared before the congregation. On this occasion, finding him not only without remorse for his previous sin but also guilty of two more lies, the church excommunicated him.<sup>87</sup>

As this case demonstrates, the Chelmsford church was willing to follow through on the principles laid down in the Halfway Statement. Yet discipline represented only part of Chelmsford's new commitment to its children. Still more important was Christian education. In another clause of the Halfway Statement, the church held itself bound to spur the children on "to get the knowledge of the principles of religion."<sup>88</sup> Ignorance was

---

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 128-30.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 110.

the unmistakable sign of spiritual darkness and stagnation, whereas knowledge was one of the means to eternal salvation. Growth in understanding Christian truths, the gospel message above all, was crucial if the saints were to advance in faith and charity. Since children's minds were as ignorant as their hearts were evil, they were considered to be particularly vulnerable to the lures of sin. Puritans thus placed great emphasis on the biblical injunction to "traîne up a child in the way he should goe."<sup>89</sup> Increasingly in the 1650s and thereafter, the Chelmsford church did its part by instructing the children in the path of the godly and nurturing them in the faith.

New England congregations generally gave increased attention to their children beginning in the mid-seventeenth century. Until this time, catechizing children had largely been the responsibility of families, with the church playing a limited role. However, by 1655, when the General Court of Massachusetts issued a statement lamenting the decline in family catechizing, ministers throughout the colony were taking steps to increase their part in Christian nurture. Writing catechisms was one method the ministers used. Between 1641 and 1663, New England clergymen wrote at least fourteen catechisms, not the least of which was John Fiske's *Watering of the Olive Plant in Christ's Garden*, published in 1657. At the persistent request of the Chelmsford laity, Fiske prepared this catechism in a simple style for young children, with a section on prayer and obedience for older ones. Another method of evangelizing the young was formal instruction. In the late

---

<sup>89</sup>Prov. 22:6 AV

1650s, Fiske began meeting weekly with the children of the church to teach them the Reformed faith.<sup>90</sup>

In the Halfway Statement, Chelmsford clearly expressed its desire to encourage children “to lay hold on and so own their parents’ covenant personally.” In an entry recorded late in 1658, Fiske revealed what exactly this ritual entailed for both the child and the church. The child was Fiske’s oldest son, Moses, who was called to stand before the church and take this important step on the day of his departure for Harvard. The church began by enquiring whether any members had anything “against him for matter of offense, as touching his life and conversation.” When no objections were made, the covenant was read, and Moses affirmed each of its four parts: (1) “To own no other God, but only the true and living God, even the maker, preserver, and governor of all things, to be your covenant God and do give up yourself unto Him”; (2) “To own the Lord Christ in all His offices as to be your mediatorly prophet to teach you the will of His father, your priest to reconcile you to His father, and your mediatorly king to rule and govern you”; (3) “To walk according to the holy order and rule of the gospel according to your best light without giving just offense unto any”; (4) “And you do here by your own personal act give this yourself to the watch and care of this church. And all this by the help of God’s spirit and grace.”<sup>91</sup>

If one phrase captures the essential spirit and purpose of the covenant ceremony, it is the next to last one: owning the covenant was a personal act prompted by a personal

---

<sup>90</sup>Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 168-70; Wilkes Allen, *The History of Chelmsford* (Haverhill, Mass., 1820), 122-23.

<sup>91</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 110, 126-27.

decision. Until this point, Moses had been considered only an heir to God's promise of salvation by virtue of his parents' membership in the church. With this step he demonstrated his own free acceptance of the teachings and practices of the church. At the same time, owning the covenant had an important communal dimension. Moses did more than stand alone before the congregation and declare his commitment to sound doctrine and godly conduct. He expressed his desire to be included as a member of the covenant and thereby committed himself to the church's watch, instruction, and discipline. He became part of the visible community of saints (though still not a full communicant). This ritual, then, reflects both the individualistic and the communal dimensions of Puritan spirituality practiced within the institutional church. The promise of salvation could be claimed only by individuals who made personal and public decisions, but they were individuals walking within the company of a spiritual elite whose support and guidance aided them along the way.

The ceremony of owning the covenant had more symbolic than practical significance. Moses was still unable to vote in church affairs and to partake in the communion supper, both of which were reserved for full members who had made a profession of experiential faith. It is true that he received the right to baptize his future children, but for a sixteen-year-old boy this privilege conferred nothing of immediate value. The ritual, however, carried great meaning for the church. After Moses professed his devotion to the covenant, the church promised "to perform unto [him] her duty of church inspection and care and also to be ready" to admit him "afterwards to further

privileges in the church.”<sup>92</sup> In this public display of responsibility, in which the members made explicit their role in caring for Moses, the church reaffirmed its link to the next generation and continuity into the future as well as its authority as guardian of the faithful.

That Chelmsford took this responsibility seriously is evident from a letter of recommendation sent on Moses Fiske’s behalf to the church at Cambridge. In this letter, which Fiske copied in the notebook, Chelmsford explained that Moses was in personal covenant with the church and requested that he be given special attention while a student at Harvard. “Out of conscience of discharging the uttermost of our trust over him, he being now more remote from under our eye and observation,” Fiske wrote, “we beg and intreat of you . . . to extend your inspection and watch over him as may concern both the preventing of scandal by him and the furtherance of his spiritual good.”<sup>93</sup> While recognizing the paternal concern reflected in these lines, one can still identify the church’s desire to fulfill its spiritual duties to its children, including those beyond its immediate reach.

The truly innovative feature of Chelmsford’s Halfway Statement allowed the children of baptized but unregenerate adults to receive the sacrament of baptism. In practice this innovation was secondary to the clauses concerning the church’s responsibility to provide discipline and Christian nurture for the children. Fiske did not record a single instance in which the church baptized a child of a parent not in full communion, but on several occasions the church employed its extended authority in matters of discipline and instruction. Because it recognized and validated nominal

---

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 127; Foster, *Long Argument*, 197-98.

<sup>93</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 127-28.



Christians, the halfway measure seems to have compromised the church's earlier standards of purity, but this is to misunderstand its central purpose. First and foremost, it served as a tool to direct, chasten, and prod the church's young people along the path of righteousness. Requirements for full membership were not lowered by the measure, but the jurisdiction of the church was widened in order that the preservation of the institution might be sustained.

## CHAPTER 3

### MAINTAINING PEACE AMONG THE SAINTS

*Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, goe and tell him his fault betweene thee and him alone: if he shall heare thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not heare thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. And if hee shall neglect to heare them, tell it unto the Church: But if he neglect to heare the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man, and a Publicane. -- Matt. 18:15-17*

The Chelmsford church experienced a rising level of internal disagreement and division during the last years of Fiske's ministry, 1660-1675. Ever since the move from Wenham, the harmony that had characterized the church had been waning. Some members dissented on points of doctrine and church practice; others feuded over church-related and personal matters; one even attempted to remove Fiske from his ministerial office. The church spent much time and effort endeavoring to resolve the disputes involving these divisive members. Strife, contention, and discord threatened the preservation of the church. Severe conflicts often caused permanent ruptures in New England's churches; they also imperiled the drive for purity, for a church at odds with itself was hardly better than one consisting of nominal Christians or hypocrites. Securing order and promoting peace, then, became Chelmsford's principal tasks in maintaining a pure gathering of saints.

The first serious disruption came in 1660, when the church learned that the General Court had withheld a military office from Thomas Adams due to his alleged

nonconformity in several matters. As the shepherd responsible for his flock, Fiske attempted to counsel Adams in an effort to bring him back into the fold. When Adams obstinately refused to listen, the church held a special meeting to discuss the matter. At issue was not simply the orthodoxy of one man. As Fiske recorded, there was some reason to believe that the church might “prove divided about the thing, some for brother Adams and some otherwise,” and thus the brethren decided “twas meet to consider of things amongst ourselves to settle peace in the church.”<sup>94</sup>

Fiske’s record of the meeting that followed reveals a church engaged in earnest deliberation, moving methodically from proposals to objections and on to answers and conclusions. The members first tried to “clear our brother” from the charges made by the General Court, but his “expressions, professions, and practice” betrayed his guilt. They found that he not only had openly stated views contrary to church policy and doctrine and voted accordingly at meetings but had “taken occasions to discourse of these matters with those of weaker abilities than himself.”<sup>95</sup> By unanimous vote, the church declared that Adams had strayed from beliefs and practices endorsed by the Chelmsford congregation and contained in the Cambridge Platform.

The church outlined four points of heresy espoused by the wayward brother. First, Adams asserted that all baptized persons are church members. Second, whereas the platform defined the church covenant as the “Visible-Political-Union” that transforms individual saints into a “particular church” and makes them “*Orderly* knit together,” Adams reaffirmed the propositions he had set forth in 1657, arguing that the covenant of

---

<sup>94</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 139.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

grace and church covenant “be all one.” Third, he contended that a narrative of grace was not required of members dismissed from sister churches, but only of “those that were never under the badge of the covenant or church members.” Finally, Adams repudiated the platform’s position on the transferral of membership based on letters of dismissal and held that “members of one church are members of all churches.”<sup>96</sup>

Having thoroughly considered these offenses, the church decided to present them to Adams with the ultimatum that he either renounce them and embrace the Cambridge Platform or “attend the counsel” of Fiske. In the course of discussion, and apparently by chance, Adams entered the meetinghouse. The church promptly confronted him with the list of his errors, “reasoned with him covering the same,” and informed him of the unanimous vote. Adams stood firm, “declining to resolve [the matter] at present, yet showing his inclination rather to proceed in his former purpose.”<sup>97</sup>

There is, curiously, no record of the conclusion to this episode or, at least, no follow-through on the church’s ultimatum. The only clue Fiske left is contained in the next entry, recorded three weeks later. It mentions in passing that Adams was one of two dissenters in an important vote on admission procedures. From this fact, one can conclude that relatively harmonious relations were restored in the church and that the problem involving Adams was left to be resolved by the passing of time.

The Adams affair involved more than the disciplining of one man, for it had implications for the church’s internal peace and its reputation in the colony. Before the church met to consider the case, Fiske had counseled Adams with an Old Testament story

---

<sup>96</sup>*Creeds and Platforms*, 207; Pope, *Notebook*, 141.

<sup>97</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 142.

about King Amaziah whose refusal to heed the warnings of a prophet marked the beginning of the end of his reign and of the fall of his kingdom. The meaning could not have been more clear: Adams's views, if permitted to spread, would disrupt the order and stability of the church. Further, more than once during the meeting, the brethren discussed how they might "clear and vindicate the church," which suggests that the court's actions against Adams brought opprobrium, not just on Adams, but on all the Chelmsford members.<sup>98</sup> Seemingly an isolated issue, Adams's heterodoxy affected the entire body.

It also raised an issue of particular importance for the church. Since the move to Chelmsford in 1655, the practice of requiring members dismissed from other churches to give a narrative of grace had been held in abeyance, and such members were received, instead, by letters of dismission. This policy was altered three weeks after the Adams affair, when, "by clear vote of the church" (only Adams and another man "suspending" their votes) Chelmsford affirmed its "liberty" to try dismissed members "touching the soundness of the judgments and truth of the work of grace" in their lives. It is unclear whether the Wenham group was behind this return to the former practice. One can say for certain, however, that the decision in 1655 to dispense with the conversion relations was made to appease the new members rather than to uphold principle. Echoing remarks he had made at the time of the move, Fiske was still trying to justify the decision five years later: the Woburn-Concord settlers "were the greater number" and would "have erected a church of themselves" without conversion relations "if the brethren of Wenham had not come hither." Yet, at the same time, he carefully refuted any suggestion that this

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

compromise was intended to be a permanent change, for by such a change, the church “sinfully . . . [would] have deprived herself of a lawful liberty.”<sup>99</sup>

Relations of conversion constituted the only practice included in Adam’s heretical views that the Chelmsford church was not exercising at the time of his censure, a fact that made the church guilty of reprimanding a member for failing to embrace a position it no longer held itself. Undoubtedly feeling that the discontinuation of this practice was the source of its recent troubles, the church sought to revive it by providing “several [sixteen plus two added by Fiske] arguments to prove it necessary, regular, and orderly for the church.”<sup>100</sup> These arguments did more than justify the church’s decision to resurrect the old practice. Speaking directly to the responsibilities and needs of the congregation, they also reflect the members’ attempt to use a relatively minor issue to unite and buttress a church in crisis.

In the first place, reciting themes familiar to the New England Way, the Chelmsford faithful affirmed their autonomy as a local component of the universal church. “Each church,” Fiske wrote, “is left to its liberty to admit and receive such as she herself finds fit . . . . Else the act of one church in this or that were a binding rule for another church.” Endorsing the Cambridge Platform’s statement that “all churches are sisters, and therefore equall,” the church once again rejected hierarchical distinctions and relations between congregations. At the same time, reasserting its spiritual responsibility, it claimed the right to “see with her own eyes and herself judge” all candidates for membership. As Fiske wrote, the local church possessed “the keys of the kingdom and the trust and

---

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 142-43.

custody of the holy things of Christ” and one day must “return a comfortable account to Him, her Lord.”<sup>101</sup>

The church also emphasized its duty to guard and promote the purity of Christ’s institution. Fiske asserted the divine purpose behind testing all candidates: “God may by this means discover some unworthiness in a person which did not appear in him at his first admission into church fellowship.” Two witnesses are better than one, the brethren argued, and may be necessary for the maintenance of godly churches during any period. At this moment, deplorable and dangerous conditions made the precaution seem critical. Although Fiske was never reticent about potential threats to church and society, it appeared that the unraveling of decency, order, and godliness in “these perilous times” was particularly close at hand: “error and corruptions may creep and have crept into the most famous churches”; “corrupt persons marching under the cloak of a godly profession” are everywhere; “corrupt opinions do abound”; and “false brethren” have been known to “creep” into unsuspecting churches and lead the faithful astray.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, Chelmsford used this occasion to promote peace and unity in the fellowship, for conversion relations, it argued, fostered such fruit. Not only did they encourage and increase the faith of the saint under trial, but they nourished church members who heard them. “A pious attendance upon this way in admission of members,” Fiske wrote, “may tend much to edification of others to consider God’s way with a poor soul in supporting, succoring, strengthening, and comforting it all along” the path of

---

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 143; *Creeds and Platforms*, 224; Pope, *Notebook*, 144.

<sup>102</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 143-44. It is possible that Fiske was referring to the recent collapse of Cromwell’s government in England or, perhaps, to the threat of the Baptists and Quakers down the road.

salvation. Most important, this practice furthered solidarity in the community and deepened relationships among the saints. As Fiske wrote, “it much tends often times to make the more room for [the new members] in the hearts of the brethren . . . Occasioning a sweet closure and union of their spirits together.”<sup>103</sup> After the painful episode of Adams, this “sweet closure and union” was an especially critical end to which the sharing of conversion relations would be a means.

These arguments for the revival of the practice cover three pages in the printed version of the notebook, and nearly all the reasons are backed by scripture references. In one place, referring to I Peter 3:15 instructing Christians to be ready to give an account of the hope for salvation, the church declared that the Bible not only “commended” but “commanded” the narrative of grace.<sup>104</sup> The Cambridge Platform, allowing each church to decide the matter for itself, had not proposed so much. Although one might question Chelmsford’s biblical exegesis, its zeal, sincerity, and resoluteness cannot be held in doubt.

Chelmsford put the requirement immediately into practice. Among the several persons called to testify to God’s grace was Deacon William Fletcher, a selectman and a member since joining the church during the Chelmsford move. Although perturbed by the request, Fletcher “satisfied the church in answer to divers questions put to him.”<sup>105</sup> However, he refused to give consent to Chelmsford’s position requiring members dismissed from other churches to make such a confession. As a result, the church kept

---

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.



him on probation, and after a year, during which he failed to conform, the brethren terminated his service as deacon.<sup>106</sup>

This disciplinary action was part of a larger controversy involving all the deacons and originating in the move to Chelmsford. Although it is impossible to glean the complete story from Fiske's account, one can say with certainty that the controversy pitted the Wenhamites against the non-Wenham majority and that it threatened a lasting division in the church. By 1661, grievances that had festered for six years broke into full view. In November, Deacon James Parker, with two other men, wishing to resettle in the nearby town of Groton, requested that "they may have the church's loving leave so to do, and their prayers for them for a blessing of God upon their undertakings." Because New Englanders valued stable and close-knit communities, a request to relocate required a good reason. Fiske recorded that Deacon Edward Kemp, "apprehending not any necessity of the remove, wished they would attend God's call here"--a sentiment shared by the leading men of the church--while Thomas Chamberlain and Thomas Adams, both prominent townsmen, "pressed . . . that they render to the church their grounds" for wishing to leave. When Fiske asked the brethren whether an explanation should be given, "scarce a man in the church but presently said, the grounds, the grounds."<sup>107</sup> The pastor presumably had control of the meeting, but, at the least, the laity provided the driving zeal.

The grounds were not quick in coming. Speaking for all three, Parker said only that it is "not their desire to express [the reasons] in particular" and that the cause of their leaving involved "several things pressing upon their spirits as in reference to church

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 168.

administration and some uncomfortable differences.” No clues were offered by the other two men, except for one terse comment that “it would be no small thing that should move [them] to a remove.” In direct response to these evasive statements, Adams located the source of their discontent in the controversy involving the deacons occasioned by the move to Chelmsford. Insisting that “there is no cause for these brethren upon that account to remove,” he objected to the departure “tooth and nail” and contended that such a move “tended to the breach of the church and [that] we had no call of God to hear them.” In a less certain tone--one that probably reflected the view of most of the communicants--Fiske wondered whether these men were “in an error and mistaken” about ecclesiastical policies or whether “the church needed to consider” the policies itself.<sup>108</sup> It seems that the members’ opinions about church practice were creating doubts in the minister himself.

Discussion continued for two days. At a second meeting, “[a]fter much agitation in the presence and absence of these three brethren,” the members decided that “the cause of the brethren’s remove was doubtful to us at present and we desired further consideration.” At the same time, they seemed willing to let the three men leave should they so choose. “If providence shall in mean time, before they can hear further from us, settle them in the proposed way,” Fiske wrote, “we shall leave the matter to God.” Taking these irresolute statements as they were undoubtedly intended--as permission to depart--all three men soon left, apparently without the church’s blessing in the form of

---

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 168, 169. Clearly, Parker had some disagreement about ecclesiastical matters. At the same time, although he never disclosed the information in the church meeting, there is evidence that the opportunity to increase his land holdings was a factor. Like many wealthy seventeenth-century New Englanders, Parker accumulated much property by investing capital in the establishment of several new towns on the frontier. Profits probably lured him to Chelmsford in 1655 and on to Groton six years later, where he became a proprietor. (See John Frederick Martin, *Profits in the Wilderness: Entrepreneurship in the Founding of New England Towns in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), esp. 11-15.)

letters of dismissal but also without being restrained. It appears that the church, despite the protestations of Adams and a few others, gave the three men the benefit of the doubt and accepted their plea that certain church policies went against their consciences. Answering Parker's request that it "not make the church a prison," Chelmsford avoided the serious rift in the community that likely would have ensued had a full explanation been demanded and a resolution been forced.<sup>109</sup>

Occurring simultaneously with the deacon controversy was another dispute, this one involving principally two men, Thomas Barrett and John Nutting, and also affecting the whole church. The problem arose at a meeting in 1662 when Barrett was presented before the congregation for membership and "Nutting excepted against him" to the point of threatening to leave the church if Barrett were admitted. Nutting complained that, because Barrett had witnessed the constable Robert Proctor's unlawful seizure of his land weeks earlier, Barrett was in part responsible and thus unfit for church membership. Lasting several weeks, this contentious debate included accusations against both men, and, ironically, the accuser became the accused: in the course of a discussion, Barrett implied that Nutting had declared that "the selectmen stole his grass," an assertion that amounted to the far more serious charge of libel and one that Barrett reported Proctor had witnessed. Despite Fiske's desire "to cast [the matter] out of the church" since further discussion threatened division, "the selectmen pressed a hearing" so that the matter was deferred to a later date when Proctor might testify.<sup>110</sup> Not unlike the case involving the

---

<sup>109</sup> Pope, *Notebook*, 170, 169.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 159, 161.

deacon removal, the laymen exerted their right to direct--even dictate--church proceedings.

When the church met again four weeks later, the selectmen, led by Thomas Adams and strengthened by the constable's testimony, took control of the meeting, contending that "John Nutting had abused them [by] saying they stole his grass." The debate that ensued occasioned "much contest in the church" and hinged on what "Nutting spake in expression and in effect." The critical issue was the state of the accused's conscience. Although admitting that he had charged the selectmen with taking "his grass without his leave," Nutting denied using the language as charged by the selectmen. In the course of the discussion, two developments served to favor his case. First, while affirming the testimony against Nutting, Proctor refused to answer further questions, including Fiske's query regarding the time and location of Nutting's supposed libel. Second, for a reason Fiske neglected to record, Barrett rose against the wishes of the church and left the meetinghouse, an act that caused further unrest among the remaining members. With these two incidents in mind, the brethren declared Proctor and Barrett's testimonies invalid and accepted Nutting's side of the story, his alleged expressions against the selectmen being "very doubtful to many" in the church. In addition, they agreed to censure both Proctor and Barrett for disorderly behavior and "contempt of the church."<sup>111</sup> With the majority of the members voting in favor of Nutting, Adams withdrew the selectmen's charges.

---

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 162-64.

That this controversy was no small matter is evident from the congregation's attempt to restore peace and unity at its conclusion. As Fiske wrote in the notebook, "Upon the closure of this business was appointed a day of humiliation before the scriptures." With no further details provided, one can only speculate that such a day involved much prayer, personal and corporate confession, and Bible reading. Whatever the case, there was "a seeming reconciliation on all hands in the church," and as Fiske recorded, perhaps with a sense of relief, although "some have given out as if the church was divided . . . so far as we may judge according to charity tis otherwise through mercy."<sup>112</sup> This ritual served to restore harmony among the members. It also was a means of purifying the congregation for its contention and divisiveness. As Barrett and Nutting were formally disciplined, the church itself repented and renewed its commitment to uphold the covenantal pledge.<sup>113</sup>

Just prior to this controversy, Chelmsford had adopted several propositions designed to promote "the keeping up of order" during church meetings. The church forbade members to make long speeches or introduce issues previously addressed in such a way as to obstruct discussion of important matters. Elevating the role and authority of elected officers, the church resolved that no one should raise an issue without first having consulted an officer in private. Further, the church declared it unlawful for any members to express their concerns in a disorderly way, since "tumultuous discourse" tends to disrupt and cause strife.<sup>114</sup> These new rules were introduced to regulate, but not to limit,

---

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>113</sup>On the uses of ritual in Puritan New England, see Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, esp. 166-212; E. Brooks Holifield, "Peace, Conflict, and Ritual in Puritan Congregations," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXIII (1993), 551-570.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 158.

the participation of the laity. Ultimate authority continued to reside with the members, and they retained the liberty to circumvent officers who refused to introduce issues that had been discussed privately. The chief point was to maintain a pure church--order being next to godliness in the Puritan economy of values.<sup>115</sup>

As the dispute between Nutting and Barrett revealed to the church, even these rules, however, were not effective in maintaining peace during meetings. One week after Chelmsford's "day of humiliation," the church therefore introduced several more rules. Taken directly from Scripture and thus "instituted by Christ in His churches," these rules outlined a three-step procedure for handling personal offenses among the elect.<sup>116</sup> First, when offended by the actions or words of another, a saint should confront the person privately, explain the grievance, and attempt to resolve the problem. If the matter was not settled, he should confront the offender in the presence of two or three witnesses. If the offender still remained unrepentant, the matter should be made public by bringing it before the entire church. Adopting this procedure, the members hoped to encourage peaceful and private settlements of personal quarrels. They also sought to promote stability and purity in the church.

These new rules did not end all disturbances, but they did provide the church with greater control over proceedings as well as the ability to censure rash accusations. One such example occurred in 1665 when Adams objected to another man's participation at communion because of "some personal and particular grievance." On this occasion, the

---

<sup>115</sup> On the place of order in Puritan society, see Stephen Foster, *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1971).

<sup>116</sup> Pope, *Notebook*, 164.

church found Adams guilty of violating two rules: neglecting to confront the man in private before addressing the whole church and failing to request the consent of an officer before introducing the matter. For these reasons--for his "disorderly acting," as Fiske wrote more simply--Chelmsford refused to let Adams participate in the Lord's Supper that very day. Following the service, the brethren met to discuss Adams's offense, and "[a]fter much agitation," they "prevailed with him to acknowledge his transgression of the rule and to condemn himself for it."<sup>117</sup> These rules, then, not only protected the sanctity of the sacrament but enabled the church to "purify" its members.

While struggling to maintain peace and harmony during the later years of Fiske's ministry, the Chelmsford church continued to focus its evangelical efforts on the children within the fold. Discipline and godly instruction remained paramount in this endeavor. A case in point is the chastening of Joshua Fletcher. A son of a member of the church, Fletcher was one of the seventy-five children presented to the congregation in 1657. When he was nearing twenty years of age in 1666, it was rumored that he had been mixing "at Rhode Island among the Quakers." In addition, Chelmsford suspected that he was given to idleness and prodigal spending and that his example was corrupting at least one other son of the church. Significantly, Fiske recorded that Adams attributed Fletcher's ways to his upbringing, "laying the cause and root of all this [evil] upon the parents and the family."<sup>118</sup> The role of parenting carried grave responsibilities and great expectations,

---

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 196-97.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 205.

since the children's covenanted status singled them out for, and all but promised them, salvation.<sup>119</sup>

After investigating, the church called Fletcher before the congregation to answer several charges, including failure to attend church services, official meetings, and catechism sessions. Fletcher proved evasive. While on one accusation "he could not justify" his behavior but "did condemn himself," on another "he somewhat shifted and excused" himself to the dismay of the church. After much debate, the church admonished him for his "pride, prejudice, and stubbornness," but this discipline proved ineffective. Within a few months, Fletcher's profligacy grew to such proportions, including a late-night visit to the home of a young woman not yet his wife (as well as horse racing), that the congregation formally excommunicated him.<sup>120</sup> It had shown considerable forbearance and, in this last act, stern resolution. A pure communion of saints could have it no other way.

Christian nurture remained the other component of Chelmsford's ministry to the children. In 1663, just six years after the catechism classes began, the church decided to test the spiritual progress of its children in the expectation of their seeking admission into fellowship as full members. Joined by at least one other communicant, Fiske was called by the church to investigate the spiritual condition of "children of the church grown up to years of discretion." He tested both their knowledge of the Reformed faith and their experience of saving grace. To his questions, one young man responded with "a good

---

<sup>119</sup>As Edmund S. Morgan has shown, "one of the cliches of Puritan preaching" on grace and conversion was that "'God casts the line of election in the loins of godly parents'." (*Puritan Family*, 182.)

<sup>120</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 206, 211-12.



relation of a work of grace” but without a sign of “the work of closure with Christ”; two brothers “answered beyond expectation as to understanding, though short of what is required.” While Fiske found one person “very ignorant,” he found another “so competent as upon his desire thought him fit to propound him” to the church.<sup>121</sup> These mixed results reveal that the church was maintaining its high membership standards, the children not excepted. For the members, they gave reason for hope but also concern since they demonstrated that the church was falling short in its efforts to transmit the faith to the next generation. Fiske had to record that only one person, his twenty-three-year-old daughter, was fully ready for membership.

Given these results, in 1666, the brethren extended instruction in the faith beyond age fifteen. By majority vote, the church required all unmarried men sixteen years of age or older “be catechized by the pastor in his house.”<sup>122</sup> It also discussed making house visits to young married couples still outside the fellowship. Fiske left no record to suggest that anyone responded to these efforts, probably because they remained content with the privileges their halfway status conferred or so scrupulous in searching their souls that they feared to apply for full membership.<sup>123</sup> Yet the young people were not unaffected by the church’s tactics. At least one man, twenty-six-year-old Samuel Chamberlain, was called to appear before the church, where he “promised for the future to attend” the required catechism class.<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 186-187.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>123</sup>On the apparent waning of piety in late 17th-century New England, see Edmund S. Morgan, “New England Puritanism: Another Approach,” *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XVIII (1961), 241-42; Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 206-238.

<sup>124</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 233.

These attempts to convert the adult children and make them full members reveal a church struggling to make the Halfway Covenant superfluous. In 1669, twelve communicants still questioned the propriety of baptizing the children of members not in full communion, and their misgivings and resistance reflected the ambivalence prevalent throughout the colony. Although most New England churches accepted the principle of the Halfway Covenant in 1662, many refused to adopt it as a practice until the late 1670s and after. The Chelmsford faithful attempted to avoid this matter altogether by making repeated efforts to bring their children fully into the church. If their efforts succeeded, the question of baptizing the children of halfway members would be moot, and the purity of the church would not be threatened.<sup>125</sup>

Chelmsford's concern for the children and young people also came into play in a matter that split the congregation for nearly six months in 1669. The controversy erupted at a private meeting of the saints in February, called to discuss securing a "teaching officer" to assist Fiske. Put to a vote, the proposal was affirmed by ten members. Despite an exhortation for "unity, agreement, and concurrence," the church was so divided that one member "objected that he did not like the distinction of parts" within the church "whereas he pretended we were all one."<sup>126</sup> Putting the concern with division aside momentarily, the brethren took up the matter at hand but found that even those most interested in hiring another minister could not devise a way for providing for his salary and living accommodations. The meeting ended without resolution.

---

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 222; Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 231-234.

<sup>126</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 212.

At the next meeting, a few days later, discussion centered on the unity of the church. One faction attempted to repair the division by drawing up a statement promising “to lay down and let fall all differences and offenses” causing disharmony and “to avoid all the very appearances of any such evil for the future.” For reasons Fiske did not make clear, the opposing group refused to endorse this pledge and even brushed aside one member’s accusation that the church was acting “like the Ephesians,” whose divisiveness St. Paul had chastised in his letter by that name. For Puritans, unity--at least within a local congregation--was foundational to church order and absolutely necessary for sharing the communion meal. As the Lord’s Supper was to be held the following Sabbath in Chelmsford, the church felt obliged to settle the dispute. Many attempts were made to reach a resolution, but differences among the laity remained too great to overcome. The communicants then discussed whether they should postpone the communion service. Finally, after much consideration, Thomas Adams, whom Fiske called “a great speaker,” brought closure to the matter by stating that “we find nothing that should . . . retard or hinder the church regularly from communicating together at the Lord’s table.”<sup>127</sup> The differences were apparently not great enough to warrant omitting the sacrament, or, perhaps, the church simply let the matter slide.

Discussion of procuring a teacher resumed in earnest at a meeting several weeks later. Those opposed argued that “the place was not able to maintain two.” Those in favor retorted that the Lord would provide for his people so long as they remained faithful to him: “where God appoints the end He appoints the means.” One member went so far

---

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 214-216.

as to declare that a second minister would actually increase the wealth of the town's inhabitants: "Boston was once as poor as Chelmsford yet they had two ministers and twas the advance of their estates."<sup>128</sup> Most of the saints, including the pastor, were not so sanguine. In words expressed in strikingly oppositional terms, Fiske left no doubt about his position: "we were called of God (as they would pretend) to get another minister and then to trust God how we should maintain him. But we conceived contrariwise."<sup>129</sup> No stranger to the practical realities of the world, Fiske opposed the addition of a second minister because he felt the church could not manage the added financial burden.

Those favoring the hire persisted in making appeals to the congregation. By this time, since Fiske and many leading members were advanced in years, there was considerable concern about the future well-being of the church. "The rising generation is to be looked to," implored Thomas Chamberlain, "and we rather to expend our estates th[a]n to let souls run on to hell." In a rather blunt statement, Chamberlain's brother Edmund contended that "when some ministers did not convert[,] God sent others, so we having had little converting work under the present minister should look out for another."<sup>130</sup> Chelmsford's evangelical activity indeed had been slight. Except for the distribution of catechisms, little effort had been made to bring the unregenerate into the selective community of saints, and within the church itself few children were joining the ranks as full members. Despite these arguments, the majority of members remained unconvinced that the church needed another teacher, and in the end, failing to reach

---

<sup>128</sup> Pope, *Notebook*, 220-21. As Martin writes, "Puritans did not have to shed their religion before they could don their acquisitiveness. They could wear the two hats simultaneously, and they did." (*Profits in the Wilderness*, 111-28.)

<sup>129</sup> Pope, *Notebook*, 220.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

consensus, the brethren requested the selectmen to look further into the matter. As cause of contention thus removed, harmony was restored; nowhere in the remaining pages of the notebook did Fiske mention the issue. In any case, this attempt to hire a teacher reveals Chelmsford's concern with the perpetuation of the church and the counterproductive disruption that concern could cause.

The Chelmsford church under Fiske's leadership suffered one final test to its peace and unity. This one involved a direct attack against Fiske by Richard Hildrich. Upon settling in Chelmsford in 1656, Hildrich soon became dissatisfied with the church and expressed privately to another member his dislike for Fiske's preaching. He finally resolved to take matters into his own hands in the early 1670s. Abetted by an accomplice, Hildrich obtained signatures for a petition calling for Fiske's removal, and at a town meeting he denounced Fiske for dismissing Joshua Fletcher from the church.<sup>131</sup> In a debate that lasted into the night, the church decided that "the carrying about the paper [petition] for another minister was sinful" but, strangely, imposed no sanctions on Hildrich. Instead, having "lovingly debated" the issue, the members voted to disregard "all former offenses" and to "look home each into our own hearts." Implicating the whole church, they agreed "upon a day of humbling ourselves before God and imploring His favor and a pardon of all our evils." Fiske recorded few details of this affair, but it is clear that the church found means of reconciliation.<sup>132</sup>

Throughout the final period of Fiske's ministry, as the founding members approached the end of their lives, the Chelmsford church strove to perpetuate itself by

---

<sup>131</sup>Wilson Waters, *History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts* (Lowell, Mass., 1917), 412.

<sup>132</sup>Pope, *Notebook*, 227-28.

turning its attention inward to the grown children, devising new strategies of nurturing, disciplining, and prompting them to enter fully into the communion. No attempts were made, however, to lower the standards for their admittance. Instead, the church reinstated the practice established at Wenham that required all candidates, including members from other churches, to give a conversion relation. The chief threat to purity during these years was rising dissent and discord. Although it seems incongruous that the proven saints should be so prone to argument, their contentiousness probably reflects the nature of the congregational way as much as the character of the members. The ardent living expected of the godly was bound to foster conflict. Indeed, the many quarrels and resolutions testify, if not to the members' piety, then to their continued interest in and dedication to the church. At the same time, the strife had to be countered. One means was the adoption of specific rules designed to promote order. Another was the corporate confession. On several occasions, such as Hildrich's accusation against Fiske, the sin of one member was imputed to the whole church, followed by a public reconciliation of all the faithful. This ritual provided the opportunity for the members to purge themselves of their sins and to restore their covenantal relationship to God. It also was an occasion in which the children could participate.<sup>133</sup> Their inability to give a conversion relation left them--neither redeemed nor wholly unregenerate--on the borders of the church. No substitute for the relation of grace, this ritual did enable the children to take part as the community enacted the redemptive drama of sin, confession, forgiveness, and salvation. Thus it served to instruct them in the faith. In short, by holding fast to the communal

---

<sup>133</sup>Foster, *Long Argument*, 226-27.

bond and including the children within it, the Chelmsford church sought to perpetuate itself in purity and peace, the goal and basis of the selective society.

### PART THREE: CONCLUSION

The Wenham/Chelmsford church in many ways represents the fulfillment of the congregational polity conceived in the late sixteenth century and developed in the seventeenth. Membership excluded all but tested and proven saints, the laity wielded much authority, and the local congregation exercised a high degree of autonomy. It also seems valid to assert--without overstating the case--that the concerns, problems, and operation of Fiske's congregation were typical of first- and second-generation New England churches. The history of the Wenham/Chelmsford church is thus more than the story of one group of people struggling to uphold particular ideals. It reveals, in microcosm, the nature and character of seventeenth-century New England churches generally as well as the stresses inherent in the New England Way.

Like the broader Puritan movement, the Wenham/Chelmsford church was impelled to a significant degree by the laity. Laymen made determined efforts to exercise authority, asserting their right to accept and dismiss members against the threat of the Newbury elders and rejecting sections of the Cambridge Platform that impinged upon local autonomy. They expressed their dedication to the church by attending to disciplinary matters with patience and resolve and by giving their time and energy to many meetings. Not always in agreement, the members discussed issues at great length, sometimes pressing a resolution in spite of Fiske's resistance, and, since a vote decided matters, they held considerable leverage in directing the course of the church. They also acted



independently. Thomas Adams, the most vocal member, at times single-handedly caused great unrest and at other times served as a peacemaker. Throughout his ministry, Fiske provided the leadership for his flock, but there were many moments when the laity challenged him on points of doctrine and church practice, and on occasion the sheep even led the shepherd.

Yet, most often, minister and members worked together. Because they had only general principles to follow, much of their task involved sorting out the details of the congregational way. Membership had to be restricted, but it was unclear whether women and members dismissed from other churches should be required to testify before the church. Discipline had to be maintained, but the saints had to decide for themselves how long to forbear before excommunicating intransigent offenders. The word of God, more than any other source, was their acknowledged guide, and they let nothing interfere with their responsibility of providing correct interpretations. Indeed, scriptural authority was so highly regarded that one of the church's main criticisms of the Cambridge Platform was that it challenged the supremacy of the Bible.

While developing the congregational polity, the church had adapted to unforeseen events and changing circumstances. One of the most striking examples occurred during the move to Chelmsford. For ten years, Wenham had held fast to the rule requiring members dismissed from other churches to give a conversion relation before being admitted into fellowship. When the church relocated in 1655, it laid aside this policy in order to accommodate the great number of settlers from other towns wishing to join the congregation. The rule was not reinstated until its suspension became a source of heresy and discord. As this case demonstrates, the New England Way was a flexible system that

allowed difficulties to be met with pragmatic and temporary solutions--as least as long as the compromises did not seriously jeopardize the purity of the institution.

Indeed, the history of the church bears testimony that the Way was not flexible enough. From the first gathering of the faithful in Wenham to the end of Fiske's ministry in Chelmsford, the congregation remained firmly committed to the ideal of purity by holding applicants to a rigorous admissions procedure and maintaining severe disciplinary measures. The mid-1650s, however, brought a shift of concern, as the saints began what became an ongoing campaign to convert their children and bring them into full communion. The Halfway Statement, which extended the church's reach beyond the communicants, was introduced as a means of ministering to the sons and daughters of the elect who had been brought up in the faith but were still outside the fold. Soon after adopting it, the church decided to require all those under sixteen years to attend catechism class and, six years later, conducted a formal enquiry into the spiritual progress of its youth. With few taking steps toward full membership, the church then began instructing grown men and considered doing the same with married couples, and it even discussed hiring another teacher for the express purpose of enhancing its evangelical ministry. Too many children were content with their halfway status, and far too many were rejecting the faith altogether.

In their zeal to found and maintain a pure church, Fiske and his flock succeeded too well: they created their own problem. The very institution they so carefully tended had to be undone if they were to accommodate their children. Yet they could not undo it without compromising the underlying principle of the church as well as undermining their own self-understanding. The only alternative was to apply pressure on the next generation

in the hope that the children, if given enough time and attention, might follow in their footsteps, and they did that with the same determination and vigor used to preserve the purity of the church.

The principal cause of this turn of events was the adoption of the conversion relation as a requirement of admission. The factors that went into making this decision included Calvinist doctrine, Puritans' unsettled and contentious experience in England, congregational theory, the cultivation of lay devotional practices, Laudian persecution, and the newly found freedom of New England, all of which played a role in the first-generation saints' own conversions. The relation requirement itself served a purpose beyond simply maintaining godly churches, for it enabled the whole gathering of the elect to participate in the salvific drama of an individual, whose own commitments, in turn, were nourished and reinforced. Yet, by making their understanding of conversion--shaped, in large part, by particular doctrines and made possible by particular circumstances--normative for Christian living and a requirement for membership in Christian churches, New Englanders limited the church to a particular kind of saint--a saint like themselves.

Their goal was nothing less than the realization of the invisible gathering of the elect. From the start, they knew this was impossible, since an institutional church could neither encase God's authority nor limit His ways with human souls. Moreover, a central part of their program--one of the primary reasons for abandoning England--was to escape the formalized religion and legalistic faith that they associated with the establishment. Rather than rely on externals and good works, they sought salvation in divine grace alone, and they strove to establish churches that excluded those who trusted and rested in their

own works instead of God's saving power. Assurance of salvation--confirmation of their saintly identity--came from inner experience, but, with the right device, church membership promised to enhance this confidence. The conversion relation was that device. Yet, ultimately, the means proved subversive to the end: the very act of institutionalizing the conversion relation not only threatened the visible church in New England but created a kind of grace that one had formally to prove. The proof involved demonstrating moral conduct and godly speech; more importantly, a candidate had to give evidence of an internal change that the faithful discerned by searching the heart. Similarly, an offender's confession of wrongdoing was not deemed authentic until the church perceived an afflicted conscience. This extreme concern with unmasking outward appearances constituted the core of Puritan religion. However, rather than providing an escape from a formalized faith, it led the saints to believe that the institutional church had the power to affirm or deny one's salvation. The rigorous admissions procedure and exacting disciplinary measures were nothing less than attempts to determine the status of souls. Ernst Troeltsch suggested that this perfectionism is the mark of a sect. Many New England churches--including Wenham/Chelmsford--sought to avoid such charges, but their preoccupation with purity, reinforced by the principles and practices of the New England Way, drove them steadily in this direction.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, James Truslow. *The Founding of New England*. Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921.
- Allen, David Grayson. *In English Ways: The Movement of Societies and the Transfer of English Local Law and Custom to Massachusetts Bay in the Seventeenth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981.
- Allen, Myron O. *The History of Wenham: Civil and Ecclesiastical, From Its Settlement in 1639, to 1860*. Boston: Bazin and Chandler, 1860.
- Allen, Wilkes. *The History of Chelmsford*. Haverhill, Massachusetts: P.N. Green, 1820.
- Anderson, Virginia DeJohn. *New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.
- Bozeman, Theodore Dwight. *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Breen, T.H., and Stephen Foster. "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts." *Journal of American History*, LX (1973), 5-22.
- Bremer, Francis J. *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976.
- Brown, David C. "The Keys of the Kingdom: Excommunication in Colonial Massachusetts." *New England Quarterly*, LXVII (1994), 531-563.
- Butler, Jon. *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Cohen, Charles Lloyd. *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

- Cole, Adeline P., comp. *Notes on Wenham History, 1643-1943*. Salem, Massachusetts, 1943.
- Collinson, Patrick. *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Cooke, Jacob Ernest, ed. *Encyclopedia of the North American Colonies*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993. "Puritanism," by Charles L. Cohen.
- Ditmore, Michael G. "Preparation and Confession: Reconsidering Edmund S. Morgan's *Visible Saints*." *New England Quarterly*, LXVII (1994), 298-319.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *The Great Awakening, Works*, Vol. IV, edited by C.C. Goen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.
- Felt, Joseph B. *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*, Vol. I. Boston: Congregational Library Association and the Congregational Board of Publication, 1855.
- Foster, Stephen. "English Puritanism and the Progress of New England Institutions, 1630-1660." In *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History*, edited by David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate, 3-37. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Godly in Transit: English Popular Protestantism and the Creation of a Puritan Establishment in America." In *Seventeenth-Century New England: A Conference Held by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, June 18 and 19, 1982*, edited by David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen, 185-238. Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.
- Gildrie, Richard P. *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679-1749*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Salem, Massachusetts 1626-1683: A Covenant Community*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975.
- Hall, David D. *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLIV (1987), 193-229.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Religion and Society: Problems and Reconsiderations." In *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, edited by Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, 317-44. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Toward a History of Popular Religion in Early New England." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 49-55.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England." In *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, edited by John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, 166-80. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.
- Haller, William. *The Rise of Puritanism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1938.
- Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- Holifield, E. Brooks. *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Peace, Conflict, and Ritual in Puritan Congregations." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXIII (1993), 551-70.
- Johnson, Edward. *Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Savior in New England, 1628-1651*. London, 1654. Edited by J. Franklin Jameson. Reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910.
- Lockridge, Kenneth A. *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*. Enl. ed. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985.
- Martin, John Frederick. *Profits in the Wilderness: Entrepreneurship and the Founding of New England Towns in the Seventeenth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- Mather, Cotton. *Magnalia Christi Americana*. 1702. Reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967.

- McCarl, Mary Rhinelander, "Thomas Shepard's Relations of Religious Experience, 1648-1649." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. Ser., XLVIII (1991), 432-66.
- McGiffert, Michael. "American Puritan Studies in the 1960's." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. Ser., XXVII (1970), 36-67.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *God's Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard's Cambridge*. Rev. and exp. ed. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Problem of the Covenant in Puritan Thought: Peter Bulkeley's *Gospel-Covenant*." *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, CXXX (1976), 107-29.
- McGrath, Alistair E. *Reformation Thought: an Introduction*. New York: Blackwell, 1988.
- Middlekauff, Robert. *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nature's Nation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953; reprint, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1939; reprint, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933; reprint, with a new preface by the author, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1965.
- Morgan, Edmund S. "New England Puritanism: Another Approach." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XVIII (1961), 236-42.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*. Rev. ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1966.



- \_\_\_\_\_. *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1963.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Builders of the Bay Colony*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Founding of Harvard College*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935.
- Parkhurst, George Adams. *325 Years: The Story of the First Parish Church, Chelmsford, 1655-1980*. North Chelmsford, Massachusetts, 1980.
- Perham, Henry S. *A Sketch of the History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*. Chelmsford, Massachusetts, 1890.
- Petersen, Mark A. "The Plymouth Church and the Evolution of Puritan Religious Culture." *New England Quarterly*, LXVI (1993), 570-93.
- Pettit, Norman. *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.
- Pope, Robert G. *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "New England versus the New England Mind: The Myth of Declension." *Journal of Social History*, III (1969-70), 95-108.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske, 1644-1675*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections, XLVII. Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1974.
- Rutman, Darrett B. "New England as Idea and Society Revisited." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 56-61.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630-1649*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965.
- Selement, George. *Keepers of the Vineyard: The Puritan Ministry and Collective Culture in Colonial New England*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638-1645." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 32-48.

- Selement, George, and Bruce C. Woolley, eds. *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts *Collections*, LVIII, Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1981.
- Silverman, Kenneth. *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.
- Stout, Harry S. *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Tipson, Baird. "Invisible Saints: The 'Judgment of Charity' in the Early New England Churches." *Church History*, XLIV (1975), 460-71.
- Troeltsch, Ernst. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Vol. 1. Translated by Olive Wyon. 1911. Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Walker, Williston, ed. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. 1893. Reprint, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Pilgrim Press, 1960.
- Waters, Wilson, ed. *Chelmsford, Massachusetts: Proceedings of the Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town*. 1905.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*. Lowell, Massachusetts, 1917.

## VITA

### Jonathan David Brand

Born in Columbus, Ohio, 2 December 1970, the writer graduated from Madison County High School, Madison County, Virginia, June, 1989 and from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, May, 1993.

In September, 1994, the writer entered the College of William and Mary as a graduate student in the Department of History and began a one-year editorial apprenticeship at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia.