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JOHN COTTON'S MIDDLE WAY

A THESIS
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
The University of Mississippi

by

GARY A. ROWLAND

August 2011

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ABSTRACT

Historians are divided concerning the ecclesiological thought of seventeenth-century minister John Cotton. Some argue that he supported a church structure based on suppression of lay rights in favor of the clergy, strengthening of synods above the authority of congregations, and increasingly narrow church membership requirements. By contrast, others arrive at virtually opposite conclusions. This thesis evaluates Cotton's correspondence and pamphlets through the lens of moderation to trace the evolution of Cotton's thought on these ecclesiological issues during his ministry in England and Massachusetts. Moderation is discussed in terms of compromise and the abatement of severity in the context of ecclesiastical toleration, the balance between lay and clerical power, and the extent of congregational and synodal authority. These issues influenced debates about Congregationalist and Presbyterian reform of the English Church and religious diversity in Massachusetts. I find that Cotton's thought and practices while in England were more inclusive of religious differences than they were in his colonial ministry because he attempted to work within the doctrinal and ceremonial parameters of the English Church and his doctrine of *adiaphora*. *Adiaphora*, also called indifferent matters, were religious practices or doctrines that led neither to salvation nor damnation. During his English ministry, Cotton taught that most of the ceremonial practices that divided many Puritans and Conformists were *adiaphora* and could be tolerated in his congregation. There was also a subversive element to his teachings on *adiaphora* since, unlike some Puritans, Cotton was not willing to submit to church demands for conformity on most indifferent matters. In New England, Cotton became

part of the religious and political establishment, and his doctrine of indifferent matters narrowed, because he did not have an incentive to subvert this new order or compromise with non-Puritan colonists. Cotton supported stricter church membership rules due to the influence of Separatism and competition between Precisionist and Antinomian strains of Puritanism. Cotton's congregational thought was more moderate towards those who attained membership. Through the fusion of Separatist and Presbyterian influences, Cotton created a church that was inclusive of lay and clerical power and balanced the autonomy of congregations with synodal authority.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Stacey, my daughter Emily, and my mother. I am thankful to them for their love and support.

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I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Sheila Skemp and my committee members, Dr. Joseph Ward and Dr. Jeffrey Watt for their advice and patience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii-iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1-4
I. FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT THAT INFLUENCED COTTON.....	5-13
II. COTTON'S ENGLISH MINISTRY.....	14-48
III. COTTON'S EARLY COLONIAL MINISTRY.....	49-64
IV. THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY.....	65-103
V. CONGREGATIONALISM.....	104-141
CONCLUSION.....	142-144
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	145-152
VITA.....	153

INTRODUCTION

John Cotton was a seventeenth-century Puritan minister whose writings and practices influenced many of the most important ecclesiological and theological disputes of his time. Cotton was born in Derby, England in December 1584.¹ He was the son of Rowland Cotton, a poor lawyer in the town. Little is known about his youth until he began his theological studies at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1597 at the age of thirteen.² He completed his education at Cambridge after fourteen years and began his ministry in 1612 as vicar of St. Botolph's in Boston, England in the Lincoln diocese. In 1633, he arrived in Boston, Massachusetts and became teacher of the Boston Church until his death in 1652.³ Many of Cotton's writings reflected a common theme of a middle ground between divergent religious groups or moderation within his own congregations. The purpose of this thesis is to address how Cotton's views on ecclesiastical toleration or a middle ground between extremes were manifested in an inclusive or exclusive church structure during various stages of his ministry. Cotton's doctrines and practices concerning indifferent matters, church structure, and theology will be highlighted to illustrate the

¹ Puritans often sought to reform the Church of England from what they considered remnants of popery such as church vestments, rituals, and icons. Many also disagreed with the organization of the church under governing bishops. In addition, most Puritans shared a strong commitment to moral piety through activities such as fasting and all day sabbatarianism. There were many strains of Puritanism that I will discuss throughout the thesis, so a detailed definition of Puritanism would be inappropriate here.

² Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 3, 4, 9-10.

³ A teacher is a minister in charge of instructing the congregation on doctrinal matters.

evolution of his thought.

Most historians have analyzed religious arguments in early modern England through a binary good/evil kind of perspective often associated with Saint Augustine. However, a growing number of historians have begun looking at religious disputes during this period through the lense of moderation between extremes.⁴ During the early Elizabethan era, the Aristotelian golden mean was associated with an amount proper under the circumstances rather than as a middle way between extremes.⁵ Early modern English polemics began to portray the mean as a middle way between extremes following Richard Montague's argument in 1624 “that the gap against Puritanisme and Popery” should be filled by the Church of England.⁶ This idea of a middle way did not necessarily equate to moderation in terms of toleration. Moderation was associated with restraint both of the self and the government to marginalize opponents.⁷ Many of Cotton's writings and practices reflected a commitment to a middle ground, but Cotton's middle way was not always a reflection of ecclesiastical toleration.

According to historian John Coffey, ecclesiastical toleration refers to “the degree of diversity tolerated within a particular church.”⁸ Moderation may be used in this way and is often associated with compromise and the reduction of severity or harshness. Compromise and the reduction of severity in the context of church structure imply a level of inclusiveness that may

⁴ Ethan Shagan, “Beyond Good and Evil: Thinking with Moderates in Early Modern England,” *Journal of British Studies*, 49, no. 3, 488-513 (July, 2010): 489.

⁵ Louise Campbell, “A Diagnosis of Religious Moderation: Matthew Parker and the 1559 Settlement,” in *Moderate Voices in the European Reformation*, ed. Luc Racaut and Alec Ryrie, 32-50 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ Shagan, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 492.

⁸ John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 12.

permit greater religious diversity to exist within a congregation.⁹ Cotton's writings and actions will also be evaluated based on moderation in this sense. Thus, I will use the term moderation and ecclesiastical toleration to reflect an inclusive church structure. For example, churches with rigid membership requirements, an oppressively hierarchical church structure, and lay powerlessness would generally tend towards an immoderate form of church structure. When membership was open to all, the laity was given a greater role in church governance, and each congregation was able to promote its own doctrines, there was generally greater potential for religious diversity. In contrast, the terms “middle ground” or “middle way” will be used to refer to arguments made that purport to be a mean between extremes. This mean, however, may or may not be “moderate,” depending on the level of ecclesiastical toleration it permits. There is a great deal of relativity associated with the term “moderation,” and themes of moderation were often used as a tool to make repressive measures seem less severe, but greater clarity may be achieved when the term is placed in the context of the arguments and practices described.

Cotton's changing concept of indifferent matters, also called *adiaphora*, helps elucidate some of his views on moderation. Historian Gregory Dodds defines *adiaphora* as matters of theological indifference that do not determine an individual's salvation or damnation.¹⁰ Historian Ethan Shagan points out that “indifference merely meant that an action was not always good or evil but rather became good or evil depending on its worldly context rather than its eternal valuation.” Thus, what was extrinsically indifferent in God's eyes could become intrinsically

⁹ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “Moderation.” Definition 2b. “Abatement of severity or rigour; the action or act of making something less severe; restriction within moderate limits.” Definition 2d. “Settlement by arbitration or compromise; an arrangement, a compromise,” <http://0-www.oed.com.umiss.lib.olemiss.edu/> (accessed May 15, 2011).

¹⁰ Gregory D. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xvii.

sinful in man's based on personal conscience. Church doctrines and enforcement concerning what, when, and how ceremonies would be performed, therefore, became a major religious issue in seventeenth-century England.¹¹

Some historians have asserted that Cotton became the prime advocate for an oppressive church structure characterized by clerical authoritarianism, lay powerlessness, synodal domination of church autonomy, and increasingly rigid church membership requirements.¹² Other historians have stressed that church structure in Massachusetts was a fairly inclusive system that changed very little after the Antinomian Controversy.¹³ In this thesis, I argue that Cotton's theological and ecclesiological influences generally tended towards an inclusive church structure in terms of the relationship between the laity and clergy, and the autonomy of congregations, but Cotton's views regarding church membership, while often phrased in a language of moderation, became increasingly intolerant throughout his ministry. In his English church, however, Cotton's doctrines and practices were based on a broad definition of indifferent matters, which allowed him to accommodate divergent factions within the Church of England.

¹¹ Shagan, "Beyond Good and Evil," 505-6.

¹² Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650: A Genetic Study* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933), 174-176, 178-179, 182-184; Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 228.

¹³ James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

I. FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT THAT INFLUENCED COTTON

Cotton's theory of church organization was called Congregationalism or the New England Way. Congregationalism was a form of church organization based on autonomous congregations bound through covenants, which tied believers together through a contractual spiritual bond. There were various types of covenants. William Ames, Cotton's influential teacher at Cambridge, described the church covenant as an agreement “by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose of the church and its edification.”¹ Church covenants often included generalized statements of mutual support among members as well as a commitment to follow God's law. Covenants could include more specific details such as the role of the clergy or laity or church membership requirements.² There were also political covenants that bound the people to obey the government and to live according to God's will. In addition, doctrinal covenants such as the covenant of grace and covenant of works defined the relationship of God to man. God made the covenant of works with Adam. This covenant demanded obedience to God's law, but Adam fell into sin and broke this covenant. The covenant of grace was brought about through Christ's intercession. This covenant allowed mankind once again to gain salvation despite man's sinful nature.³ Cotton's doctrine of

¹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, trans. John D. Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim Press), 180.

² Cooper, *Tenacious*, 17.

³ Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University

covenants would change throughout his life and help define his congregational theory.

Three forms of church organization – Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, and Separatism – helped shape Cotton's congregational thought. The first of the three major church models that influenced Cotton's congregational theory was that of the Church of England. The organization of the English Church was based primarily on enforcement of ecclesiastical and civil laws through governing bishops who controlled a subunit of the church called a diocese, which usually encompassed two or three counties. Diocesan government was primarily based on administrative and judicial duties rather than pastoral duties. A combination of civil and ecclesiastical officials imposed discipline through a system of visitation and consistory courts. Cotton's first church was under the diocese of Lincoln. The deprivation of ministers was an exclusive function of the governing bishops.⁴ Other ecclesiastical and civil functions within the church were often delegated to subordinates within the hierarchy. Bishops also exercised power through the upper house of Convocation which enacted canon law, granted subsidies, and played an advisory role concerning church administration. However, “major initiatives were conveyed to Convocation by the Supreme Governor,” who acted in accordance with the wishes of the Archbishop of Canterbury who, after the king, was the head of the church hierarchy. The king exercised authority through his veto power and the appointment of bishops. Parliament also had considerable power over ecclesiastical law. Most ecclesiastical bills originated in the House of Commons, although some were blocked in the House of Lords, which had a significant percentage of peers who were bishops.⁵

Press, 1994), 88-89.

⁴ The deprivation of ministers means that clergy were stripped of their clerical offices.

⁵ Kenneth Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor: The Episcopate of James I* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), 15-17, 64-66, 36, 63, 58.

Thus, the Church of England was a top-down system based upon a mixture of civil and ecclesiastical law. Those who adhered to the church's doctrines and practices closely could be called Conformists. Cotton cooperated with his bishops and Conformist laity within his church while at the same time creating a conventicle, a private gathering of Puritans was based on a covenant.

The Presbyterian system of church organization was probably the most formidable challenge to the Church of England. Thomas Cartwright was the first divine who regularly agitated for Presbyterian reform in England. Cartwright was convinced that the Presbyterian-synodal form of organization was fundamental to destroying the system of bishops that he believed hindered salvation.⁶ He attacked the English church structure in some controversial lectures given at Cambridge, England in 1570 and left for Geneva after losing his chair in divinity. Cartwright's pamphlet, *Admonition to Parliament*, was published in 1572 and was the first work that articulated the Presbyterian platform to the English populace. The *Admonition* prompted a series of exchanges between Cartwright and John Whitgift. Whitgift was the quintessential Conformist divine in Elizabethan England who served as Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1583.

The debate between Cartwright and Whitgift regarding church structure as well as the proper use of ceremonies lasted until the 1590s. Cartwright argued that the Presbyterian model was the only true form of church government. This church structure was commanded by God, and deviations from it were fundamental, rather than indifferent, to salvation. Thus, the organization of the Church of England was a hindrance to salvation. In contrast, Whitgift argued

⁶ Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 283.

that the Bible did not designate one true form of church government, and the state had the authority to determine the organization of the church.⁷ Whitgift strove to enforce subscription to *The Three Articles of 1583*, which required adherence to the church structure of the English Church.⁸ These articles proclaimed the monarch's spiritual and temporal powers, “the legality of the Prayer Book, the three orders of the ministry and the Articles of Religion.”⁹ Since Presbyterians held that church structure was fundamental and that the organization of the Church of England was contrary to God's word, they could not in good conscience subscribe. There were some who avoided complete subscription during Whitgift's reign as Archbishop because of intense opposition from Presbyterians and Puritans to the Book of Common Prayer and the Episcopal system of church organization.¹⁰ From 1589-1591, Whitgift often used a conciliar court called the Star Chamber to prosecute Puritan dissenters.¹¹ This court was useful for the state because sedition and ecclesiastical offenses could be prosecuted without the potential interference of sympathetic juries or grand juries.¹² Because of these measures taken under

⁷ Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans?: Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1998), 4, 8,13.

⁸ The Book of Common Prayer also called the Prayer Book was the official liturgical book of the Church of England. During the Presbyterian national church in England, the Directory of Public Worship replaced the Book of Common Prayer. Subscription was an oath declaring one's adherence to the Three Articles of 1583. The second article was the most objectionable to Puritans. It required prospective clergy to assent to use of the Book of Common Prayer for public prayer and the sacraments. In addition, it required oath takers to swear that they believed the church structure of the English Church was not contrary to the Bible.

⁹ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 220.

¹⁰ Puritans could exist within various forms of church government in England. Some Puritans were Separatists who joined congregational churches, others opted for the Presbyterian form of church government and practices, while others remained within the Church of England. Puritan in the context of this paper does not refer to Separatists or Presbyterians, however.

¹¹ Kenneth Fincham, “Clerical Conformity from Whitgift to Laud,” in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, 1560-1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier, 125-158 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 127, 131.

¹² J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History: Fourth Edition* (Bath: The Bath Press, 2002), 117-119.

Whitgift, the Presbyterian movement in England was effectively eliminated until the English Civil War period.

The Presbyterian-synodal church system was first created in France under the influence of John Calvin and Theodore Beza. Presbyterian church structure was often independent of civil control and based on the equality of each church. Above each individual church was a hierarchy of regional and national synods that had the power to appoint ministers, enforce church discipline, and establish church doctrine. The hierarchy was usually four-tiered, but Scottish Presbyterianism, which helped shape the new national Presbyterian Church during the English Civil War, had five-tiers. In Scotland, the names of synods from most local to national were: kirk session, presbytery, synod, provincial assembly, and general assembly. The presbytery was the level at which most of the activity took place, although bodies further up the hierarchy had greater power. The presbyteries dealt with most serious cases of church discipline and meted out sentences such as excommunication. They met every week or two rather than “meeting quarterly or twice yearly like the other assemblies of the same level.”¹³ Power neither flowed top-down nor bottom-up; instead, the churches “delegated lay and clerical representatives to the assemblies above them.”¹⁴ Presbyterians supported the ideal of a national church, and church membership required no admission requirements.¹⁵ Presbyterians allowed access to Communion to everyone unless they were “scandalous.” In addition, they supported a set liturgy. In contrast, Puritans opposed set prayers.¹⁶

¹³ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 136-137, 285.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁵ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 54.

¹⁶ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 401-402; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 69.

At the same time as Presbyterianism was developing, Jean Morely proposed a church structure based on the autonomy of each congregation. Morely believed that individual churches should control church discipline, doctrine, and ministerial nominations. He argued that if churches were allowed this autonomy that “the Holy Spirit would animate all its decisions and Christ would truly be its head.”¹⁷ John Calvin and Theodore Beza rejected this form of church government because it seemed too prone to democracy, anarchy, and schism.¹⁸ This debate would be rehashed in the future during the pamphlet wars between Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the English Civil War era.

The third church model that influenced Cotton was Separatism. During his English ministry, Cotton tried to find a middle ground between Separatist congregationalism and conformity to the Church of England. Separatists opposed the idea of a national church, and their church structure was based on the autonomy of each congregation. Nevertheless, they, like the Presbyterians, supported the use of synods, which helped control some of the chaos associated with absolute congregational independence. The Separatists used synods only for purposes of “mutual encouragement, exhortation, and guidance” rather than as binding bodies in a fixed hierarchy.”¹⁹

Separatists emphasized the control of the laity over church decision-making and discipline more than Presbyterians and Conformists. Some Separatists such as Robert Browne and Henry Barrow stated that “every member was a prophet, priest, and king.” Despite their

¹⁷ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 136-37. There is no evidence that Morely's vision of autonomous churches influenced Congregationalists in England.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁹ Stephen Brachlow, *The Communion of Saints: Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology, 1570-1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 214.

promotion of lay control, however, Separatists actually sought to balance the power of the clergy and laity. For example, Separatists came to differing conclusions regarding control of the laity or clergy over church discipline. Most granted the power to both the laity and ministers. The laity could also excommunicate church officers for disability or apostasy²⁰

The Separatist focus on lay power and congregational autonomy seemed to be a more inclusive church structure because it was not conducive to clerical tyranny or hierarchical oppression, but the Separatist inclination towards purity served as a form of exclusion. Church membership was not based on any universal notions of admission. Separatists sought only members who were “visible saints,” people who were likely among the elect. Good works and sound biblical doctrine were two marks that revealed the regenerate. New members pledged adherence to a church covenant. They rejected proof of saving faith as a sign for membership because only God could know what was in men's hearts, so to select saints on this basis was to pretend to be God. Men could only see the beliefs and actions of others, so they based church membership on these criteria instead.²¹ The very fact of separation from the Church of England was the most important way to discern visible sainthood. In March 1593, Parliament passed *An Act for Retaining the Queens Subjects in their due Obedience*. Under this act adults who failed to attend church “or who belong to illegal conventicles would be automatically imprisoned. If they failed to conform within three months, they would face the choice of exile or death.”²² It was not surprising that Separatists were extremely rare in England and normally met secretly in private

²⁰ Ibid., 134-136, 177, 169, 182-183.

²¹ Ibid., 130-131.

²² Coffey, *Persecution*, 98.

houses.²³ Because of their focus on purity and their persecuted status, they did not evangelize; instead, they sealed themselves off from the unregenerate to avoid spiritual contamination.²⁴ Their purist, close-knit community reinforced their assurance of salvation.²⁵

Individuals who became members were subjected to rigid standards of purity. They considered it blasphemy to partake in Communion with non-Separatists.²⁶ Each member of the congregation had the duty to police the behavior of errant members, which only increased the pressure for purity compared to the Church of England in which discipline was primarily maintained through bishops.²⁷ In addition, Separatists were even more virulently anti-Catholic than most Puritans and Presbyterians and argued that “all vestiges of popery [should be destroyed].”²⁸ Separatists also emphasized purity through strict moral standards because it provided them with a source of assurance of their salvation.²⁹ Although Separatists were ecclesiastically the most intolerant of the three groups so far discussed, some Separatists advocated civil religious toleration for various sects, which flowed logically from their rejection of a uniform state religion.³⁰

²³ Ibid., 96.

²⁴ Wilbur K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England: From the Beginning of the English Reformation to the Death of Queen Elizabeth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 262, 272.

²⁵ Coffey, *Persecution*, 96.

²⁶ Jordan, *Religious Toleration to the Death of Queen Elizabeth*, 273.

²⁷ Brachlow, *The Communion*, 136.

²⁸ Coffey, *Persecution*, 97.

²⁹ Brachlow, *The Communion*, 134.

³⁰ Jordan, *Religious Toleration to the Death of Queen Elizabeth*, 262, 272.

In sum, Cotton's congregational theory was developed from various forms of church organization. Cotton's thought on church organization and church practices evolved throughout his lifetime based on the relative influence of these forms of church government. These diverse sources of influence also impacted his doctrine regarding indifferent matters, which buttressed his arguments for church structure throughout his lifetime.

II. COTTON'S ENGLISH MINISTRY

During his English ministry, he based his church practices on accommodating the spiritual needs of both Puritans and Conformists within his church. In matters of theological doctrine, Cotton's thought was a mixture of various strains of Puritanism. His adherence to a combination of theological variants may help explain why he was able to serve as a voice of moderation to bridge the gap among Puritan factions in his New England ministry. His doctrine on matters indifferent was broad enough to accommodate Puritans and Conformists in his congregation. There was also an anti-authoritarian aspect to Cotton's doctrine of *adiaphora*, which allowed him to resist attempts to narrow it. Many historians note Cotton's moderation and ability to compromise but ignore his more anti-authoritarian tendencies. Larzer Ziff argues that the slaughter of Catholics in Cotton's hometown of Derby and his moderate Puritan educational training at Cambridge molded him into a diplomatic man prone to compromise.¹ In addition, scholar Perry Miller asserts that Cotton had always been obedient to authority both in England and Massachusetts: "He was teaching in America nothing that he had not taught in England; it had always been his settled conviction that churches should obey the authorities, 'in patient suffering their unjust persecutions without hostile or rebellious resistance.'"² In contrast, I assert that Cotton's willingness to compromise was buttressed by an equally strong desire to resist

¹ Ziff, *The Career*, 4, 16.

² Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 227.

authority. The combination of these two factors allowed him to retain an inclusive church during his English ministry.

A. INDIFFERENT MATTERS

Before discussing Cotton's views regarding indifferent matters, it may be helpful to address some other perspectives on *adiaphora*, particularly in regard to ceremonial conformity. Two of the most important figures in early modern England to discuss indifferent matters in the context of church ceremonies were Archbishop John Whitgift and Thomas Cartwright.

Whitgift asserted that the state should regulate indifferent things rather than leaving them to individual conscience. This argument was based on the need for churches to follow the Pauline admonition to practice ceremonies “decently and in order,” which he believed would be rendered impossible if individual variations in liturgical practice were permitted.³ He further justified his position using Erasmian arguments. Like Erasmus, he differentiated between the spiritual and external aspects of Christianity.⁴ Individual conscience was relegated to the private realm, while the state mandated external conformity. Since Whitgift believed, like Erasmus, that unity itself was not indifferent, he argued that, although the ceremonies themselves were *adiaphora*, the church had control over official practice.⁵

Thomas Cartwright took a more radical course and argued that most church ceremonies should not even be permitted to exist. Although Cartwright believed that the government of the church was not a matter indifferent, he did argue that ceremonies were indifferent matters. He

³ Shagan, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 506; Ethan Shagan, “The Battle for Indifference in Elizabethan England,” in *Moderate Voices in the European Reformation*, ed. Luc Racaut and Alec Ryrie, 122-144 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 125.

⁴ Desiderius Erasmus was a Catholic reformer widely read in England. The major themes in his writings were “conformity, peace, tolerance, and moderation.” He believed that peace was a fundamental aspect of religion and public discussions of obscure doctrines should be avoided for the sake of peace. Those who opposed conformity or insisted on pressing obscure doctrines publicly would be labeled as enemies of peace and heretical. Thus, Erasmian rhetoric could be deceptively used to make enforced conformity seem reasonable. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, xi, 33-34, 100, 208.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 106-108.

asserted that the Bible had not specified what ceremonies should be associated with Communion or what kind of clothing the clergy should wear. Nevertheless, he argued that current ceremonial arrangements were impermissible not because they were “in themselves unclean,” but because they had become too closely associated with popish practices. Even if the church made pains to show the purely symbolic and unnecessary nature of these ceremonies, Cartwright argued that parishioners still suffered from a “popish mentality.” Therefore, congregants would falsely interpret the ceremonies as necessary for salvation, which would violate the Second Commandment's injunction against worship of idols.⁶

Whitgift retorted that the ceremonies were permissible because they did not carry the same significance to the Church of England as they had in the Catholic Church. Like Cartwright, he argued that the ceremonies themselves were not unclean. Ceremonies were impermissible only if they were treated as necessary for salvation. Their legitimacy derived from the monarch and the need for “order and uniformity” in the church. He admitted that individual parishioners may misinterpret the significance of the ceremonies, but he argued that the mistaken views of some church members should not override the power of the monarch to impose ceremonial uniformity.⁷

Cotton's inclination towards a Conformist position regarding ceremonies is suggested from a poem fragment written in the 1610's. It is unclear whether he supported what he called “moral Puritanism,” but Cotton seems to object to Puritan “scruples” about performing church ceremonies. The poem fragment stated:

Of Puritans two sorts I find,

⁶ Lake, *Anglicans*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

The moral and the ceremonial kind:
The ceremonial God's great name to hallow,
Will strain at motes, as well as beams not swallow.
His tender conscience, makes his fleshly heart
At smallest pricks and scruples back to start.⁸

By 1618, however, Cotton adopted the position of many moderate Puritans and opposed conformity to ceremonies in some instances. Before discussing Cotton's increasingly non-conformist arguments on indifferent matters, it is important to reflect upon what "moderate Puritanism" entailed in the context of Jacobean England.

Most of Cotton's English ministry occurred during the reign of James I, so James's policies must be evaluated to assess how he may have helped forge Cotton's identity as a moderate Puritan. Some historians argue that King James oppressed Puritanism, but a more nuanced viewpoint explains how he helped shape the moderate Puritan identity during his reign. Historian Stephen Foster argues that James I was intolerant toward Puritans in general. James vetoed laws and morals legislation that Puritans favored even though those bills were quite modest. In addition, he issued orders which forbade any clergy under the rank of bishop from preaching "in any popular auditory the deep points of predestination, election, reprobation, or of the universality efficacy, resistibility, or irresistibility of God's grace."⁹ The 1604 House of Commons under James I was predominantly Puritan and agitated for religious reforms. In response, James called the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, but, according to Foster, no

⁸ John Cotton, "Fragment of a Poem," in *John Cotton: Revised Edition*, ed. Everett Emerson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 119-120.

⁹ Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 116, 128.

major ecclesiastical reforms were achieved.¹⁰

In contrast, Kenneth Fincham stresses that James I's policies were fashioned to distinguish between “moderate Puritans” and “radical Puritans.” He argues that King James tolerated the former and persecuted the latter. Radical Puritans “challenged the Crown's authority to impose ecclesiastical government and ceremonial conformity.” James used subscription to the Three Articles of 1583 as his major tool to determine who was a moderate or radical Puritan.¹¹ Most Puritans who were deprived during the early years of James's reign were members of the radical camp. The church courts were less prone to persecute Puritans during James's rule.¹² Unlike radical Puritans, moderate Puritans expressed misgivings about certain ceremonies but were tolerated because they were “discreet and obedient” and were willing to confer with their bishops about their doctrinal concerns.¹³ James also made concessions to moderate Puritans at the Hampton Court Conference. He increased the preaching ministry, adopted changes to the catechism, permitted minor changes to the Book of Common Prayer, and agreed on a new translation of the Bible.¹⁴

Laurence Chaderton was one of the moderate Puritan divines at the Hampton Court Conference seeking reform of the Church of England. He served first as a fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge, and from 1584 as Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Chaderton had once been a Presbyterian who attended and even moderated at national synods. He also attended

¹⁰ Ibid., 58. The Hampton Court Conference of 1604 was a meeting of leading Conformist and Puritan divines to discuss Puritan proposals for reform in the English Church.

¹¹ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 220.

¹² Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales, eds., “Introduction,” *The Puritan Ethos, 1560-1700* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). 26-27.

¹³ Kenneth Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 213-215.

¹⁴ Ibid., 213.

the last national synod in 1589. Despite the crackdown on Presbyterianism during Whitgift's reign as Archbishop, he managed to keep his position as a fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge.¹⁵

To Peter Lake, Laurence Chaderton exemplifies moderate Puritanism. Like other moderates, he was willing to subscribe because he saw certain long term benefits to conformity. His goal was gradual reform rather than abrupt changes that might threaten the unity of the church. Chaderton and other moderate Puritans were willing to make a trade off. Conformity was given when necessary “merely as the price that had to sometimes be paid” for “the infusion” of Puritan reforms within the church. Chaderton, like many moderate Puritans sought to bring forth gradual changes through preaching the Puritan message within the church. Being “a prolific preacher” himself, Chaderton considered conformity a small price to pay for his continued ability to expound Puritan teachings within the church.¹⁶

Like Whitgift, Chaderton also stressed the importance of obedience to magistrates as well as the indifferent nature of ceremonies. However, Chaderton argued that indifferent matters were left to individual conscience rather than the government. He placed the burden on magistrates to enforce compliance with indifferent matters leniently instead of encouraging individuals who opposed the ceremonies to refuse to submit to them. Occasional conformity, he argued, may be necessary but to require constant, strict obedience on ceremonial practices implied that they were “in some sense essential,” which Chaderton considered an abuse of power.¹⁷ If a magistrate enforced ceremonies too stringently, he committed a sinful act through treating indifferent

¹⁵ Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 49, 48.

¹⁷ Shagan, “The Battle,” 128-129.

matters as somehow necessary acts.

Chaderton's emphasis on obedience to the magistrate undercut his arguments against rigid enforcement. Individuals should obey enforcement of these indifferent matters as long as they realize that obedience was “in no way pleasing to God.” In addition, obedience was justified for the sake of avoiding deprivation. Finally, he argued that the Bible and the monarchy never conflicted on religious matters. Instead, individuals just perceived them to conflict because of human “perversity and sin.”¹⁸ This argument may imply that magistrates were sinful because their actions conflicted with the Bible, but, it could be used with equal force as a statement justifying strict obedience to the church. In sum, Chaderton argued that the government should be lenient in enforcement, but, like Whitgift, he believed that obedience was required.¹⁹

Cotton in some ways resembled moderate Puritans, but his teachings on obedience to matters that violated one's conscience on indifferent matters were reminiscent of radical Puritan advocacy of disobedience to church authorities. Like Whitgift and Chaderton, Cotton considered church ceremonies as indifferent matters because the Bible did not prohibit them. As with many moderate Puritans, he conferred in the kindest terms with his bishops concerning conformity.²⁰ He constantly professed his loyalty to the Church of England and accepted the validity of the Book of Common Prayer and set prayers generally.²¹ Cotton's teachings on indifferent matters stressed not only the importance of following one's conscience but also disobedience to

¹⁸ Lake, *Moderate*, 42-43.

¹⁹ Shagan, “The Battle,” 128-129.

²⁰ Sargent Bush, Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 93.

²¹ John Cotton, *A Practical Commentary, or, an Exposition with Observations, reasons, and uses, upon the First Epistle Generall of John* (1656), 157.

magistrates if necessary.

In 1618, Cotton wrote the first portion of a pamphlet which was not published until 1660 called *Some Treasure Fetched Out of Rubbish*. He described three types of indifferent matters. The definitions he provided were somewhat vague, but one major theme pervaded the work; he called for *mandatory* disobedience to civil and ecclesiastical enforcement on many indifferent matters for those who conscientiously objected to their use. Some indifferent matters which Cotton called “necessary and decent,” had to be obeyed. These were matters “the neglect thereof would be uncomely to the light of Nature, Scripture, [and] Custom.” Cotton's example of this kind of indifferent matter was making sure that women “keep silent” in the church.²²

His next category, “expedient and decent things,” such as whether to be celibate could be enforced only by the civil magistrates but not by ecclesiastical authorities, although governing bishops could advise and persuade on these matters. Neither magistrates nor ecclesiastical authorities could enforce what Cotton called “indifferent decent things.” In fact, the church could not even advise or persuade on these matters. His example of this category was whether to wear a gown or a cloak.²³ On these “indifferent decent matters” liberty of conscience was not limited to private views. Opposition to these matters was expected to be expressed outwardly. Cotton believed that “conformity with the rites of the church was against the commandment which forbade graven images, and that, his conscience being so convinced, he would sin against it if he complied with the ceremonies.”²⁴

Cotton declared that it would be a sin to *obey* commands from church governors or civil

²² John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish* (1660), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2-4. What kind of clerical garb should be worn was a contentious issue during Cotton's ministry.

²⁴ Ziff, *Career*, 68.

magistrates on indifferent decent things that contradicted one's conscience. He argued that obedience to laws on these matters only increased the power of the state and church governors. For the state to force these matters of conscience was to cause men to sin and anger God. Cotton protested:

It is true, by forbearing Obedience to these Commandments we offend the Spirits of our Governours, and make them to be...offended with us; but by yielding Obedience to these things, we should offend their Consciences in edifying them unto Sin, and provoke the Lord to be offended with them and us. It is not for Christians, much less for Ministers, to redeem our peace and liberty at so dear a price.²⁵

Thus, like Chaderton, Cotton also emphasized that magistrates caused themselves to sin through their enforcement of indifferent matters. Unlike Chaderton, however, he made no caveats concerning the necessity of occasional conformity on some indifferent matters and stressed the importance of individual disobedience rather than focusing on magisterial restraint. His belief that public disobedience was mandatory on some indifferent matters resembles the confrontational spirit of radical Puritanism. While Cotton “conferred” regarding conformity, evidence showed that he likely followed his convictions and refused to conform on at least some church ceremonies. It was likely based on his statements from *Some Treasure* that he refused to wear the surplice, which was a garment Anglican clergy were supposed to wear.²⁶

Despite his somewhat radical stand on indifferent matters, Cotton also displayed more moderate tendencies. In his second surviving letter to his diocesan bishop John Williams, Cotton asked him for patience to allow him time to conform to certain ceremonies. At one point he

²⁵ Cotton, *Some Treasure*, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

indicated that he was at least engaged in some soul searching regarding his views about kneeling at Communion.²⁷ Thus, Cotton was following Chaderton's approach of conferring respectfully with his bishop about conformity and seeking patience to “resolve his own doubts and those of his congregation.”²⁸

Sometime between 1629 and 1632 Cotton wrote *A Commentary on the First Epistle of John* and professed his belief in the validity of the Book of Common Prayer because set prayer was not specifically prohibited in the Bible. Cotton responded to Separatist critics that “if it be lawful to read Psalmes, why is it not lawful to read Prayers?”²⁹ He also developed a very minimalist standard for what constituted a “true church.” Complete separation from the national church was acceptable to Cotton only if the church was not a “true church.” A church was true even if it was fundamentally erroneous as long as it was not blasphemous or idolatrous.³⁰

In 1625 when Charles I came to power, Archbishop George Abbot, a Calvinist who was sympathetic to Puritanism, was still Archbishop of Canterbury. Charles and William Laud, Bishop of London, feared that Puritans wanted to seize control of the Episcopal ecclesiastical system and redesign it to their liking, so they pursued a new push toward conformity.³¹

Historians have disagreed concerning whether or not the Laudian persecution was severe.

²⁷ John Cotton to John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln, 30 August 1621, in *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, Sargent Bush, Jr., ed., trans. George S. Goebel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 95-96.

²⁸ Lake, *Moderate*, 257.

²⁹ John Cotton, *A Practical Commentary, or, an Exposition with Observations, reasons, and uses, upon the First Epistle Generall of John* (1656), 157.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

³¹ Dwight Braughtigam, “Prelates and Politics: Uses of 'Puritan,' 1625-1640,” in *Puritanism and Its Discontents*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers, 49-66 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 54. William Laud was appointed Bishop of London in 1628 and became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Laud's influence over the English Church became greater than Archbishop John Abbot once Laud became bishop of London.

Historian David Cressy claims that Puritans did not consider the persecution under Laud to be oppressive. Cressy points to the small number of departing clergy, which were comparable to those deprived under James I, as evidence of this contention.³² In contrast, Susan Hardman Moore notes that most of the Puritans who fled were parish clergy who were fairly moderate Puritans. These ministers were not the radicals persecuted under James I. Laud was targeting clergy who were loyal to the church and at least conferring about conformity, and Laudian persecution caused “seventy-nine clergy...to leave between 1629 and 1640.”³³

Besides the issue of deprivation of moderate Puritans, there were other policies pursued under Charles I and Laud that indicated their intolerance on matters of church ceremonies, doctrine, or Puritan political liberty. Ceremonial conformity was enforced rather laxly throughout James I's reign and into the 1620's.³⁴ Like Erasmus and Conformists such as Whitgift, Laud appealed to the supposedly moderate theological truths of peace, order, and unity to justify the importance of ceremonies for “decency and order” within the church. Unlike Erasmus and Whitgift, however, Laud elevated ceremonies from indifferent matters to “essential components of Christianity.”³⁵ It was not surprising then that when Laud rose to power he rigidly enforced ceremonial conformity. He also imposed new church innovations such as the installation of altar

³² David Cressy, *Coming Over: Migration and Communication between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 87.

³³ Moore, “Popery, Purity, and Providence: Deciphering the New England Experiment,” in *Religion, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Patrick Collinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 266-267.

³⁴ Kenneth Fincham, “Clerical Conformity from Whitgift to Laud.” in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, 1560-1660*, eds. Peter Lake and Michael Questier, 125-158 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 138-139.

³⁵ Dodds, *Exploiting*, 199.

rails, which angered Puritan opponents.³⁶ Laud and a powerful circle of bishops sought to impose Arminian doctrine. Arminianism stressed the importance of works in order to achieve salvation. Most Puritans and Conformists professed predestinarian doctrine. Predestinarians believed that God had predestined those who would be saved and those who would be damned and that Arminians wrongfully limited God's almighty nature by binding his power through human works.³⁷ Finally, Laud and Charles sought to oppress Puritan political liberty. During his reign “Puritan” became a label for a political “enemy.”³⁸ Charles ruled for eleven years without calling Parliament. He needed money for a war in Scotland, so he finally called on Parliament to meet on April 13, 1640. To avoid Puritan calls for political and religious reform, Charles prorogued Parliament on May, 5, 1640.³⁹

Cotton felt the impact of Laudian persecution first hand and became a more radical Puritan as a result. He justified leaving England, in part, because sins had “overspread [the] Country” and ministers were being persecuted.⁴⁰ Cotton was aware that nonconformists were being persecuted in Lincolnshire and elsewhere. For example, he received a letter from Minister Nathaniel Ward written on December 13, 1631, in which Ward briefly mentioned his pending judicial hearings before Laud and his decision to leave England. Ward lamented, “I pray therefore forget me not and believe for me also that there be such a piece of neighbourhood

³⁶ Fincham “Clerical,” 146, 152-153.

³⁷ Nicolas Tyacke, “The ‘Rise of Puritanism’ and the Legalizing of Dissent, 1571-1719,” in *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, eds. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, and Nicholas Tyacke, 17-49 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 27; Foster, *Long Argument*, 132-133, 136-137.

³⁸ Braughtigam, “Prelates and Politics,” 49, 53.

³⁹ Because Parliament had only been allowed to meet for three weeks, it was referred to as the Short Parliament.

⁴⁰ John Cotton, *God's Promise to his Plantation as it was Delivered in a Sermon* (1630), 10.

among Christians.”⁴¹

Despite Cotton's knowledge that other ministers were being persecuted, he did not leave England until his own ministry came under investigation. In 1630, Cotton and his wife, Elizabeth, fell ill with malaria and spent most of the year at the estate of Theophilus Clinton, fourth Earl of Lincoln and “a staunch Puritan.”⁴² Cotton's wife died of malaria, and he remarried on April 6, 1632 to Sarah Hawkrige Story, a widow with one daughter. Shortly after his marriage, he heard that he was going to be summoned before the Court of High Commission, but he fled before its messengers arrived, eventually arriving in London. While in London, Cotton met with two of his moderate Puritan friends, Thomas Goodwin, vicar of Trinity Church in Cambridge, and John Davenport, minister of St. Stephen's, Coleman Street.⁴³ They tried to convince Cotton to continue to conform to church ceremonies since they were only indifferent matters. Instead, Cotton convinced them to oppose conformity because obedience on indifferent matters against one's conscience was a violation of the Second Commandment. Once Cotton converted both Goodwin and Davenport to his nonconformist position, Goodwin found it difficult to continue conforming. He resigned and fled to Holland. He returned to become one of the leading Independents who blocked Presbyterian dominance in the English Parliament. Davenport also left the ministry within a year and fled to Holland. In 1637, he helped found the New Haven colony in New England.⁴⁴ Thus, because Laudian strict enforcement of ceremonies,

⁴¹ Nathaniel Ward to John Cotton, 13 December, 1631, in *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, ed. Sargent Bush, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 162.

⁴² Ziff, *The Career*, 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 64-65, 68; The Court of High Commission was an ecclesiastical court; “it was a spiritual Star Chamber, much hated by proceeding by oath *ex officio*, whereby a man could be driven to condemn himself under questioning.” J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 131.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 68. A consistory court was an ecclesiastical court “presided over by chancellors learned in Canon law, which heard lawsuits such as matrimonial and defamation cases.” J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal*

Cotton's moderate Puritan tendencies gave way to his more radical stand against conformity expressed in *Some Treasure*.

B. COTTON'S BISHOPS AND HIS ENGLISH CHURCH

Cotton's mixture of moderate and radical tendencies may have been a result of the lax enforcement of conformity in his diocese combined with his desire to defend Puritan practices. One way conformity was enforced was through triennial visitations: Canon law required a bishop to conduct visitations of his diocese upon appointment to his See and once every three years thereafter. A bishop might tour his diocese for several weeks during these visitations. Meetings were held throughout the diocese and bishops usually delivered sermons at churches they visited. These visitations were important opportunities for bishops to connect with the clergy and laity under their administration. They also served a judicial function, as bishops would summon various church officers to exhibit documentation such as proof of ordination and submit a list describing various offenses that were returned to the consistory for judicial proceedings.⁴⁵ Bishops did not have to attend triennial visitations, for they could send commissaries instead, but during James I's reign bishops personally attended seventy-two percent of the time.

Outside of these visits “a bishop’s itinerary was usually confined to journeys between his manor houses and the cathedral city.” Many bishops also served in London as royal officials and resided in London most of the year.⁴⁶ Thus, between triennial visitations, most bishops did not make formal visitations to churches throughout their diocese very frequently.

Most of Cotton's bishops did not provide much oversight, which may have allowed him

⁴⁵ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 112-117.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 315, 41-42.

to accommodate his Puritan members while retaining services for Conformist parishioners. Cotton served under four bishops as a vicar in the Lincoln diocese: William Barlow (1612-1613), Richard Neile (1614-1617), George Montaigne (1618-1621), and John Williams (1621-1633). The first three were unsympathetic to Puritanism, yet Cotton's church maintained a great degree of autonomy. Historian Kenneth Fincham argues that bishops were more involved as pastors and administrators of their dioceses than many historians have claimed.⁴⁷ Larzer Ziff asserts that Cotton's experience with bishops lends credence to Puritan complaints that bishops were primarily concerned with politics and provided lax supervision of their dioceses.⁴⁸ While Fincham's argument provides evidence that historical claims of politically motivated, disinterested bishops have been exaggerated, Ziff's argument seems applicable to Cotton's diocese. Throughout Cotton's twenty-one year English ministry none of his governing bishops ever personally conducted a triennial visitation in his diocese. Bishop George Montaigne did make an official visit in 1618 shortly after his appointment to the diocese, however. Three of Cotton's bishops, Montaigne, Neile, and Williams, lived in London outside the Lincoln diocese, though Richard Neile resided within the diocese during the summers.⁴⁹

In 1612, Cotton became vicar of St. Botolph's in Lincolnshire under Bishop William Barlow. Barlow opposed Puritanism and had persecuted it in the past. Just one year before Cotton's ministry began, Barlow prosecuted six nonconformists in Lincoln diocese. Also, Barlow “suspended three lectureships and refused permission for a fourth to be erected” between 1608

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴⁸ Ziff, *Career*, 39.

⁴⁹ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 309-321.

and 1613.⁵⁰ Cotton was probably not persecuted under Barlow because the bishop may have considered Cotton either a Conformist or at most a very moderate Puritan. Cotton's early poem suggested that he opposed Puritans who did not conform to church ceremonies.⁵¹ Barlow died in 1613, which may have given Cotton an opportunity to stray from Conformity.⁵²

In 1614, Bishop Richard Neile became bishop of Lincoln and ordered a survey of the laity. The survey revealed that many of them rejected the importance of the sacraments and focused only on the need for preaching. To counteract the lay resistance to the importance of the sacraments, Neile decided to send moderate, educated Puritan ministers to “repair the damage with orthodox preaching.” The report also stated that any suppression of preaching in Lincoln “would make 'a clamour in the countrey' and foster the opinion that he [Neile] was 'an enemy to the preaching of the gospel.’”⁵³ Thus, Neile may have had low expectations that Lincoln diocese was even capable of strict conformity. Cotton had still not yet ceased to conform to church ceremonies and may have been seen as more of a moderating influence than a trouble maker.

A combination of factors may have led to Cotton's decision to abandon conformity to church ceremonies. Lay agitation for radical Puritan reforms, resentment over the large minority of Catholics in Lincolnshire, and Richard Neile's comparatively lax enforcement could explain the change. Perhaps Cotton simply reexamined the Bible and decided to alter his views regarding ceremonies. What is clear, however, is that by 1615 Cotton refused to make the sign of the cross

⁵⁰ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 219, 242.

⁵¹ Cotton, “Fragment of a Poem,” 119-120.

⁵² Conventicles were private religious gatherings. Puritans, fearing repression or simply wishing to gather for spiritual edification, often attended these meetings.

⁵³ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 242.

in baptism and rejected “other required elements of the official liturgy.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, he organized Puritan parishioners to join a covenant and gather as a conventicle to avoid these ceremonial practices. A brief description of church membership in the Church of England, and Cotton's early definition of a true church will illustrate Cotton's beliefs concerning covenants during his English ministry.

In the Church of England, the privileges of church membership were conveyed, theoretically, through confirmation. Confirmation was a rite of initiation given to adults following their mastery of the catechism and Prayer Book. Only bishops were supposed to administer the rite, but since bishops were in short supply, priests usually performed confirmation and the requirements for mastery of the Prayer Book and catechism were usually ignored. In practice, Confirmation was usually just a formal initiation rite into the church based solely on infant baptism. Many church members were never confirmed and were not prohibited from partaking in the Eucharist. Therefore, the privileges of full church membership in England were not really a hurdle for the vast majority of parishioners.⁵⁵

In Massachusetts, a non-Separatist covenant requirement had developed in the church of Samuel Skelton, minister of the Salem Church. His congregation would not allow most members of the Church of England, save a few members of a Separatist leaning church in London, to partake in the sacraments until they had joined the church covenant. Skelton's actions implied that he thought the Church of England was not a true church. Puritans who were not Separatists could still become members of his congregation, and he rejected the notion that the state could

⁵⁴ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion & Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 244.

⁵⁵ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 123, 125-127.

not interfere in church matters.⁵⁶

On October 2, 1630, Cotton wrote a letter to Samuel Skelton which defended the Church of England as a true church and reflected his opposition to any limitations on Communion or baptism based on membership in a specific covenanted congregation. Cotton defined the church as “a flocke (1) of saints (2) called by god into the fellowship of Christ (3) meeting together in one place (4) to call upon the name of the Lord (5) & to edify themselves in communicating spiritual gifts (6) & partaking in the ordinances of the Lord (7).”⁵⁷ This definition of a church could be summed up as a united fellowship that meets in one place to worship God.

He discussed certain aspects of this definition at length. First, Cotton argued that everyone in the Church of England should be allowed to be baptized. He used an example from the Bible of an Ethiopian eunuch who was baptized even though he was not of a particular congregation and was in service of a foreign potentate, which would make his return to his own home virtually impossible.⁵⁸ He then discussed the reasons why England was a true church and congregational covenants were not required. First, Cotton asserted that the presence of the impure among the congregation does not make a church untrue. They should be tolerated because their behavior “argueth the neglect of discipline, not the nullity of a church.” Second, although Cotton argued that covenants may be useful “for the wellbeing & continuance of a church,” they are not “any such essential cause of the church without which it can not be.” Covenants made in an individual congregation were not required because a national covenant legitimized the Church of England. The Elizabethan regime, through its rejection of popery, made a national covenant, which was given by free consent of the English people through the

⁵⁶ John Cotton to Samuel Skelton, 2 October 1630, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 144-146.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 144-146.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 144-146.

acts of Parliament.⁵⁹ English doctrines, he insisted, were only lacking on circumstantial matters.⁶⁰ Finally, he argued that the English ministry was consensual, even if ministers were appointed, as long as the congregation accepted them.⁶¹

Besides the church covenant, Cotton also addressed the requirements for salvation via the covenant of grace. He defined the covenant of grace as a promise made with God that “is absolute without condition, so that he will remember us with everlasting mercy, so that whosoever have made a covenant with God to cleave to him in Christ, he will never cast them off, no more than he will drown the world.”⁶² Those who fell away permanently were never really under this covenant while those who only temporarily backslid were still under the covenant, but God was testing their faith.⁶³ Although he argued that God offered a covenant of grace to those who were saved, this covenant was not based on membership in an elite group of select Puritans. Instead, Cotton preached that a covenant within the church was only one of a variety of ways that led to salvation.⁶⁴ Thus, there was no imputation of damnation towards those who did not join the church covenant.

A few examples will illustrate how Cotton put his views on the nature of a true church into action in England. In 1618, Edward Wright was appointed as a chaplain to Cotton's church. Wright's position permitted him to conduct church ceremonies such as the reading of prayers or

⁵⁹ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁰ Cotton, *A Practical Commentary*, 157.

⁶¹ Cotton, Letter to Skelton, 146. Cotton himself had been appointed rather than elected to minister at St. Botolph's. Emerson, *John Cotton*, 36.

⁶² Cotton, *A Practical Commentary*, 152.

⁶³ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁴ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 30.

Communion ceremonies. These ceremonies and set prayers pleased Conformists in Cotton's church. When Wright conducted these ceremonies, Cotton and his Puritan churchgoers opted out of them to maintain their liberty of conscience. Cotton and Puritan members of his church would leave the building before the reading of the Apostle's Creed. The Conformists would stand to read it while the Puritans filed out to hear Cotton give additional sermons. It seems probable that his views on set prayers were an application of his doctrine on "indifferent decent" matters. He tolerated those who wished to recite these prayers even though he opposed them. In addition, Cotton and his Puritan parishioners refused to kneel at Communion while other members freely engaged in this practice. Even when suspended for nonconformity in 1621, Cotton still refused to obey this practice. His second surviving letter to Bishop John Williams shows that he continued not to kneel in future years.⁶⁵ Thus, he was able to promote ecclesiastical toleration in his church in England to both Puritans and Conformists.

Although Cotton promoted moderation within his church, a radical Puritan element existed in Lincoln diocese. An incident of iconoclasm occurred in April 1621 at St. Botolph's shortly before the anti-Puritan minister Robert Sanderson was scheduled to preach. Radical Puritans destroyed stained-glass windows, statues, and religious ornaments. An investigation was conducted and Cotton was found not to be involved and only had to write a brief statement to his bishop, George Montaigne, explaining why he opposed kneeling at Communion. In the statement, Cotton explained that he could not kneel because it was not a practice instituted in the Bible. Considering that the iconoclasm occurred shortly before the visit of Sanderson, Montaigne may have felt that the installation of a new vicar would only create more chaos.⁶⁶ Although

⁶⁵ John Cotton to John Williams, 31 January 1625, in *Bush, Correspondence*, 99.

⁶⁶ Ziff, *The Career*, 51-53.

Cotton was openly defiant of church ceremonies, he was at least willing to confer with Montaigne about nonconformity, rejected separation from the church, and defended the use of the Book of Common Prayer.

Shortly after the iconoclasm incident, John Williams was appointed Bishop of Lincoln. Williams was a Calvinist who was sympathetic to the Puritans. He held the prestigious position of Keeper of the Great Seals, a position at Court where he served as a spokesman for the King. Williams was primarily concerned with his political role. Fincham states that Williams was one of only two bishops in England who “consistently ignored their pastoral responsibilities.” He was probably neglectful because of his powerful position as Lord Keeper. He did not visit the diocese until 1625 and was not present in a triennial visitation until 1635, two years after Cotton had left for Massachusetts.⁶⁷

Towards the end of Cotton's English ministry he had become so anti-conformist that he even challenged full subscription, although not overtly. Bishop Lewes Bayly of Bangor was the only bishop accused of regularly permitting some Puritan clergy to avoid subscription to Canon 36 of 1604, which dealt with conformity to the Three Articles of 1583. Limited subscription “allowed a minister to omit the third clause of the second article, which stated that the public liturgy, ‘and none other,’ should be followed in divine worship.” Cotton must have sympathized with Puritans seeking this exception. Even though Cotton subscribed, his church operated in violation of the clause in practice, although he did have his chaplain provide the official liturgy to Conformist laity. Cotton convinced Bayly to ordain the nonconformist John Angier in 1628 without subscription. Cotton's decision to give this advice was risky since anything less than full

⁶⁷ Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, 57, 120, 296.

subscription was equated with Puritan radicalism. Less than a dozen clergy in all of England were permitted limited subscription.⁶⁸

In sum, Cotton's doctrine on indifferent matters was more inclusive than the typical Conformist, Presbyterian, and moderate Puritan perspectives on these issues because of his emphasis on open resistance to authority. The lax supervision of his diocese combined with his inclusive vision of indifferent matters allowed him to construct a hybrid form of church organization that accommodated both Conformists and Puritans.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 220-221.

C. COTTON'S DOCTRINES WHILE IN ENGLAND

Cotton's doctrinal views also reflected an emphasis on moderation combined with radical elements both of which were conducive to an inclusive church. Cotton's theological views reflected different strains of Puritan thought that may help explain his more conciliatory approach during Massachusetts' Antinomian Controversy.⁶⁹ In addition, more radical elements also existed in Cotton's theological views that had the potential to create religious diversity. Cotton's method of argumentation concerning doctrines and other religious groups were at times difficult to discern. For example, he utilized arguments for intolerance of religious dissenters to advance intra-church moderation. Cotton's moderate Puritanism was also reflected in his use of seemingly inclusive polemics that he used to undermine religious dissidents.

A common tactic in moderate Puritan discourse was to argue for greater toleration for themselves within the church by contrasting their demands with threats from more divergent dissenters. Through this form of argument, moderate Puritans claimed that their minimal requests for accommodation were quite reasonable because more aberrant religious groups threatened

⁶⁹ The Antinomian Controversy took place between 1636 and 1638. Antinomian means “against or opposed to the law.” It was “the opinion that ‘the moral law is not binding upon Christians, who are under the law of grace.’” They stressed that assurance of salvation was gained through God's grace rather than works. “Antinomian” was associated with moral licentiousness, so colonists supporting free grace rather than works did not call themselves Antinomians. David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 4.

greater doctrinal change and social instability. Cotton's first letter to Bishop John Williams reflected this tactic. In 1621, Cotton wrote his first letter to Williams shortly before he officially became Bishop of Lincoln. In the letter, Cotton insisted that he was loyal to the Church of England, opposed Separatists, and denied rumors that he supported civil disorder. He told Williams that his critics had labeled him as a rebel and that they wished him to be “exiled from [his] own home” and “cast...into the hateful tomb of silence.” Cotton declared, “All schisms, whether of Separatists or Anabaptists, I heartily detest, and wish that they were driven completely from the hearts of the faithful; so much so that I should dare to say – whatever idle fools may allege to the contrary – that not even a trace of such a sect is to be found in all of our Holland.”⁷⁰ Ironically, Cotton used his denunciation of tolerance of sects outside the church as an argument for a greater accommodation of moderate Puritans such as himself within the church. He may have also feared that he would be associated with radical Puritanism after the iconoclasm incident at St. Botolph's.

Radical Puritans and Presbyterians often denounced arguments made by other religious groups; moderate Puritans, on the other hand, were more subtle. They used rhetoric focused on compromise and sought to incorporate their opponents' potential objections in their arguments. Their criticism might have been more persuasive because they tried so hard to sound reasonable and inclusive. Cotton tried this moderate Puritan rhetorical technique to defend Predestinarianism against Arminian criticism.

In 1624, Richard Montagu wrote a pamphlet in favor of Arminianism. James Ussher, the future Archbishop of Armagh, sought to respond to this document with a predestinarian position

⁷⁰ John Cotton to John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln, 31 January 1625, in Sargent Bush, Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*. Translated by George Goebel (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 98-102. “Holland” was the name given to a portion of Lincolnshire along the coast where Boston, England was located.

that would address Montagu's criticisms without flatly denouncing his arguments. The goal was to advance predestination and at the same time to explain how God could be just when it seemed like the non-elect never even had a chance for salvation.⁷¹

Ussher called on Cotton and other moderate Puritans to fashion a response that, while appearing conciliatory, was really meant to undermine Arminianism without conceding predestinarian doctrine. Cotton provided an unpublished treatise in 1625. He believed in absolute predestination: the idea that God chose those who were the elect without reference to their works. Cotton used the doctrine of reprobation to explain why the damnation of the non-elect was just. Cotton “argued that reprobation consisted of a 'double act' of God.” The first act was a negative act – God chose some for non-election. The second act was a positive act – God damned the non-elect for their sins – because they were judged based on their works.⁷² The treatise drew criticism from Puritans, including William Twisse, because it seemed to show that the non-elect were damned because of a temporal condition, which undermined the predestinarian position that God was unchanging and did not grant salvation based on conditions.⁷³ Twisse provided his criticism before Cotton emigrated to Massachusetts. Cotton's manuscript was unpublished until Twisse published it in 1646. Twisse published it because he was allied with the Presbyterians. Since the Presbyterians were waging a pamphlet war with Congregationalists during the English Civil War, he published it to discredit Cotton for doctrinal

⁷¹ David Como, “Puritans, Predestination and Construction of Orthodoxy in Early Seventeenth-Century England,” in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, 1560-1660*, eds. Peter Lake and Michael Questier, 64-87 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 69, 75.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁷³ David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 189); Como, “Puritans,” 85.

inconsistency.⁷⁴

There were a variety of strains of Puritanism. Cotton's doctrines help explain the influences of this multivocal religious tradition and may help explain his ability to act, at times, as a conciliator during Massachusetts' Antinomian Controversy. Historians such as Janice Knight, Theodore Bozeman, and David Como have expounded on various Puritanisms which share some commonalities but also have differences as well. They have disagreed about Cotton's theological influences. Janice Knight criticizes Miller's version of the New England mind as a univocal description that really only describes what she calls the "Amesian" variant of Puritanism. Instead, Knight differentiates between a Sibbesian Puritan tradition based on the teachings of Richard Sibbes and an Amesian version derived from William Ames. Sibbesians and Amesians were equally orthodox varieties of the Reformed tradition. Both of these strains recognized the existence of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, and the main difference between them consisted in rhetorical emphasis rather than doctrinal opposition. Knight describes the Sibbesians as moderate Puritans willing to compromise on most matters of church ceremonies and ecclesiology. Because of their moderation, they usually were tolerated by the Church of England and had long, successful careers in the ministry.⁷⁵ They stressed the unconditional nature of the covenant of grace, God's love, the indwelling of the spirit, and the idea that many souls were destined for salvation.⁷⁶ Thus, they offered a wider road to salvation. Knight places John Cotton, John Davenport, Philip Nye, and Thomas Goodwin within this

⁷⁴ Como, "Puritans," 85. It was published as "A Treatise of Mr. Cottons, Clearing certaine Doubts Concerning Predestination. Together with an Examination Thereof" (1646).

⁷⁵ Knight *Orthodoxies*, 1-3, 22, 92, 35-36.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4, 36-37.

tradition.⁷⁷ In contrast, Amesians were less conformist, and, therefore, had typically short, unsuccessful ministries in England. They emphasized God's role as a lawgiver, stressed obedience to the law through a covenant of works, and warned that only a miniscule minority would be saved.⁷⁸

Theodore Bozeman, on the other hand, paints Cotton as part of a “precisionist strain” within Puritanism. This Puritan tradition was based on an obsession with works, purity, and introspective piety as sources of assurance.⁷⁹ Like the Amesians that Knight identified, the Precisionists undermined assurance due to their emphasis on God as a harsh lawgiver, works, and the likely damnation of most parishioners.

Although Bozeman admits that Cotton emphasized a loving God more than many Precisionists, Bozeman characterizes Cotton as man obsessed with purity, constant self- analysis, God's role as a lawgiver rather than affectionate father, and paranoia that most believers were really “hypocrite Christians.” Cotton, like other Precisionists emphasized that people should “regularly...question and review their status before God.” Hypocrite Christians were “the baptized but unregenerate members(s) of the Church of England.” The difference between a “hypocrite Christian” and a real Christian was so imperceptibly slight that no one could really rest assured that he or she was among the elect or merely a hypocrite destined for Hell. Cotton “warned his parishioners at Boston, Lincolnshire, about 1630” that hypocrisy could be “spun

⁷⁷ Ibid., 22, 48. Philip Nye was a Puritan minister. He began his ministry in 1622. He fled to Holland in 1633 because of the Laudian persecution. He later became a leading Congregationalist, also called Independent, during the English Civil War. He was one of the writers of a Congregationalist pamphlet called *An Aplogeticall Narration* and wrote the preface to Cotton's *Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2-3, 36.

⁷⁹ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 52, 122, 138, 173. If a person gained “assurance,” then they felt more confident that they were among the saved.

with so fine a thread, and...so well dyed,” that believers could “hardly discern any difference.”⁸⁰

Bozeman argues that some Puritans had grown tired of the disciplinary demands of Precisionism and a new strain of Puritanism developed around the 1610's known as Antinomianism. Antinomianism developed into a kind of counter-Puritanism that fostered a new vision of Christian redemption. Their bibliocentric focus, evangelistic fervor, and predestinarianism were similar to those of other Puritans, but they differed in other ways.⁸¹ For example, most Antinomians believed that justification occurred before faith, sanctification was not evidence of justification, “faith [was] the discovery of justification,” assurance was certain once it was achieved, and the moral law was inapplicable to the regenerate.⁸² In England, John Eaton was the first major Antinomian and “the most thoughtful and influential.”⁸³ Bozeman rejects the notion that Cotton held Antinomian oriented views. He points out that *The Epistle Generall of John* and *The Way of Life*, show that Cotton was familiar with Antinomian doctrines and “condemned them unreservedly.”⁸⁴ *The Epistle Generall of John* was written no earlier than 1628, so, if he adopted some Antinomian or Familist ideas in England, it must have been towards the end of his ministry there. Although Bozeman recognizes that Antinomianism contained many elements from mainstream Puritanism, he also characterizes it as a kind of counter-Puritanism.⁸⁵

David Como emphasizes that most beliefs that describe Antinomianism are really just a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 213, 166, 108, 217, 219-220, 168.

⁸¹ Ibid., 7, 207.

⁸² William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 232 n. 11.

⁸³ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 188.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 7.

rearrangement of ideas from mainstream Puritan doctrine.⁸⁶ For example, the notion that faith was not a condition necessary for justification, that faith could serve as a form of assurance, and that the regenerate were spotless in God's eyes were all beliefs that were acceptable within Puritanism, at least through much of its history. Antinomians modified some of these doctrines. John Eaton taught that God saw the elect as spotless not because God averted his gaze as most Puritans thought but because the regenerate really were perfect in God's eyes. This perfection was not literal, however. Eaton argued that those who thought God still saw sin in the elect were really supporters of a covenant of works. He also denounced other Puritans as Antichrists, which was a label usually reserved only for the Catholic Church rather than fellow Puritans.⁸⁷ Eaton also emphasized the unconditionality of God's grace, that the saved were justified from eternity, and that the regenerate were no longer subject to the Law of Moses either ceremonially or morally, although the Old Testament could be used as a kind of guidebook.⁸⁸ Although Bozeman concentrates on the Precisionist aspects of Cotton's teachings, Como highlights his potential connections to Antinomianism, whereas Knight ignores any potential Antinomian influences, arguing that Cotton's doctrines derived primarily from the Sibbesian brand of Puritan thought.⁸⁹

Despite the differences in these historical perspectives each of these authors describe aspects of Cotton's theological beliefs that can be linked to Antinomianism or mainstream Puritan doctrines that at least resembled Antinomian doctrines. For example, Como suggests that Richard Rothwel, a venerable Puritan preacher known for his evangelical accomplishments,

⁸⁶ Como, *Blown*, 177.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 181-184, 187, 190.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 212-217.

⁸⁹ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 52; Knight, *Orthodoxies*, 3; Como, *Blown*, 206-207.

influenced Cotton's beliefs.⁹⁰ According to Stanley Gower, Rothwel's disciple, Cotton obtained Rothwel's writings after his death in 1627. Cotton had planned to publish them but had difficulty translating his shorthand. Nevertheless, Rothwel's writings may have influenced Cotton during his attempts to transcribe them. Cotton shared many of Rothwel's doctrines, some of which would be associated with Antinomianism within several years of Rothwel's death. For example, Rothwel's belief that justification came without faith became linked with Antinomianism and was a doctrine Cotton also held. Cotton's teachings were similar to Rothwel's in other ways. Both believed that faith was a "sealing" or personal revelation that helped provide assurance of salvation.⁹¹ Richard Sibbes also preached about "the seal of the Spirit" as a metaphor for assurance. Bozeman suggests that Cotton's "seal of the Spirit" language could be confused with a belief in immediate revelation, which was another Antinomian doctrine. Cotton described the seal as "an immediate work of the Spirit [which]...makes us that we never doubt more."⁹² The Sibbesian strain of Puritanism that Knight identifies also seems to bear some similarities to Antinomianism. Like Antinomians the Sibbesians focused on God's love, the unconditional nature of God's grace, the indwelling of the spirit, and believed that many were destined for salvation.⁹³ Although Knight argues these were just areas of emphasis rather than doctrine, these beliefs all resemble the Antinomian variant of Puritanism as well.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Como, *Blown*, 206.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 207 n. 97, citing Samuel Clarke, *The Lives of Thirty-Two English Divines* (London, Printed for William Birch, 1677), 69.

⁹² Bozeman, 226.

⁹³ Knight, *Orthodoxies*, 3-4, 87.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4, 87, 92. For the remainder of the paper I will refer to Precisionist and Antinomian strains rather than Sibbesians or Amesians, since the former terms are broader because they are not connected to specific individuals. In addition, there is a great deal of overlap between Sibbesians and Antinomians as well as Amesians and Precisionists, which would make it difficult to discuss four strains of Puritanism without undue confusion.

Some of Cotton's beliefs in England show tendencies that would lend themselves to disunity in the church, which was probably unintentional since Cotton, despite his somewhat radical tendencies, also emphasized the importance of a united and peaceful church. These proclivities to division manifested themselves later in Massachusetts's Antinomian Controversy. For example, Bozeman points out that Cotton stressed the familiar Protestant “principle of private judgment, which requires faith ground in personal inquiry and intellectual conviction” in contrast to the Catholic “implicit faith,” which promoted the idea that Christians should “believe what the church believes.” Cotton took this doctrine to extremes that, like Antinomianism or Familism, could undermine the authority of the clergy and the Bible and even be used as a justification for immediate revelations. For example, Cotton told his parishioners not to trust the clergy as much as their own interpretation of the Bible. He said “The Spirit breathes where it lists...Then let us...not...rest in what Ministers...teach, but what the Spirit teacheth.' 'One dayes Instruction of the Spirit, will lead you into more knowledge than a hundred Sermons.’”⁹⁵

Cotton espoused a belief in prophesy. Although he did place prophetic abilities within scriptural limitations, he stressed the mystical aspects of prophesy and the importance of spreading enlightenment gained from prophesies to others. The following excerpt illustrates the potential for mysticism, anti-authoritarianism, and sectarianism in Cotton's teachings:

That many a godly man by the same spirit discernes many secret hidden mysteries, and meanings of the Holy Ghost in Scripture more then ever he could by any reading or instruction; and many times discernes some speciall work of the spirit of God, which inables them to fore-see some speciall blessings,...and so leads them on to many good

⁹⁵ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 226-227, citing “John Cotton's Treatise on the Duration of the Lord's Day,” in Sibley's Heir, Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications*, LIX (1982), 509.

things which they did little think of, and so makes them of Propheticall spirits, and bowes them to teach others also, to lead on others of their neighbours in the wayes of God.⁹⁶

In sum, Cotton's doctrinal influences while in England appear to reflect a middle ground between the Precisionist and Antinomian strains of Puritanism, which are two categories that overlap, in some ways, with Knight's conception of Amesian and Sibbesian Puritan variants. These diverse influences on Cotton's religious thought may have put him in a unique position to empathize with clergy in the Bay Colony who seemed more inclined towards the Precisionist and Antinomian poles. In addition, Cotton emphasized aspects of Puritan thought such as individual interpretation and revelations that imbued his teachings with anti-authoritarian and sectarian elements that at least showed potential for religious diversity. He minimized the threat of schism through the inclusive nature of his English church, which accommodated both Conformists and Puritans with a minimum of alienation towards either group. Cotton's doctrine on indifferent matters seemed to provide the framework for his latitude on ceremonies, church organization, and doctrinal variation.

Cotton's emigration to the new political and religious environment of Massachusetts provided little incentive for his continued accommodation of various religious beliefs and practices. Even as he travelled to Massachusetts aboard the *Griffin*, Cotton's beliefs regarding church structure seem to have been evolving. His son, Seaborne, was born on the ship, but Cotton refused to baptize him because he rejected the idea that he was still a minister based on his prior ordination in the English Church. Cotton made this decision after conferring with two other ministers on the ship, Thomas Hooker and Samuel Stone. They agreed that a congregation must first elect them before they could truly be considered ministers. Thus, Cotton's views on

⁹⁶ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* (1651), 62.

church organization already began to evolve toward Congregationalism before his arrival in Massachusetts on September 4, 1633.⁹⁷ The Bay Colony had already developed political and religious institutions several years before his arrival that also influenced the continued evolution of his thought concerning church structure.

⁹⁷ Ziff, *Career*, 80-81, 78.

III. COTTON'S EARLY COLONIAL MINISTRY

Cotton's moderation in England on indifferent matters, church membership, and purity became more rigid during the early colonial period. In terms of the rights of the laity and autonomy of congregations a more Separatist form of church structure developed. This new form of church organization allowed for less potential for clerical domination and freedom from a strict church hierarchy. Nevertheless, a precisionist emphasis on purity plagued Massachusetts and prevented many colonists from gaining church membership, which was a prerequisite for the benefits of citizenship and lay decision making power. Historian Edmund Morgan argues that although Puritans in Massachusetts were more purist than their English co-religionists, they lacked the extreme perfectionism of rigid Separatists such as Roger Williams.¹ Thus, they were able to create a practical polity that appreciated the goal of perfection but were reasonable enough to realize that it was an impossibility. Morgan thus seems to embrace the notion that ministers such as Cotton were able to find a true middle way between purity and moral liberality that was at least moderately inclusive. I argue, in contrast, that in terms of purity, the Bay Colony

¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little Brown and Company), 158; Slayden Yarbrough, "The Influence of Plymouth Colony Separatism on Salem: An Interpretation of John Cotton's Letter of 1630 to Samuel Skelton," *Church History*, 51, 290-303 (September, 1982): 294-295. Extreme Separatists like Williams rejected any form of communion with the English Church. In contrast, the Separatism that influenced Plymouth, Salem, and John Cotton came from Separatist minister John Robinson. He believed that his congregants could have "personal communion" such as "private prayer, thanksgiving, singing, profession of faith, confession, and reading or hearing read the scriptures with members of the English Church. However, he argued that Separatists should not have "church communion" with Conformists. Church communion included actions such as communications with any form "of government ecclesiastical, and the ministry thence derived." Robinson allowed his congregants to listen to preaching in the Church of England.

was in some ways more precisionist than Separatism. The obsession with purity also characterized Cotton's Boston Church. At first, Cotton's emphasis on evangelism and the subjective experience of God's grace allowed for a fairly inclusive church, but a more exclusive system was developing due to increased factionalism and an obsession with purity. The new political and religious structure that developed in Massachusetts helped to exacerbate these immoderate tendencies.

Although a small settlement was founded at Salem in 1629, the bulk of settlers to the new Massachusetts Bay Colony arrived on June 11, 1630 with John Winthrop, who was the Governor of Massachusetts. He was reelected multiple times and was governor during the latter half of the Antinomian Controversy.² These colonists soon founded the city of Boston. The wilderness environment of the New World allowed for innovations because the Puritans had no pre-existing structure to break down and no set instructions on what to create. Foster points out that the absence of English institutions and bishops allowed colonists to “mount a frontal assault on an old order before they took to building the new.”³

The Bay Colony was founded on a political covenant, which was a contract between the people and the rulers by which the settlers agreed to abide by the laws in order to further a stable society based on God's will.⁴ Winthrop summed up the political covenant as a “due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical” that was “based on mutual consent through a special overruling providence” where “the care of the public must overshadow all private respects.”⁵ If this

² Ibid., 54-55.

³ Foster, *Long Argument*, 151.

⁴ Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma*, 93-94.

⁵ John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649*, Abridged Edition, eds. Richard S. Dunn and Latitia Yeandle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8.

covenant was breached, Winthrop warned, “the lord will surely break out in wrath against us.”⁶ Thus, from the beginning of the settlement, there was a strong desire for unity and purity to create an ideal society based on God's will. The charter of the colony gave almost unlimited power to a General Court to make legislation and hear judicial disputes. The only major limitation on the Court's power was that it could not make any laws inconsistent with those of England. Since the General Court determined what was inconsistent with English law, the colony was, for all practical purposes, a sovereign state.⁷ The General Court was originally composed of eighteen assistants who were elected at large. Freemen elected the assistants but had no real political power besides this right during the first several years of settlement. When the freemen agitated for more representation, deputies were created to represent local interests in the General Court.⁸

Massachusetts was not a theocracy, but the church held power through its “advisory” role and church membership requirements. To become a freeman, which entitled an individual to political rights such as the right to vote and the right to hold political office, an individual had to be a landowner and a church member in a Puritan congregation in Massachusetts. Churches determined membership requirements, so they were able to control who ultimately would be permitted to gain political power.⁹ Magistrates often called on the clergy for advice on both civil and ecclesiastical matters. Clerical advice was not binding, but the Court frequently made decisions based on its counsel, so the divines became highly influential in the civil sphere.

⁶ Winthrop, *A Modell*, 9.

⁷ Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma*, 86.

⁸ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

Nevertheless, the clergy had no court of their own and were not allowed to hold public office, so their power was in some ways limited more than clerics in the English Church.¹⁰ The civil government had the power to suppress heresy and sedition, which were used to protect the Puritan church monopoly in Massachusetts.

The ideals of purity and unity also shaped the Puritan churches in Massachusetts. Historian Susan Hardman Moore contends that the colonists were only continuing the themes of anti-papery and purity that they had advanced while in England. They had no road map telling them how to create institutions in New England. Moore argues that the church structure in Massachusetts, “autonomous, local, voluntary, consensual,” was created as a polar opposite to the deficits that many Puritans, not just Separatists, saw in the English Church because of its “hierarchical, national, mandatory, autocratic” nature.¹¹ Thus, she attributes changes within the colony to a continuance of English ideas and the freedom of the wilderness, and she eschews the idea that any changes occurred due to the influence of Separatism. Other historians have emphasized that a moderate form of Separatism may also have influenced the church structure of Massachusetts.¹² William Ames, one of Cotton's most influential teachers, created a blueprint for congregational church organization that influenced Cotton's congregational theory. In *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* Ames asserted that the true church of Christ was not “national, provincial, or diocesan...but it is a parochial church of one congregation.” Furthermore, Ames stressed the importance of a church covenant “by which believers bind themselves individually

¹⁰ Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma*, 95-96.

¹¹ Moore, *Popery*, 281.

¹² Yarbrough, “The Influence,” 294, 290-303. In his letter to Samuel Skelton, Cotton argued that the Salem Church had come under the influence of Robinsonian Separatism from the Plymouth Colony. Cotton admitted in *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* that Robinson had influenced his doctrines regarding communion with the English Church. Yarbrough's argument, therefore, is persuasive.

to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose of the church and its edification.” Ames also argued that ministers were “either pastors and teachers or ruling elders.”¹³ In sum, the new environment of Massachusetts, the proximity to Separatist oriented congregational churches, and the influence of Ames's theory of Congregationalism likely all contributed to the church structure that developed in the Bay Colony and influenced Cotton's congregational theory as well.

The congregational church structure that developed in Massachusetts reflected the desire for independent churches with a strong laity who were not beholden to a strict hierarchy or oppressive clergy. Congregationalism was based on three groups working together: ministers, officers, and church members. Churches included two ministers, a pastor to dispense the word and a teacher to instruct the church on doctrinal matters. The clergy were “to deliver the Counsell of God to [the laity] with all Authority, to prepare matters for the Churches hearing...and to administer ordinations and censures.”¹⁴ The administration of the church was primarily in the hands of the clergy. Ruling elders also served a ministerial role. They could assist in decisions regarding membership, excommunication, suggest matters for the church to discuss, and even had a limited preaching role. The deacons had a more limited function and were primarily responsible for distributing the collection plate.¹⁵ The laity in general had the power to choose officers and ministers, to advise on church membership issues, and assist in the judgment of scandals. In the Church of England, there was no requirement for the laity to choose their

¹³ William Ames “The Marrow of Sacred Divinity,” trans. John D. Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim Press), 208, 180, 210. This three-fold ministry was used in Cotton's Massachusetts church.

¹⁴ John Cotton, *The True Constitution of a Particular and Visible Church* (1642), 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3, 8.

ministers.¹⁶ Thus, in the English Church, clergy who opposed or even sought to repress the religious views of the laity could be appointed without lay consent. The more democratic nature of Congregationalism helped to protect laypeople from this kind of oppression.

¹⁶ Cotton, *A Practical Commentary*, 157.

A. THE CHALLENGE OF ROGER WILLIAMS

The first major challenge to the newly formed civil and religious institutions in Massachusetts came from Roger Williams. Williams arrived in the Bay Colony in February 1631. He was offered the position of teacher of the Boston church, but he refused it because the congregation would not renounce the Church of England as a false church.¹⁷ Williams's stance on the illegitimacy of the national church was a standard Separatist belief that was not shared by the non-Separating Congregationalists in Massachusetts. Like many Separatists, Williams stressed higher standards of purity, church autonomy, and separation of the civil and ecclesiastical spheres. Ironically, Williams's challenge to political and religious institutions in the Bay Colony likely helped spawn an increased level of civil interference in church affairs and less church autonomy. Increased civil power and more mutual interaction between Puritan churches in Massachusetts did not transform Massachusetts into an oppressive civil and ecclesiastical tyranny, however. As early as April 12, 1631, Williams voiced his opposition to civil regulation of religious matters. Williams also argued that the king did not have the power to grant Indian lands. Williams's Separatism threatened the colonial patent, because regulation of the colony rested in the hands of the king as well as of Archbishop William Laud, who was given control of a royal commission to regulate the colony.¹⁸

The General Court realized the threat Williams posed and became furious when the Salem Church chose him as their teacher. The magistrates insisted that the Salem Church should “forbear to proceed” with Williams’s official installation as teacher until the General Court “had

¹⁷ Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma*, 116-117.

¹⁸ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 216-217, 219.

conferred about it.”¹⁹ This incident was the first time the General Court interfered with the autonomy of a covenanted church. To avoid civil interference, Williams attempted to exercise the right of independent congregations to withdraw communion from other churches. He sought to separate the Salem church from other churches in Massachusetts, but the Salemites were unwilling to take such a drastic step.²⁰ During the summer of 1635, Thomas Hooker, John Cotton and others tried to persuade Williams to back down.²¹ A defiant Williams was brought before the General Court on November 26, 1635 and refused to retract any of his opinions, so the Court banished him. He was permitted to stay in Massachusetts until spring, but Williams was banished in the middle of winter after it was discovered that he was spreading his views among a small conventicle of about twenty followers.²² The magistrates sought to capture him and ship him back to England, but he escaped and founded the colony of Rhode Island, which, unlike Massachusetts, was based on the principle of religious toleration. The churches also limited congregational autonomy in the wake of the controversies with Williams. In response to “remnants of the Williams faction in Salem,” reverend Hugh Peter created a revised covenant for his congregation that bound it “to use the counsel of 'our sister churches.'”²³ In sum, the reaction to Williams helped mold the future church structure and civil and religious interaction in the colony. The full autonomy of congregations had posed a threat to stability in the Bay Colony. Like some Separatist churches the Massachusetts congregations would in time call synods to

¹⁹ John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649: Abridged Edition*, eds. Richard S. Dunn and Latitia Yeandle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 37, 37 n. 92.

²⁰ Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal*, 83.

²¹ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 190.

²² Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal*, 85, 87.

²³ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 189.

solve their religious disputes, but their advisory nature began to give way to a more binding power similar to Presbyterianism.

Williams was in many ways more purist than other colonists. His extreme precisionism may be contrasted with Cotton's changing notions of indifferent matters, purity, and church membership. Williams criticized Cotton for his lenience and argued that popish beliefs or practices should exclude individuals from membership.²⁴ Williams argued that prayer with unregenerate persons, even family members, should not be permitted. Oaths could be given only to the elect.²⁵ His insistence on following what he saw as apostolic Christian purity led him to support the idea that women should be veiled in church, a position Cotton opposed.²⁶ Eventually, he became so purist that he refused to have Communion with anyone except his wife. His focus on salvaging the pure from the reprobate world was evident in his advice for the regenerate to “abstract yourself with holy violence from the Dung heape of the Earth.”²⁷ Williams's purism was also evident in his beliefs concerning excommunication. Williams argued that anyone who visited England and attended any sermons in the Church of England should be excommunicated. Cotton did not support this position, and excommunication rarely occurred in his church.²⁸ Cotton argued that Williams's demands for perfectionism went to extremes and that he needed to adopt a more moderate course.

²⁴ Cotton to Roger Williams, Early 1636, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 212, 216; Ziff, *Career*, 215-216.

²⁵ Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620-1660* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 42; Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal*, 82.

²⁶ Gura, *Glimpse*, 41.

²⁷ Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma*, 130.

²⁸ John Cotton, *The Controversie concerning Liberty of Conscience in Matters of Religion* (1649), 11; Emerson, *John Cotton*, 61. From 1634 to 1652, he only excommunicated five church members. Given the divisiveness of the Antinomian Controversy, this number is quite low.

B. COTTON'S EMPHASIS ON OBEDIENCE AND PURITY

Unlike Williams, Cotton had become a respected member of the clerical establishment and cooperated with the civil government and other congregational churches to establish new standards of uniformity and purity for the Bay Colony. Cotton's changing doctrines on indifferent matters and some of the changes he introduced into the church membership rules in Massachusetts reflected his desire for stability and piety. In 1635, Cotton began working on several documents that show how his views of religious moderation and disobedience to oppression regarding indifferent matters had changed. He no longer had to worry about conformity to the Church of England, so the incentive for compromise with non-Puritans was reduced. He was now a prestigious member of the clergy who exercised a great deal of influence through his advisory role to the General Court. Thus, he had an incentive to support obedience to the government, and Williams's recent disturbances may have triggered a strong impulse for unity in Cotton that contrasted with his earlier advocacy of resistance to enforced conformity.

In 1635, Cotton wrote *The Controversy Concerning Liberty of Conscience in Matters of Religion* in response to "a friend." In *Some Treasure* written in 1618, Cotton had divided indifferent matters into three categories: "indifferent decent matters," "expedient and indifferent matters," and "necessary and decent matters." Obedience to the church and civil government was required regarding indifferent matters that were "necessary and decent matters" whereas "expedient and indifferent matters" could be enforced by the civil magistrates but not the church. Finally, individuals had a duty to disobey both the church and state on matters that were

“indifferent and decent.”²⁹ In *The Controversy*, Cotton condensed the categories to only two: religious doctrines or practices that were “fundamental” to salvation or “circumstantial” matters that did not threaten salvation.³⁰ This change seems fairly minor, but his views regarding disobedience on indifferent matters changed more drastically.

In *Some Treasure*, those who objected to laws that were indifferent and decent were charged with a *duty to disobey* these laws in order to combat sin and prevent the government and religious officials from gaining too much power.³¹ By contrast, in *The Controversy*, Cotton argued that individuals could be zealous in their views but could hold circumstantial matters only “in a spirit of Christian meekness and love.” Furthermore, religious dissenters were required to obey laws on these indifferent matters even if the laws pertaining to them were “erroneous and unlawful.”³² Now that Cotton was part of the power structure rather than opposed to it, his advocacy of civil disobedience to the enforcement of *adiaphora* had waned. Cotton’s emphasis on accommodation for non-Puritan congregants had also begun to fade because the English Church could no longer pressure him to abide congregants who failed to live up to Puritan ideals.

Cotton's enhanced desire for purity was visible in his writings and in the church covenants that developed in the Bay Colony. In England, Cotton had established a church that had an internal group of covenanted members, but those who did not join these covenants were considered members of the congregation and were allowed to receive the sacraments. There was a need to compromise for the sake of unity with Conformist clergy and laity, which produced a

²⁹ Cotton, *Some Treasure*, 2-4.

³⁰ Cotton, *Controversie*, 7.

³¹ Cotton, *Some Treasure*, 8.

³² Cotton, *Controversie*, 7.

more inclusive church in England. In 1630, Cotton had rebuked Samuel Skelton for refusing to allow colonists who were not covenanted members of a specific congregation to participate in Communion and baptism. The enhanced desire for purity and the ability to avoid the compromises with Conformists quickly rubbed off on Cotton, however. Shortly after his arrival in Boston in 1633, he supported a covenant-based form of church membership that excluded all of those who did not join the covenant from the sacraments or any voting rights in the congregation.³³

Cotton's changing thought regarding covenants was reflected in *The True Constitution of a Particular and Visible Church*, written in 1635. In England, Cotton emphasized that covenants were optional and not necessarily a surer route to salvation. Furthermore, there were no requirements, except perhaps confirmation, to be a church member and receive the sacraments. In New England, Cotton altered his description of a church significantly. He now defined it as “a Mystical body (1) whereof Christ is the head (2) the members and saints (3) called out of the World (4) and united together into one congregation (5) by an holy covenant (6) to worship the Lord, and to come one another in all his holy Ordinances. (7).”³⁴ In England, the church was united through fellowship in one place, but now Cotton asserted that covenants bound members together. Cotton insisted that covenants were mandatory for membership and limited only to a select group of saints “called out of the world.”³⁵ Only these “visible saints” could become

³³ Yarbrough, “The Influence,” 294, 299. The church covenant for the Boston Church said the following: “I do promise, by the grace and help of the Lord Jesus, that I will give myself to the Lord Jesus, making him my only priest and atonement, my only prophet and guide, my only king and law giver, and that I will yield subjection to him in his church, and all his ordinances herein according to the Gospel, and will walk with the church in memberly love and succor, according to God.” Emerson, *John Cotton*, 37.

³⁴ Cotton, *True Constitution*, 1-2.

³⁵ Ibid.

official members of the congregation and participate with the clergy in decision-making.³⁶ The church became more exclusive doctrinally and morally, which left little room for concern for non-members.

In Massachusetts, non-members were still forced to attend church, however, even though their lack of membership suggested that they were more likely to be among the damned.³⁷

Although Cotton argued that the Puritan church in Massachusetts was not a national church, mandatory attendance gave the Puritan churches a monopoly.³⁸ They had in effect created a non-consensual national church, which was conducive to Cotton's desire for "unity in the foundation of religion and church order."³⁹

Some historians have argued that non-members were satisfied with their plight because Massachusetts was stable and no major rebellions occurred there.⁴⁰ The lack of rebellions is a rather minimalist standard of contentment. Timothy Breen and Stephen Foster's conclusion is surprising since non-church members had no formal power over church decision-making, were banned from taking Communion, and were not even allowed to vote or hold political office. Furthermore, non-members did voice opposition to these laws. For example, Thomas Lechford, a lawyer who lived in Massachusetts for three years declared in disgust: "The people begin to complain, they are ruled like slaves, and in short time shall have their children for the most part

³⁶ Non-members will be labeled as such rather than as "the laity."

³⁷ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 206-207.

³⁸ John Cotton, *The Bloody Tenent, Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe* (1647), 156.

³⁹ John Cotton and John Wilson to Sir Richard Saltonstall, 1652, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 503. It is questionable whether Wilson co-authored this document.

⁴⁰ Timothy H. Breen and Stephen Foster, "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," in *Puritan New England: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 113, 110-127.

remain unbaptized: and so have little more privilege than Heathens, unless the discipline be amended and moderated.”⁴¹ Miller points out that the Puritans “dismissed the shadowy non-members from their speculations as persons of no ecclesiastical importance.”⁴² Cotton's writings seem to support Miller's assessment. In *The True Constitution*, Cotton focused only on the rights of members and ignored the role of non-members in church activities.

Increased pressures for piety may have prompted stricter church admissions standards. Theodore Bozeman argues that the Antinomian strain of Puritanism in both England and Massachusetts was precipitated by “the grueling, costly regime of precise and pietist faith.” In England, Puritans with their private gatherings, fasts and covenants were able to stand out and display their elect status more easily through their works. In Massachusetts, most of the original colonists were Puritans and government was guided by their religious doctrines, so many Bay Colony Puritans lost their sense of specialness and their persecuted minority status which had helped them to forge a powerful spiritual identity in England. They fell into a spiritual slump. The church member requirement may have helped them distinguish themselves from those who did not live up to certain ideals of purity.⁴³ The requirement that new members could not be admitted without the consent of current members may also have served to filter out the impure.⁴⁴

Most historians agree that the church membership requirements in Massachusetts became more rigid within a decade of settlement, but they are not certain exactly when or why this change took place. At first, the Massachusetts churches required prospective members “to

⁴¹ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 207.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 233, 246.

⁴⁴ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 47.

profess only 'historical faith,' that is, an assent to the major doctrines of Christianity. Within a few years of John Cotton's arrival in 1633, most churches added a test of 'grace' or conversion."⁴⁵ Some historians have tried to trace this requirement back to the Elizabethan period, but historian Stephen Brachlow points out that "Cotton was the first major figure to depart from the prevailing puritan assurance dependent not upon sanctification but an inner experience of grace."⁴⁶ If Antinomianism is considered a "strain" of Puritanism, however, then assurance of salvation based solely on grace did predate Cotton. Church membership was gained through testimony before the church of a conversion experience. Those who passed this ordeal were called "visible saints." Cotton was the main advocate for the new test of grace. The original intent of the test may have been to bind the community together rather than to exclude, for within six months of Cotton's arrival in September, 1633, sixty-three people joined the Boston Church, which was a record.⁴⁷ Brachlow argues that the test may have been developed because of Cotton's theory of salvation through grace rather than through the motive to exclude.⁴⁸ By 1635, Spiritual enthusiasm began to wane as colonists became anxiety ridden over their spiritual condition. The grace requirement probably became more of a hurdle after the Antinomian Controversy.⁴⁹ Only about half of Boston's population during the first generation were church members.⁵⁰

Membership may have been limited because of the Puritan rejection of Conformist liturgy. In England, Cotton had a chaplain who catered to the ceremonial needs of Conformists in

⁴⁵ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 33.

⁴⁶ Brachlow, *Communion*, 133.

⁴⁷ Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 178-179.

⁴⁸ Brachlow, *Communion*, 134.

⁴⁹ Stoeber, *Faire*, 24-25.

⁵⁰ Delbanco, *Puritan Ordeal*, 11.

the congregation and had defended the Book of Common Prayer as a matter indifferent because set prayers were not forbidden in the Bible. By 1635, Cotton had abandoned this view. Set prayers were now not permissible because they were not specifically mentioned in the Bible.⁵¹ Cotton's shift towards more strict biblicism and rejection of Conformist liturgy indicated that he was influenced by precisionist tendencies in the early colonial years, even though doctrines akin to Antinomianism also influenced his thought.

Cotton conceded that there were some limits to purity required for membership. He still allowed membership to those with “some 'superstitions' in their former practice the sinfulness of which they remain uncertain about.” Cotton was concerned with “weak” Christians as well, for even if Christians had some doubts about their salvation, he would not necessarily exclude them from membership.⁵²

In sum, Cotton began to endorse a less inclusive church structure in Massachusetts in many ways. He had become less moderate on indifferent matters, liturgical issues, and church membership rules. Although Cotton's test of grace may have begun with evangelistic notions of inclusion, it eventually degenerated into an exclusive church membership requirement, albeit not primarily through Cotton's actions alone. The church membership rules were even more exclusive than the Separatist standard, which was based primarily only on pious works and the fact of Separation itself. The existence of this subclass of non-members should temper arguments made by historians such as Edmund Morgan that Massachusetts was able to establish a practical church structure that somehow established a true middle way between excessive moral liberality and Separatist perfectionism.

⁵¹ John Cotton, *True Constitution*, 6.

⁵² Cotton to Roger Williams, Early 1636, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 212, 216.

IV. THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY

Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy is probably the most contentious historiographical debate about his life. He has been portrayed as a mainstream Puritan, a radical Antinomian, a theological turncoat, a traitor to his friends, and a staunch defender of Antinomian theology. I argue that Cotton's blend of Antinomian and Puritan doctrines, which could be called Cottonian, placed him in the role of conciliator between the Antinomian and Precisionist factions. Ironically, his Antinomian tendencies included sectarian, anti-authoritarian elements that prompted the need for reconciliation in the first place. In general, he displayed more support for the Antinomians and retained most of his beliefs after the conflict, albeit less openly. He did not betray his friends to salvage his place in the power structure in Massachusetts. He turned his back on Anne Hutchinson toward the end of the Antinomian controversy only because her beliefs had descended into Familist doctrines that virtually all Puritans would have found intolerable.¹ In addition, Cotton openly opposed some of the political decisions made to suppress the Antinomians and helped achieve toleration for some doctrinal differences. At Anne Hutchinson's church trial, however, Cotton helped modify Congregationalism in ways that discouraged

¹ Familism was a term used “against the Family of Love” an obscure religious sect found by Henrich Niclaes. Terms like “Familist” and “Antinomian” were also used to demonize individuals who held views that were not even associated with either sect. Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 319. Many of the beliefs Familists held overlap with Antinomianism. Like the Antinomians, Familists believed in the preeminence of the spirit over scripture. They also held more divergent doctrines such as belief in personal union with the Holy Spirit, the morality of the soul, the denial of the resurrection of the body, the belief that the godly cannot sin, and immediate revelations not based upon the scripture. Stoever, *Faire*, 163, 232, n. 11. Anne Hutchinson will be discussed in greater detail shortly.

religious diversity and an inclusive church structure. Thus, Cotton made some minor contributions that prevented complete political and doctrinal uniformity, but his modifications of Congregationalism towards the end of the conflict created a somewhat more rigid church structure, although it did not become a Laudian prelacy.

The Antinomian controversy began due to a theological dispute regarding how believers obtain assurance of their salvation. Assurance meant that individuals could feel comfort that they were among the elect who would be saved. Assurance did not mean that an individual was saved (justified), for only God could determine who was saved or damned, but it at least might give people some sense that they were likely among God's chosen.² The most vocal of the Precisionist leaders in Massachusetts, Pastor Thomas Shepard, argued that sanctification (holiness achieved through good works) could provide evidence that an individual was saved, and the lack of good works showed that an individual was likely among the damned.³ Thus, even though God ultimately chose who was justified, the Precisionist doctrine of assurance prompted individuals to focus on good works to assuage any internal doubts they had that they were among the saved. In addition, individuals had an incentive to display their pious deeds to others as evidence that they were of the elect. In contrast, Cotton and the Antinomians stressed that sanctification could not be evidence of justification.⁴ Grace preceded sanctification. Cotton supported this doctrine because of his belief in predestination and man's utter dependence on God. God was almighty and chose who would be saved, so man could not bind God's will through good works.⁵ Once

² Winship, *Making*, 4, 16; Stoever, *Faire*, 53.

³ Winship., *Making*, 16.

⁴ Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious*, 47; Stoever, *Faire*, 53, 26, 180.

⁵ Emery Battis, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 31.

elected, an individual could never fall from this state of grace. Thus, individuals who sinned could still be saved and works were not relevant to salvation

Recently, some historians, especially those focusing on theology, have argued that English Antinomianism and Familism most likely did influence the Antinomians in Massachusetts. William K.B. Stoever and Michael Winship both argue that geographic origins suggest Antinomian connections.⁶ Stoever points out that “London and the eastern counties were long regarded principal habitat of English Antinomians; there were more London and Lincolnshire people in Boston than elsewhere in the Bay Colony, and it seems scarcely accidental that New England Antinomianism was concentrated in the Boston Church.”⁷ David Como does not state definitively that the New England “Antinomians” were the offspring of England’s Antinomians and Familists. However, he asserts that Bay Colony Puritans would have associated arguments denouncing evidence of justification from the covenant of works with English Antinomians such as John Eaton.⁸

⁶ Stoever, *Faire*, 168; Winship, *Making*, 230.

⁷ Stoever, *Faire*, 168.

⁸ Como, *Blown*, 441-442.

A. THE IMPORTANCE AND CAUSES OF THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY

The Antinomian controversy was important for a variety of reasons. It helped shape the Bay Colony's political and ecclesiastical institutions. It resulted in two major civil trials against alleged heretics. Cotton testified on behalf of these supposed heretics in both of these trials, but the dissenters were banished nonetheless. The civil government used these trials and new statutes passed during the conflict to strengthen their authority and protect the church from religious dissent. The church responded to the crisis with the formation of a synod, which defined various heresies and attempted to strengthen Massachusetts Congregationalism against religious pluralism. The Boston church strengthened its authority through excommunication proceedings against religious dissidents.

The Antinomian controversy had ramifications that affected not just Massachusetts but all of colonial New England and beyond. Antinomian refugees reshaped the political geography of New England. Religious dissenters colonized New Hampshire and bolstered the small populations of Rhode Island and Maine. Connecticut received its first substantial influx of English colonists after Thomas Hooker, a Precisionist minister and former theologian at Cambridge, left Massachusetts perhaps due to religious differences with Cotton on the issue of grace. The infusion of new dissenters into Rhode Island led to the creation of new towns, increased the colony's small, fledgling population, and made Massachusetts, which had made attempts to annex Rhode Island, more wary about absorbing a land full of its exiled undesirables. Since Rhode Island provided the earliest example of the full separation of the civil and ecclesiastical spheres in the colonies, it became a model for new colonies and states that also embraced this radical new ideal. If Massachusetts had annexed Rhode Island, Rhode Island's

blueprint of religious freedom may not have become influential, and we can only speculate what kind of relationship between the church and state would have developed in the colonies and later in the United States. Cotton's moderate position during the Antinomian controversy was important because the outcome of the conflict hinged to a substantial degree upon his decisions.

Finally, the Antinomian controversy was important in terms of its international implications. It was “the first serious confrontation of an established Puritan society with its own radical offspring and therein heralded things to come.”⁹ The suppression of the Antinomians was used as an example to show the English populace that New England Congregationalism could produce unity. Opponents of Congregationalism such as the Presbyterians in England, who were trying to establish a new national church, argued that the New England Way had created societal and religious chaos for several years in Massachusetts.¹⁰ Therefore, many Presbyterians concluded that Congregationalism was dangerous to religious unity and should not provide a framework for a new national church. The Antinomian controversy also led to increased debates concerning the proper balancing of religious suppression or toleration for the formation of social stability. Because of the various religious and political implications of the Antinomian controversy, it was likely the most important religious conflict in seventeenth-century English North America.

The Antinomian controversy not only had numerous implications but also a myriad of causes. Historians disagree about what were the main precipitants of the Antinomian controversy. Some historians blame a particular person, often Anne Hutchinson, for spreading Antinomian

⁹ Stoever, *Faire*, 29.

¹⁰ “The New England Way” refers to Congregationalism in New England.

beliefs and then falsely attributing these views to John Cotton.¹¹ Anne Hutchinson was born in 1591 in Alford, England. Her father, Francis Marbury, was a Conformist minister while her mother was a Puritan. She married William Hutchinson, a cloth merchant and farmer, who was elected as a deputy to the General Court in Massachusetts. The couple had fifteen children. She served as a nurse and midwife in England and Massachusetts. She visited Cotton's church in Boston, England, from time to time, even though it was a day's ride from Alford. Hutchinson considered herself an ardent follower of his teachings. Winthrop and Cotton both described her as an intelligent, bold woman.¹² She was blamed as the fomenter of the conflict because of her conventicle and her denunciations of most ministers in the colony as false preachers.¹³ Although Hutchinson was an important figure in the conflict, there were a variety of other colonists who helped foment the conflict, and Hutchinson's doctrines were similar to Cotton's throughout most of the controversy.

Historians have begun to focus more on the theological and political causes of the Antinomian controversy rather than emphasizing the role of a particular individual. Kai Erikson focuses on the conflict based on the psychological construct of deviance and emphasized the political and social aspects of the controversy. Erikson concentrates on the civil trials and sedition charges that developed from political contention and the power dynamics of dissent. He generally dismisses the importance of the theological aspects of the conflict. For example, he argues that the clergy used membership requirements as a "political instrument" but "cloaked

¹¹ Ziff, *Career*, ch. 4; Batts, *Saints*, 91.

¹² Emery Batts, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 7, 177-179, 12-13, 75, 15, 6.

¹³ Hall, *Antinomian*, 316, 318.

[their differences] in the language of theology.”¹⁴ Erikson cites Cotton Mather, Cotton's grandson, and historian Charles Francis Adams to support his lack of theological emphasis. Cotton Mather stated that “multitudes of the persons who took in with both parties did, never to their dying hour understand what their difference was.”¹⁵ Erikson quotes historian Charles Francis Adams's interesting opinion of the theological dispute:

Not only were the points in dispute obscure, but the discussion was carried on in a jargon which has become unintelligible; and, from a theological point of view, it is now devoid of interest. At most, it can excite only a faint curiosity as one more example of the childish excitement over trifles by which people everywhere and at all times are liable to be swept away from the moorings of common sense.¹⁶

Michael Winship looks at the controversy primarily “as political, as personalities, personal agendas, and an ongoing process of judgment calls, stakings of positions, and shifting coalitions, a series of short-term events having short-term effects with cumulative results”¹⁷ He argues that Henry Vane, an Antinomian follower of Cotton who later became governor of Massachusetts, exacerbated theological tensions because he opposed Precisionism, which most political officials in the colony had embraced. Shortly after his arrival in 1635, he began to accumulate substantial political power. In May 1636, Henry Vane was elected governor, despite his young age. Winship suggests that Vane's political prestige and religious zeal alienated

¹⁴ Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), 86-87.

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Hartford: Silas Andrus, 1853), I, 508.

¹⁶ Charles Francis Adams, *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History: The Settlement of Boston Bay; The Antinomian Controversy; A Study of Church and Town Government* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), 367.

¹⁷ Winship, *Making*, 2.

Precisionists, helped Hutchinson's conventicle to grow in size, and may have even influenced the theological views of Cotton and Hutchinson.¹⁸

Theodore Bozeman emphasizes the theological aspects of the Antinomian controversy. He stresses that the grueling Precisionist regimen may have precipitated an Antinomian backlash. Cotton's emphasis on Antinomian ideas may have evolved to help Bay colonists through their religious malaise.¹⁹ In contrast, Perry Miller argues that Puritan covenant theology gave believers a greater sense of assurance because works helped provide them evidence of their salvation.²⁰ Bozeman notes, however, that Precisionist writings reflect a preoccupation with “sabbaths, fasts, meditations, and introspections and of intertwined obsessions with obedience” that undermined their sense of assurance compared to Antinomians.²¹

The Antinomian controversy involved theological and political aspects that were inextricably linked. The change in church membership rules reflected this reality. In the early 1630's, Cotton and John Wilson, Pastor of the Boston Church, were aware that they had differing views on the relationship between sanctification, justification, and assurance but were able to get around these differences. The church membership requirements of the Boston Church initially only required an individual to be a “visible saint.” Cotton conceded that he could not tell for certain who was justified and that some who were justified might have no sense of assurance of their own salvation.²² Until 1636, prospective members only had to give a confession of faith and

¹⁸ Ibid., 55, 227.

¹⁹ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 240.

²⁰ Stoever, *Faire*, 12-13, citing Perry Miller, “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,” *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 32 (1937), 254, 278, 284-86, 289.

²¹ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 236; Stoever, *Faire*, 58-59.

²² Winship, *Making*, 36.

lead an outwardly holy life to become church members.²³ Thus, in the early colonial years membership barriers had been established, but they had not yet become extremely rigid.

The Puritan need to separate themselves from the ungodly pervaded the colony and led to stricter church membership requirements. Unlike in England, Puritans dominated the institutions and culture of New England, so it became difficult to distinguish the godly from the ungodly. To help discern who was truly among the elect, a new church membership requirement developed in 1636, the first year of the Antinomian controversy, that required “prospective church members to publicly testify to a work of grace within their souls.”²⁴ As part of their public testimony, prospective members “were expected to exhibit the spiritual combat and 'mourning for sin' that marked the pietist way.”²⁵ Meanwhile, the Antinomian faction sought to prohibit Precisionists from admission to membership.

The growing theological factionalism and changes in church membership rules may have had their genesis in doctrinal disputations between John Cotton and a Precisionist minister named Thomas Shepard. Shepard was born in 1605 and was a minister in Earles Colne, Essex. He was expelled by Laud in 1630, even though he was a moderate Puritan.²⁶ After living in hiding for five years, Shepard left for Massachusetts and arrived in August 1635. He became minister of Newtown (later Cambridge) in February 1636 as a replacement for Thomas Hooker.²⁷

Shepard's theological questioning of Cotton's religious doctrines began with an exchange

²³ Ibid., 75; Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 240.

²⁴ Winship, *Making*, 75.

²⁵ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 240.

²⁶ Winship, *Making*, 12.

²⁷ Stoeve, *Faire*, 30.

of letters sometime between February 1, 1636 and June 1, 1636. Shepard's first letter to Cotton may have been the earliest document of the Antinomian controversy.²⁸ Shepard expressed concern that Cotton was elevating revelations above scripture and stressing the importance of grace without any emphasis on sanctification. Shepard asked him “whether this revelation of the spirit, is a thing beyond the word...[or whether] the spirit is not separated from the word but in it and is ever according to it.”²⁹ Although Cotton agreed that revelations must always be part of the “sense and Intendment of the Word,” he also emphasized that the spirit could provide “comfort and Power to the soule” that was “above, and beyond the letter of the word.”³⁰ To Shepard, Cotton's emphasis on the spirit above the word seemed akin to Familism. Cotton rejected sanctification as evidence of justification because he did “not wish christians to build the signes of their Adoption upon [any] sanctification, But such as floweth from faith in christ jesus.”³¹ Shepard's letter marks the beginning of a barrage of theological queries aimed at Cotton from various ministers until August 1637. Shepard expressed his misgivings about Antinomian doctrine publicly in June 1636, in a series of sermons on the parable of the ten virgins that lasted until May 1640. During this time, “Shepard took occasion to review and assail free grace ideals, explicitly, frequently, and in some detail.” He lamented that in the Bay Colony “if a man fasts, prays, watches his distempers, mourns..., and follows God hard here, he is a legal Christian.”³² Even in 1645 Shepard “still thought that Cotton's 'familist' position on the issue [of assurance]

²⁸ Hall, *Antinomian*, 24-25.

²⁹ Thomas Shepard to John Cotton, Between 1 February 1636 and 1 June 1636, in *Bush Correspondence*, 227.

³⁰ John Cotton to Thomas Shepard, Between 1 February 1636 and 1 June 1636, in *Bush Correspondence*, 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

³² Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 245, 310, 327.

had been the font of all of the other errors that emanated from Boston.”³³

³³ Winship, *Making*, 133.

B. JOHN WHEELWRIGHT'S FAST DAY SERMON AND TRIAL

The Antinomian controversy broadened from Shepard's denunciations of free grace at his church in Cambridge, into a broader dispute in the Boston Church and throughout Massachusetts on Sunday, October 23, 1636 when the Boston Church invited John Wheelwright to give a sermon. Wheelwright, Anne Hutchinson's brother-in-law, had recently arrived from England. Wheelwright had been a vicar in Bilsby, a town about a mile from Alford. He studied theology at Cambridge and received a Master of Arts Degree. In 1632, he was removed from his ministry because of his Puritan beliefs.³⁴ The Antinomians wanted him to be granted a teaching position alongside Cotton in the Boston Church.³⁵

During Wheelwright's sermon, Winthrop interrupted him and denounced Wheelwright's doctrines as unbiblical. Pastor Wilson and John Winthrop were two of the most prestigious members of the Precisionist camp, but Cotton, Wheelwright, Hutchinson, and Governor Henry Vane, as well as the majority of the church, leaned toward Antinomian doctrines. Internal divisions were based not only on doctrine but also on Anne Hutchinson's contention that only John Cotton and John Wheelwright were able teachers of the Gospel. Other pastors were deeply offended and were likely jealous of the fact that only Cotton and Wheelwright were labeled as true ministers.

To bridge the doctrinal divide between the Precisionists and the Antinomians, John Cotton and John Wheelwright attended a private conference with other ministers in the Bay on

³⁴ Ibid., 57-58.

³⁵ Battis, *Saints*, 121.

October, 25, 1636.³⁶ At the meeting, Cotton and Wheelwright were asked about their views regarding sanctification and union with Christ. Both Wheelwright and Cotton stated at the meeting that they believed that sanctification could be seen as evidence of justification, but justification preceded sanctification, which Winthrop said Cotton had “delivered plainly in public, divers times.” Both ministers also attested to their belief in the indwelling of the Holy Ghost within the believer, but, unlike Hutchinson and Henry Vane, they stated that this indwelling was not a “personal union.”³⁷ Christ did not literally dwell within the soul of the believer. Anne Hutchinson and Henry Vane's view that Christ literally dwelt within the soul of the believer was based on Familist doctrine.³⁸ A compromise was reached regarding Wheelwright's employment. Instead of being appointed to a teaching position alongside Cotton, he was relegated to minister over a small church outside Boston.³⁹ This decision only increased the divisions in Massachusetts since Cotton had wanted Wheelwright to serve as a minister in Boston.

On Saturday, December 31, 1636, Governor Vane condemned Pastor Wilson, who had “delivered a speech to the General Court that many deemed offensive.” Wilson blamed Antinomianism in Boston as the font of all dissension in the Bay Colony.⁴⁰ Most of the congregation wanted to censure him. Despite Cotton's opposition to Wilson's doctrine, he

³⁶ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, I*, 1630-1649, 239-240.

³⁷ Winthrop, *Journal*, 106.

³⁸ Battis, *Saints*, 122; Stoever, *Faire*, 232 n. 11.

³⁹ Battis, *Saints*, 124.

⁴⁰ Stoever, *Faire*, 27.

intervened on behalf of the small minority that opposed the measure.⁴¹ At this same General Court session, Cotton rebuked Wilson's religious opinions with a "grave exhortation," but this action may have been prompted by Wilson's initial denunciatory speech. Furthermore, Cotton at least blocked the formal censure that his more radicalized followers favored.⁴²

To mend the divisions in the Bay Colony the General Court called a fast on January 19, 1637. Cotton spoke before Wheelwright and delivered a message of moderation and reconciliation. Cotton preached "that it was not a fit worke for a day of Fast, to...provoke to contention [but] ...to labour [for] pacification."⁴³ Wheelwright was also given the opportunity to deliver a sermon to work toward religious understanding.⁴⁴ Instead of delivering a message of compromise or tolerance, as Cotton had, he chose to use violent rhetoric that inflamed factious passions and threatened the security of the civil government and church. He compared those under a covenant of works to antichristians and pagans and derided them as a great danger to the state and church.⁴⁵ Wheelwright proclaimed: "We must all prepare for a spirituall combat...wheresoever we live, if we would have the Lord Jesus Christ to be abundantly present with us, we must all of us prepare for battell and come out against the enimyes of the Lord, and if we do not strive, those under a covenant of works will prevaile."⁴⁶

Wheelwright acknowledged that his sermon would "cause combustion in the Church and common wealth." Nevertheless, he preached that God was pleased to see that the fire was

⁴¹ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 48.

⁴² Stoever, *Faire*, 27.

⁴³ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 293.

⁴⁴ Batts, *Saints*, 143.

⁴⁵ John Wheelwright, *A Fast-Day Sermon*, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 163, 171.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

“kindled,” and he lauded the coming “battle betweene Gods people and those that are not.” His constant use of violent imagery, while qualified with the word “spiritually,” tended to incite fears of violence and spread factionalism.⁴⁷ Theodore Bozeman observes that “John Wheelwright's Fast Day sermon of early 1637 exudes more belligerent machismo than any other recorded speech from seventeenth-century English America.”⁴⁸ Winthrop's charge that John Wheelwright's application of scripture used violent allusions that could have jeopardized the peace of the commonwealth was not groundless, especially since the purpose of the sermon was to heal religious differences.⁴⁹

Although Cotton and Wheelwright usually held similar doctrines, there were some differences that indicated that Familism influenced Wheelwright more than it did Cotton. For example, Bozeman notes that, unlike Cotton but like some English Antinomians, Wheelwright rejected the entire idea of a fast as a kind of works-righteousness.⁵⁰ In addition, Como notes that, like some Antinomians, Wheelwright was willing to label fellow Puritans as Antichrists, a term usually reserved for the Pope. Thus, Wheelwright's behavior would probably have indicated to his “dumbfounded listeners” that he had Familist tendencies, although Wheelwright denied that he had ever supported Familist doctrines.⁵¹ Supporting the rabble-rousing aspects of Wheelwright's speech, Vane “defended [Wheelwright's] assertion that preaching the gospel of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁸ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 327.

⁴⁹ John Winthrop, “A Short Story of the Rise, reign, and ruine of the Antinomians, Familists, & Libertines,” in Hall, *Antinomian*, 260.

⁵⁰ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 294-296.

⁵¹ Como, *Blown*, 443; Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 306.

free grace must break the colony's peace and spoke of 'turneing the world upside downe.'"⁵²

Cotton lacked the Antinomian tendency to denounce the applicability of the moral law of the Old Testament to the regenerate, to label his Puritan opponents as Antichrists, or reject the importance of works such as fasts, which showed a continued level of precisionism in his thought. His blending of Antinomian and Precisionist strains of Puritanism could be described as Cottonianism.

Precisionist ministers sought to convince Cotton to turn his back on Wheelwright and the Antinomians, but he refused. In January, 1637, probably shortly after Wheelwright's fast-day sermon, "Massachusetts ministers" sent Cotton a letter asking him to stand against the Antinomian faction. They used uniformity as a lure to persuade Cotton to come to their aid, arguing "you cannot be ignorant of which way the stream of most Divines, both of our own Country & others runs."⁵³

Although they acknowledged that Cotton did not make public statements that seemed to favor either side in the dispute on grace, other passages from the letter indicated that he had sided with the Antinomian faction despite pressure from most of the ministers in the Bay. The ministers stated that "sundry things which you have publickly uttered, were darkly & doubtfully delivered." They also expressed dissatisfaction with Cotton's vague equivocating answers to their theological questions and stated that they need more than consent from him to proceed against the dissenters. Instead, they required his "seasonable reproof of those that dissent."⁵⁴

After Wheelwright's sermon, a law was passed that strengthened the power of the General

⁵² Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 337.

⁵³ Massachusetts Ministers to John Cotton, January, 1637, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 252-253.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Court, which was soon to charge him with heresy and sedition based on his fast day sermon. The law prohibited the churches from questioning the speeches of members of the General Court and permitted the magistrates to punish individuals prior to church discipline in heresies “or errors of any church member as are manifest and dangerous to the state.”⁵⁵

The General Court met on March 9, 1637 and charged Wheelwright with heresy and sedition, although they only found him guilty of sedition rather than religious doctrine.⁵⁶ On the heresy charge, Wheelwright was asked whether faith came into existence before justification “and was only active afterward” and whether sanctification could be “secondary evidence of salvation.” Like Cotton, Wheelwright argued that faith did not precede justification; instead “faith came into existence in the process of justification and was only active afterward.” Wheelwright also held, like Cotton, that sanctification could be “secondary evidence” of salvation. Cotton agreed with Wheelwright's doctrine at the trial and spoke up for him. Cotton stated, “Brother Wheelwright's doctrine was according to God”⁵⁷ Wheelwright later stated that Cotton “constantly stood by me, and with me” in the trial before the General Court.⁵⁸

It was common during this time to label religious persecution as “sedition,” but considering the message, context, and nature of Massachusetts colonial society, this charge was likely based more on the real potential for unrest rather than religious doctrine.⁵⁹ Cotton stated that he did not have sufficient knowledge to determine whether Wheelwright's sermon was

⁵⁵ Winship, *Making*, 122.

⁵⁶ Battis, *Saints*, 148.

⁵⁷ Winship, *Making*, 123-124.

⁵⁸ John Wheelwright, *A Plain Apology*, (National Library of Scotland, 1658), 14.

⁵⁹ Coffey, *Persecution*, 27.

sedition because he was not present at the sermon.⁶⁰ On March 31, 1637, Peter Bulkeley, a Precisionist minister, responded to Cotton's concern for "the want of brotherly love" among the Massachusetts ministers.⁶¹ Cotton's correspondence and trial testimony seemed to indicate that he wanted doctrinal divisions to be forborne for the sake of peace. Cotton remained the most important voice of moderation in a society where divisions were only intensifying.

After the trial, many Massachusetts citizens petitioned the Court to reverse its ruling. Although petitioning was a "time-honored" custom in English culture, petitioners could face punitive action if they accused their rulers of causing the grievances they sought to redress. The petition stated that Wheelwright's sermon did not cause them to become seditious. The petition "untactfully suggested that the Court reflect if Satan were behind its action and warned the Court to "consider the danger of meddling against the Prophets of God."⁶² The petition was denied and later used as a convenient tool to charge the signers with sedition. Although Wheelwright was found guilty of sedition in March 1637, the Precisionists were not strong enough politically to risk sentencing him harshly. Thus, they repeatedly held sentencing over to the next General Court meeting. In May 1637, an election was held and Governor Henry Vane was defeated and John Winthrop once again became governor. In addition, some Antinomian magistrates were defeated in the election. The Precisionists took advantage of their political fortunes to suppress Antinomian dissent and passed an immigration law to accomplish this purpose.

There had been rumors that some Antinomians from Grindleton, England might be moving to Massachusetts, so to prevent settlement of religious undesirables, the May General

⁶⁰ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 92.

⁶¹ Peter Bulkeley to John Cotton, 31 March, 1637, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 254.

⁶² Winship, *Making*, 127-128.

Court enacted an immigration law. Shepard's statements may have prompted the magistrates to create the law. Shepard asked his fellow colonists: "Would you ruin the Gospel?...Would you have this state in time to degenerate into Tyranny?...Be gentle and open the door to all comers that may cut our throats in time."⁶³ The Act stated that "no newcomer should be allowed to purchase habitation or remain more than three weeks within any town without the express consent of one of the council or two of the other magistrates."⁶⁴ In July, the act was applied to some new colonists from Lincolnshire, England who happened to be related to Anne Hutchinson. Winthrop refused to allow them to stay permanently.

Cotton not only opposed the immigration law, he threatened to leave the colony because of it.⁶⁵ He decided to stay after Winthrop and Dudley convinced him that his views would be tolerated, Wheelwright was punished only for sedition rather than heresy, and immigrants with views similar to Cotton's on issues such as grace would not be turned away or barred from church membership.⁶⁶ In addition, Cotton decided to stay because he was convinced that his presence would not destroy the unity of the Bay Colony.⁶⁷ Thus, Cotton was able to preserve at least some assurance of a somewhat more inclusive church than may otherwise have existed had he chosen to leave.

Cotton's threat of emigration was no mere bluff, and, had he emigrated, it is possible that the history of religious toleration would have been significantly altered. Sixty colonists signed a

⁶³ Thomas Shepard, "The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied," 2 vols. (1695), 1:1:163.

⁶⁴ Batts, *Saints and Sectaries*, 155, citing *Colony Records, I*, 196.

⁶⁵ Winship, *Making*, 149.

⁶⁶ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared*, (1647), 53-54, In Hall, *Antinomian*, 144-145.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

petition stating their willingness to leave with him. Cotton wrote, years later, that he had planned to move to New Haven with John Davenport, but the evidence seems to point to a plan to emigrate to Rhode Island. Robert Bailie, a Presbyterian critic of Cotton who accused him of various heresies, claimed that Cotton and Vane had “employed Roger Williams to buy land from the Narragansett Indians.” Winship notes that “Williams himself seemed to corroborate Bailie's account.”⁶⁸ Williams had formed a society based on civil religious toleration in Rhode Island. If Cotton had come to live under this new regime, he may have been won over to the concept of civil religious toleration and used his intellectual prowess to advocate it.

The Precisionist faction gained even more political power after a new General Court was elected in October, 1637. Now that their strength was solidified, they sentenced Wheelwright to banishment in November, 1637. Prior to his sentencing, however, a synod was called in Newtown, Massachusetts on August 30, 1637 in the hopes of healing the divisions in the Bay Colony.⁶⁹ Shepard opened the meeting, and Peter Bulkeley and Thomas Hooker served as moderators.⁷⁰

At the synod, the clergy agreed to church doctrines and practices on issues such as grace, the questioning of ministers, and conventicles. “Various elders, including Cotton, were assigned the task of writing confutations to each of the errors.” Eventually the synod condemned eighty-two errors. Cotton considered “some of the Opinions to bee blasphemous: some of them, hereticall: many of them, Erroneous: and almost all of them incommodiouly expressed: as

⁶⁸ Winship, *Making*, 144, 126.

⁶⁹ Battis, *Saints*, 164.

⁷⁰ Stoever, *Faire*, 31.

intending to except those chiefly, wherein I had declared mine own opinion, as before.”⁷¹

The list of errors generally “avoided direct conflict with Cotton's teachings.” At the synod Cotton “to all appearances, conceded on the first two of the five questions he brought to the synod: union required the act of faith, and faith was more than passive in the activity of justification.” The Pietists persuaded Cotton to adopt the Reformed concept of justification found in Romans 4:3-5, which “demonstrated a sequence of unbelief, faith, union with Christ, and then justification.”⁷²

Historian Philip F. Gura contends that Cotton compromised virtually all of his beliefs and eventually betrayed Vane, Wheelwright, and Hutchinson in order to save his powerful position in the Bay Colony.⁷³ Despite Cotton's compromises, he was able to gain concessions from the Precisionist ministers. Cotton's desire for compromise allowed him to provide breathing room for a slightly divergent doctrine of grace. Cotton retained his view that God acted in salvation even prior to faith, and the other ministers agreed to put a greater emphasis on grace rather than works. He continued to hold most of his original beliefs on grace.⁷⁴ Wheelwright's views on grace were virtually identical, but the General Court banished him later because it was feared he would endanger civil peace.⁷⁵

The leeway that Cotton was given at the Synod later allowed Wheelwright to regain his church membership years after the Antinomian controversy ended and allowed Cotton to preach

⁷¹ Winship, *Making*, 158.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 158, 161.

⁷³ Gura, *Glimpse*, 251-252.

⁷⁴ Battis, *Saints*, 172.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 228; Winship, *Making*, 159.

doctrines with Antinomian elements in the future. Thus, Cotton at least made a minor contribution to the scope of matters that would be tolerated as indifferent. Cotton seemed to have been pleased with the synod because even if “all the participants could not come to an agreement, all the parties could nonetheless agree 'without dissunion of affection, or disturbance of the Churches peace...in this *one*, not to *condemn*, nor to *despise one another in differences of weaknesse*.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Winship, *Making*, 164 (emphasis, Cotton's).

C. ANNE HUTCHINSON'S CIVIL TRIAL

Although the synod did not change actual practice substantially, the civil magistrates slammed down the hammer of intolerance in November 1637, when they finally decided to sentence John Wheelwright to banishment and pursue a civil trial against Anne Hutchinson. The charges against Hutchinson were vague and the Court never stated exactly why she was punished. The Court focused on her support for Wheelwright, the nature of her conventicle, and her slandering of ministers.

After Wheelwright's sentencing, the General Court charged Anne Hutchinson with countenancing or entertaining members of her brother-in-law's faction. Because she was a woman, Hutchinson could not sign the petition in support of Wheelwright, so her only "crime" was associating with him.⁷⁷ Hutchinson argued that her toleration or private friendship with this faction was a "matter of conscience." Winthrop retorted that countenancing or entertaining members of a group that differed from the religion of "the fathers of the commonwealth" was a breach of the Fifth Commandment to honor one's father and mother.⁷⁸

Hutchinson was then questioned about her conventicle. Winthrop asked her why she held such meetings on a set day every week. Hutchinson retorted: "It is lawful for me so to do....it was in practice before I came therefore I was not the first." Winthrop argued that she used her conventicle to seduce many souls and encourage them to disrespect the ministers and magistrates. Hutchinson stated that she did not think that was the case. Winthrop also asked her

⁷⁷ Many Colonists who supported Wheelwright signed a petition asking the General Court to reverse its decision against Wheelwright. The General Court did not take up the appeal and, in fact, used it to identify dissenters and prosecute them.

⁷⁸ Winthrop, "A Short Story," in Hall, *Antinomian*, 258.

whether she instructed men at her conventicle. She stated that there was a separate meeting for men and women.⁷⁹ Hutchinson stated that she did not think her conventicle seduced anyone. The Court also considered whether conventicles were private, and thus entitled to more freedom of expression, or public. Winthrop decided that statements made at private conventicles were public because “what was spoken in the presence of many is not to be made secret.”⁸⁰

The Court asked whether Hutchinson had slandered the ministers as false preachers by declaring that they were under a “covenant of works.” She admitted that preaching about a covenant of works was acceptable, but preaching about it as a means of salvation was not. She denied that she had said that some of the ministers preached a covenant of works and denied that those under a covenant of works could not be saved.⁸¹ Based on the allegations of her accusers, Hutchinson believed that the doctrine of “the seals” meant that ministers who were unsealed were damned and under a covenant of works. Hutchinson had some difficulty explaining the doctrine at the trial, so Cotton described it to the Court in an attempt to defend her.

Cotton's testimony related to his belief regarding the “seal of the Spirit.” In Cotton's theory, greater assurance could only come if God justified a person; Jesus “freed the soul from bondage and the curse of the law,” and the Holy Spirit “sealed” a believer, which relieved anxiety regarding one's justified status. Thus, Cotton did not state the seal was necessary for justification but for a greater sense of assurance. The idea of the seal connected to the importance of works as a source of assurance. He explained to Precisionist critics who pointed to passages showing works were evidence of salvation that these scriptures applied only to those who were

⁷⁹ Examination of Mrs. Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 316-317.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 318, 324.

already sealed with the Spirit. The unsealed did not have assurance from their works. But the sealed, although they had a great deal of assurance, did not have complete certitude to their saved status, so their good works were an additional, secondary confirmation of their justified status. The Seal of the Spirit allowed Cottonians to feel superior to the “deficient subclass of those as yet unsealed” and allowed his followers to distinguish themselves “from hypocrites [and] restore confidence in the colonial venture.”⁸²

Cotton testified that Hutchinson had only stated that the other ministers “did not preach the covenant of grace as clearly because they preached the seal of the Spirit upon a work and because they themselves had not been sealed with the Spirit.” Cotton told the Court that Hutchinson had not meant that the ministers were unjustified, “only that they had not yet experienced full assurance, which is to say that he took her to mean that they were under the Son's work and not the Holy Spirit's.”⁸³ Cotton stated that he had never heard Hutchinson state that some preachers were “under a covenant of works.” Also, he denied hearing her state that other ministers “were not able ministers of the new testament.”⁸⁴ Despite his testimony that Hutchinson had not slandered the ministers, she was still ordered banished because of her views regarding immediate revelation.

The Puritans believed that scripture was God's main way of communicating with humans rather than immediate revelations. Signs of God's providence could also be seen in acts of nature, the sufferings of the wicked, or the bounty of the blessed, but immediate revelations were a

⁸² Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 271-272, 269.

⁸³ Examination of Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 333.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

source of spiritual knowledge that most Christians believed ended with the Apostolic age.⁸⁵ Objections to immediate revelations were more than just doctrinal; they were also based on historical incidents associated with anarchy. Deputy Governor Thomas Dudley and Governor John Winthrop argued that this doctrine was to be feared because of incidents such as the tragedy at Munster.⁸⁶ Anabaptists had captured Munster based on an alleged immediate revelation. When they took the city, those who would not convert to their faith were slaughtered. Winthrop argued that Hutchinson “walked by such a rule as cannot stand with the peace of any state.” because her revelations were “above reason and Scripture.”⁸⁷

Cotton and Wheelwright both preached in favor of immediate revelations, but they also stressed that these revelations only came through the Bible and should be consistent with it.⁸⁸ Cotton had preached about the importance of revelations both during his ministry in England and Massachusetts. Since Hutchinson had been a close follower of Cotton's for many years, her beliefs in immediate revelation may have had their genesis in his teachings. However, she used her revelations beyond the restraints Cotton had sought to impose. For example, Hutchinson was alleged to have believed that her revelations were “as infallible as any part of Scripture.”⁸⁹ She stated during the trial that God guided her by “the voice of his own spirit to my soul.” Furthermore, she prophesied that God would curse the members of the Court if they persecuted

⁸⁵ Winship, *Making*, 179.

⁸⁶ Examination of Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 343, Winthrop, “A Short Story,” in Hall, *Antinomian*, 275; Erikson, *Wayward*, 98. Anabaptists, who believed in immediate revelations, took over Munster and slew anyone who refused to convert to their faith. The city was retaken, and the Anabaptists were annihilated.

⁸⁷ Examination of Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 343, Winthrop, “A Short Story,” in Hall, *Antinomian*, 274-275.

⁸⁸ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 278; Winship, *Making*, 179.

⁸⁹ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 301; Erikson, *Wayward*, 98.

her and that her revelations were based on miracles from God. She admitted that she had stated that “she had never had any great thing done about her but that it was revealed to her beforehand.”⁹⁰

Cotton chose to defend Hutchinson against the condemnation of the Court, even though he likely knew that immediate revelation was associated with anarchy and Familism and that defending this doctrine may tarnish his prestige. Cotton suggested when Hutchinson referred to “immediate revelation” she might be referring to revelations based on scripture and providence rather than more suspect revelations based on miracles.⁹¹ The Deputy Governor Thomas Dudley, minister Hugh Peters, and Deputy Collicut all expressed disapproval of the idea of immediate revelations in general and Cotton's attempt to defend her with his doctrine.⁹² Cotton himself was only defended from persecution during Hutchinson’s examination via the intervention of John Winthrop. When the ministers began questioning Cotton’s doctrines, Winthrop silenced them, declaring that “Mr. Cotton is not called to answer to any thing but we are to deal with the party here standing before us.”⁹³ Hutchinson was sentenced to banishment and placed under house arrest. She was allowed visitors and soon faced a church trial to determine if she would be excommunicated from the Boston Church.⁹⁴

At Hutchinson's civil trial, the General Court suppressed dissenters and reinforced religious intolerance. The Court “decreed that anyone who openly defamed the Court's judicial

⁹⁰ Examination of Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 338-339.

⁹¹ Examination of Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 340-341; Winship, *Making*, 180.

⁹² Examination of Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 342-343.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁹⁴ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 298.

decisions was liable to fine, imprisonment, disenfranchisement, or banishment, and it legalized the punishment of Court members who used 'reproachful or unbecoming speeches' to their fellow magistrates.” It also gave “official recognition to the tireless labors of Shepard, the only ministerial foe of Boston so honored. It decided that Harvard College would be located in Newtown, shortly to be renamed Cambridge, in recognition of 'the vigilancy of Mr. Shepard...for the deliverance of all the flocks which our Lord had in the wilderness.’”⁹⁵

In sum, Cotton used his religious doctrines to defend Hutchinson at the civil trial even though her views were not identical to his own. Furthermore, he refused to bow to pressure from Precisionists to condemn her doctrines. He had generally tried to avoid religious conflict. Cotton was able to seek compromise because he was more moderate than both the Precisionist and Antinomian factions. His doctrinal middle ground and desire for peace rather than purity of doctrine likely prompted him to take this position. During Hutchinson's church trial, however, Cotton turned his back on her because her doctrines became too divergent for him to bear.

⁹⁵ Winship, *Making*, 190, 186.

D. ANNE HUTCHINSON'S CHURCH TRIAL

Anne Hutchinson's church trial was the third phase of the Antinomian controversy. The church trial began on March 22, 1638. Hutchinson had already been sentenced to banishment, but the church trial would determine whether she would also be excommunicated from the Boston Church. The church trial highlighted some of the Puritan concepts of church discipline. A little background information on the nature of the church trial may provide some clues regarding the motivation for Cotton's behavior during the trial. Cotton moderated the proceedings and made most of the decisions regarding the procedural "rules" that would be adopted.⁹⁶

The goal of church discipline was to inspire "a genuine act of repentance."⁹⁷ The church was willing to exercise patience to allow those with erroneous opinions to move toward contrition. When repentance was not forthcoming, however, the church utilized a variety of methods to help ensure religious uniformity. Anyone who did not live in conformity with the church covenant could be censured. There were two forms of censure that were typically used. Usually, offenders received an admonition barring them from Communion until they confessed their sin. In some extreme cases, the punishment was excommunication, which cast the individual out of the church. Hutchinson received excommunication, supposedly for lying, since she recanted her heretical doctrines before sentencing.⁹⁸

Unlike the civil trial, which focused on the issue of grace, the mortalist heresy became the

⁹⁶ When I use the term "rules" in this section I do not mean that they were formal rules. They were simply the informal procedures adopted at the trial.

⁹⁷ Hall, *Antinomian*, 390.

⁹⁸ Report of the Trial of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 360, 363, 365, 386, 388.

focus at the church trial.⁹⁹ Mortalism was the belief that there was no resurrection of the body and the soul was annihilated at death and replaced with a new soul by Christ. It was associated with Familism and considered heretical “since the end of the second century A.D.” Mortalism was thought to lead to licentiousness and epicureanism because it excluded the idea that there was a final judgment. Hutchinson preached that the soul was like the body and would die, and there was no resurrection of the body at the end of time. Cotton condemned this Familist belief at Hutchinson's trial as something that would 'rase the very foundation of Religion to the Ground.’”¹⁰⁰

Despite Cotton’s strong condemnation of mortalism, Michael Winship argues that “Cotton did his best, in the face of hostile and unwarranted skepticism, to send Hutchinson into exile not as an excommunicant but as a visible saint in good standing in the Massachusetts communion of churches.” For example, Cotton praised Hutchinson at the trial for dissuading many women “from Restinge upon any Duties or Workes of Righteousness of your owne.” Although “he warned the sisters to carefully discriminate between the good and bad they had received from Hutchinson,” he also “praised her many virtues and evangelical successes.” Cotton did plead with Hutchinson to change her doctrines and convinced her to repent, but it is difficult to say that he “did his best” to defend her when the vast majority of the positions he took during the trial favored the Precisionists. In fact, his positions in the church trial seemed to begin the gradual erosion of some aspects of Congregationalism which had hitherto been useful as a tool to protect religious dissent. It is noteworthy that there were ministers who offered alternatives that

⁹⁹ Gura, *Glimpse*, 261.

¹⁰⁰ Winship, *Making*, 191; Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 299, 301.

could have permitted greater religious diversity, but Cotton opted not to follow their advice.¹⁰¹

Cotton helped define the parameters of various church practices at the trial, although the concepts he delineated were not formal church rules or codes. A more formal system of church rules called the Cambridge Platform was created at the Cambridge Synod from 1646-1648. During Hutchinson's church trial, Cotton's decisions regarding what might be considered informal church rules were generally unfavorable to Hutchinson and to religious dissenters.

Whether church discipline required unanimous consent became a key issue at Hutchinson's trial.¹⁰² No punishment could be imposed without the consent of the church members. Cotton helped define the concept of consent and admonition at the trial. English Congregationalists were disturbed by reports that unanimous consent for church discipline had been abandoned. Thirteen English ministers wrote a letter in June, 1637 and expressed disapproval when they heard “thatt the power of excommunication. & c. is soe in the body of the church that what the major partt shall allowe that mustt be donne, though the pastours & governers & part of the assemblie be of another minde, & peradventure upon more substantiall reasons.”¹⁰³

Since the letter was written in June, 1637, it probably arrived during the Fall, so Cotton was likely aware of the opinion of these English divines prior to the church trial. Nevertheless, he chose to adopt a different rule that provided an exception to unanimous consent. This rule made it easier to punish unpopular opinions in the church. At some point prior to December 19, 1637, Cotton responded to the letter. He told his English brethren that the colonists “have taken

¹⁰¹ Report of the Trial of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 368-372.

¹⁰² Hall, *Antinomian*, 349.

¹⁰³ John Dod and Twelve Other English Ministers in England to New England “Brethren,” About June, 1637, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 264.

your motion into serious Consideration.” He then went on to explain that there have been “some Controversyes amongst our selves” and that a further explanation would be delivered on a ship at a later time.¹⁰⁴ Cotton could have heeded their advice or even cited the letter as confirmation that unanimous consent should be without exceptions, but he made an exception to the rule instead.

One of the elders asked during the church trial whether a church member could be censured “*whan all the Members doe not consent thearto: or whether the Church hath not the power to lay a Censure upon them that doe hinder the Churches proseedings.*” Cotton responded that all church members should consent, but he followed this statement with a caveat that “if yet some Bretheren will persist in thear Dissent upon no Ground but for by Respects of thear owne or out of naturall affection than the Church is not to stay her proseedinge for that.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, Cotton's decision on this issue negated the votes of family members, relatives, and those who had some personal interest in the discipline of a church member as long as the church made “paynes” to “remove such Scruples.” Since Hutchinson's supporters were deemed to lie within this exception, Cotton's position made it easier to admonish her. The rule may have been articulated due to practicality, but its effect set a precedent that could be used to stifle minority opinions within the church.

Pastor Wilson went one step further and declared that the silence of church members constituted consent for purposes of church censure.¹⁰⁶ Cotton's later writings expressed agreement with Wilson's rule. Cotton interpreted the near silence of the church as confirmation

¹⁰⁴ John Cotton to John Dod, 16 December, 1637, in *Bush Correspondence*, 271.

¹⁰⁵ Hutchinson Trial, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 367-368.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 368.

that the church was nearly unanimous in excommunicating Hutchinson.¹⁰⁷ He omitted “Leverett’s admission that many church members wished to stay Anne’s excommunication” and “made it appear that any person who complained about her censure was contradicting the near-unanimous opinion of the congregation.”¹⁰⁸

During Hutchinson's church trial, Cotton also helped refine the meaning of “admonition.” Cotton decided that religious *opinions* should be suppressed as harshly as actions. Minister Sargeon Savidge argued that admonitions should only apply to “groce and abominable” acts but should not apply to matters of opinion, even if they are “unsound,” because “in most Churches thear hath bine some Errors or Mistakes held.” Savidge pointed out that matters of opinion regarding the resurrection were not punished in the New Testament.¹⁰⁹

In contrast, Cotton reasoned that certain opinions could be more dangerous than actual practices and that repeated attempts to convince Hutchinson of her error were sufficient. Cotton declared: “Yet she may hould Errors as dayngerous and of worse consequence than matters of practise can be, and therfor I see not but the church may proceed to Admonition.” Cotton also stated that additional efforts to allow Hutchinson to be further informed of her error would go beyond the requirements of admonishment. In addition, he declared that lying or other immoral practices, in contrast to matters of opinion, should be punished immediately without delay.¹¹⁰

Cotton made a distinction between how people “expressed” their opinion versus their

¹⁰⁷ Lyle Koehler, “The Case of the American Jezebels: Anne Hutchinson and Female Agitation during the Years of Antinomian Turmoil, 1636-1640,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31, no. 1, 55-78 (January, 1974), 74.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Thomas Leverett was the ruling elder of the Boston Church and helped to administer church discipline; Winthrop, “A Short Story,” in Hall, *Antinomian*, 307.

¹⁰⁹ Hutchinson, Trial, In Hall, *Antinomian*, 365-366.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 366, 387.

actual opinion. If dissenters stated that they really followed orthodox doctrine but had only “expressed” themselves in an inappropriate way, Cotton was quick to come to their defense. For example, Cotton argued that Wheelwright’s fast day sermon inadvertently encouraged “the Opinionists.”¹¹¹ Wheelwright did not intentionally support these heretics because he was a newcomer who was not well acquainted with his audience. Also, he had confessed that “if he had before discerned their Familisme, he would not have expressed himself as he did.”¹¹² Cotton's focus on “expression” rather than belief at least allowed some breathing room for diverging religious opinions to be uttered, although Hutchinson tried this tactic at the church trial to no avail.

Cotton devised another church rule dealing with the private expression of religious beliefs. Hutchinson wanted to prevent ministers who had discussed her views with her privately from testifying against her. She objected because these ministers “professe[d] to her in the sight of God that thay did not come to Intrap me nor insnare me, and now without speakinge to me and expressinge any Unsatisfaction would come to bringe it publickly.” She maintained that since Thomas Shepard, the minister who wished to testify against her, had not dealt with her in front of two or three witnesses that she would not be able effectively to counter his accusations. Shepard stated that he had tried to correct her doctrine, but he admitted that he had promised to keep her opinions private. Nevertheless, he chose to bring them before the public at the church trial because of the “Flewentness of her Tonge and her Willingness to open herselfe and to divulge her Opinions and to sowe her seed in us that are but highway side and Strayngers to her.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ “Opinionists” was a term used to describe members of the Antinomian faction that had doctrines tending towards Familism.

¹¹² Cotton, “Congregational Churches Cleared,” (1648), 40, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 400.

¹¹³ Hutchinson, Trial, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 353.

Thus, Shepard was proposing that completely private conversations with one pastor, even if declared to be held in confidence, could be divulged publicly. Cotton agreed with Shepard's concerns and created a rule, which seemed moderate in conception, but was applied in the trial in a way that stifled private religious expression. Cotton declared the following rule: "To answer this, indeed if thear be any playne Breach of Rule then you may [prevent them from testifying against you]. But if thear be not a manifest Breach than the church hath not power to make Inquisition in a doubtful Case."¹¹⁴ Cotton may have acquiesced to Shepard because he feared his own persecution if he did not, since Shepard was the primary agitator against him throughout, and even after, the Antinomian controversy.

Although the popularity of Hutchinson's conventicles probably would have caused her beliefs to be disseminated, there was never any testimony that the specific views she discussed with Shepard were ever actually propagated beyond her private conversations. The church opposed her doctrines even if there was only a *possibility* that error could spread.

Following Hutchinson's testimony concerning her mortalist heresy, the proceedings were postponed for one week, during which Hutchinson stayed at Cotton's house. He convinced her to recant her mortalist views, and she read a long statement of repentance before the Church when the trial reconvened. Shepard felt that what Hutchinson "had just said did not sound like 'true Repentance,' however Cotton might gloss it." When Cotton asked her about whether she had not held an erroneous view on inherent graces, an issue she had disputed with the ministers for the last two years, she argued that she had just misunderstood the issue or expressed herself in the wrong way. The elders, including Cotton, felt she had lied and had not truly repented, so she was

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 353.

excommunicated.¹¹⁵

In sum, Cotton was exposed to a variety of opinions that he could have used to create more favorable “rules” during Hutchinson's church trial, but he chose to adopt more stringent procedures. Although the laity retained substantial powers in the congregations in Massachusetts, future Congregational rules such as the further erosion of the idea of unanimous consent created a church structure that could more easily suppress religious dissenters. Cotton may have not intended this result. It may be that Cotton chose to make fairly strict rules because he had already decided to abandon Hutchinson near the beginning of the proceedings because her doctrines had veered too far into the direction of Antinomianism and Familism for him to abide. Doctrinally, Cotton was willing to compromise on some issues of grace because he considered them indifferent matters and because he sought toleration for himself. Cotton would not tolerate fundamental errors, however, unless repentance was forthcoming.

¹¹⁵ Winship, *Making*, 203-204, 206-207, Hutchinson, *Trial*, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 374.

E. ANTINOMIAN AFTERMATH

In the aftermath of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton altered some of his religious doctrines and continued to speak out against civil laws that he found objectionable as he had against the immigration law. Cotton rejected civil control over church discipline, so he opposed a law passed in September, 1638 that would have entailed this result. The law “gave excommunicants a six-month limit to get back in the good graces of their churches or face presentation before the Court.” The law “was repealed within a year.”¹¹⁶

With respect to doctrine, Cotton retained some of his Antinomian leaning positions but did conform to more Precisionist beliefs than he had before the controversy. He continued preaching about the “all-sufficiency of Christ,” emphasizing that sanctification could provide little assurance that one was saved.¹¹⁷ Cotton and his congregation, unlike some Precisionist clergy, still considered Wheelwright to be an orthodox minister.¹¹⁸ Even a decade later, Cotton “still held his pre-synodical view” concerning “the relationship of faith and justification, and sanctification as evidence of justification,” which were two of the most pivotal doctrinal disputes in the controversy.¹¹⁹

However, some of Cotton's doctrines changed toward more Precisionists positions. He stressed the importance of following the scripture closely and obediently rather than preaching that the Spirit might even be superior to the word. He also “spoke less reservedly of the value of

¹¹⁶ Winship, *Making*, 221.

¹¹⁷ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 340.

¹¹⁸ Winship, *Making*, 219-220.

¹¹⁹ Stoeber, *Faire*, 36; Cotton, “Congregational Churches Cleared,” 43-46.

conditional promises” rather than emphasizing only the unconditional nature of God's grace.¹²⁰

There were various reasons why Cotton may have altered his theological doctrines. First, he may have actually been convinced by some of the other Massachusetts ministers that he was wrong about certain issues. Second, Thomas Shepard's constant vigilance against what he considered heretical may have deterred Cotton from divergence from the opinions of other Massachusetts clergy. Shepard did not think the suppression of the Antinomians was as successful as it could have been, “and he continued to agitate conflict at least up to 1641.” Shepard continued to assert that those who believed in “absolute promises for assurance” or “visions” would go to Hell. He also claimed that Cotton and his followers still taught the same doctrines they had taught before the controversy, albeit more discreetly.¹²¹

Finally, providence probably played a role in changing Cotton's views. In the early years, Rhode Island seemed to be a chaotic failure. For example, “In December 1638, Winthrop wrote...[that] Nicholas Easton, from Newbury, outdid Hutchinson in denigrating sanctification, [and a man named] Herne, an obscure figure, taught that women had no souls.”¹²² In addition, Roger Williams wrote to Winthrop in the spring of 1642 that the Gortonites had almost overwhelmed his capacity for toleration. Williams told Winthrop that “the tide is too strong against us, and I fear (if the framer of Hearts help not) it will force me to little Patience, a little Isle next to your Prudence.”¹²³ Finally, Indians tomahawked Anne Hutchinson and most of her family in 1643. Thus, there were several major reasons for Cotton and other Bay Colonists to

¹²⁰ Bozeman, *Precisionist*, 340.

¹²¹ Winship, *Making*, 9, 236, 221-222.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 213.

¹²³ Ziff, *Career*, 203, citing Publications of the Narragansett Club, First Series, VI, 141. The Gortonists were followers of Samuel Gorton. They were a strange anti-authoritarian spiritist sect.

conclude that God had not blessed religious diversity.

In contrast, Wheelwright's settlement in Exeter thrived. "Perhaps twenty married males were there by the spring of 1638, around half of them with ties to Wheelwright going back to Lincolnshire." Wheelwright was not sympathetic to Rhode Island radicals. Boston church members who followed him were permitted to join his church in Exeter.¹²⁴

In sum, Cotton maintained a theological and political middle ground during most of the Antinomian controversy, but the more aberrant doctrines Hutchinson espoused at the church trial may have caused Cotton to interpret congregational practices in a way that strengthened the power of the clergy relative to the laity to some extent. Theologically, he was able to pursue a middle path that allowed the church to be inclusive of some divergent doctrines concerning grace. In addition, he opposed some political changes such as the immigration law that would have limited immigration to a narrower band of Puritan belief. Finally, although Cotton's congregational modifications at the church trial strengthened clerical power, they were not substantial enough to suppress most lay rights. The trend toward a more centralized and authoritarian form of Congregationalism would continue in the aftermath of the Antinomian controversy and during later disputes with Presbyterians in both Massachusetts and England.

¹²⁴ Winship, *Making*, 215.

V. CONGREGATIONALISM

The aftermath of the Antinomian Controversy, the downfall of the Church of England, and the increasing power of Presbyterians in England and Massachusetts affected Cotton's congregational theory in a variety of ways. Some historians have asserted that Cotton became the prime advocate for an oppressive church structure characterized by clerical authoritarianism, lay powerlessness, synodal domination of church autonomy, and increasingly rigid church membership requirements.¹ Other historians have stressed that Congregationalism was a fairly inclusive system that changed very little after the Antinomian Controversy.² In contrast, I argue that there were some moderate changes to Congregationalism during this time period. The power of synods and the clergy increased, especially due to the increasing power of Presbyterians in both England and Massachusetts. However, the laity retained enough power to moderate the more oppressive tendencies of these developments. Church membership rules remained the most immoderate of all the aspects of Massachusetts Congregationalism. The competing admission standards among churches may have created anxiety among prospective members about how to fulfill church membership requirements. As the power of the Church of England waned, Cotton adopted more precisionist admission requirements that made it almost impossible for members of

¹ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 174-176, 178-179, 182-184; Ziff, *Career*, 228.

² Cooper, *Tenacious*, 17.

the English Church to join his congregation. The proportional number of non-members increased. Cotton's lack of moderation regarding church membership began to negate the potential for inclusiveness that had defined other aspects of Congregationalism.

A. CONGREGATIONAL CHANGES IN THE WAKE OF THE CONTROVERSY

The Antinomian controversy resulted in changes to Congregationalism that in some ways made Puritanism in Massachusetts less inclusive and more centralized. For example, church membership requirements became more rigid.³ In addition, the clergy sought greater uniformity through consociations, which were meetings between ministers to make sure their doctrines and practices were in accord.⁴ The laity still retained significant decision-making powers, however. Despite these changes, Cotton still contended that Congregationalism was a moderate and inclusive system.

Church membership requirements were not entirely uniform throughout the colony after the Antinomian Controversy. Differences of doctrine based on grace and the role of works as a basis for assurance still existed and were used as a tool to screen out doctrinal undesirables. For example, Thomas Shepard used the public testimony requirement “from a motive of surveillance.” He used it to screen out those who rejected his precisionist vision of Puritanism. His works-driven fervor caused anxiety that further hindered his congregants from trying to gain admission.⁵

Thomas Hooker's church had more liberal church membership requirements. He argued that since some Puritans “never knew the time and manner of their conversion,” it would be difficult for them to relate an experience of grace. Hooker believed that people could become church members “if [they] live *not in the commission of any known sin, nor in the neglect of any*

³ Delbanco, *Puritan Ordeal*, 179.

⁴ Ziff, *Career*, 208-209.

⁵ Knight, *Orthodoxies*, 177.

known duty, and can give a reason of [their] hope towards God.”⁶ Although Hooker's admissions test was more inclusive, he may have only promoted his laxer membership requirements so that those who shared his own religious beliefs could become members.⁷

Cotton's admissions test became even more difficult in the wake of the Antinomian Controversy. Cotton wrote *A Copsy of a Letter* in 1637 and outlined the steps necessary to become a church member in the Boston congregation. In the letter he tried to convince his correspondent that the churches in Massachusetts did not have overly strict membership requirements. He stressed that prospective members “(a) were required neither to disclaim the churches of which they had formerly been members nor to profess repentance for their former communion with the English churches and (b) did not covenant never to have communion with the English churches.” In sum, Cotton argued that the church was inclusive⁸

Looking more closely at the letter reveals that it was not as moderate as it might appear. Church applicants had to fulfill many requirements. First, they had to describe their personal transformation through God's grace. Second, they were usually questioned on church doctrines. Third, they had to give a public confession of their sins. This requirement included repenting for following “inventions,” which was a code word that meant the applicant had to repent for participating in ceremonies practiced in the English Church that were contrary to those of the Bay churches. Finally, they had to subscribe to the covenant.⁹ Only a year earlier Cotton had emphasized that members could be admitted even if they “were uncertain” whether some

⁶ Ibid., 176, citing Thomas Hooker, “Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline” (1648), part 3, chap. I, p. 6.

⁷ Delbanco, *Puritan Ordeal*, 179.

⁸ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 44.

⁹ Cotton, *A Copsy of a Letter of Mr. Cotton of Boston* (1641), 2, 5.

Conformist church practices were sinful or not.¹⁰ Cotton's apologetics did not show the real difficulty of attaining church membership. To submit publicly to confession and questioning on doctrinal matters probably discouraged membership based on fear of rejection and ridicule. Applicants may have lost confidence that they could pass doctrinal questioning in the wake of the religious differences manifested in the Antinomian controversy. Furthermore, public repentance of "inventions" probably barred some non-Puritans from membership because they could not, in good conscience, renounce them. The dwindling membership in the Boston Church was evidence that these requirements were not as easy to meet as Cotton argued. Nevertheless, Miller's assertion that the clergy in Massachusetts became the equivalent of a Laudian prelacy because the clergy dominated disciplinary decisions, selection of church officers, and admissions procedures, does not seem to reflect many of the actual practices in the Bay Colony churches following the Antinomian controversy.¹¹

J.F. Cooper disputes Miller's contentions, using church records as his major source of information. He asserts that the relationship between the clergy and laity was not particularly contentious and that the laity continued to exercise a great deal of authority through "lay clerical *interchange*." [His Italics]. He shows that the laity took an interest in a variety of issues such as ordination, church membership, and excommunication. For example, the records detailing the foundation of the First Church of Dedham in 1637 show that the clergy and lay people discussed the details of the church covenant for several months. They hammered out the details of their covenant on issues such as the duties of members and officers, church administration, and church membership rules. Cooper contends that the laity retained a great deal of power in the church

¹⁰ Cotton to Roger Williams, Early 1636, in *Bush, Correspondence*, 212, 216.

¹¹ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 174-176, 178-179, 182-184.

because they were well versed in the Bible and could use it to prevent the clergy from abusing their power.¹² Although the laity could use the Bible to defend themselves against clerical tyranny, the clergy maintained an influential role since they were considered the greatest authorities on the interpretation of God's word.

Historians have disagreed about whether lay questioning of ministers was stifled following the Antinomian controversy. Some have argued that the Newtown Synod of 1637 made new rules that hampered the practice of questioning ministers.¹³ Michael Winship contends that the Newtown synod did not result in increased oppression of lay questioning, for “the synod condemned the practice of asking questions after a sermon, not for information but for reproofing doctrine and reproaching the ministers, 'and that with bitterness.’” He points out that “bitterly asking questions intended to reprove doctrine and reproach ministers had probably never been approved practice in Massachusetts.”¹⁴ During the controversy, some Antinomians would travel to other churches to disturb the church services and question whether “legalist” ministers were even qualified to hold any clerical office.¹⁵ The synod's prohibition on questioning the clergy was probably created to discourage this kind of activity rather than a respectful discussion of Christian beliefs with a minister in the church.

The Newtown Synod also placed some new restrictions on conventicles. The impetus for the changes was the threat to stability that Hutchinson's conventicle had posed. Winthrop blamed the spread of Antinomianism on her “double weekly-lecture,” which attracted crowds as large as

¹² Cooper, *Tenacious*, 16-17, 14, 19.

¹³ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 184; Battis, *Saints*, 173.

¹⁴ Winship, *Making*, 163.

¹⁵ Stoeber, *Faire*, 29. Antinomians derided Precisionists as “legalists” because of their focus on works.

eighty people. He railed against these meetings because Hutchinson did not just repeat sermons but also gave her comments and opinions on them.¹⁶ To counter her influence, the church limited the size and purpose of conventicles. The synod “condemned as ‘disorderly and without rule’ ‘such a set assembly...where sixty or more did meet every week, and one woman (in a prophetic way, by resolving questions of doctrine, and expounding scripture) took upon her the whole exercise.’”¹⁷ However, the doctrine against conventicles used the phrasing “one woman,” which indicated that it was probably only meant to suppress Hutchinson herself rather than all future conventicles.¹⁸

The laity also seemed to have retained some authority with respect to church discipline. In 1639, Richard Wayte, a tailor and member of the Boston church, was excommunicated for stealing. Cotton and the clergy accepted his attempts at readmission fifteen months later. The laity, however, refused to consent to his readmission despite the prodding of Pastor Wilson. After consulting Wayte privately, the dissenting church members permitted his readmission two weeks later.¹⁹ Several months later, Wayte was in trouble again with the church for his persistent drunkenness. He refused to confess his sin, so he was once again excommunicated. After his second excommunication, the laity became more involved in disciplinary procedures perhaps due to the clergy's blunder in backing his readmission. Thus, in a trial in 1640, “Nineteen lay people participated in an excommunication trial of another church member in addition to the ministers.

¹⁶ Winthrop, “A Short Story,” 10, 32, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 207, 264.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 208 n. 5, citing *Winthrop History*, I, 286.

¹⁸ Winship, *Making*, 163.

¹⁹ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 61.

Thirteen of them were ordinary men who lacked the title of distinction “Mr.”²⁰ In contrast, in Hutchinson's trial the clergy took the leading role in her excommunication proceedings. Thus, even though ministers at the Newtown Synod endorsed language limiting the questioning of ministers, it appeared that the laity had not been rendered powerless in questioning their fellow members or deciding if they should be censured. Cotton's statements on the relationship between the clergy and laity seemed to support this argument for a middle ground, for he stated: “The Gospel alloweth no Church authority (or rule properly so called) to the Brethren, but reserveth that wholly to the Elders; and yet preventeth the tyrannie and oligarchy, and exorbitancy of the Elders, by the large and firm establishment of the liberties of the Brethren.”²¹

After the Newtown Synod, ministers began to cooperate with each other in order to maintain uniformity among congregations. Ziff points out that the early colonists sought so much autonomy that they opposed the idea of the clergy meeting together to come to agreement about biblical texts. By 1641, however, these meetings “were common.”²² The goal of these consociations according to Cotton was for the churches to “all come to be of one minde in the Lord.”²³ Thus, because of these consociations, the laity were exposed to less doctrinal diversity. The ministers were probably wary of voicing doctrinal differences publicly for fear that another Antinomian controversy might erupt.

After a period of religious turbulence, mechanisms of control were put in place to hem in the schismatic nature of Congregationalism. The aftermath of the Antinomian controversy had

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

²¹ John Cotton, *The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven, And Power thereof, according to the Word of God*, (1644), 12. Cotton considered ruling elders to be part of the clergy rather than the laity.

²² Ziff, *Career*, 208-209.

²³ John Cotton, *The Bloody Tenent, Washed, and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe* (1647), 185.

prompted changes that created, in some ways, a more immoderate Congregationalism. Church membership had become more exclusive based on doctrinal inquisition and a more precisionist attitude toward Conformist “inventions.” Once able to jump the hurdle of membership, however, the laity sustained many of the same powers they had prior to the Antinomian controversy on issues such as church discipline and questioning of ministers. Although the Newtown Synod had limited questioning of ministers, it seemed to have targeted disruptive behavior more than public discussion of religious beliefs. Because of more frequent consociations, the laity were exposed to less doctrinal diversity. However, the consociations did not represent the kind of rigid centralized control that Miller suggests resulted in a new Laudian prelacy in New England.²⁴ At the same time that Massachusetts church organization was becoming more stabilized and centralized, the English Church was fragmenting. The downfall of the Episcopal system in England provided the next major impetus for changes to Congregationalism both in England and the Bay Colony.

Events in England were developing that showed that the English Church's authority was waning, and Cotton's increasingly intolerant attitude towards Conformists may have been based on this reality. He adopted new standards of church membership to filter out prospective members who might have any Conformist tendencies. In *A Cobby of a Letter*, written in 1637, Cotton argued that members of the Church of England were not required to repent for their membership in that church and “did not covenant never to have communion with English churches.” In 1641, Cotton wrote a manuscript that was not published until 1645 called *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*. In *The Way of the Churches*, Cotton's requirements for church membership became even more purist. He stated that members of the Church of England could become church members and receive Communion only if they “repent that they belong to

²⁴ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 174-176, 178-179, 182-184.

a national and therefore unscriptural church...they came to the Lord's table with ignorant and scandalous persons; they worshiped God with the inventions of men; and they accepted an unscriptural form of church government.” In this document, Cotton rejected the whole notion of a national church, which was a Separatist position that contradicted his earlier statements of non-Separation from the English Church.²⁵ A little background on events in England will help show why Cotton adopted this new more Separatist stance.

In 1640 and 1641, the personal rule of Charles I ended. His need for revenues to fund the war in Scotland forced him to convene the Long Parliament. During these years, the Puritans dominated Parliament and sought to undo Laudian innovations and dismantle church institutions that had been used to victimize Puritan dissidents. On December 16, 1640, the House of Commons voted that Convocation “had no power ' to make any constitutions, canons, or act whatsoever in matter of doctrine, discipline, or otherwise, to bind the clergy, or the laity of the land, without common consent of parliament.”²⁶ On December 18, 1640 Laud “was brought under impeachment and arrested along with a dozen of his colleagues.”²⁷ On March 1, 1641, “the House of Lords ordered the abrogation of all of Laud's changes in the celebration of communion, while a committee was appointed to investigate 'all innovations' introduced into the Church during recent years.”²⁸ Intolerant and despised courts such as the Court of High Commission and

²⁵ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 48.

²⁶ Wilbur K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England From the Convention of of the Long Parliament to the Restoration, 1640-1660: The Revolutionary Experiments and Dominant Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 21.

²⁷ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 397.

²⁸ Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 25.

Star Chamber were also abolished.²⁹ Without bishops and church courts, local clergy were responsible for preaching and enforcing mandatory church attendance. Efficient enforcement mechanisms were now obsolete, so various religious groups became more vocal and grew in size.³⁰ On November 22, 1641, the Grand Remonstrance narrowly passed Parliament. The Remonstrance was not created to destroy the idea of a national church, but “it did insist that the temporal power of the bishops must be destroyed in order to free them for the prosecution of their neglected spiritual duties.” Early in 1642, the Parliament and king started to divide into rival camps that led to war in the fall of that year. In January 1643 Parliament passed a bill abolishing the Church of England.³¹

²⁹ B. Reay, “Introduction,” in *Radicalism and Revolution in the English Revolution*, eds. J.F. McGregor and B. Reay, 1-21 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 4.

³⁰ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 397.

³¹ Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 37, 42.

B. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHALLENGE IN THE EARLY 1640's

The English were accustomed to uniformity and still sought to repress heretical sects, so Parliament sought to create a new national church. Parliament could not agree on a framework for the church. Various models such as the retention of bishops under a new synodal system, a unification of church and state run through Parliament, and a Presbyterian organization similar to the Scottish church were major contenders. Congregationalists argued for independent congregations under no formal national church government, although civil magistrates would ensure punishment for heresy and blasphemy. Since Congregationalism offered no unified national church and certain heretical sects such as the Particular Baptists had adopted a congregational model, Presbyterians argued that autonomous churches would lead to the proliferation of heresy and chaos.³²

Presbyterian church organization was more centralized and authoritarian than Congregational church structure.³³ Presbyterians wanted to form a hierarchical national church. A presbytery of elders determined matters of church discipline rather than allowing individual congregations to make these decisions. These ministers were chosen through a centralized hierarchical system rather than through election by church members.³⁴ Only the elders had to be reformed members, and they had governing power over the church.³⁵ Presbyterians supported a fixed liturgy unlike the Congregationalists who opposed set prayers. Presbyterians based church

³² Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 397-399.

³³ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 69.

³⁴ Phillip Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 390.

³⁵ Ziff, *Career*, 188.

membership on geographic units rather than limiting membership to visible saints. Lay elders determined worthiness for Communion.³⁶ Finally, they thought all church attendees should be allowed Communion as long as their lives were “non-scandalous”³⁷ Thus, the Presbyterians were more inclusive in terms of membership and worthiness for Communion than the Congregationalists, but they were more exclusive regarding the number of individuals who would be involved in church decision-making.

Congregationalists and Presbyterians feared the implications that could result from their differing church structures. Congregationalists, remembering their persecution under the Church of England and their hatred for Catholic hierarchy, were wary of giving decision-making authority to elders in a centralized, national church.³⁸ The Presbyterians mistrusted the democratic aspects of Congregationalism such as “the limited use of synods,” lay decision-making, and the idea of congregational independence because they believed these elements would invite sectarianism and toleration.³⁹ To prevent schism, Bay Colony divines assimilated some of the features of Presbyterianism to create a kind of uniformity, although they never became quite as oligarchic as Miller and Ziff assert. Massachusetts Puritans were also anxious to show that they were not a threat to religious stability in England. They sought to accommodate Presbyterian leaning Congregational churches in Massachusetts as part of their desire to maintain stability both in the Bay and in their interactions with the newly forming Presbyterian national church.

³⁶ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 401-402.

³⁷ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 69.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ziff, *Career*, 188.

There were only two churches in Massachusetts with Presbyterian leanings, Newbury and Hingham.⁴⁰ These churches had always been more prone to advancing clerical power over the laity, but, with the growing power of Presbyterianism in England, they may have been emboldened to suppress lay decision-making even further. By 1643, the clergy of the Newbury church, Thomas Parker and James Noyes, started shifting more church decision-making to the clergy at the expense of the laity. Many of the laity disliked this development. Clergy throughout Massachusetts met in Newbury to address this problem, and Cotton and Thomas Hooker moderated the convention.⁴¹

Church membership was an important topic at the Newbury Convention. The Newbury ministers, pursuant to Presbyterian doctrine, had wanted all residents to be allowed to attain church membership without passing a religious test.⁴² The clergy slightly liberalized the church membership requirements to accommodate the Presbyterian faction. The elders concluded that “the well behaved constituted 'fit matter' for the church, though not always able to make 'large and particular relations of the work on doctrine of faith.’”⁴³ This decision allowed the Presbyterian churches to have more open church membership standards, but the Congregationalist churches in Massachusetts continued to have the same restrictive church membership requirements.⁴⁴ Cotton continued to support a non-inclusive view of church membership. He opposed the compromise that was reached with the Presbyterian churches on

⁴⁰ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 71.

⁴¹ Ibid., I will refer to the ministers in Newbury and Hingham as Presbyterian, even though they were really a hybrid of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism and were accepted in the Congregational communion; Ziff, *Career*, 207.

⁴² Cooper, *Tenacious*, 76.

⁴³ Ibid., 70-71.

⁴⁴ Gura, *Glimpse*, 164-167, 193.

the issue of church membership because he wanted all the churches to retain the same rigid admission standards.⁴⁵

Another major issue addressed at the Newbury Convention was what powers the clergy and laity possessed. Church decision-making still required the consent of the laity.⁴⁶ Gura states that Parker and Noyes were tolerated only “because their church had been founded in ‘the Independent manner,’” and they still held many Independent principles. Although they were founded as Congregational churches, they had gradually drifted towards Presbyterian principles such as greater clerical authority, broader church membership standards, and an increasing desire for central control through synods. The clergy compromised with the Presbyterian oriented churches while still retaining enough lay rights to counteract the authoritarian features of Presbyterianism.

Presbyterians who did not allow lay participation might suffer persecution. Gura contends that Presbyterians such as the pastor of Higham, Peter Hobart, suffered religious persecution because Massachusetts civil authorities harassed and fined him.⁴⁷ Although Robert Childe, a Presbyterian activist for equal political rights for all colonists in Massachusetts, did suffer persecution, the motives for intolerance toward Hobart seem to have been related to Hobart's desire to impose his religious views on an unwilling congregation. The laity were angered that Hobart had excluded them from any decision making. According to Winthrop, “Hobart managed ‘all affairs without the church's advice.’”⁴⁸ Thus, intolerance toward Hobart may have been prompted by his own intolerance of the laity within his church rather than by the oppression of

⁴⁵ Ziff, *Career*, 208.

⁴⁶ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 71.

⁴⁷ Gura, *Glimpse*, 201.

⁴⁸ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 71, citing Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal*, vol. 2, 244-245.

Presbyterianism *per se*.

Despite the desire of Massachusetts Presbyterians for clerical control of church discipline, Cotton's church continued to recognize the role of the laity in these matters. In 1645, Thomas Heddel, a non-church member, came before the church and questioned Cotton about the role of the laity in disciplinary matters. Heddel objected to the practice of referring disciplinary matters to the clergy, "who then exercised unilateral authority to decide whether matters should belong to the church." Cotton responded that the purpose of this rule was not to "bringe it to the elders that they should kepe it from the church but that thay may prepare it for the church."⁴⁹ Richard Hutchinson, a town officer and brother-in-law of Anne Hutchinson, asked what should be done if a complaint was brought to an elder and the elder refused to act on it. He also expressed his belief that Cotton's arguments were similar to those of the "Bishops and Presbiterians." Cotton denied any affinity for Presbyterian disciplinary practices. He told Hutchinson that disciplinary matters require the consent of church members. The elders could refuse to bring matters that were not "ripe," but the church members could bring a matter before the church without the elders' consent if they brought forth two witnesses who could attest to the elders' mismanagement of the complaint. This disciplinary doctrine existed since the early 1630's and was not a step toward a more authoritarian or repressive ministry.⁵⁰ In addition, lay people were unwilling to permit the clergy to perform ordination. The church in Woburn refused to allow ministers from neighboring congregations to ordain their minister without lay permission to avoid excessive clerical authority that might "be an occasion of introducing a dependency of

⁴⁹ This was the third time Heddel had questioned Cotton regarding these issues.

⁵⁰ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 72-73.

churches, and so a presbytery.”⁵¹

In sum, churches with Presbyterian leanings in Massachusetts were permitted some leeway to liberalize their church membership requirements and allow the clergy a greater role in church decision-making. Cotton objected to the compromise with the Presbyterians on the issue of church membership, but the Newbury Convention rejected his attempts to impose his exclusionary admission standards. Cotton and other Puritans in Massachusetts retained a strong commitment to a middle way to balance the participation of the laity with the authority of the clergy. At the same time as the Bay Congregationalists were seeking to compromise with a small but vocal Presbyterian minority, the English Presbyterians were striving to accommodate the small but outspoken band of Congregationalists who opposed the new national church.

In 1643, Parliament decided to create an Assembly of Divines to establish a new national church structure. The Assembly was composed of clergy nominated by burgesses and knights throughout England to advise and consult with Parliament about the church structure, liturgy, and discipline of a new national church. Parliament could delegate questions to them but the recommendations of the divines were not binding. It held its first meeting on July 1, 1643.⁵²

The Presbyterians became a stronger force in the Assembly of Divines due to the increasing power of the Scots. Parliamentarians initially fared poorly in their war against the king; therefore, they sought Scottish aid. The Scots provided assistance only after the Parliamentarians entered into a Solemn League and Covenant with them in September 1643. This covenant called on the English and the Scots to work toward a Presbyterian national church which would create uniformity of doctrine, organization, and modes of worship. It also admitted

⁵¹ Foster, *Long Argument*, 71.

⁵² Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 41.

Scottish clergy into the Assembly of Divines as advisors on church government.⁵³ The Scottish system was anchored by a strong national Presbyterian church. Their General Assembly appointed a central committee called the Commission of the Kirk that had even more power over the church than synods and presbyteries. It issued “orders in the name of the entire church and [played] the major role in deposing recalcitrant ministers.” It oversaw efforts to purge the church from “remnants of popery” and punished those who failed to take an oath to the covenant.⁵⁴

With the power of Presbyterians growing in England, Cotton was inspired to write *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* in 1643 to bolster the Congregationalist cause.⁵⁵ *The Keyes* reaffirmed Cotton's belief that “the basic unit of the Christian church is the individual congregation, and it is from this unit that all ecclesiastical power is derived.”⁵⁶ The document was important for several reasons. First, in 1645 it convinced John Owen, an influential theologian during the English Civil War and Interregnum, to become a Congregationalist.⁵⁷ Second, it was published seven times, so it was a popular pamphlet even though it drew criticism from both tolerationists and the Presbyterians.⁵⁸ Finally, like *The Apologeticall Narration*, *The Keyes* sought a “middle way” between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. Philip Nye and Thomas Goodwin, Cotton's clerical allies and two of the writers of *The Apology*, prefaced *The Keyes*.

Cotton sought a middle ground between the Presbyterian belief in a powerful clergy and

⁵³ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 400.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁵⁵ Everett Emerson, *John Cotton*, 140-141. It was first published in 1644.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 398.

⁵⁸ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 49.

the Separatist emphasis on the rights of the laity. Cotton argued that Congregationalism balanced these competing interests.⁵⁹ He also emphasized that ministers were to be “stewardly” to help guide their congregation toward Christ instead of “lordly” as they had been in the Church of England.⁶⁰ The lay people might help resolve “private scandals” among their brethren. When there was a “publike scandall” the brethren and clergy both had the power to inquire, hear, and judge church members according to the church discipline necessary given the offense.⁶¹ As in the church trial of Hutchinson, silence was considered consent for matters of church censure.

Cotton's doctrine on excommunication was nebulous in *The Keyes* and throughout his writings. Excommunication was of importance because it was the ultimate censure of the church, so whoever controlled that power could be seen as dominant. Some of Cotton's writings supported the idea that the laity could excommunicate their own clergy. This doctrine did not sit well with Presbyterians who favored a hierarchical system and feared the religious anarchy that could result from this position.

Perry Miller uses Cotton's doctrine of excommunication to buttress his argument that Cotton and other clergy in Massachusetts were tyrants who imposed their religious views to ensure conformity against a powerless laity. Miller argues that the laity “controlled the gateway to the office, but not the office.”⁶² Miller quotes Cotton's *Keyes* to show what supposedly was done in practice: “The peoples discerning and approving the justice of the censure before it be administered, ariseth from the Elders former instruction and discretion of them therein:

⁵⁹ Cotton, *Keyes*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 179.

Whereunto the people give consent, in obedience to the will and rule of Christ.”⁶³

The Keyes also included other statements that appear to hold the opposite conclusion, for Cotton added that: “This power or priviledge of the Church in dealing in this sort with a scandalous offender, may not be limited only to a private brother offending, but may reach also to an offensive Elder.”⁶⁴ Later in the paragraph he referred to his remarks regarding “libertie...as hath been opened above in Chap. 2.” In Chapter two, Cotton stated that “the brethren have the power and libertie (to wit, to joyn with the sounder part of the Presbyterie, in casting them out, or cutting them off).”⁶⁵ He continued: “Evident therefore it is, that there is a key of power or libertie given to the Church (to the Brethren with the Elders) as to open a doore of entrance to the Ministers calling; so to shut the doore of entrance against them in some cases, as when through corrupt and pernicious doctrine, they turn from Shepherds to become ravenous wolves.”⁶⁶

These somewhat contradictory passages reflected the kind of balance Cotton sought to achieve. He was not a proponent of an oppressive clergy but of a system of mutual cooperation and consent between them and the laity. If the “brethren have the power and libertie (to wit, to joyn with the sounder part of the Presbyterie, in casting them out, or cutting them off,” then it seems they could depose a church officer, for example a teacher, as long as another church officer such as a minister represented “the sounder part of the Presbyterie.” Ultimately, the congregation would have to decide who was “sounder” because both church officers would likely declare their doctrine as truth. Cotton may have been motivated to deemphasize the role of

⁶³ Cotton, *Keyes*, 14-15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

the laity in church discipline because, as Stephen Foster observes, “New Englanders in statements intended for English readers persistently understated their differences with Presbyterianism.”⁶⁷ Cotton may have expressed this position because of his experiences in the Antinomian controversy where church members were divided about whether Wilson or Cotton were preachers of the true doctrine. In 1648 five years after *The Keyes* was written, the Cambridge Synod, which Cotton was instrumental in framing, confirmed the right of the laity to depose the clergy.⁶⁸

Cotton also tried to discredit claims that Congregationalism would lead to sectarian chaos with his arguments on the role of synods. If a synod was binding than divergent religious views expressed in individual churches would be subject to a hierarchical structure that could demand conformity. Advisory synods could only make suggestions to individual churches. Larzer Ziff argues that in *The Keyes* Cotton stated that he wanted synods to have binding power.⁶⁹ In contrast, James F. Cooper claims that their power was merely advisory.⁷⁰ I argue that Cotton taught that synods were technically binding, but he did not provide them with enforcement mechanisms, which diminished their ability to impose hierarchical control. Synods could meet for the purposes of consultation to decide on matters of doctrine, to suppress the corruption of doctrines and practices within a church, or to reform corruption of all the Congregational churches by renewing their covenant with God and embarking on a path “that may tend to the

⁶⁷ Foster, *Long Argument*, 169; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 58 n. 52.

⁶⁸ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 84.

⁶⁹ Ziff, *Career*, 208.

⁷⁰ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 82-83.

publike healing, and salvation of them all.”⁷¹ In *The Keyes*, Cotton affirmed his belief that individual churches rather than a hierarchy should govern church discipline. If there was dissension or disagreements between churches or between factions within a church, the parties should first meet informally to resolve their disputes.⁷² When reconciliation was not forthcoming, however, church elders should meet in a synod to resolve their differences.

Cotton declared in *The Keyes* that churches meeting in a synod “hold forth no superiority in one church or court over another, but all of them in an equall manner, give advice in common, and take one common course for redresse of all.” Despite this equality, synods “can command and enjoyn things to be believed and done.”⁷³ The enforcement of their decisions, however was left to the individual congregation. If the individual congregation failed to enforce the ruling of the synod, then other churches could not impose their will on the errant church but could only withdraw communion from them. Churches that were in communion with one another were linked in ways such as mutual consultation, admonition, participation, contribution, the creation of new congregational churches, and, when necessary, meeting in a synod to establish church doctrines and practices.⁷⁴ Thus, Cotton's intention was to create a binding body, but it was limited in its powers of enforcement. *The Keyes* was intended for a Presbyterian audience who would have found more hierarchical structures appealing in order to suppress schismatic churches, so Cotton may have overstated his enthusiasm for binding synods.

Cotton also limited the power of synods to regulate indifferent matters; his arguments in

⁷¹ Cotton, *Keyes*, 24.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 42, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-26, 15-17.

this regard are remarkably similar to his writings on *adiaphora* in 1618 in *Some Treasure*. Synods could only regulate things that are “necessary” to salvation and cannot “teach the people to observe more then Christ hath commanded.”⁷⁵ Likewise, a synod had power to enjoin matters that are “indecent” or disorderly such as forbidding men to wear long hair or permitting “women to speak in open assemblies.” In *Some Treasure*, Cotton argued that the church could enforce indifferent matters that were “necessary and decent,” and he used the same example of women keeping silent in the church.⁷⁶ Like in *Some Treasure*, Cotton asserted that the church could not regulate “indifferent decent things.”⁷⁷ He used the same example in *Some Treasure* concerning whether or not to wear a gown as an example of an indifferent decent thing that the church could not enforce.⁷⁸ The overlap between the power of synods and the powers of the Church of England in these two documents suggest that Cotton was engrafting his ideal vision of what the Church of England should have been onto the ecclesiological landscape of New England.⁷⁹

Arguments for a middle way in *Keyes to the Kingdom* were not only relevant to the issue of church structure but also blended into the toleration debate underway in England. *The Apologeticall Narration*, like *The Keyes*, portrayed Congregationalism as a middle way between Separatism and Presbyterianism. The middle way was not as moderate as it appeared, for Cotton still opposed the idea of a national church and did not recognize the Presbyterian Church as a true church. Cotton's most powerful Congregationalist allies in England were called the “Five

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Cotton, *Some Treasure*, 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 2-4.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁹ Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 369.

Dissenting Brethren” and were members of the Assembly of Divines.⁸⁰ Like Cotton, they argued that a church should be governed by “each particular congregation” although at times certain matters should be addressed by “a combined Presbyterie of the Elders of several congregations united in one government.”⁸¹ The Dissenting Brethren had all been in exile in Continental Europe. They were able to return to England and rose to prominence as leaders of the Independent when ecclesiastical authority had become weakened in early 1641. John Coffey argues that the document was important because the Independents who wrote it “were jeopardizing the chances of the Assembly fulfilling its purpose – to draw up a uniform system of church government.”⁸² Some historians have credited *The Apology* with spawning the new age of religious toleration in England beginning in 1644.⁸³

The authors of *The Apology* wanted Congregationalism to be tolerated, but they condemned toleration of the sects. Avihu Zakai makes this observation and criticizes historians who have assumed that the Dissenting Brethren were advocating religious toleration. He points out the contradictory statements made by Winthrop K. Jordan, who admitted the document supported persecution of the sects but also stated that the Independents had supported religious toleration for the sects before the *Apology* was published.⁸⁴ The document only has one vague sentence which could even remotely be linked to toleration. The sentence states that the

⁸⁰ Ibid. The “Five Dissenting Brethren” were Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, William Bridge, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Sidrach Simpson. They co-wrote *The Apologeticall Narration*. They were obstructionists because they did not even want to create a national church.

⁸¹ Thomas Goodwin, Phillip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs, and William Bridge, *An Apologeticall Narration: Humbly Submitted to the Honourable Houses of Parliament* (1644), 12.

⁸² Coffey, *Persecution*, 144; Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 51-52, 274.

⁸³ Coffey, *Persecution*, 144; Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 51-52.

⁸⁴ Avihu Zakai, “Religious Toleration and its Enemies: The Independent Divines and the Issue of Toleration during the English Civil War,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 21 (Spring: 1989): 8, 1-33.

Independent Brethren seek: “to unite the Protestant partie in this Kingdom, that agree in Fundamentall truths against Popery and other heresies, and to have that respect to tender consciences as might prevent oppressions and inconveniences.”⁸⁵ The remainder of the document says nothing that could be construed as anything but an argument solely for toleration of the Congregationalists themselves. Zakai also notes that the Presbyterians and Congregationalists had agreed to avoid public disputation against each other until the Church of England was dismantled. Thus, Zakai argues that *The Apology* really was pleading only for a continuation of the agreement between Presbyterians and Independents “to respect 'tender consciences.’”⁸⁶

Zakai's argument indicates that *The Apology* was likely not meant for a general plea for toleration of the sects, but John Coffey and Jordan are correct to point out that the document at least increased debate on the issue.⁸⁷ It appears that some tolerationists such as the Baptist William Walwyn and Roger Williams were expecting these Dissenting Brethren to advance a more tolerationist argument. Williams argued against the Five Dissenting Brethren throughout his *Queries of Highest Consideration*, but at the opening Epistle of the work he addressed them as “Those worthy and much esteemed Persons unto whom we Query, we have heard to be Men of Conscience of Abilities, and are in this worthy of double Honour.”⁸⁸ Walwyn expressed his disappointment that contrary to his “expectation” *The Apology* did not concern toleration in general but only asked for Congregationalists' toleration from Presbyterians, and he noted that

⁸⁵ Goodwin, *Apologeticall Narration*, 26.

⁸⁶ Zakai, “Religious Toleration,” 11-12.

⁸⁷ Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, 144; Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 274.

⁸⁸ Roger Williams, *Queries of Highest Consideration, Epistle, A2*, (London, 1644).

there were few differences between the two churches.⁸⁹ Perhaps these tolerationists expected more from the writers of *The Apology* because the Independent Brethren had reaped the benefits of toleration in Holland and were now facing the rigid orthodoxy the Presbyterians sought to impose. Thus, *The Apology* was important because it managed to fuel the flames of debate concerning religious toleration because it incited the derision of both Presbyterian intolerationists and tolerationist sectaries.

It is interesting that historians have not given *The Keyes* nearly as much attention as *The Apology* regarding the toleration debate, since the former contained a similar theory of Congregationalism, was written perhaps even earlier than *The Apology*, and, unlike *The Apology*, actually did express something that was at least somewhat connected to intra-church toleration through a discussion of indifferent matters. If historians do wish to credit *The Apology* for inaugurating a new era of religious toleration through *increasing debate* on the issue, they should also credit Cotton for inculcating the value of disobedience into some of its writers over a decade earlier in England.

⁸⁹ Zakai, "Religious Toleration," 18, citing William Walwyn, *The Compassionate Samaritane*, 1-3.

C. DEVELOPMENTS IN ENGLAND AND NEW ENGLAND AFTER 1644

On November 11, 1644 the Assembly of Divines recommended that Parliament establish a national Presbyterian church; Parliament established a new national church a week later, but the Congregationalists were able to win some concessions that incorporated some of their views into the new national church.⁹⁰ There was an experimental Presbyterian structure set up in London. “The city was...divided into twelve classes. But it was an emasculated presbytery which Parliament had last enjoined. The elders in whom disciplinary power was vested, were to be indirectly nominated by a board of triers... [which] was invested with the power of selecting the elders, thus preserving to Parliament ultimate control over church government in the capital.”⁹¹ Although on March 5, 1646, an act was eventually passed making the Presbyterian Church the national church of England, the debate on religious toleration and the power of the Independents and the sects prevented it from being established except in London.⁹²

The new church adopted a hierarchical synodal system like that in Scotland; however, “the decisions of the superior systems were made advisory rather than binding on individual congregations; government officials conducted the election of parish elders; and sentences of excommunication could be appealed to commissioners chosen by Parliament.” Thus, Congregationalists, who sought a greater role for the civil government over church affairs, were able to win major concessions from the Presbyterians. *A Directory for Public Worship* was created to replace *The Book of Common Prayer*. It established the order of church services as the

⁹⁰ Jordan, *Religious Toleration to 1660*, 57.

⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

⁹² Ibid., 80.

Presbyterians had championed, but it included “sample prayers” to appease Congregationalist concerns. Implementation of a national Presbyterian Church in England met with little success.⁹³

Because of all these concessions, English Presbyterians had reason to be displeased with Congregationalist influence. Prominent Presbyterians lashed out at their Congregationalist opponents, and John Cotton, as one of the most prestigious advocates of Congregationalism, was not immune to their criticism. The specter of Antinomianism had come once again to haunt Cotton, for the Presbyterians painted him as a heretic based upon his role in the conflict.

John Winthrop inadvertently smeared the reputation of Massachusetts Congregationalism and its greatest proponent. Winthrop foolishly wrote a pamphlet called *A Short Story of the Rise, Reign, and Ruine of the Antinomians*. His *Short Story* was written in response to critics in England who argued that the punishment of the Antinomians showed that “the colonists were treating matters of conscience as civil crimes.”⁹⁴ Winthrop emphasized that the punishments were based on the civil offense of sedition rather than for religious “opinions” as “falsely reported” in England.⁹⁵ Second, *The Short Story* was meant to laud the achievements of the New England Way so that political and religious structures in Massachusetts could serve as a model of government in England. Ironically, *The Short Story* failed to convince tolerationists that Massachusetts was anything but oppressive. Winthrop also intended to show that the Congregational system could suppress heretics. He revealed that Cotton had been sympathetic to the Antinomians, which put Cotton under scrutiny as a heretic. Robert Bailie, a Presbyterian opposed to Congregationalism, wrote *A Dissuasive from the Errours of Time* to discredit Cotton

⁹³ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 401-402.

⁹⁴ Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, chapter 8.

⁹⁵ Winthrop, “Short Story,” in Hall, *Antinomian*, 213, 217, 283.

and argued that the Congregational system could lead to only sectarian chaos and used Cotton as the prime example of the failure of Congregationalism to preserve religious unity.

Cotton wrote *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* to vindicate his actions and defend the New England Way. His goal was also to show that Congregationalism should be the form of church government that should be adopted not a plea “that the Congregationalists deserved to be accepted in church fellowship.”⁹⁶ As teacher of the Boston church, Cotton had a duty to censure members propounding erroneous doctrines. He claimed that he carried out this duty against Hutchinson. Cotton pointed out that Hutchinson recanted her false doctrines and was condemned only for lying. In addition, he insisted that he would have excommunicated her for her heretical doctrines had she not recanted.⁹⁷ Cotton asserted that reports that the church severely admonished him were untrue, and he had received more criticism from England than he had from his fellow colonists.⁹⁸ He credited the Newtown Synod with the suppression of the Antinomian threat. The Puritan churches in Massachusetts “took [the] right course...to gather into a Synod with the consent of the civill Magistrates: and in the Synod to agitate, convince, and condemne the Errors, and the offensive carriages then stirring.” The type of synods used in New England were effective, according to Cotton, because they helped to convince the magistrates and the churches to proceed against heretical church members.⁹⁹ Cotton also recognized the potential for synods to produce compromise and uniformity among the Massachusetts churches. Cotton used his diplomatic skill to help provide a framework for Congregationalism in the Bay

⁹⁶ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 51.

⁹⁷ Cotton, “Congregational Churches Cleared,” 86, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 431-432.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65-66, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 428.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85, in Hall, *Antinomian*, 430-431.

Colony based on accommodating the perspectives of various churches in a synod held in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In the late 1640's, Presbyterian agitation for reform in the Congregationalist churches in New England prompted the gathering of the Cambridge Synod. The synod began in September 1646, adjourned in 1647, and finally produced a new framework for church government called the Cambridge Platform in 1648. Although the Newbury Convention had worked out a compromise on the issue of church membership, some Presbyterians and Conformists agitated for more extensive changes. Dr. Robert Childe, a church member with Presbyterian leanings, and six other petitioners, one of them a known Conformist, petitioned the General Court in May 1646 to extend the franchise.¹⁰⁰ When the General Court rebuffed them, they sought, unsuccessfully, to get the English government to intervene to extend their rights.¹⁰¹ The Puritans feared this new outbreak of Presbyterian demands for universal church membership rights, and they wanted to salvage the Congregationalist focus on visible sainthood, which was supposed to preserve the sanctity of Communion. Cotton was one of three ministers appointed to formulate these doctrinal statements. His writings were very influential in producing the Cambridge Platform. For example, some statements regarding consultation among churches are almost identical to passages from *The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven*.¹⁰²

Cotton seems to have taken a more moderate stance toward Presbyterianism than he had earlier during the Cambridge Synod, but his contradictory statements make it difficult to know for sure. Once the Presbyterian Church had been made the official church of England, Cotton and

¹⁰⁰ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 298.

¹⁰¹ Gura, *Glimpse*, 196-200.

¹⁰² Emerson, *John Cotton*, 57-58.

the Massachusetts Congregationalists, as they had with the Church of England, argued that they had not separated from the new national church. Cotton wrote the preface to the Cambridge Platform, which was published as *A Platform for Church Discipline*, and stated that the Puritans in Massachusetts accepted the Presbyterian Church as England's new national church. He abandoned his older view that Congregational churches should be the "sole churches of England."¹⁰³ He pleaded that the Presbyterians in England should not consider them schismatics for "a different apprehension of the mind of Christ...in some points touching church order."¹⁰⁴ These statements seem to show that Cotton, as he had prior to the English Civil War, once again believed that church structure was an indifferent matter. Nevertheless, the Cambridge Platform also stated that "the true visible church was not national, provincial, or classical, but 'only congregational.'"¹⁰⁵ In addition, only one year earlier in *The Bloody Tenent Washed*, Cotton argued that church organization was a fundamental matter.¹⁰⁶ These contradictory statements indicate that although Cotton supposedly adopted a moderate position and pledged loyalty to the new national church he may have been just making a hollow gesture to ensure that Congregationalists were not chastised as Separatist heretics.

The Cambridge Platform also addressed differences with Presbyterians regarding church membership. The synod established a compromise doctrine of church membership with Presbyterians that "recommended but did not require a public declaration of God's manner of

¹⁰³ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 390.

¹⁰⁶ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 62.

working upon the soul.”¹⁰⁷ Cotton became more inclusive towards Presbyterians on matters of church membership, although not necessarily out of altruistic motives. He declared that Presbyterians could become church members of Congregational churches but sought to incorporate them primarily to convert them to Congregationalism. Cotton asserted that it would be “wrong for members to desert Presbyterian churches because of their government.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, Congregationalists could remain members of Presbyterian churches but primarily just to try to reform them. In sum, he took a more moderate stance toward Presbyterian church membership so that Congregationalist reforms could be made in the Presbyterian-leaning churches in Massachusetts.

The “tribalization of church membership” was another issue addressed at the Cambridge Synod. Church membership was increasingly based not on conversion but on descent from the first generation of colonists who had become church members. Only those who descended from this first generation of church members were treated as presumptive church members and baptized. One issue that arose was whether a child whose grandparent was a church member but whose parents were not could receive baptism. Cotton supported extending baptism to the grandchildren of church members, but three clergy members disagreed, so the issue was left unresolved until the Halfway Covenant was adopted in the 1660's.¹⁰⁹ Although the extension of baptism to the grandchildren of church members seemed like a step toward more inclusive admissions requirements, the motivation for the Halfway covenant was probably based on the desire to exclude. Miller argues that the New England Puritans decided to extend membership to

¹⁰⁷ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 390.

¹⁰⁸ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 57-59.

¹⁰⁹ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 79. The Halfway Covenant allowed grandchildren of church members to be baptized.

the grandchildren of the first colonists because they wanted to ensure the church retained enough members to survive without having to incorporate the ungodly non-members who were not blood related to the original colonists.¹¹⁰ The Puritans in Massachusetts began to lose their early evangelistic fervor and became more like a tribe based on blood than a spiritual institution. In future decades, they continued to shrink in size and importance.¹¹¹

Cotton's theory of church discipline for non-members reflected how irrelevant they had become. He stressed that members would point out the failings of non-members to keep them in line. The mandatory attendance rule would also force colonists to be subject to church discipline even without official membership. In addition, these non-members might also conform because “they see no hope of enjoying church fellowship or participation in the sacraments for themselves or their children' unless they win the approval of ministers and members.”¹¹²

The clergy in Newbury also wanted to make decisions without consulting with the laity or obtaining their consent, so the Cambridge Synod addressed rules regarding consent for church decisions and the questioning of ministers. Cotton created an exception to the majority consent rule during Anne Hutchinson's church trial in 1638. This rule prevented the minority of religious dissenters from preventing the excommunication of Hutchinson for her differing religious views. The church now allowed majority consent to determine the actions of church members. Cooper lauds the majority consent rule and seems to suggest that it enhanced religious diversity. He argues that “churchgoers began to recognize that legitimate differences could exist within

¹¹⁰ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 98.

¹¹¹ Michael Winship, “Were There Any Puritans in New England,” *The New England Quarterly*, 74, 118-138 (March, 2001): 128, 127; Foster, *Long Argument*, 172-174, 219.

¹¹² Emerson, *John Cotton*, 59, citing “A Platforme for Church Discipline,” in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, ed. Williston Walker (New York: Scribner, 1893), 169-170.

Congregationalism and unanimity could not always be achieved.”¹¹³ Thus, he contends that the church became more inclusive due to this rule. During the Antinomian controversy an attempt was made to censure Pastor Wilson because his religious views differed from the majority of the church. Thanks to the intervention of John Winthrop a church with both Antinomian and Precisionist members was preserved. In contrast, a majority consent rule would have led to the censure and possible excommunication of Wilson and his supporters. Thus, it seems that the majority consent rule was actually more conducive to religious coercion and exclusion than the original unanimous consent requirement.

The synod also reined in the questioning of ministers during sermons to some extent. In the Newtown Synod of 1637, questioning of ministers that was disruptive was discouraged during the sermon. In the Cambridge Platform, a new rule stated that questioning of elders should not “oppose or contradict the judgment or sentence of the elders, without sufficient and weighty cause, because such practices are manifestly contrary unto order, & government, & inlets disturbance & tend to confusion.”¹¹⁴ This new rule seemed to have created a higher barrier for lay participation in decision-making because “sufficient and weighty cause” was required before legitimate opposition to clerical opinions could be voiced. However, the laity still retained significant powers, for they had the right to question the decisions of the clergy and the right to depose them if the clergy themselves also joined in this decision with the congregation.¹¹⁵ In 1648, five years after *The Keyes* was written, the Cambridge Synod, which Cotton was instrumental in framing, confirmed the right of the laity to depose the clergy but only if the

¹¹³ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 79.

¹¹⁴ Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 184.

¹¹⁵ Cooper, *Tenacious*, 84.

clergy and laity both consented.¹¹⁶ Cotton took exception to this provision, however. He pointed out that it was not likely that a clergy member would vote to excommunicate himself. Thus, Cotton seemed to have clarified to some extent his comments on excommunication of the clergy in *The Keyes*. He also emphasized, however, that the clergy should not seek to veto the actions of the congregation on issues of church discipline, which implied that ministers should accept the decisions of the laity on these matters.¹¹⁷ Despite Cotton's tendency towards majority consent, Ziff's statement that "Cotton was the primary mover of the antidemocratic provisions of Congregationalism" seems an overstatement.¹¹⁸ Instead, Cotton represented a kind of middle ground on congregational issues relating to clerical and lay power and the authority of synods. Cotton's list of "Exceptions against some things in the Synod at Cambridge" written in 1649 showed his support for some of the more inclusive aspects of Congregationalism. For example, Cotton stated that the Boston church disagreed with the idea that "Teaching of the word [be considered] peculiar to Pastour, & Teacher. Wee think, in case of their Absence, the Ruling Elder, *or any other brother*, whom the Church shall desire, may Attend upon the same" [My italics]. In terms of the questioning of ministers, Cotton's position was also more inclusive of the laity than the rules adopted at the synod. He disagreed with the rule that stated "that men may not speake without the Elders leave, nor continue speaking when they require silence." He and his church judged the rule "not to be alwayes safe; as in case the Elders Offende, then it is in their Power, whether they be dealt with, or noe."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Cotton, List of "Exceptions against some of the things in the Synod at Cambridge," 1649, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 527.

¹¹⁸ Ziff, *The Career*, 228.

¹¹⁹ Cotton, "Exceptions," in Bush, *Correspondence*, 526-527.

The Cambridge Platform also reflected Cotton's middle ground position on the power of synods. Some ministers such as Pastor John Wilson argued in favor of binding synods. The Platform called for larger synods and declared that "Synods 'tho' not absolutely necessary to the being,' were... 'necessary to the well-being of the churches'"¹²⁰ Synods could also make binding decisions "so farr as consonant with the word of God."¹²¹ These rules suggest that if a synod was called, its decisions were binding as long as they were based on scripture. However, like Cotton's conception of synods in *Keyes to the Kingdom*, synods could not impose their decisions. For example, synods were "[n]ot to exercise Church-censures in a way of discipline, nor any other act of church authority or jurisdiction' that might compromise the local churches' right to congregational independence." In addition, the Cambridge Platform called for synods to consist of both clergy and laity.¹²² Lastly, the Cambridge Platform reiterated the Congregationalist commitment to a magistracy that would "uphold both tables of the law, and...punish blasphemy, heresy, and schism."¹²³ Overall, Cotton used his diplomatic skill at the Cambridge Synod to strengthen the New England Way from the dangers of schism while also retaining significant lay rights through compromise with other Puritan congregations and churches with Presbyterian leanings.

After the Cambridge Synod, Cotton moved toward even closer ties with Presbyterians. In the early 1650's the power of the Presbyterian Church in England began to diminish. In 1651, Cotton wrote *Certain Queries*, a short pamphlet that called for communion between

¹²⁰ Ziff, *Career*, 233.

¹²¹ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 390.

¹²² Cooper, *Tenacious*, 82-83.

¹²³ Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, 391.

Congregational and Presbyterian churches that came close to advocacy for unification. With the exception of Dr. Childe and a few others, the Presbyterians had caused little agitation to the Massachusetts Puritans, and compromises with Presbyterian leaning churches were made at the Newbury Convention and at the Cambridge Platform. Furthermore, unlike in *The Bloody Tenent Washed*, Cotton now expressed his view that church organization was not a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith.¹²⁴ He concluded that the Presbyterian Church was “a true church.”¹²⁵ Cotton argued that Presbyterians could become members of Congregational churches and share in the Eucharist as long as they “doe approve also of a Congregationall way” and were willing to join the church covenant. Presbyterian ministers could even be accepted as Congregationalist pastors if they “become more discriminating as to who is admitted to the Lord's Supper” and “restrict the power of the elders over churches other than the ones to which they minister.”¹²⁶ Cotton's acceptance of Presbyterianism as a true national church was reminiscent of his acceptance of the English Church under governing bishops. He was willing to endure the existence of a national church structure that did not reflect his Congregationalist ideal in order to avoid charges that he was a schismatic who threatened stability.

He may also have been motivated to strengthen ties between the churches because of his desire to buttress Presbyterian power in England against the growing strength of sectaries and tolerationists.¹²⁷ Even in Massachusetts, religious dissenters such as the Baptists posed a challenge to religious uniformity. To respond to this threat, the General Court outlawed the

¹²⁴ John Cotton, *Certain Queries Tending to Accommodation, and Communion of Presbyterian and Congregational Churches* (1644), 8; Emerson, *John Cotton*, 62.

¹²⁵ Cotton, *Certain Queries*, 7.

¹²⁶ Emerson, *John Cotton*, 62.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

formation of Baptist churches in the Bay Colony in 1644. Cotton defended Massachusetts against English tolerationists such as Sir Richard Saltonstall, a former colonist who wrote a letter in 1652 to Cotton in opposition to the persecution of Baptists in the Bay Colony. Cotton retorted that religious dissenters were tolerated as long as they “carry their dissent more privately and inoffensively.”¹²⁸ The level of privacy needed for toleration may have bordered on absolute secrecy, for in 1645 John Clarke and his Baptist cohorts were punished for delivering a sermon in the private home of a blind man at his request.¹²⁹ As with Hutchinson's descent into the mortalist heresy, Cotton showed once again that he could not abide fundamental doctrinal deviations even though his tolerance for differences in church structure was malleable. Ironically, Cotton became more tolerant of Presbyterianism based, in part, on a shared commitment to intolerance of other religious groups such as the Baptists who were shunned for their support for adult baptism and arguments in favor of civil toleration for various religious sects.

¹²⁸ Cotton and Wilson to Saltonstall, 1652, in Bush, *Correspondence*, 502-503.

¹²⁹ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103. John Clarke was a Particular Baptist leader who arrived in the Bay Colony amidst the Antinomian controversy. The factionalism rampant in the Bay Colony disgusted him, so he left to help found Newport, Rhode Island as a haven for religious toleration. Gura, *Glimpse*, 22, 9.

CONCLUSION

Historians have misjudged John Cotton's congregational theory. Miller and Ziff are too quick to assume that he advocated clerical power and the suppression of the laity. Cooper, on the other hand, understates the power the clergy held over their congregations. Cotton's goal was to create a "middle way" that balanced the interests of the clergy and the laity as well as the power of the independent churches with the influence of synods. Cotton's contributions to Congregationalism tended to favor clerical power and more binding synods, but the changes in these areas were not significant enough to render the laity virtually powerless.

In England, Cotton's broad doctrine on indifferent matters, his willingness to defy authority, and his desire to find compromise among Conformists and Puritans created an inclusive church structure. Doctrinally, his theological fusion of Precisionist and Antinomian strains of Puritanism likely allowed him to adopt a position of compromise in the Antinomian controversy. Cotton's emphasis on individual interpretation of the Bible and revelations revealed a schismatic nature to his theology that may have inadvertently sparked the Antinomian controversy and carried the potential at least for a tolerant church structure.

The new political and religious environment of Massachusetts, Cotton's teachings on congregational church forms while in England, and the influence of Separatism combined to mold Cotton's early congregational thought. During the pre-Antinomian colonial era, Cotton was able to develop a church that was more inclusive than his English church in terms of lay power

and church autonomy. However, his focus on church admission requirements through relation of a conversion experience and the narrowing scope of his doctrine of indifferent matters began to erode the moderation inherent in other aspects of his New England Way.

Cotton's blend of various Puritan strains likely put him in position to argue for a more doctrinally inclusive church during the Antinomian controversy. His attempts at reconciliation failed, however, when his Antinomian allies became more anti-authoritarian, but he was able to maintain some minor concessions on ecclesiastical toleration for differences on the doctrine of free grace. Towards the end of the controversy Anne Hutchinson's views had become so divergent that Cotton reached his limit regarding theological inclusion and helped form congregational practices that reduced lay rights. In the aftermath of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton's views on church membership took a more purist turn perhaps in response to competing church admission requirements and the waning power of the English Church.

The rise of Presbyterian power in both England and New England prompted Cotton to argue that the true form of church government was Congregational while also seeking a level of toleration from the new national Presbyterian Church. Although he generally opposed the Presbyterians on matters of church government, he was willing to ally with them to combat sectaries and tolerationists in England and the Bay Colony. In New England, Cotton's congregational theory co-opted elements of Presbyterian Church organization by advocating more binding synods and greater clerical authority. Nevertheless, this new church structure modified the New England Way only slightly and did not lead to clerical tyranny or a Laudian prelacy. However, in the area of church membership, Cotton's practices and thought became increasingly immoderate. The result was an ultra exclusive church based on blood rather than purity or faith. The admissions requirements and alienation of the growing number of non-

members within his church was the tragic flaw that undermined more moderate aspects of Congregationalism.

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