

# Adding to the Church: During the Early American Period

by Richard J. Bauckham

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*The New England churches developed a unique approach to church membership, emphasizing personal conversion experiences and the need for individuals to demonstrate a genuine experience of God's grace.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:21, Matthew 18:3, John 3:3, 2 Corinthians 13:5, 1 Peter 3:15

**Topics:** "Church Polity", "Conversion Theology"

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## Description

Richard J. Bauckham delves into the early American period, focusing on the New England colonies from 1630 to 1660. The New England churches pioneered a congregational church polity in a tolerant environment, unlike the Anabaptist and Separatist congregations in the Old World. They faced challenges in admitting members and defining criteria for church membership, emphasizing visible saints. The theology of conversion in New England required a rigorous process of demonstrating saving grace, leading to debates on the path to true conversion. The controversy over the Half-Way Covenant in 1662 revealed tensions between church purity and societal pressures, reflecting a shift in second-generation church life.

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## Transcript

FOR the purpose of this paper, the 'early American period' is intended to cover the New England colonies from c. 1630 to c. 1660, i.e. it begins with the years of the great migration in the 1630s and covers the first generation of the great New England divines: Thomas Hooker (who arrived in New England in 1633 and died in 1647), Thomas Shepard (who arrived in 1635 and died in 1649), Peter Bulkeley (who also arrived in 1635 but lived until 1659), John Davenport (who arrived in 1637 and survived all his fellows to die in 1670), and, probably the most respected of them all, John Cotton (who arrived in 1633 and died in 1657). Our period closes with the synod of 1662 which established the practice of the 'Half-Way Covenant'.

### Church Polity

The peculiar interest of the New England churches in this period lies in their pioneering attempt to practise a congregational church polity in tolerant surroundings--'tolerant' surroundings because this is one of the characteristics which most significantly distinguishes them from the Anabaptist and Separatist congregations of the Old World. The sixteenth century Anabaptists and the Separatists were gathered churches in a hostile environment, always at least potentially illegal and subject to persecution. An

assessment of the theory and practice of 'adding to the church' in these earlier gathered churches must take account not only of procedure but also of the fact that it usually took considerable courage and strength of conviction to become an Anabaptist or a Separatist. The New England churches were in a different situation: they were not merely the only churches in their society, they were also the recognized, the official, in a real sense the 'state' churches. Like the Separatist churches they had a theory of the godly magistrate's role in protecting and assisting the church, but unlike the Separatists they were in a position to implement that theory. No Separatist church in the Old World was faced with the problem of large numbers of unregenerate parents wanting their children baptised (as was to become a New England problem). To this extent the situation is the most novel aspect of the New England way. Theologically too they were differently placed, for they inherited not only the sixteenth-century Calvinism on which the Elizabethan Separatists built their churches but also the rich theological development of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English Puritanism. Puritan experiential theology in particular was, as we shall see, of decisive importance.

Technically the New England churches were 'semi-Separatist', i.e. they acknowledged the English churches to be true, though corrupt, churches. However things may have appeared to some English observers, the colonists' intentions were not schismatic. The churches they established were Congregational in polity, though just why this was so is a difficult question. There would seem to have been a somewhat mixed inheritance: from the Separatist tradition, from the Congregationalism of Henry Jacob in England, and from the idea of the church covenant as it was already partially being developed in English parish situations. The New England churches received members into a covenant which was voluntary on both sides: as Thomas Hooker put it, 'This being a spiritual Corporation: as none can be constrained to join it, unless they willingly subject; so neither can they join, unless the body do as freely and willingly entertain them'.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the principle of a church covenant voluntarily involving both the candidate for membership and the body of church members raised questions for criteria for membership which Puritans of Anglican or Presbyterian persuasion had never had to face. By rejecting the concept of the inclusive national church the New Englanders were making a startling break with the major tradition of Reformed and Puritan thought, an innovation which appeared shocking to many of their Puritan brethren who remained in England. One of these wrote in horror in 1637: 'you are so strict in admission of members to your church, that more than half are out of your church in all your congregations'.<sup>2</sup> But, especially during the Interregnum at various times when Independency in England seemed to be gaining strength, interest in the New England experiment was more sympathetic in some quarters and controversial writings concerning the justification, successes and failures of the New England way provided an important means for debate over church polity among the English Puritans. The New Englanders, for their part, saw their role as providing for the home country a model of purer reformation which others might follow: 'a city set on a hill', as John Winthrop put it.<sup>3</sup> All the greater therefore was their feeling of responsibility in implementing the experiment of gathered churches which would not incur the slur of Donatism, Anabaptism or Separatism.

Few people in church history have ever believed in a pure church, in the sense of a visible church containing only regenerate members--not even the Donatists, despite the fact that their name became a catchword for accusing people of this particular folly. But the idea of the gathered church does of course imply an attempt to bring the visible church more closely into approximation to the invisible church than is true in the case of national churches. The New Englanders fully recognized this and expressed their view of the matter by saying that church membership must be limited to those who 'in the judgment of reasonable charity' may be considered 'visible saints'. Church members were visible saints: no New

England theologian claimed that anyone but God could discern the invisible church. However rigorous the tests of true conversion may be, it was clear enough from Scripture, if not also from experience, that unregenerate men (those whom Thomas Hooker called 'cunning hypocrites'<sup>4</sup>) might pass the 'judgment of reasonable charity' and enter the church: and New England theology had a high opinion of the ability of the unregenerate man to simulate the marks of true conversion without having actually experienced true saving grace. The ideal of the church of visible saints was therefore that its membership be restricted to 'Persons visibly, externally (regenerate) to the judgment of reasonable charity, not always really and internally such by the powerful impression of God's grace'.<sup>5</sup> We should note that the fallibility of human judgment in this respect does operate in two different directions: not only will the 'cunning hypocrite' be allowed in, but the truly converted person may be excluded if he fails to convince the church of the reality of his faith. By and large the New England churches were not too bothered by the second kind of error: they rarely took seriously the thought that any true Christian might be excluded by their admission procedures, since they at least thought these procedures were relatively generous ('the judgment of reasonable charity'). When they did consider the possibility they tended to put first the purity of the church.<sup>6</sup>

By what criteria was a man to be judged a visible saint? During the 1630s the New England churches advanced far beyond the Separatist position in this respect. They developed a system whereby much more was required of prospective members than a profession of faith and an outwardly godly life. To understand this development we need to glance back at the English Puritan Theology. From the 1570's onwards Puritan theology, especially in the conforming Anglican tradition, had concerned itself very considerably with describing and detailing a man's experience of the work of the Spirit in his heart, both in bringing him to faith and in providing him with the evidence upon which an assurance of salvation might be based.

Within the Elizabethan situation this had been a different kind of response to the same problem which the Separatists had confronted: the problem of an indiscriminating, undisciplined church, whose official structure encouraged the popular belief that a man was a Christian just because he was baptised, thought himself a Protestant (i.e. he rejected the Pope and the Mass) and performed the minimum ecclesiastical duties. The Separatists sought to restore the scriptural meaning of church membership by tying it to a voluntary individual act of covenanting and subjecting it to adequate discipline.

The conforming Puritans who from Richard Greenham onwards developed a practical theology of conversion and assurance turned the problem inwards to the conscience instead of outwards to the form of the church, and concentrated on encouraging the mere church-goer to find the reality of his profession in personal Christian experience. They were concerned with the cultivation of personal religion within the national church structure. The Puritan emigrants to New England had grown up in this tradition and had themselves undergone intense conversion experiences which bore out in practice the theories they knew from the writings of Rogers or Perkins or Sibbes.

Their great innovation was to marry this experiential theology of conversion to the practice of a congregational church polity. In other words it became requisite for a prospective church member to convince the church that God had dealt with him in the manner approved and prescribed in the sermons and treatises of the authoritative writers. A visible saint became defined as a man able to give a credible account of the work of grace in his soul: repentance and faith had to be demonstrated (to the 'judgment of reasonable charity') by an explanation of the way in which God had brought one to repentance and faith.

Thus, according to John Cotton for example, church members cannot be admitted 'till we be convinced in our consciences of the certain and infallible signs of their regeneration'.<sup>7</sup> In Cotton's church at Boston, some of the questions put to candidates were: 'How it pleased God to work in them, to bring them home to Christ, whether the Law have convinced them of sin, how the Lord hath won them to deny themselves and their own righteousness, and to rely on the righteousness of Christ.'<sup>8</sup> Thomas Shepard had to reply to the objection that the practice of requiring testimony from candidates for membership was quite often abused because people insisted on entering into all the irrelevant and unprofitable details of a lengthy spiritual autobiography: 'I confess it is not fit that so holy and solemn an Assembly as a Church is, should be held long with revelations of this odd thing and tother, nor gather together the heap, and heap up all the particular passages of their lives, wherein they have got any good; nor Scriptures and Sermons, but such as may be of special use unto the people of God, such things as show, Thus I was humbled, then thus I was called, then thus I have walked, though with many weaknesses since, and such special providences of God I have seen, temptations gone through, and thus the Lord hath delivered me, blessed be his Name etc'.<sup>9</sup> By 1640 the practice of relating experiences of grace had become established and normal.

In 1648 it received the official sanction of the Cambridge Platform, which declared that 'a personal and public confession and declaring of God's manner of working upon the soul is both lawful, expedient, and useful', and citing I Pet. 3:15 insisted that, 'We must be able and ready upon any occasion to declare and show our repentance for sin, faith unfeigned, and effectual calling'.<sup>10</sup> In this way the signs of grace which the earlier English Puritans had treated as means to personal assurance of salvation became the necessary evidence for convincing one's fellow-Christians and persuading them to admit one to the church covenant.

### The Gathered Church

In attempting to evaluate the New England way we need to remember the essentially experimental nature of the approach. Where I shall offer some criticism I am partially echoing contemporary criticisms, but I am not concerned to follow the main body of seventeenth-century debate with Anglicans and Presbyterians. The dominant issue for contemporaries was the general one of the gathered church versus the national church: that issue I shall ignore because, as I have said, the special interest of the New England churches lies in their particular understanding of how a gathered church is gathered.

One danger which certainly lurks in the whole Puritan development of experiential theology is that as soon as one attempts to present in any detail a normative sequence of experience or even a normative set of ingredients to true conversion there is a strong temptation to go beyond the scriptural data and prescribe rules by which the grace of God is bound. In personal pastoral work this danger is offset by the experienced pastor's spiritual sensitivity to individual needs and problems; the danger is rather more acute when the rules shift from being helps and guides for personal religion and acquire the status of being normative qualifications for membership of the visible church. What happens of course is that the majority of converted Christians when giving a testimony fit their spiritual experience into the theological norms which they and their hearers expect: thus the majority of recorded seventeenth-century testimonies conform to a stereotyped and predictable pattern. This is not to suggest that such testimony is at all insincere, simply that most people asked to give an account of experiences will order and interpret and select experiences according to some sort of recognized pattern. Such patterns are doubtless necessary: to understand spiritual (or any other sort of) experience we do need a ready-made general framework of interpretation. But it must be flexible enough not to restrict our experience of God, and it must not be too rigid to accommodate a single genuine conversion. I suspect that here again a major weakness of New

England theology was the application of earlier theology to purposes for which it had not primarily been developed. The attempts to map out a path to conversion and assurance were made in order to help men along that path: New England made them into tests of whether men had travelled the path. Being a Christian tended to mean: having been through the recognized series of experiences.

The precise nature of that sequence of experiences was open to debate even among the New Englanders, and the terms of admission to membership did in fact vary from church to church. Richard Baxter's criticism of the system (he was actually referring to English churches of the same type) was that terms of admission 'are as various as the opinions of the Pastor (yea, the people too) and as their several degrees of charity'.<sup>11</sup> My own impression, however, is that differences have been rather exaggerated and that the essential unanimity of the New England preachers about the experience of true conversion is much more impressive than their disagreement over related issues. They had, like most preachers of the Gospel, a certain difficulty in determining what we might call the 'conversion level', the level of difficulty above which the preacher may be said to be erecting barriers to the Gospel and below which he may be said to be encouraging men to enter too easily into a mere delusion of salvation. Contemporary critics, however, agree that the New England pastors set the level high. Nathaniel Ward, who was step-son to Richard Rogers and a distinguished Puritan preacher himself, is recorded as responding to Thomas Hooker's sermons on preparation for receiving Christ in conversion with, 'Mr. Hooker, you make as good Christians before men are in Christ as ever they are after', and wishing, 'Would I were but as good a Christian now as you make men while they are preparing for Christ'.<sup>12</sup>

Giles Firmin, who wrote against Shepard in 1670, did so because his own pastoral experience had brought him up against the severe spiritual difficulties of people who after reading Shepard's account of the true convert could not be convinced of the genuineness of their faith,<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Shepard's book *The Sincere Convert* (London, 1643) I shall take as an example of the basic New England approach: it contains little with which any New England preacher would have quibbled. Shepard, like his colleagues, had been considerably affected by the Antinomian controversy: hence perhaps his inordinate stress on the fact that there are no easy short-cuts to saving grace. The book is subtitled, 'Discovering the paucity of true Believers; And the great Difficulty of Saving Conversion'. He stands firmly in the Puritan tradition which understands it to be necessary for a man to be prepared for saving grace by a process (in Thomas Hooker's phrase) 'harsh and tedious and long'.<sup>14</sup> Under the ministry of the Law a man must be totally crushed by the experience of his own depravity and corruption before it is possible for him to lay hold savingly on God's mercy in Christ. Shepard's major concern is that most men stop short somewhere along this path. Though he throws out the occasional encouragement to those who may be tempted to despair, the weight of his argument is directed against the false security in which he believes most of his fellows to be living. His sternest warning is that men should not 'catch hold of Christ before they be fit for him'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for example, the 'presumptuous unbeliever',

'seeing what sins he hath committed, and it may be having a little touch and some sorrow for his sins, catcheth at Christ, hoping to be saved by him before ever he come to be loaden with sin as his greatest evil or God's wrath kindled against him as his greatest curse; and so catching at Christ, hopes he hath Christ, and hoping he hath Christ already, shuts out Christ for the future, and so rejects him. . . You shall have these men and women complain never of the want, but only of the weakness of their faith, and they will not be beaten off from thence; let them hear never so much of their misery, nor see never so much of their sins, yet they will not be beaten off from trusting to Christ.'<sup>16</sup>

Where William Perkins and Richard Sibbes had been concerned to nourish up the smallest seeds of faith in the man who desired salvation, Shepard deplors the premature faith which keeps a man from ever knowing the full depths of his depravity and therefore from becoming fit for a genuinely saving experience of grace. 'Catch not at Christ, snatch not at his bread. but wait till God give thee him.'<sup>17</sup>

### Tests of Regeneration

The difficulty of conversion is worth labouring because it is basic to an understanding of the New England situation. The concept of preparation--the preparation of the heart to receive Christ--which characterized most New England theology of conversion, has been understood by some as a way of making salvation easier, a sort of theological subterfuge in the face of an unpalatably severe doctrine of divine sovereignty, a means by which man could on his own part make some approach towards salvation. In reality the 'Preparationists' were mostly concerned that salvation should not appear too easy, to keep men from claiming God's promises of mercy before they could conceivably be applicable to them, before they had been through the depths of humiliation, the 'prostration of the heart' as John Cotton called it.<sup>18</sup> Shepard never imagined that the natural man himself was capable of reaching even this condition:

'Thou mayest hang down thy head like a bulrush for sin, but thou canst not repent of sin; thou mayest presume, but thou canst not believe; thou mayest come halfway and forsake some sins, but not all sins; thou mayest come and knock at Heaven's gate as the foolish Virgins did, but did not enter in and pass through the gate. . . thou liest bound hand and foot in this woeful estate, and here thou must lie and rot like a dead carcass in his grave, until the Lord come and roll away the stone, and bid thee come out and live'.<sup>19</sup>

Humiliation was the work of God, but not (we should note) therefore a sign of election: it was not for the preacher to say that God might not bring the reprobate to this state and simply leave him there.<sup>20</sup>

Shepard devotes much space to exposing false security, the conditions of men who think they have received saving grace but in fact have not. The devil's tricks for deceiving men in this respect are seemingly endless. In one such passage Shepard enumerates five errors of understanding which provide men with this kind of false security:

too low a view of repentance. The repentance involved in true regeneration is 'not when a man is troubled somewhat in mind for sin, but when he cometh to mourn for sin as his greatest evil'.

Mistaking the struggles of the unregenerate conscience against sin for the struggle of Spirit against flesh in the heart of the regenerate. 'The striving of the Spirit against the Flesh, is against sin, because it is sin. . . But the striving of thy conscience against sin. . . is only from a fear of the danger of sin.'

It is possible for apparently good desires in religious matters to arise merely from self-love: self-love, for example, can drive a man to prayer for pardon and mercy. The love of Christ, however, is distinguished from self-love because it 'makes a man desire Christ and his honour for himself (Christ), and all other things for Christ'.

A man may think himself saved because he sometimes does things for the glory of God: but this is a motive possible in the reprobate. The regenerate are distinguished by seeking God's glory constantly and solely.

Too light a view of sin: the truly regenerate man groans day and night under the sins of which he cannot be rid.<sup>21</sup>

Again and again Shepard repeats that faith which has come easily to a man is ipso facto no true faith. He knows and says that his readers trust in Christ for their salvation--but so do the papists, who have never known the depths of sin or the gift of whole-hearted repentance. 'Hence,' he concludes,

'many of you trust unto Christ, as the apricot tree that leans against the wall, but it's fast rooted in the earth: so you lean upon Christ for salvation, but you are rooted in the world, rooted in your pride, rooted in your filthiness still. Woe to you if you perish in this estate, God will hew you down as fuel for his wrath, whatever mad hope you have to be saved by Christ. This therefore I proclaim from the God of Heaven to you. 1. You that never felt yourselves as unable to believe as a dead man to raise himself, you have as yet no faith at all. 2. You that would get faith, first must feel your inability to believe; and fetch not this slip out of thine own garden: it must come down from Heaven to thy soul, if ever thou partakest thereof.'<sup>22</sup>

The Sincere Convert has nothing to say about church membership: but these tests of regeneration were doubtless those which Shepard sought to apply as pastor of the church at Cambridge. The evidence is that Shepard held to as strict as possible a correlation between the visible and invisible churches. Though of course the church would never be entirely successful in excluding hypocrites from church membership, nevertheless it was her urgent duty to exercise as much care as possible, for 'one man or woman secretly vile, which the Church hath not used all means to discover, may defile a whole Church'.<sup>23</sup>

#### Requirements for Church Membership

Shepard's doctrine was not exceptionally stringent or demanding in New England terms: much the same would have been heard from most New England pulpits in the 1630s or 1640s. There were, however, two areas of significant disagreement. The first was over the question of testing candidates for admission to church membership by requiring a demonstration of saving grace. What happened normally was that a private examination by the elders was followed by a public testimony to the whole church; this might be followed or be replaced by a question-and-answer session in which any church member would be free to cross-examine the candidate about his religious experience.

Doubtless the process could be somewhat intimidating, but this was not the intention, and diffident candidates would be excused the public examination. In most churches, however, as in Shepard's, the intention was to ascertain as accurately as possible whether the candidate was truly regenerate. In practice the examinations could not have been everywhere and at all times on the same level of close scrutiny; and we do know of one case, that of Thomas Hooker's church at Hartford, Connecticut, in which they were significantly and deliberately more lenient.

Hooker fully agreed with the Massachusetts pastors that the church must consist only of those who may 'in the judgment of reasonable charity' be considered 'visible saints': he differed only in allowing for a rather more generous degree of error in the exercise of the judgment. Candidates for membership at Hartford related their conversion experiences to the church only if they wished to do so: normally they had only to answer 'certain probatory questions' in a private examination before the elders.<sup>24</sup> Hooker wrote that in his view a more thorough examination was necessary when the first members of a new church covenanted together to set up the church than in the case of admissions of new members later.<sup>25</sup> In controversy with the Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford he defined the 'grounds of probabilities' on which the judgment of reasonable charity was to be based: He that professing the faith lives not in the neglect of any

known duty, or in the commission of any known evil, and bath such a measure of knowledge as may in reason let in Christ into the soul, and carry the soul to him: these be grounds of probabilities, by which charity poised according to rule may and ought to conceive, there be some beginnings of spiritual good.'<sup>26</sup> Even allowing for the controversial context, this is a considerably less exacting statement than Shepard or Cotton would have required.

Hooker's doctrine of conversion differed in no especially significant way from Shepard's: his more inclusive church admission procedure would seem to be based mainly on a less confident view of the church's ability to discern true conversion and the difference was therefore only one of degree. He was perhaps also somewhat influenced by his higher view of the value of the external covenant, that into which the children of believers entered by their baptism.

The external covenant was, as we shall see, to prove a source of considerable confusion in the theology and practice of the New England churches. It was also one element in the second area of disagreement over conversion and church membership: the whole problem of 'preparation' for conversion was one on which the various pastors held differing positions. Thus whether baptism (the infant baptism of the children of visible saints) played any part in bringing a man to saving faith was an issue on which opinions ranged from Cotton's decisive negative to Peter Bulkeley's high view of the efficacy of baptism understood as the covenant ground on which the baptised might 'plead the promises of (God's) grace'.<sup>27</sup> The balance of law and promise in the path to conversion was delicate, and susceptible to many different emphases. Not everyone thought that a man could reach the promises of the Gospel only on the far side of a totally destructive experience of legal terrors; some were more inclined to stress the attractive power of divine love even in the experience of the unregenerate man under the Law. But the issue of preparation was especially highlighted by the ministry of John Cotton at Boston and the Antinomian controversy of 1638.

Cotton brought to the issue of preparation a renewed stress on the basic Reformed doctrine that regeneration precedes all the saving work of God in a man's soul; to the general New England understanding that there is a gradual work of saving preparation for Christ in which the soul is not merely passive Cotton brought an insistence on the Calvinist view that man in regeneration is wholly passive. Justification, according to Cotton, precedes faith and is therefore strictly unconditional: nothing at all in the preparation of the heart for conversion can be considered a saving qualification for conversion.<sup>28</sup> Cotton did not reject all preparation: he insisted with all the New England pastors on the necessity of the ministry of the Law, Only the ministry of the Law can destroy all a man's confidence in works and leave him in the condition where he 'can do nothing but wait for faith'.<sup>29</sup> What Cotton rejected was all saving preparations; and this was what his colleagues felt to be at least partly responsible for the growth of the Antinomian heresy of Anne Hutchinson and her followers. Cotton's views were said to be 'the Trojan horse, out of which all the erroneous opinions and differences of the country did issue forth'.<sup>30</sup>

Cotton was extraordinarily slow to recognize the heresy and this does suggest a real connection of thought between Cotton's theology and that of the Antinomians. Doubtless the trouble was less Cotton's theology as such than a somewhat inept application of it. Cotton argued not only that union with Christ occurs before faith but also that therefore the first, the primary evidence of regeneration was not any aspect of sanctification but purely the witness of the Spirit in the heart of the regenerate man.<sup>31</sup> The whole Preparationist tradition as far back as Greenham and Perkins had been directed towards enabling men to discern the workings of the Spirit in their hearts in the form of changed desires and sanctified life: the fruits of the Spirit were the primary evidence of his presence. Cotton by contrast held that the primary evidence was the witness of the Spirit enabling a man to receive and hold in faith the unconditional promise of God's

free grace to the elect, that in fact saving faith itself was the first and sufficient evidence of regeneration. The Antinomians simply took the further step of asserting that individual direct revelation of one's place in the covenant of grace, independent of Word or ministry, was all that mattered: sin, repentance and sanctification were crowded out of the picture.

This was not just a case of applying theoretical theology in a way which had dangerous practical results. Cotton's concerns were much the same as Shepard's: he found men and women basing their faith on quite inadequate grounds and sought to awaken them from false security. With Shepard he deplored people's trust in the external covenant and in conditional promises which did not yet apply to them: 'Take heed you do not close with promises before you have Jesus Christ'.<sup>32</sup> He at first approved of Anne Hutchinson's activities because what she was doing was successfully awakening people to the fact they were living only in a covenant of works, resting on duties, and mistaking for evidence of saving grace those religious desires and exercises which every New England pastor knew were nothing but the work of common grace in the unregenerate.<sup>33</sup> Cotton's own solution to the matter was a re-emphasis on the fact that salvation is God's work alone, but this was twisted by the Antinomians into a short-cut to saving grace, the teaching that these things were not merely inadequate but unnecessary.

The rights and wrongs of Cotton's theology never received a proper airing because the fear of Antinomianism smothered the matter. The actual result of the controversy was simply an even stronger insistence that genuine spiritual experience must follow the recognized path. For us, however, the controversy may highlight the single greatest problem of New England theology. This theology was Reformed in that it wished to stress at every point the divine initiative in man's salvation, but it was also primarily an experiential theology and excessively introspective. When the churches required a narrative of spiritual experience they were requiring that the convert describe the work of God in his life in such a way that it might be recognized as unmistakably the work of God. That in itself may not be wrong. But certainly where New England piety did become imbalanced was in forgetting that the divine initiative will be found primarily in the facts and proclamation of the Gospel and only secondarily in the individual's experience. Given the faithful proclamation of the Gospel the miracle of human response might perhaps have been left to the Spirit in a rather less carefully defined sense than the New Englanders allowed. In New England the divine initiative could not be real unless it were sought out and located in the depths of the individual conscience in a process of intense introspection. The lesson it is difficult not to draw from the Preparationists' attempts to map out this process is surely that the earliest workings of the Spirit in the regenerate heart will normally be elusive. There must be something at fault in an experiential theology which depends upon tracking them down.

### The Position of Children

Finally we turn to the second great controversy of New England theology, that which closes our period and resulted in the 1662 synod's endorsement of the idea of the 'Half-Way Covenant'. The problem arose out of the New England practice of baptising children only if they were the children of visible saints; such children were considered 'external covenanters' and New England covenant theology provided a somewhat vague presumption that the children of believers might be expected to come to saving faith themselves. They could not, however, come into full church membership until they were converted. But the question arose whether baptism should be allowed for the children of unconverted external covenanters. The majority opinion of the first generation of pastors had been that it should not, but by 1662 all these pastors had died (except John Davenport who did hold out firmly against the Half-Way Covenant) and by 1662 New England faced a situation which the early pastors had doubtless not

anticipated: the probability that very soon the majority of the population would be unbaptised. Large numbers of the second generation of the colonists, external covenanters by virtue of their own infant baptism, were growing up without showing evidence of saving grace--and wanted their children baptised. By means of what was derisively known as the Half-Way Covenant, the synod of 1662 defined the status of these unconverted external covenanters: provided they understood and publicly assented to the doctrines of the faith and provided their external conduct was free of scandal, they could have their children baptised and be themselves subject to church discipline.<sup>34</sup>

Davenport was quite correct to see the Half-Way Covenant as a betrayal of the New England ideal. It was admitted on all hands to be in some sense a compromise with pressure from society. No one liked the idea of a society in which the majority would be unbaptised and one of the most persuasive arguments of the advocates of the Half-Way Covenant was that without it the unregenerate majority would tend to seek church membership by hypocrisy. By granting them the ambiguous status of half-way covenanters it was possible to satisfy their demands while at the same time guarding the purity of full membership. In terms of the New England theology of conversion, however, this amounted to something very like encouraging men to rest content with the external covenant and not go on to an experience of saving grace. A man who died unregenerate in the external covenant had no advantage whatsoever over the man who died outside it. The overvaluation of the external covenant which by 1660 was clearly prevalent even among the pastors runs entirely counter to the whole thrust of early New England theology. We must account for it partly by the churches' position in New England society, which made some sort of church membership requisite for the sake of social respectability, and partly also by a form of tribalism which clothed itself in covenant theology. It was natural family feeling which made even the finest New England saints apt to believe that God had pledged Himself to continue His church primarily in the line of the physical descendants of visible saints.

The Half-Way Covenant does show us that the New England experiment did not wholly manage to stand the test of second generation church life, a test which few significant movements in church history have survived without alteration. To what extent it also demonstrates a real general spiritual decline in New England is difficult to tell. We must take account of the probability that many of the first generation of church members became members at a time when admission procedures were less strict than they became by 1640. But almost certainly there was real decline. Most of the original colonists had of course become colonists precisely because they were deeply religious men who fitted the pattern of religious experience described in early New England theology. Historical distance makes it quite impossible to guess whether or how many of their supposedly unregenerate children may in fact have come to a faith which was won with less spiritual struggle and did not provide a conversion experience on the New England norm, but was nevertheless real.

It has been suggested that the 1660 situation exposes a basic fallacy in the idea of a church of visible saints; the concern for church purity is supposed to have cut the churches off from the world to such an extent that they failed to concern themselves with the work of conversion: hence the declining membership. The suggestion makes any sense at all only in the context of a belief that Church discipline and the Lord's Supper could be aids to conversion. For those who share the New England belief that the Word is the ordinary means of conversion and have read New England writing on conversion, the suggestion is incredible. There was no danger that the influence of the preached Word would be any less wide than in the English parish situation, for church attendance was legally compulsory on all citizens, visible saints or not. All the evidence is that as a result of this the level of education in the faith was very

high: there is nothing comparable to the evidence of extraordinary ignorance of the fundamentals of Christian doctrine which we have from English parishes in this period. Doubts may be expressed about the manner of preaching conversion in New England, but that the churches cared about conversion there can be no doubt. The Cambridge Platform declared:

'To the exception that we take no course for the gaining and healing and calling in of ignorant and erroneous and scandalous persons, whom we refuse to receive into our churches . . . we conceive the receiving of them. . . would rather lose and corrupt our churches than gain and heal them... We therefore find it safer to square rough and uneven stones before they be laid into the building, rather than to hammer and hew them when they lie unevenly in the building'.<sup>35</sup>

This was the New England way of adding to the church.

## NOTES

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