

*New England Church "Relations"
and Continuity in
Early Congregational History*

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IN HIS ground-breaking study of early English dissenters, Champlin Burrage announced a half-century ago that the "beginnings of Independency or Congregationalism, are not, as heretofore, traced to the Brownists or Barrowists, but to the Congregational Puritanism advocated by Henry Jacob and William Bradshaw about 1604 and 1605, and later put in practice by various Puritan congregations on the Continent, when it was brought to America and back into England."¹ This evolutionary scheme, as developed and substantiated in later studies, has by now acquired considerable authority. The late Perry Miller's *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* was "a development of the hints" received from Burrage and others; Charles M. Andrews adopted a similar point of view; and in 1947 Professor Thomas Jefferson Wertebaker went so far as to write that "before the end of the reign of James I, English Congregationalism, the Congregationalism which was transplanted in New England, had assumed its final form."²

Obviously, the Burrage thesis has proved a boon to historians in that it provided a framework within which they

¹ *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research, 1550-1641* (2 vols., Cambridge, England, 1912), I, 33.

² *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), p. xv; Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (4 vols., New Haven, 1934-1938), I, 379, n. 2; Wertebaker, *The Puritan Oligarchy* (New York, n.d.), p. 26.

have been able to work out the early history of non-separating Congregationalism as a continuous development, independent of the Separatist movement. Some scholars, however, have found that continuity more apparent in theory than in practice. Larzer Ziff, for one, has recently revived the argument that the churches established in the Massachusetts Bay Colony by 1633 took their polity from Plymouth by way of Salem, and he heavily emphasizes John Cotton's primacy as theoretician in the development of the New England Way.³ It is difficult to deny that the principal founders of the New England Way were in 1633 Separatists in every respect except that they professed not to be; but it does not follow that their profession was simply a smoke-screen thrown up as an *ad hoc* measure to conceal their adoption of Separatist doctrines. John Cotton's statement that these men learned their Congregationalism not from John Robinson but from William Ames and the Holy Ghost remains to be reckoned with.⁴ And until a better reconstruction is offered, the thesis that the New England Way was first formulated in England, and first tested in the Netherlands, remains at least plausible.

The alternate reconstruction is that the New England Way, conceived as a state religion, first took root in New England not, as Professor Wertenbaker would have it, by transplantation from Old England, but by a sudden mutation of the Separatist strain in Puritan thought. Whether this mutation is to be attributed, with Professor Ziff, to the fertile brain of John Cotton, or, with Robert Baillie, to "the free air of a new world,"⁵ the fact remains that according to this reconstruction, the New England Way was a late

³ *The Career of John Cotton* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 63-64, n.; 75 ff. On the question of Cotton's primacy, see the review of this book by R. P. Stearns, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, L (June, 1963), 104-105.

⁴ *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), Pt. I, pp. 13-14.

⁵ Baillie, *A Dissuasive from the Errours of the Time* (London, 1645), p. 55.

product of Puritanism, first developed in the New World and subsequently exported to Cromwell's England.⁶

This argument has been advanced recently in books by Geoffrey Nuttall and E. S. Morgan. Following the lead provided by Richard Baxter's recollection that he first became aware of Presbyterians and Independents in England in 1641, these scholars hold that, until the summons of the Long Parliament, there were really only two sorts of English Puritans: a minority of Separatists, and an amorphous majority of nonconformists which included a few persons who were tending towards something that, in the 1640's, became known as Congregationalism or Independency.⁷ As for those whom we have become accustomed to call Non-separating Congregationalists, such as William Ames, Henry Jacob, William Bradshaw and the rest, Professor Nuttall argues that these men, though rightly regarded individually as precursors of Independency, dif-

⁶ Cotton's reputation as chief architect of both the New England Way and English Independency had been well established by the end of the seventeenth century. See Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (2 vols., Hartford, 1855), I, 265, and William Hubbard, *A General History of New-England*, 2nd edn. (Boston, 1848), pp. 182-184, 186; cf. the statements by British and continental writers quoted in Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1957), p. 16, n. 1. By his remark about the "free air of a new world," Baillie meant, of course, that Cotton had caught Separatism in that licentious climate. Once converted, he then refined Separatism into something much like John Robinson's "Semi-separatism." In Baillie's view, then, Robinson was the real father of Independency; Cotton was "its greatest promoter and patron." *Dissoasive*, pp. 17, 55-56, 58-59. Cotton himself denied Baillie's imputation and emphasized the continuity of New England polity with non-separating theory and practice running all the way back to Thomas Cartwright. See his *Way . . . Cleared*, Pt. I, pp. 16, 20, 25, and his preface to John Norton's *The Answer To The Whole Set of Questions of the Celebrated Mr. William Apollonius*, . . . (1648), ed. and trans. by Douglas Horton (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 17.

⁷ Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York, 1963), pp. 12-13; Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, pp. 8 ff. For Baxter's remark, see his *The True History of Councils* (London, 1682), p. 90; cf. Nuttall, p. 53, n. 1. It may be that too much has been made of this statement. In context, Baxter's point is that the prevailing climate of his youth was one of religious indifference, and that those few who took church matters seriously were persecuted as "Puritanes" and "Precisians." Farther on (p. 92), he recalls that "in former times there had been divers Presbyterian Nonconformists," but that these had died off, "and very few succeeded them. About as many Nonconformists as Counties were left; and those few most stuck at Subscription and Ceremonies, . . . and but few of them studied or understood the Presbyterian or Independent Disciplinary Causes."

ferred too widely among themselves on details of ecclesiastical organization to be brought together under a distinct title.⁸ Professor Morgan agrees that "Congregationalism was not yet a fully worked out system in England or even a distinct movement," and he adds that "the reason is obvious: few Englishmen in England had had experience before the 1640's in forming or running a Congregational Church."⁹ Some such experience had been acquired, of course, by the followers of Henry Jacob in England and of John Forbes in the Netherlands. But Nuttall prefers to designate Jacobs as a semi-separatist, following the usage of Robert Baillie and other Presbyterian critics; and in discussing "the so-called Congregational classis" in the Netherlands, he observes that when John Davenport arrived in Holland in 1633 he "was for occasional communion with the Brownists."¹⁰ Similarly, in a reference to "the Separatist churches in England and Holland," Morgan evidently means to include Jacob's congregation and the Congregational Classis. Elsewhere, less bluntly, he describes the former as "technically non-separating."¹¹

In sum, Morgan and Nuttall agree that all Congregational practice before 1633 was Separatist in fact if not in theory, and that the body of non-separating Congregationalist ideas which had been advanced by that date provided only a rough and internally inconsistent sketch of the system worked out by John Cotton and his colleagues in New England. Professor Morgan argues further, as we shall see, that neither the separating nor the non-separating precursors of the New England Way had fully developed the idea that a true church is a fellowship of "visible saints": that conception awaited the mutation in Congregational thought just

⁸ *Visible Saints*, pp. 9-11.

⁹ *Visible Saints*, p. 82 with n. 37.

¹⁰ *Visible Saints*, pp. 10, 13.

¹¹ *Visible Saints*, pp. 86-87.

mentioned. Laying the latter thesis aside for the moment, we might at this point raise two objections.

First, the argument that early Congregationalism was not a "fully worked out system" must be weighed along with Richard Baxter's observation that "'Independents greatly differ among themselves.'"¹² Professor Nuttall himself has argued convincingly and at length that the notion of a comprehensive body of theological and ecclesiastical doctrine to which all communicants must give formal assent was foreign to mature Congregationalist thought and that Congregationalists agreed to disagree among themselves regarding all matters peripheral to the core of Reformed dogma.¹³ In New England we know that there was considerable divergence in thought and in practice; and Dr. C. K. Shipton has recently pointed out that even in Massachusetts there was less of both agreement and compulsion than the term "orthodoxy" implies.¹⁴ In view of this persistent latitudinarianism, then, how significant are the discrepancies in early Congregational ecclesiology? Indeed, when did Congregational ecclesiology reach maturity in the sense that it became a static, closed, and unchanging system?

It must be objected further that Nuttall and Morgan too readily acquiesce in the judgment of the Presbyterian party

¹² Quoted by Nuttall, p. 117.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Ch. III, esp. pp. 114 ff; cf. his *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, 1946), pp. vii, 96-97, 111 ff; and Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future* (New York and London, n.d.), pp. 96-97, 103-105. Baillie, *Dissoviative*, p. 106, recognized this "looseness" as a distinction between separating and non-separating Congregationalism: "The *Brownists* will not dispence with known errors and sinnes in the members; . . . But the *Independents* . . . make it their rule to hold out none for any error that is not fundamentall. . . ."

¹⁴ "The American Image," an address delivered at the University of Illinois for the Division of Humanities, November, 1964. Dr. Shipton has persistently advanced the idea that New England Puritanism was essentially flexible and non-authoritarian. See his "Puritanism and Modern Democracy," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, CI (July, 1947), 181-98; and "The Hebraic Background of Puritanism," *Publication of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XLVII (March, 1958), esp. pp. 143-146.

that the followers of Jacob and Forbes were Separatists in fact if not in name. It is true that John Paget, the Presbyterian minister of the English Church in Amsterdam, tried to discredit Thomas Hooker and John Davenport in the eyes of the Dutch and English ecclesiastical authorities by asking them whether they would be willing to hold communion with Brownists. Hooker replied in 1632 that to separate from the Church of England was "an error in Judgment and sinne in practize," but to refuse to worship with Separatists was to fall into their own error of worshipping only with men of like mind as well as like faith.¹⁵ Here is the precise point at which separating and non-separating Congregationalists diverged. It is the point at which John Robinson stuck in his search for common ground with the non-separatist William Ames: Robinson was willing to concede that there were godly men in the Church of England with whom he could communicate in private worship, but he could not join them in their public communion or admit them into his.¹⁶ He would not have listened to a sermon preached by Hooker in an English parish, and, evidently he would not have admitted Hooker, as a member of the

¹⁵ Raymond P. Stearns, *Congregationalism in the Dutch Netherlands: The Rise and Fall of the English Congregational Classis, 1621-1635* (Chicago, 1940), pp. 105-106. Thus early was sounded the keynote of non-separating Congregationalism to which Baillie referred (note 13, above). Cf. Cotton Mather's statement, as quoted by Shipton, "The New England Clergy of the 'Glacial Age,'" *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, XXXII (December, 1933), 35-36, n. 1, that: "In the same Church there have been *Presbyterians, Independents, Episcopalians* and *Antipaedobaptists*, all welcome to the same Table of the Lord when they have manifested to the Judgment of Christian Charity a work of Regeneration in their souls."

¹⁶ Robert Ashton, ed., *The Works of John Robinson* (3 vols., London, 1851), III, 116-117. The point of difference here was of more than theoretical significance. Non-separating Congregationalists did, in fact, partake of the sacraments with Separatists just as they did with Episcopalians—and they had done so from their beginnings in Holland. The "Dissenting Brethren" in the Westminster Assembly stated, in their *Apologeticall Narration* of 1643/44, that, "as a real testimony" of their professed allegiance of the Church of England, "some of us after we actually were in this way of communion [i.e., the Congregational] baptized our children in Parishional congregations, and as we had occasion, did offer to receive into the communion of the Lord's Supper with us some, whom we knew godly, that came to visit us when we were in our exile. . . ." Quoted in John Browne, *History of Congregationalism . . . in Norfolk and Suffolk* (London, 1877), p. 107.

Church of England, into his church at Leiden. Hooker, then, by admitting his willingness to hear Robinson at Leiden, was rejecting rather than confessing the Separatists' brand of exclusiveness.

Up to this point, we have dealt only with negatives in the Nuttall-Morgan argument. We have yet to consider its central affirmation, namely, that "the 'Independent Churches' were 'born of' 'Mr. Cotton and others in New England'."¹⁷ If, says Nuttall, this statement by William Erbury in 1658 was an exaggeration, it was "the exaggeration of a truth."¹⁸ In order to make this claim valid, it is clearly necessary to show that Cotton and his colleagues contributed something to Congregationalism which essentially and permanently changed its character—something which hitherto had been absent in both separating and non-separating Congregational theory.

Professor Morgan believes that he has found such an innovation in the New England practice, established soon after John Cotton's arrival in 1633, of demanding proof of conversion as a requirement of church membership. He maintains that earlier Congregationalists had required only a profession or confession of faith, *i.e.*, an attestation to creedal orthodoxy, together with a reputation for upright living and subscription to the church Covenant. But the New England Churches, drawing upon the extensive body of Puritan literature treating of the operation of the Holy Ghost in the human soul, added a new test in which candidates for church membership submitted experiential data concerning the process of their regeneration.¹⁹

At this point, Professor Morgan argues, a fundamental change occurred in the concept of how a church was to be

¹⁷ William Erbury, quoted by Nuttall, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ *Visible Saints*, Chs. II-III, *passim*, esp. pp. 65-66.

gathered. Previously, separating and non-separating Congregationalists alike had been preoccupied with the externals of ecclesiastical structure: the saving faith of covenanters could only at best be presumed from the *prima facie* evidence of behavior and profession and properly was the concern of God rather than of men. Now, the voluntary gathering of the faithful was placed on a new, more charismatic basis: the Spirit was sought before the Word in candidates' testimony.

As a preliminary to the examination of this thesis, let us reduce it to a syllogism. Its major premise is that the religious test which required prospective church members to give narrative and descriptive evidence of their experience of regeneration became a definitive element in Congregational polity. Its minor premise is that this test, which hereafter will be referred to as the church "relation," was inaugurated in New England after 1633. Thus, Congregational polity reached its definitive stage of development in New England after 1633.

In evaluating this thesis, we shall seek to determine whether the New England church relation was as important and original as Professor Morgan maintains. Was it a *significant* departure from earlier theory and practice, or was it simply a technical refinement added to earlier theory and practice? The suggestion will be advanced here that the ideal of ecclesiastical purity which the church relation helped to implement had long been axiomatic in both separating and non-separating Congregational ecclesiology, and that New Englanders merely adapted that ideal to new circumstances. Because the ideal was held in common by both types of earlier Congregationalists, our thesis will require only occasional distinction between them; and the term Congregationalist will generally be meant hereafter to include all those who would ground true churches in church

covenants, whether explicit, with the Separatists, or implicit, with the non-Separatists. Our attention will, however, be directed primarily toward separating Congregationalists; for it was they who left themselves most open to the charge—laid upon them, as we shall see, by Professor Morgan as well as by their non-separating opponents—of embracing an ideal of purity which could lead only to unending schism and which had, therefore, to be fundamentally altered before Congregationalism could become the basis of a state religion. We have already summarized Morgan's argument that the New England Fathers, lacking an adequate blueprint of non-separating Congregationalism, had to build, *mutatis mutandis*, upon the polity developed by hard experience in Separatist congregations. It is beside the purpose of this essay to examine that argument, with its corollary that all Congregational experience before 1633 was virtually Separatist, beyond what has already been said. It is rather our purpose to suggest that early Congregational polity embodied, in both theory and practice, a conception of purity with which New England church membership requirements were consistent and continuous. If the New England Way was a mutant, the mutation must be sought elsewhere than in Congregational standards of admission.

The importance of the church relation must be assessed in connection with that which Nuttall and Morgan consider to have been the central idea in Congregational thought, namely, that the goal of ecclesiastical reformation is a carnal snare unless the church is first purified in its matter: the church is only the body of the faithful; its worship can be no more pure than they are pure.²⁰ The church must,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii, and Ch. I, *passim*, esp. pp. 31-32; Nuttall, p. viii, and Ch. I, *passim*, esp. pp. 52 ff. One of the charges brought by ecclesiastical authorities against Henry Barrow and John Greenwood was their accusation that "we admit into our church persons unsanctified." George Paule, quoted in Benjamin Hanbury, *Historical Memorials Relating to the Independents, or Congregationalists* (3 vols., London, 1839-1844), I, 35. Indeed, this is the first matter which Barrow takes up in his *A Brief Discoverie of the False Church*

therefore, heed Paul's exhortation to Timothy and purge itself of all who are not "sanctified, and meet for the master's use" (2 Tim. 2:21). Questioned on this point, Richard Mather replied bluntly enough: "We do believe that all Members of Churches ought to be Saints . . . and therefore we count it our duty to use all . . . meanes whereby God may helpe us to discern, whether those that offer themselves . . . be persons so qualified or no."²¹ Professor Morgan argues that before this ideal could be realized in practice, Congregational Churches needed a scientific procedure by which regenerate men and women could recognize each other as such. Hence the importance of the New England Church relation: it made possible the institutional adaptation of the idea that a Congregation is a group of visible saints.²²

That being so, might not the test for saving faith be adequately appreciated as a technical improvement by means of which Congregationalists brought their practice into line with their theory? Professor Morgan seems to regard it in that light when he observes that it enabled New Englanders to answer the question: "If the church was a company of the faithful, who was indeed faithful?"²³

But it is easy to overstate even this moderate estimate of the theoretical significance of the new test. The evidence of saving faith which it elicited was direct, but it was also subjective; and it was considered to be no less presumptive than

[1590], in Leland H. Carlson, ed., *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1587-1590* (London, 1962), pp. 279-319. Cf. Henry Ainsworth's Preface to the *Confession of the London-Amsterdam Church* (1596) in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston, 1960), p. 51. In the Preface to his *The Communion of Saints* (Amsterdam, 1607), Ainsworth maintained that the ungodly cannot be made holy by touching holy things; instead, they pollute the things they touch. For a later statement of the same argument, see John Owen, *Pneumatologia: Or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London, 1674), Bk. V, Ch. i, Sec. 20.

²¹ *Church-Government and Church-Covenant Discussed* (London, 1643), p. 23.

²² *Visible Saints*, pp. 62-63.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

that provided by behavior and conversation. The margin of error in discerning the elect remained precisely as wide as the field of enquiry. Puritans—and Calvinists generally—had always talked about this problem in one of two ways, depending upon whether they wished to emphasize God's sovereignty or God's mercy. On the one hand, it was axiomatic that divine criteria of election and reprobation are sealed mysteries; no man can know or even safely speculate about the ultimate judgment of God. Accordingly, the visible Church must always be tainted with false professors; and Puritan theoreticians, including the Congregationalists, were careful to state that the church can never be sure of the quality of a communicant's faith.²⁴

On the other hand, God's intentions towards men, as towards the rest of Creation, may be discerned to a limited extent in His providential works; and the decree of election is followed by the work of sanctification. If, therefore, a man seeks evidence of his justification, he need not, according to William Perkins, "ascend into heaven to search the secret Counsell of God, but rather descend into his owne heart to search whether *he be sanctified* or not."²⁵ And when he has had subjective experience of what it is to be sanctified, he can then descry sanctification in others: for the saint, said Perkins, "doth both [feele] and shew forth the power of Christ in him."²⁶

In fact, the saints had ample criteria in the effects, or symptoms, of sanctification for taking each other's spiritual

²⁴ William Perkins, *Workes* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1609), I, 296; Albert Peel and Leland H. Carlson, eds., *Cartwrightiana* (London, 1951), p. 71; Barrow, *Writings*, ed. Carlson, p. 73; Robinson, *Works*, III, 428; William Bradshaw, *A Preparation to the Receiuing of Christs Body and Blood* (1609), 9th edn (London, 1634), pp. 76 *recto-verso*. Cf. Morgan, pp. 52-53.

²⁵ *Workes*, I, 6.

²⁶ *Workes*, I, 79; cf. Thomas Cartwright: the godly can be recognized "not onely by their owne profession, but also by the testimonie of the spirit of God, who by manifold graces powred vpon them, euen vnto an apparant sanctification of numbers of them, do beare them witnes that they be members of the body of christ. . . ." *Cartwrightiana*, p. 50.

measure. Nor did these criteria involve outward behavior alone: sanctification is a transformation of the will and of the affections which can be readily recognized in one's conversation by those who know what to look for. When Anne Stubbes told Thomas Cartwright, for example, that she felt a longing for the coming of Christ, Cartwright was able to pronounce her faith genuine; for it was generally agreed among spiritual diagnosticians that "unfaindly from the hart to desire the Lo: Comyng" is a mark of the godly.²⁷ This kind of profession, added to the evidence of good works and obedience to God's Word, amounted, in Henry Jacob's opinion, to nothing less than "the fruits and sure witnesses of true faith justifying us."²⁸

In suggesting, then, that the New England church relation enabled Congregationalists to discern the truly faithful, we are, in a sense, discovering a solution to an artificial problem. Earlier Congregationalists may not have required candidates for Church membership to discuss the circumstances of their conversion, but we know that they did hold strict standards of admission; and, if the statement by Henry Jacob quoted above may be accepted at face value, we know that these standards were considered to be adequate criteria of saving faith. To recognize a saint was, at once, a difficult and an easy task: difficult because one could never be sure; easy because the criteria for determining the probability of sanctification were both abundant and clearly established. To put the matter rather crudely, we can be reasonably confident that Henry Jacob could tell a saint when he met one; and that the members of his Congregation were principally of that sort. John Robinson said as much when he admitted that saints could be found in the parishes of England as well as in the particular churches

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁸ "Principles & Foundations of Christian Religion" (ca. 1605), in Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, II, 156.

abroad: "And surely," he wrote, "if the Lord's people be there, it is no difficult thing for the spiritual man, conversing with them, to discern and judge ordinarily, which they be. The Spirit of God in one of his people will own itself in another of them though disfigured with many failings, . . . and faith, if it be not dead, may be seen by works, of him that hath a spiritual eye, through many infirmities."²⁹ In short, saints recognize each other by virtue of that which Richard Baxter called "Connaturality of Spirit,"³⁰ or, less mystically, by a combination of common sense and intuition.

The New England Church relation supplied no serious deficiency in Congregational admission practices. By focusing on the process of regeneration, it more fully utilized the resources of Puritan pneumatology and gave additional grounds for judging the fitness of applicants for membership. In other words, it augmented *quantitatively* but not *qualitatively* the criteria upon which a decision depended: evidence of regeneration was considered to be no less presumptive, and therefore no more dependable, than evidence of sanctification.

That this was true is attested by the frequent and emphatic disclaimers with which New England apologists defended their admission procedures. To the question: "Is no one to be admitted into the Communion of the external visible church unless he is endowed with the real internal holiness of regeneration and with justifying faith in Christ?" John Norton replied with a flat "No."³¹ His reason was

²⁹ *Works*, III, 108. Puritans frequently discussed the saints' faculty of mutual recognition in terms suggesting sense-perception or animal instinct. See Nuttall, *Holy Spirit*, pp. 141-142.

³⁰ Richard Baxter to Barbara Lambe, August 22, 1658, in Matthew Sylvester, ed., *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), App. III, p. 54.

³¹ *The Answer*, ed. Horton, pp. 25-26. It should be pointed out, however, that inasmuch as this was the first question which Apollonius put to Norton, it must have been in the forefront of the Dutch theologian's mind. Cf. Baillie, *Disvasive*, p. 105. Indeed, the concern about this matter by churchmen and lay observers outside the New England Way is one of the strongest factors suggesting the importance of the church relation as an

simple: the elect are known only to God. If a candidate professes himself to be a faithful Christian, the church is bound to take him upon his word—unless he is patently a hypocrite or ignorant of the meaning of faith—“even though he may not be so in the judgment of God.”³² His “declaration of the work of experienced faith” is simply another form of outward profession; its “inward side . . . cannot be known by others.”³³ Similarly, the Cambridge Platform

innovation in Congregational practice. In a letter to John Wilson in 1637, 4 *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, VII (1865), 10–11, R. Stansby reported disquieting rumors in England that New England admission procedures deprived over half the population of church communion. Cf. Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing, or, News from New England* (London, 1642), ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Boston, 1867), pp. 150–151. Added to this indirect evidence—which must, of course, be partly discounted as hearsay testimony, blown up in some cases, e.g., Baillie, for polemical purposes—there is Thomas Hooker’s unmistakable conviction that the use of relations had been pushed to inquisitorial extremes. See his *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* (London, 1648), Pt. III, Ch. i, p. 6.

These critics seem, however, to have been less concerned about the test for saving faith as such than about the exclusiveness which, in their opinion, it signified. (See argument in text above, pp. 24–25.) Their criticism is essentially the same as that which Separatists had been enduring for more than fifty years. Baillie, for example, clearly regarded New England admission procedures as embodying the old Separatist exclusiveness carried “to the utmost pitch of perfection.” *Disvasive*, p. 58. Morgan emphasizes (p. 111) Baillie’s distinction between Separatists and Independents on the ground that, whereas the former required only outward piety for church membership, the latter demanded evidence of saving grace. Baillie does make this distinction—but he does not make it consistently. Elsewhere in his book, he notes precisely the same difference between Separatists and Nonconformists (such as John Cotton, before his flight to New England): whereas “*Nonconformists*, with all the reformed,” look only to knowledge, consent, and behavior as requirements for admission to the Lord’s Supper, the “*Brownists*” deem a candidate “not qualified to be a Church Member, except he declare publicly in the face of the Congregation, . . . clear and certain signes of his real Sanctification, and true Regeneration, . . .” p. 22. In support of this assertion, he cites the admission procedures described in John Canne’s *A Necessity of Separation from the Church of England* (1634)—a book which Morgan cites, p. 72, n. 16, in support of his argument that a test for saving faith had not yet appeared in Congregational practice.

If, then, Baillie can be made to support the “mutation” theory, he can also be made to support the thesis that the church relation was merely a “technical refinement” in Congregational polity: “Concerning the matter of the Church, the *Independents* have learned all their unjust scrupulosity from the [*Separatists*]; as the *Brownists* require every Church member to be a Saint, really regenerate and justified, . . . the other requires the same.” But whereas the “*Brownists* are satisfied with the signes of personall grace, . . . the *Independents* require more; they proceed to a triall by a long conversation of the sociable and complying disposition of the person to be admitted, with the spirits of the whole Church whereof he is to be a member.” Pp. 105–106.

³² Norton, *Answer*, p. 35.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

denies that "faith in the heart" is essential to the being of a church, "because that is invisible."³⁴ And it states that all may be admitted who "in charitable discretion . . . may be accounted Saints by calling, (though perhaps some or more of them be unsound & hypocrites inwardly)."³⁵ In short, the church relation did not admit of a closer approach to the "secret counsells of God" than William Perkins had allowed.

The Cambridge Platform further urges that "severity of examination is to be avoyded" in order that "the weakest christian, if sincere, may not be excluded, nor discouraged."³⁶ This, of course, was a sore point. Critics of the New England Way were more concerned about the alleged strictness of its admission procedures than about their novelty. The names of Thomas Lechford, William Rathband, and Robert Baillie come to mind quickly in this connection. From their point of view, the church relations were a cruel and unusual means employed to deny communion to deserving Christians.³⁷ If their estimate was correct, then the Church relations were unquestionably a distinct (and unpleasant) innovation in Congregational practice.

Without venturing into the complex question of the alleged exclusiveness of New England churches, we can observe simply that if they were intended to be strict in "fencing the Lord's table," then the church relations were a means—though hardly a necessary means—to that end. On the other hand, if they intended to be lax, the church relations were no impediment to laxity. In theory, if we can believe the Cambridge Platform, candidates for admission were granted all possible benefit of doubt. And we know that, in practice, there was a considerable range of

³⁴ Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, p. 208.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

³⁷ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, p. 21. See note 31 above.

difference between the use of church relations by, let us say, Thomas Hooker and John Davenport.³⁸ In any case, before allowing the "cruel and unusual thesis," we should give a careful hearing to John Norton. Here are some of his comments about the kind of relation required:

Nothing beyond the strength of any faithful adult using his reason is required in the candidate's confession or for the criterion in general.

Nothing is required . . . which is not shared by all faithful men. There is no place here for private matters. Extraordinary beliefs are not sought after. . . .

All must be done in a spirit of gentleness and prudence, with thought for the dignity of the candidate.

The manner must be tempered to the character of the candidate.

In circumstances in which the honor of confession to Christ might be lost, it should be made certain that the smoking flax is not quenched by any means. It is enough if anything of Christ be made manifest in any way.³⁹

The suggestion here—and it is a suggestion worth pondering—is that the test for saving faith was added to the requirements for admission not in order to narrow but rather to widen the grounds upon which a candidate might declare, both for his own spiritual consolation and that of his auditors, "the hope that was in him."

If such an interpretation appears naïve, this much at least can be said: the church relation was not a demonstrably more precise instrument for discerning qualified church members than those which had been earlier and continued to be in use. Its effect was not to sharpen the perception of regenerate men and women in discerning their own kind, but rather to widen the field of vision.

³⁸ Hubbard, *General History*, p. 320; Hooker, *Survey*, III, i, 5-6; Stansby to Wilson, cited above, note 31.

³⁹ *Answer*, pp. 42-43. Norton was doubtless putting New England admission practices in the best possible light for the benefit of critics abroad; still, it is worth noting that the criteria stated here are quite as liberal in letter and spirit as Hooker's suggested rule-of-thumb "according to which satisfaction is to be regulated, . . . touching the visibility of the Saints": "In a word, if a person live not in the commission of any known sin, nor in the neglect of any known duty, and can give a reason of his hope towards God, this casts the cause, with judicious charity, to hope and believe there is something of God and grace in the soul, and therefore fit for Church-society." *Survey*, III, i, 5.

In discussing the church relation as a technical development in Congregational admission procedures, we have assumed as a theoretical constant the conception of a true church upon which that development was based: namely, the conception that a particular church is a fellowship of "visible saints," *i.e.*, of members who, having persuaded themselves of their own regeneration, are able to satisfy their fellows that this persuasion is not feigned. If the visible church must approximate the invisible as closely as possible, then the same condition of membership—saving faith—must apply to both. Proceeding upon the assumption that this corollary was recognized by Congregationalists from the time of the first Separatist martyrs and exiles, we conclude that the adoption of a scientific test for saving faith was merely an epiphenomenon in the emergence of Congregational polity into the "free aire" of New England.

Professor Morgan has brought this assumption into question. In his view, the development of the idea that church members must be regenerate was consequent to, or at least concomitant with, the development of a systematic procedure for certifying them as such. Saving faith is a possession implanted in the soul by the Holy Ghost. Normally, it is associated with certain traits of character manifested in behavior and conversation. But these effects can be wrought by causes other than the seed of regenerating faith. Just as a pain in the chest is not necessarily the result of an abnormal condition of the heart, so the syndrome of sanctification is not necessarily caused by a transformation of the soul. The church relation was a means of probing into the soul itself, and of diagnosing, more or less accurately, the degree of its morbidity or vitality. Morgan argues that, in the absence of such a test, the organic condition of saving faith could not have been a real and meaningful requirement for church membership. Nor, in fact, did the early Congre-

gationalists maintain any such requirement: their admission procedures were, he states, concerned only "with outward, visible behavior and with openly expressed opinions, not with the presence or the absence of saving faith."⁴⁰ They "doubtless assumed," he admits, "that a probability of salvation attended those" who qualified in these respects; but they made no attempt to verify this assumption: "Saving faith lay in the heart, where only God could see it; the visible church could not and should not examine the hearts of its members."⁴¹

Of course, Professor Morgan is fully aware that the diagnostic techniques which the church relation implemented had been developed in response to the dilemma which confronted all non-separating Puritans: bound outwardly to conform to a church defined by magisterial decree rather than by the Scriptures, they were forced to spend their inspiration and zeal in preaching. Unable to be reformers, they became evangelists.⁴² But in transforming Calvinism into an evangelistic religion, they had first to crush the serpent of fatalism which was the Puritans' special tempter. The theologians had constantly to warn men that they cannot save themselves; the preachers had constantly to urge that they try. Perry Miller has emphasized the contractual element in Puritan theology as a solution to the paradox of predestination.⁴³ But that this solution was not entirely satisfactory is attested by the fact that the divines never tired of asking—and, of course, answering—the question: if election is unconditional and grace is irresistible, then why not sit back and wait for the inevitable? In a work written by John Owen long after the covenant of grace had

⁴⁰ *Visible Saints*, p. 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 47.

⁴² Cf. William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 1957), pp. 15, 173.

⁴³ "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York, 1964), pp. 48-98.

received its definitive exposition, this question recurs again and again in various contexts.⁴⁴ It is the King Charles's head in the literature of Puritan divinity.

The simplest and perhaps most satisfying method of dealing with this question was that of examining closely personal experience for signs of election. If an anxious Christian could find assurance that the seeds of regeneration had been planted in him, he could then be urged to labor with the Holy Ghost to bring forth the fruits of sanctification and thus participate actively in the work of his own redemption. But the spiritual physicians could not administer real comfort unless they could demonstrate convincingly that the symptoms of true faith and repentance were distinguishable from the simulacra produced by hope and fear. To this end they labored diligently. In 1592, William Perkins published a work entitled, *A Case of Conscience, the greatest that ever was: How a Man may know whether he be a Child of God or No*. The years that followed witnessed a great volume of sermons and treatises addressed in whole or in part to the same question. This literature may properly be called scientific, in the modern sense of the word, because it proceeded from the premise that the human will is a passive agent of the Holy Ghost—just as in modern psychology, the will is a passive agent of equally mysterious *pneuma*, labelled *id*, *libido*, etc. Puritan casuistry, in other words, was a branch of the science of pneumatology. It was not primarily concerned to chasten hypocrites (for hypocrites and true believers alike were caught up in the same inexorable determinism), but to identify the phenomena of rebirth, and to separate these from what today we would call auto-suggestion and wish-fulfillment. These phenomena were sorted out and arranged in normative, episodic sequences with which individual Puritans

⁴⁴ *Pneumatologia*, II, v, 10; IV, i, 7.

could compare their own experiences. In addition, rules of thumb were worked out by which the authenticity of individual experience could be tested.

These norms and rules of thumb—which Morgan sums up as the “morphology of conversion”—were applied to Bay Colony Congregationalist standards of admission in the form of the church relation.⁴⁵ By listening to a brief account of a candidate’s spiritual experience, and by occasionally asking well-chosen leading questions, expert examiners—initially the church elders—could quickly decide, on grounds well-laid, whether the candidate was, in Perkins’s words, “a child of God or no.” Thus, the church relation was a seventeenth century forerunner of the Rorschach, or ink-blot, test, by which a trained technician can make a sketchy but comprehensive assessment of the salient features of his subject’s personality.

Inasmuch as there appears to be no recorded use of a psychological probe of this kind in church admission procedures before the 1630’s, we may justifiably ask, with Morgan, whether early Congregationalists can be said to have held saving faith as a requirement of church membership. If so, then the requirement must be regarded as meaningless; the Saints were taken at face-value, *i.e.*, on the basis of their word supported only by their works.

In fact, Morgan argues, the idea that saving faith is the definitive ingredient in the matter of a true church was not advanced by Separatists; nor was it a distinctive element in the theory of non-separating Congregationalism. Rather, it was developed by the majority of Puritan apologists in the Church of England. These moderates did not, of course, maintain that a true church is co-extensive with its regenerate membership; that is a Congregational idea. Rather,

⁴⁵ Morgan, *Visible Saints*, pp. 90 ff. Morgan discusses Puritan analysis of the process of regeneration on pp. 66-72.

they argued that a true church deserves its title only so long as it is an instrument, more or less effective, for propagating the Gospel and thus *begetting* saving faith in those of its communicants who are capable of being saved.⁴⁶ The Church of England must be preserved as a conduit of divine grace, sanctified as such by God, despite its imperfections; to separate from it is, in effect, to abandon its thousands of elect but unawakened parishioners who desperately need to hear the Word preached; it must be cherished for the living faith which works within its inert and rotting carcass. In their dialogue with the Separatists, these defenders of the spiritual essence of the Church of England were partial to arguments *ad hominem*: in the 1580's, for example, Thomas Cartwright suggested to "certeine schismatical persons" that, if the Church of England was potent enough to have begotten them, it must be worth saving.⁴⁷

Thus, by defining a church in terms of saving faith, Anglican apologists forced Separatists, who had to justify their schism by arguing that Congregational polity was a *sine qua non*, into the difficult position of appearing to throw up a Covenant of works in the path of free grace.⁴⁸ This position was in fact so uncomfortable, argues Morgan (and it is a particularly illuminating argument), that Henry Ainsworth felt obliged to adopt a new defensive tactic. In a work published in 1609, he replied to his non-separating critics that if the Church of England were a true church by virtue of the Saints scattered throughout its motley ranks—if, that is, saving grace *per capita* is the criterion of a true church—then the Anglican parishes could hardly stand comparison with Separatist congregations which were formed by regenerate men and women for the very reason that they were regenerate.⁴⁹ Morgan believes, however, that

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

⁴⁷ *Cartwrightiana*, p. 206.

⁴⁸ See Morgan, pp. 52-54, and citations there.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55. See note 52, below.

this was a defensive, *ad hoc* argument—a tactical reinterpretation rather than a reaffirmation of the Separatists' position. It may have had some influence in gradually modifying the basic Separatist idea that a true church is defined by its order; but it did not lead, directly or immediately, to the adoption of a test for saving faith.⁵⁰ When such a test was finally adopted, it bridged the dichotomies of grace and works, spirit and word, church matter and church order. By enabling Congregationalists to incorporate in their admission practices the concept that a church consists in the saving faith of its members, the church relation brought about that mutation in Congregational theory referred to earlier, which Morgan believes to have occurred first in New England. He describes that mutation in these words:

In England and Holland, anyone who wished to join a Separatist church could qualify himself to do so by actions that lay within his own power. In New England, membership required an experience that was beyond the power of a man to attain by his own efforts. . . . While affirming the old distinction between the visible and the invisible church, they thus narrowed the distance between the two far more drastically than the Separatists had done.⁵¹

We can be fairly certain that the Congregationalists of England and Holland would have found this claim dubious. Professor Morgan already has shown us that Henry Ainsworth regarded the Congregationalists' confession of faith, together with his subscription to and observance of the church covenant, as satisfactory proof of regeneration. Ainsworth's development and use of this idea was doubtless an important contribution to the dialogue between separating and non-separating Puritans, and thereby to the evolution of Congregational thought. But the idea itself was neither unique nor original with Ainsworth; nor was its conception merely a reflexive response to the charge that

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 62-63, 73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Separatists were, at bottom, Donatists, straining towards perfection in this world in order to earn God's mercy in the next. Congregationalists had known all along—had, in fact, been insisting all along—that by separating from the world and covenanting together they were witnessing the work of the Holy Ghost in their regeneration, that they were God's vanguard of Saints selected to begin and carry on the mission of establishing true churches out of the Word. In aid of this mission, Ainsworth declared in 1607, God provided them with "his faith for a shield, his salvation for a helmet upon their heads."⁵² This statement—which could hardly be more explicit on the point that a Congregationalist's faith is *saving faith*—would not have given a moment's pause to the martyred ghost of Henry Barrow. Almost twenty years earlier, Barrow had written that, within the corrupt matter of the churches of England, "hath God still reserved a . . . little poore remnant, who have beene marked with the mark of God on their foreheads, . . . which have . . . neither drunke of the whore's cup, neither have been defiled with her fornications: but have beene the lambes called, chosen," to find and lead the way out of Babylon.⁵³

⁵² *Commonion of Saints*, Ch. XVI, Sec. vii, p. 332. Ainsworth's "reinterpretation" of the Separatist position, as set forth in his *Counterpoison* (1608), is summarized by Morgan, pp. 54-55, as follows: "Separatist members, he said, already had faith, while the Anglicans' claim that they produced faith was in itself proof that the Anglican church was improperly constituted, because the members should have had faith before they were admitted." In short, Ainsworth turned the Anglicans' argument back upon them. He had used the same tactic in 1596 when he asked: "shall profession of faith saue [the Anglicans], and shall yt not vs lykewise, that make the same profession?" Preface to the *Confession* of the London-Amsterdam Church, in Walker, *Creeds*, p. 55. It is doubtless true that the phrase, "profession of faith," denotes here nothing more than a creedal statement—this is, after all, the preface to a creedal platform. The argument may thus be taken to mean that personal assent to the doctrine of justification by faith rather than personal assurance of its application is the basis of a true church. In context, however, profession of faith—together with the other requirements for church membership—clearly signifies saving faith. The question just quoted is immediately preceded by another: "will [the Anglicans] slay those that Christ gyveth lyfe vnto?" (p. 55) And Ainsworth had previously stated, p. 51, that a true church must be composed of "new creatures." In the Puritan idiom, this phrase was not used loosely.

⁵³ Barrow, *Writings*, pp. 275-276.

The Congregationalists' conviction that their churches were composed of "faithfull, and loving people, everie stone living elect and precious,"⁵⁴ was derived from their conception of the relation between faith and ecclesiastical order. They recognized, of course, the discreteness of these primary elements in the nature of a church; but they did not dichotomize them. Faith and order were held to be separate but interdependent: true churches could not exist apart from true faith; true faith could not fail to beget true churches. This idea was simply the application to ecclesiology of the orthodox Puritan doctrine that regeneration is inevitably followed by sanctification. Regeneration is a total mutation of man's spirit, involving his understanding, will, and affections: it transforms the Old Adam into a New Creature, cherished and sanctified, who can and who *must* obey God lovingly, if imperfectly, in all things.⁵⁵ One of the fruits of sanctification is the establishment of true churches. Hence, in Congregational theory, the bridge between the invisible and the visible church can be summed up in one word: obedience.

The bridge of obedience had a two-ply strength derived from the bi-partite theory upon which it was based. First, God's Elect will necessarily build true churches; it is in their nature as New Creatures to do so. Secondly, only the Elect will have the spiritual stamina to persevere in this arduous and dangerous work.⁵⁶ For this latter reason, especially, persistent and thoroughgoing obedience to God's will was considered to be the best evidence of regeneration. And it

⁵⁴ Robert Browne, *A True Description . . . of the visible Church* (1589), in Walker, *Creeeds*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ See John Preston, *The Saints Qualification*, 2nd edn (London, 1634), pp. 212-13, 310, 323 ff., 332, 377; cf. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, III, i, 19; Regeneration "doth alwayes certainly and infallibly produce the *Reformation of Life* concomitant with sanctification."

⁵⁶ For a good exposition of the relation between faith and obedience, see Robinson, *Works*, I, 61-67. On the importance of perseverance as a sign of true sanctification, see Preston, *op. cit.*, pp. 403, 416.

was upon this evidence, demonstrable in their lives, that Congregationalists were able to claim saving faith as the qualification for membership in the invisible as well as in the visible church. Or, as Henry Ainsworth put it “. . . faith is the doore, by which we have entry & accesse *both unto God, and into his Church or assembly*, which thereupon is called the *multitude of the faithful*. . . .”⁵⁷

The foundation of the first of these propositions—that ecclesiastical order is a by-product of saving faith—had been laid by Separatists before 1590. In the late 1580’s, an anonymous Puritan tract attacking Separatism advanced the argument that “the inward Kingdome is before the outward”: reformation will come, but it will come only after godly preachers have had a full measure of time in which to plant the seeds of true faith in English parishes.⁵⁸ This plea for gradualism—which the non-Separating Puritan was compelled to make—was a response to the Separatist argument that, although faith is “first in nature”—*i.e.*, it logically precedes order in the causal sequence—it is “not first in tyme.”⁵⁹ In this conception, faith and order are analogous to the Persons of the Trinity: Father and Son are related as cause and effect, but are not separated in time. The metaphysical basis of this argument is of little interest, for it was soon abandoned. John Robinson stated some years later that faith precedes order “in nature, time, and dignity.”⁶⁰ The point of importance is that Congregationalists early had established the principle that faith and order together

⁵⁷ *Communion of Saints*, Ch. XVI, Sec. IV, pp. 320–21. (Italics added to “both . . . assembly.”) Thomas Hooker, in 1632, made the same point in his defense of communion with Separatists: “if in the judgment of reasonable charitie [a Separatist] may be counted a member of Christ, and so a Saint, by the same charitie he may be counted fit to be a member of a Congregation. . . .” Stearns, *Congregationalism in the Dutch Netherlands*, p. 106.

⁵⁸ *Cartwrightiana*, p. 237.

⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Works*, III, 104.

define a true church. This meant that the church had to be purified in its matter if it was to be reformed. It had to restrict its membership to the faithful; for, in Robinson's words, it is faith alone that makes men "in their persons severally fit for, and capable of that order, wherein they are jointly to be united." That Robinson meant saving faith is clear in the context of his argument, which is a defence of private communion with "holy persons . . . the same so discerned mutually" within the Church of England.⁶¹

Are we justified, then, in accepting the indictment that Congregational practice emphasized works at the expense of faith? We have been considering the grounds upon which Ainsworth and Robinson believed that the way of their polity could be followed only by true saints. They believed that they had achieved a just balance between faith and works; and the Anglican apologists, caught up on the short tether of their allegiance to the Church of England, could do no more than pay lip service to the concept of faith while demanding little or nothing in the way of obedience. On the other hand, as Ainsworth and Robinson believed, the Congregationalists gave substance to the concept of faith by insisting that it be manifested in the life of the church.⁶²

This belief is as valid as its premise, namely, that Congregational polity does, in fact, meet scriptural specifications more exactly than any other. Men, after all, do not form true churches of their own will except as the Spirit guides them. In 1582, Robert Browne defined a particular church as a company of believers who "keep [God's] laws in one holy communion: *because* Christ hath redeemed them unto holiness and happiness for ever. . . ."⁶³ The faith required

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 106. If faith alone fits men for a rightly ordered church, then order must signify faith; or, as Robinson matter-of-factly summed up, pp. 107-108: "order [must] also be a matter of faith, if it be not a matter of sin. . . ."

⁶² Cf. the quotation from *Mr. Henry Barrowes Platform* (1611) in Morgan, p. 30, n. 69.

⁶³ *A Book which showeth the Life and Manners of all true Christians*, as quoted in Hanbury, *Historical Memorials*, p. 21.

for this work, as Henry Ainsworth said, "is the gift of God not of man, & he addeth to his church such as he wil save."⁶⁴ And Henry Barrow, on the eve of his martyrdom, was confident that when the Saints had been gathered out of the world, God would smite the false church: "He only now staieth but untill his arke be built . . . and the number of his elect be fulfilled. . . ."⁶⁵ To argue, then, as Professor Morgan does, that early Congregationalists were Arminians in spite of themselves because their way was open to any who chose to follow it, is to judge them by a species of voluntarism which they would have denied. Congregationalists did not choose to obey the Lord; they were chosen.

We have noted, moreover, that these prophets of Congregationalism believed, not only that they had been chosen to build God's churches, but also that they could not do so unless they were, in fact, His Saints. And in this belief we must concede that they had a point. These people were pioneers; their way was hard and perilous. They called themselves Saints—and so they had to be by any standard. Here, for example, was the standard set by John Penry:

By the quyckening power of Christ, I do believe, that his members here vpon earth are drawn more and more to like of his blessed will, and to practize the same yea to giue their lyves rather than to dishonor their God in the voluntarie and willing denyall of his truth, and the breach of his law and will revealed to them.⁶⁶

Soon after writing these words, Penry met, on the scaffold, the last of the Saints' qualifications. Here, indeed, was evidence of saving faith. Perhaps it was not as scientific as that which the church relations afforded in New England, but it was hardly less convincing to those who had been reared under the influence of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. Nor even, in fact, less scientific. Puritan martyrology, like Puritan biography, was concerned with the collection of

⁶⁴ *Communion of Saints*, Ch. XVII, Sec. vi, p. 348.

⁶⁵ *Writings*, p. 276.

⁶⁶ "Confession of Faith and Apology," in Burrage, II, 81.

case histories which were read, quite in the Baconian spirit, as empirical data illustrating the work of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. Congregationalists, especially, regarded this kind of literature as evidence of the sanctity of their mission; and they wished that it might be kept up to date. In 1596, for example, the Preface to the *Confession* of the London-Amsterdam congregation lamented that England "should bee so againe defiled with the blood of the seints," and expressed the hope that God "will one day rayse vp an other John Fox, to gather and compile the Actes and Monuments of his later Martyrs. . . ." ⁶⁷

Only a few of the Saints, of course, were called to meet the ultimate test; most of them were permitted to try their souls in exile—to sacrifice their livelihoods, comfort, and security rather than their lives. We are reminded at once of the hardships to which John Robinson's followers submitted themselves; but the lot of the earlier Congregations in Holland was probably no better. Not long before his death in 1593, Penry warned his brethren in London that "banishment with loss of goods is likely to betide you all," and he urged them "to reioice that you are made worthy for Christ's cause to suffer and bear all these things." ⁶⁸ His pessimism was fully borne out: in 1599, the exiled congregation in Amsterdam complained that they were isolated, friendless, and sunk deep in poverty. ⁶⁹

In view of the fact that in these circumstances church fellowship obviously conveyed only spiritual benefits, it may reasonably be supposed that, as a whole, only the truly spiritual could have persisted in following—or would have sought out in the first place—the Congregational Way. As

⁶⁷ Walker, *Creeds*, p. 52. Hugh Peter made a similar plea in his *Good Work for a Good Magistrate* (London, 1651), p. 74.

⁶⁸ Quoted by Henry Martyn Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years* (New York, 1880), p. 266, n. 58.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

John Robinson pointed out, the majority of men can be depended upon to take the "safest way in differences of religion without further question, . . . that doing as most do, they may have the fewest find fault with them."⁷⁰ Being sensitive to charges of Donatism, the Separatists were invariably ready to admit that their churches were flawed by hypocrites⁷¹—a categorical term which doubtless was meant to include adventurous types with little or no stake in the social order as well as those whom today we would call psychologically maladjusted. But there is cause to believe that the hypocrites were few. For what rational motive would impel a genuine worldling to dissemble religious affection in order to infiltrate the furtive, fugitive, harried world of early Congregationalism? Pastor Francis Johnson's wife may have been one of the few recognizable hypocrites—perhaps the only woman in history whose hat gave rise to a syllogism.⁷² But if a wavering person were troubled enough in his conscience to forsake the protection of the law for a clandestine or exiled congregation, then, for that very reason he would be counted no hypocrite. For, as Ainsworth wrote, "even such as be weak in faith must we receive, bearing their infirmities after Christ's example, who would not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking weke. . . ."⁷³ To a considerable extent, then, membership in early Congregational Churches was restricted to the regenerate by the circumstances in which they existed—and, again, the same standard applied for membership in the visible church as in the invisible.

⁷⁰ *Works*, I, 40.

⁷¹ *Confession of the London-Amsterdam Church*, Art. 17, in Walker, *Creeds*, p. 64.

⁷² Dexter, p. 287. Mrs. Johnson's hat had given offense as being "topish" in appearance. Pastor Johnson replied thus:

What is not in the nature thereof topish, that used by any is not topish:

The hat in the nature thereof is not topish;

Ergo, being used by her it was not topish.

⁷³ *Communion of Saints*, Ch. XVII, Sec. v, pp. 345-46.

In practice, the early churches in Holland were troubled less with hypocrites than by over-zealous and contentious persons. Because separating Congregationalists regarded doctrinal correctness as evidence of saving faith, differences of opinion led, occasionally, to excommunication and, frequently, to dissension.⁷⁴ To Henry Ainsworth, however, this discord was not a source of weakness but rather a beneficent dispensation: by allowing Satan to infect the godly with heretics, and thus forcing them to contend for the truth, "doth our lord sift & trye vs, whither wee love him with our wholl harts or no." Through dispute, the church will be purified both in its matter and in its order: hee that shall contynue to the end, hee shalbee saved. This is our comfort, that God will heerby purge his vine, and disclose the disguysed hypocrits which come vnto vs in sheeps garments, but his owne portion hee will bring thorow the fire. . . .⁷⁵

This doctrine of the survival of the fittest became, as we know, a standard article of Congregationalist faith. It was given classic expression in New England by William Stoughton in 1668: "God sifted a whole Nation that he might send choice Grain over into this Wilderness."⁷⁶ By this date, however, church leaders were faced with a problem drastically different from any that Robert Browne, Henry Ainsworth, or John Robinson had experienced. The task of these pioneers had been to nurse the Congregational seedling through the long winter of Tudor and Stuart persecution that it might one day flourish in a favorable climate. Those who persevered—those whom God had seen fit to "bring thorow the fire"—were Saints certified by their very survival. Moreover, they survived in small, closely knit groups whose members knew one another intimately. By constant association and disputation they knew who they were,

⁷⁴ See Dexter, Chs. V-VI; Morgan, Ch. II.

⁷⁵ Preface to the *Confession* of the London-Amsterdam Church, in Walker, *Creeeds*, p. 58.

⁷⁶ In Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans* (2 vols., New York, 1963), I, 246.

what they were, and what they believed. They had no need of religious tests beyond subscription and adherence to their covenants. Indeed, the group that founded the first church at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1629, did not at first even require of each other a profession of the basic articles of Reformed theology; they merely bound themselves, in a single, simple sentence, to walk together in the ways of God.⁷⁷

But then, as the Lord's wheat settled in New England, a new situation came into being, and with it a new problem. The Saints found, for the first time, a crowd of strangers clamoring at their church doors—persons whom they had not known long and intimately in the Old World. Moreover, in New England, the church doors opened the way, not to martyrdom, but to political privilege and social prestige. How, then, were opportunists to be sorted out from the truly faithful?

Henry Ainsworth had not to cope with this problem; but he had predicted its coming in a book published in 1607. As its title, *The Communion of Saints*, suggests, and its language affirms throughout, he took for granted that separated churches were gathered by holy people. But he foresaw that

. . . in times of worldly peace, many wil presse to enter the church, for company, favour, or fashion sake; which otherwise would neuer regard the same, being . . . the children of this world: therefore care must be had that no such vnclean wicked persons be accepted.

To be acceptable, newcomers must first

. . . willingly receiv and confesse the truth, renouncing their former evil wayes; promising submission, meekness, & obedience in the faith. . . . [Furthermore], ther must be seen in them, the seed and foundation of religion, . . . namely repentance from dead works, & faith towards God.⁷⁸

The last point raises a fascinating question: how were faith and repentance to be discerned? Did Ainsworth anticipate

⁷⁷ Walker, *Creeeds*, pp. 106, 116.

⁷⁸ Ch. XVII, Sec. xi, pp. 355-57. The last two statements in the quotation have been transposed in order.

the future necessity of devising a test for saving faith? Or, was he advising the strict application of a test or tests already developed and in occasional use? Whatever the answers to these questions, Ainsworth's injunction is clear: saving faith must be retained as a requirement of admission when church membership becomes a social as well as a spiritual desideratum.

We will probably never know whether Henry Ainsworth used or thought of using a test for saving faith similar to that developed in Massachusetts after 1633.⁷⁹ We can entertain the supposition—having been occupied above in laying grounds for it—that, although Ainsworth may well have envisioned such a test, he would have felt little need for it in his own time and place. If this supposition is correct, then the church relation, whenever and wherever it may have first been adopted, signalled no change in Congregational theory or (in the deeper sense) practice; but it did represent continuity. The church relation was not an innovation embodying a new standard of purity, but a technical adaptation of the old standard to new circumstances.

It was, moreover, only a supplement to previously established techniques. All of the earlier criteria of worthiness, which can be summed up under the heads of agreement, submission, and obedience, were retrained and incorporated in New England admission procedures.⁸⁰ If these criteria had been abandoned—if the church relation as a test for saving faith had been adopted as the only requirement for church membership—then, indeed, we could agree that the New England churches were gathered on a new theoretical basis. And that basis would have been Antinomian. For it was the Antinomians who carried to its logical conclusion Stephen Bredwell's dictum that, "By

⁷⁹ Cf. Morgan, p. 73.

⁸⁰ Contemporaneous accounts are in substantial agreement on the basic requirements. See Morgan, pp. 88-89, with citations there; cf. also his comments, pp. 92-93.

faith only, visible Churches have their account and being in Christ."⁸¹

Bredwell believed, as we have noted, that Congregational churches were founded on a covenant of works. In truth, that criticism was more pertinent in the 1630's than it had been in 1588. In the early days, when Congregational worship appealed only to the devout, worship carried with it the assurance of devotion. But when the Congregational Way became established under civil government in New England, its spirituality fell under a serious threat. Viewed in this light, the church relation was a means to redress that balance between faith and order which, from the beginning, had been one of the most important contributions of Congregationalism to Puritan ecclesiology.

⁸¹ *Rising of the Foundations of Brownism* (1588); quoted in Hanbury, p. 23.

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