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Learning Church: Catechisms and Lay Participation in Early New England Congregationalism

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Learning Church: Catechisms and Lay Participation in Early New England
Congregationalism

by

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Dedication

Q: Whom do you dedicate this work to?

A: Makayla, the one in whom my soul delights.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the people and institutions who made this work possible. The University of South Carolina and the Massachusetts Historical Society provided funding and materials that were indispensable for this project. Thank you to the excellent staff in both places. I'm also grateful for the extensive feedback that I received from Woody Holton and Douglas Winiarski. Both were extremely generous with their time and encouragement. I want to thank my dear brothers and sisters at my local church. I would never have been able to persevere without your faithfulness and fellowship. My parents have both been unwavering in their support of this work and my pursuit of a career in History; and for that I am grateful.

This work is dedicated to my bride.

Abstract

This thesis analyzes catechisms and catechizing in New England religious culture from 1628-1662. These question and answer documents were intended for comprehensive religious instruction of both children and adults, and thus provide a direct window into the worldview of New England laity. In the hands of ordinary men and women, catechisms became a profound tool of religious and ecclesiastical empowerment. This thesis argues that catechisms held an indispensable role in equipping early New England men and women to participate in the government and rituals of their nascent Congregational churches. Ministers wrote catechisms to equip laity for their responsibilities of structuring new churches and calling church leaders. Catechisms also played a part in shaping the process of church admissions, both by providing theological content and emotional expression of one's religious experience that would be deemed sufficient to enter a particular church. Once in the church, laity turned again to their catechisms to learn a robust sacramental piety that was focused on the physical elements and their attendant actions. In early New England, catechisms were not merely instructional tools for children, but functioned as handbooks on how laity participated in church life.

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MHSC..... *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections* (Boston).

Chapter One: Introduction

When Cotton Mather sat down to write his ecclesiastical history of New England at the turn of the eighteenth century, he sought to preserve and highlight its greatest legacy. He pointed not to the rigor of New England minds, nor to the relentless frequency of their sermons, nor even to the practice of their piety, but to the claim that “few pastors of mankind ever took such pains at *catechising*, as has been taken by our New-English divines.” Mather invited all to read these “most judicious and elaborate catechisms” and to judge “whether true divinity were ever better handled.”¹ Both in the minister’s efforts to catechize and in the content of the New England catechisms themselves, Mather saw something definitive and vital about the New England Way. Catechisms were, for him, the evidence of New England orthodoxy and the vindication of earlier generation’s unity in their attempt to construct their New Jerusalem. It is also noteworthy that Mather made these laudatory statements about New England catechizing in the introduction to his fifth book on New England church government. It seems he wanted readers to connect the catechisms to the unique ecclesiology of New England.

In many ways Mather’s direction has gone unheeded. Some scholars have done an excellent job of exploring the importance of the catechism in the education of children and Indians in the fundamentals of the English language.² But analysis of the content of these vaunted catechisms and their role in New England ecclesiastical life remains

¹ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Vol. II (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 179.

² James Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1974); E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

underexplored.³ This inattention to the content of catechisms was noted by nineteenth-century historian Wilberforce Eames, who first tried to compile a list of all extant New England catechisms. He quoted an earlier historian who noted that catechisms “were considered too small and unimportant to be preserved in the libraries of the learned, and the copies that were used by children, were generally worn out by hard service or otherwise destroyed.”⁴ This perception has largely continued.

This essay will examine New England catechisms and the role they played in the region’s church life. It will look primarily at catechisms written by New English ministers for their congregations but will also include some catechisms that were widely circulated and used. The principal advantage of this restriction is to be able to develop a sense of the distinctive character of the New England catechism and to understand the role it played in that unique church environment. The present study is also limited to catechisms written before the Boston Halfway Synod in 1662, after which relevant changes in ecclesiology began to take effect. This limitation likewise allows for examination of the role of the catechisms in the development of the New England Congregational system and the laity’s role in it.

Mather’s claim about the importance of catechisms seemed to be at odds with the idea that catechisms were merely educational tools. While they certainly were that, they were much more, both in their content and in the ways in which they shaped New England church experience. What exactly were these catechisms and what was their

³ Typical of the cursory treatment given to catechisms in modern studies of New England is David D. Hall’s helpful overview of the subject in: David D. Hall *The Faithful Sheperd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 168-70. An impressive and in-depth study of catechisms and catechizing exists for England, but has no counterpart in New England, see: Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England c. 1530-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁴ Wilberforce Eames, *Early New England Catechisms* (Worcester: Press of Charles Hamilton, 1898), 5.

function in the New English church? Was there anything unique about the form and function of the catechism in New England? Were their contents as homogenous as Mather suggested? In what ways were they utilized beyond childhood education? How did they shape church life and experience for church members? In answering these questions, this essay will argue that catechisms played an indispensable role in equipping Puritan men and women to participate in the government and rituals of the New England Congregational churches in their first decades after establishment. Catechisms affirmed the importance of lay involvement in church government and equipped them with practical knowledge of its functioning. They also played a part in shaping the context of church admissions, both by providing content for church relations and holding ministers accountable in judging them. Finally, they encouraged and outlined an ethos of sacramental piety that was adopted and utilized by the laity.

Chapter Two: The Background and Philosophy of New England Catechizing

Catechizing has a very long history in the church. The practice dates from the first century and continued through the Middle Ages. While ubiquitous throughout the church, catechizing did experience something of a revival in the sixteenth century. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote famous catechisms and the Roman Catholic Church began to produce many as well. The publishing history of catechisms in England shows this trend. In the 1530s, there were a total of eight catechisms published in England. This number steadily increased until it peaked in the 1640s when there were ninety-five catechisms published.⁵ The trend also impacted New England. It is impossible to know the precise number of catechisms in New England, as most have since been lost, but it was a significant number. William Eams listed at least thirty-seven extant catechisms floating through New England before 1662, and many more were unpublished but still extant in manuscript form.⁶ Some catechisms were brought over by the first-generation migrants and a great deal more were written in New England.

A catechism was a question and answer document intended for religious instruction. They were primarily intended to facilitate memorization and discourse of religious doctrine. A questioner would ask a respondent a question and expect to receive the memorized answer in return. This was often followed up by related, but unwritten questions to probe the understanding surrounding that particular doctrine and how it related to their whole system of orthodoxy. The basic outlines of this method remained

⁵ Green, *The Christian's ABC*, 51.

⁶ Eames, *Early New England Catechisms*, iii-iv.

largely unchanged, though toward the end of the seventeenth century some new methods were introduced by Cotton Mather.⁷ In addition to this one-on-one setting, catechisms were often the content for lecture series done by ministers. These lectures often served to complement and expand upon the knowledge that the laity had already gleaned from and memorized from the catechisms.⁸

The size and sophistication of the catechisms varied greatly. Many catechisms were quite small. For example, New England's most famous catechism, John Cotton's *Milk For Babes* (1646), was only about thirteen pages long. Others were extremely long, like Samuel Stone's *Whole Body of Divinity* (1656), which was over five hundred pages.⁹ The difference in sophistication of the theological content between these two documents is almost as dramatic as their length. Cotton's was to be memorized and was primarily intended for younger children, while Stone's was primarily intended for ministers and informed laity. While these two represent the poles of the spectrum, most catechisms in New England fell in the middle of these two in both length and nuance. Richard Mather aptly made the case for both sorts of catechisms in the introduction to his own. He argued that there must be both a "short and familiar" way of catechizing for the young, as well as

⁷ Cotton Mather, *Maschil, or, The Faithful Instructor* (Boston 1702).

⁸ Thomas Shepard gave a series of lectures on his catechism from 1643-45, see: Mary Rhinelanders McCarl, "Thomas Shepard's Record of Relations of Religious Experience, 1648-1649," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (July 1991): 441. Samuel Willard famously gave a twenty year series of lectures on the Westminster Shorter Catechism from 1687-1707. They were compiled and published as: Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures* (Boston 1726); Many more such lecture series on catechisms undoubtedly occurred and are now unknown. For example, a layperson's sermon notebook from Ipswich contained notes on catechism lectures given by Ezekiel Rogers in 1645. Notes on Sermons Delivered at the First Church in Ipswich, Mass., 1645-1646, *MHSC Ms.*

⁹ Samuel Stone's *Whole Body of Divinity* (1656) is extant in a full manuscript, copied by Samuel Willard in 1697, at the *MHSC*. Baird Tipson has generously made his transcription of the entire document available at the Congregational Library & Archives: <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/series2/StoneSamuel>. This essay relies largely on Tipson's transcription, with many thanks, hereafter cited as, *Whole Body*. For a history of Stone's remarkable manuscript see Tipson's introduction and also helpful context for its production and dissemination: David D. Hall, *Ways of Writing: The Practice and Politics of Text-Making in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 15, 40, 46, 167.

“a larger Doctrine of Catechisme, containing the whole body of Divinity” for the more developed “apprehensions of God's people.”¹⁰

While New Englanders lauded and practiced the art of catechizing, they were quite vehement in their opposition to rote memorization and were emphatic that such knowledge does not equate to saving faith. Ministers railed against this tendency from the pulpit. John Davenport warned his parishioners that to base their assurance on the fact that they were “so taught and catechised from your childhood...is insufficient, unless your faith be grounded on the scriptures and be wrought in you by the teaching of God’s Spirit.”¹¹ True to their Calvinist heritage, no merely human efforts at catechizing could ensure salvation. As Thomas Shepard preached, the one who is “well catechized concerning Christ and all his offices” has but a “literal knowledge” that cannot save, but this knowledge must be wrought supernaturally into the soul and affections before salvation takes place.¹² For the Puritans, catechetical knowledge was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for salvation.

Given their general opposition to set forms in matters of faith and practice in both the Catholic and Anglican churches, it was surprising that Puritans defended the practice of catechizing at all. It was one of the few set forms that they defended and utilized in spiritual matters. While it was a well-established practice in Elizabethan Puritan circles, catechizing did have detractors among those who came to New England. According to Richard Mather, the opposition largely came from “Anti Paedobaptists” who denied that

¹⁰ Richard Mather, *A Catechisme, or, The Grounds and Principles of Christian Religion, set forth by way of Question and Answer...* (London 1650), introduction.

¹¹ John Davenport, *The Knowledge of Christ Indispensably required of all men that would be saved* (London 1653), 8.

¹² Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied* (London 1660), 74.

children are members of the church and therefore should not be catechized.¹³ The sentiment carried into New England as some desired of ministers a “direct Scripture for Ministers catechizing.”¹⁴ The New England clergy, of course, were happy to oblige. They insisted that catechizing could be found in Scripture. John Cotton doubted not “but *Isaac* and *Rebecca* took pains to catechise their families” and even pointed to some passages in the book of Proverbs as “part of the Catechism, which David taught his son *Solomon*.”¹⁵ Additionally, he argued that catechisms had been in use since the first century, even claiming that the book of Hebrews contained a portion of an “Apostle’s Catechism” that was in use among the “Primitive Apostolic Churches.”¹⁶

The use of catechisms was also defended rationally by Thomas Shepard and John Allin in their early 1640s defense of the New England Congregationalism. Catechisms had to be distinguished from the set prayers and liturgies that the Puritans so opposed. While catechisms could be set because “God gives us no new matter or doctrine daily to be believed,” prayers must be spontaneous because God does give “new matter of new affection daily.” Moreover, catechisms provide sufficient defense against men “pretending new light” and yet do not stifle theological inquiry and worship and at the same time provide sufficient liberty for “further future light, in points less clear.” Such qualities of the catechisms distinguish it from the Common Prayer Book worship that was “tyrannous[ly] imposed” on churches.¹⁷ In the context of these cautions, New England Puritans were ready advocates of catechisms and catechizing.

¹³ Mather, *A Catechisme*, introduction.

¹⁴ Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing or News From New England* (Boston: J.K. Wiggin & WM. Parsons Lunt, 1867), 53.

¹⁵ John Cotton, *The Way of Life or God’s Way and Course* (London 1641), 59, 199.

¹⁶ John Cotton, *The Grounds and Ends of the Baptism of the Children of the Faithful* (London 1646), 164.

¹⁷ John Allin and Thomas Shepard, *A Defense of the Answer made unto the Nine Questions or Positions sent from New England* (London 1648), 35-6.

By the time the *Arabella* set sail, English Puritans had articulated a coherent vision for what they intended catechizing to accomplish. This ideal of catechizing has been helpfully summarized by Ian Green in his magisterial study of English catechisms into five goals. First, was it inculcated the necessary religious knowledge for the salvation of one's soul. Second, it led to a more thorough understanding of Scripture and thus allowed for more facility in hearing sermons. Third, it equipped for church life and prepared persons for the partaking of the Lord's Supper. Fourth, helped the laity distinguish between true and false doctrine. Fifth, it helped in promoting right Christian behavior.¹⁸ These aims were certainly carried over into New England's catechizing philosophy and were at various points articulated by them.¹⁹

While these perfunctory purposes of catechizing were inherited from England, New England catechizing took on unique forms and functions. Most importantly, catechizing became the means by which the laity were educated and prepared to participate in the new Congregational Church system. The architects of these churches lauded the importance of lay involvement in the running of church affairs. This was a new responsibility for these New England laity and they required help and direction.²⁰ In this context, the catechism became the primary tool by which the laity were prepared for their role in church life. Catechisms on the church, its offices, and its operations were widely circulated and utilized in the early decades of New England. This was a striking contrast to the English catechism in which there was "hardly any trace" of detailed

¹⁸ Green, *The Christian's ABC*, 26.

¹⁹ Richard Mather's *A Catechisme* contained an extended series of questions and answers covering the purpose of catechizing that begins his catechism.

²⁰ James F. Cooper Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27-31. Cooper does an excellent job of describing the importance and method of lay education with regard to ecclesiology in the first decade of New England, but he leaves out the importance and content of church catechisms to this process.

discussions of ecclesiology and the outer forms of the visible church.²¹ The reason for this development in New England was because of the importance of catechizing in educating the laity for church government.

Another unique feature of New England catechizing was that no single catechism could be given formal authority over any other in all the churches, as was true with the Anglican Common Prayer Book. Each church had autonomy in determining matters of faith and practice and could not have a uniform catechism imposed on them from a presbytery. While affirming the utility of catechisms, John Cotton was emphatic that “little benefit we have seen reaped of set forms of questions, and answers devised by one church, and imposed by necessity upon another.”²² Thus, catechisms must be adopted by an individual church as orthodox but could not be thrust upon it without consent.

The rejection of a universal catechism led to the proliferation of New England catechisms, each for their own church and context. Typical of this process was the example of John Davenport, who wrote a catechism for the founding of his New Haven church in the 1640s and then wrote a new one when he was called to pastor at the First Church in Boston in 1669.²³ This could, at times, cause quarrelling and territorialism among the ministers who preferred their own catechism to others. But it also led to unique blends of catechisms floating through various congregations.

Although there was no master catechism, some were far more popular and widely utilized than others. Undoubtedly, the two most popular catechisms in the first few decades were *Milk For Babes* (1646) and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1646).

²¹ Green, *The Christian's ABC*, 330.

²² John Cotton, *Answer to Mr. Ball on Set Prayers* (London 1642), 41.

²³ Francis J. Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 346.

These were imported from London and used by most churches. They were not only popular, but durable. Both remained popular through the turn of the century and into the revolutionary era. The case could be made that one of these two eventually were at least functionally canonical catechisms even if not officially sanctioned by Congregational doctrine.

Despite the independence of churches, ministers had no problem bolstering theological claims or proving their orthodoxy by reference to catechisms. In this way, catechisms served as touchstones of orthodoxy to which ministers could appeal. Ministers often cited catechisms in passing or when defending complex doctrines. In his explanation of the inner workings of the Trinity, John Cotton assured his readers of his doctrine by asserting that this was “as our *Catechisms* teach us.”²⁴ Even in the autonomous Congregational culture, catechisms earned a place as touchstones of orthodoxy among various churches.

New England Puritans adopted and defended the practice of catechizing. They largely affirmed the various theories and forms of catechizing that had been developed by Puritans in England. Yet, catechizing took on a new significance in the context of developing a laity informed enough to participate and exercise authority in the Congregational churches. Thus, while looking at catechisms and catechizing in early New England, we get a fuller picture of the development of the ecclesiastical structure and how the laity were empowered to participate in it.

²⁴ John Cotton, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London 1652), 124.

Chapter Three: The Story and Development of New England Catechizing

The story of New England catechizing began in England with the inadequacies that those who were to migrate saw in English catechizing. For one, the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer emphasized a mere knowledge of doctrine, argued Puritans, without working on the affections. This meant that the Parish was creating a false sense of assurance among the people and then bringing unconverted people into the church and creating a mixed congregation. The Anglican catechism was said to be inadequate in its descriptions of sin and the church. By simply covering the Apostles Creed, Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, Puritan soteriological and ecclesiological emphases were overlooked.²⁵ In contrast to this general ethos of catechizing, New England catechizing stressed the importance of ecclesiology and saw lay initiative in much of the process.

Another criticism of English catechizing was the emphasis on the church's initiative in doing so rather than the family. Although the New England churches were involved in catechizing as well, they never did so to the exclusion of the family. Household catechizing was considered of the utmost importance in passing on the reformed faith. Household catechizing was explicitly prohibited by William Laud in order to enforce uniformity and prevent the Puritan movement from continuing to operate outside the hierarchy of the Anglican Church.²⁶

²⁵ Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill*, 17-8.

²⁶ Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill*, 19-20.

As soon as they had the opportunity, migrating Puritans sought to institute regular catechizing from the home. John Davenport did so as soon as he went to Amsterdam and continued the practice when he later migrated to New Haven.²⁷ Home catechizing became the ideal in the congregational churches from their inception.

Catechizing began on the ship over to New England after the Massachusetts charter in March, 1629. This first ship was sent to Naumkeag, and among its members were two strong clergy who were very much interested in setting up congregationalism and pure worship in the New World, Francis Higginson and Samuel Skelton. These two would be instrumental in the founding of Salem church and thus to the origins of the New England Congregational Way.²⁸ In writing about the voyage to friends in England, Higginson was sure to highlight that pure worship had begun even on the voyage. Higginson spoke of the company in glowing terms as “a pious and Christian-like passage...We constantly served God morning and evening by reading and expounding a chapter, singing, and prayer.” These he listed as the fundamental marks of the reformed churches. Moreover, he highlighted that “the Sabbath was solemnly kept by adding to the former preaching twice and catechizing.”²⁹ The trajectory was set for the importance of catechizing to the new Congregational churches.

The most likely catechism that was used on this passage and in the first few years of settlement in Massachusetts was John Robinson’s Catechism on the Church, which was written in the 1620s and appended to William Perkin’s *Six Christian Principles*

²⁷ Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem*, 128.

²⁸ Daniel Appleton White, *New England Congregationalism in its origin and purity* (Salem 1861).

²⁹ Everett Emerson, ed., *Letters From New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629-1638* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 24.

(1590).³⁰ Robinson's appendix to the Perkin's catechism added to it a previously absent doctrine of the visible church and all its offices and functions. It was thoroughly congregational and comprehensive in its prescriptions. It covered everything from the theological doctrine of the church, who and how to elect to which offices, how worship should be run, and how to carry out church discipline. This was the ideal catechism to use to prepare a people for Congregational church government.

Circumstantial evidence indicates that this was indeed the catechism Higginson used on the ship. We know that it was the most popular among the migrating Puritans and therefore it was likely that they had brought it with them, knowing their need to build a church. The first publications of Robinson's catechism also predate the move in plenty of time for Higginson's party to have obtained a copy.³¹ Moreover, it was already in use in Plymouth to help them construct their new church and therefore was known to be a useful tool in ecclesiology.³² Given its popularity and lack of alternative, other historians have come to the same conclusion.³³

Once in Salem by September of 1629, Higginson wrote another letter to Leicester in which he revealed the importance of catechizing to the nascent church structure. After lauding the natural resources and beauty of the new land, Higginson turned to state that their "greatest comfort and means of defense above all other is that we have here true

³⁰ John Robinson, *An Appendix, To Mr. Perkins his Six Principles of the Christian Religion* (1641). Robinson wrote and published the first edition of his church catechism in the 1620s and it was printed a number of times afterward. It was quite popular in England and Holland. I base my claim to its being the most likely one used in early Massachusetts based on the lack of a popular alternative and on the authority of three nineteenth century historians who also suggested it. See: Paul Leicester Ford, *The New England Primer* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1897), 9-10; Joseph B. Felt, *The Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Boston: Congregational Library Association, 1855), 58-60; Eames, *New England Catechisms*, 11-3.

³¹ Eames, *New England Catechisms*, 7.

³² Felt, *Ecclesiastical History*, 58.

³³ Ford, *The New England Primer*, 9-10.

religion and holy ordinances of Almighty God taught among us.” The term “ordinances” referred to the elements of a true church, typically listed as the Word, Sacraments, and Discipline. In other words, Higginson was highlighting the importance of the proper development of the church structure. It was this pure structure and worship that, for Higginson, would keep the judgment of God that was so imminent for England from these new shores. He added that “we have here plenty of preaching and diligent catechizing with strict and careful exercise and good and commendable orders to bring our people into a Christian conversation with whom we have to do withal.”³⁴ This “diligent catechizing” was not referring to children, but to “our people.” What Higginson was referring to was the use of the catechism to educate the laity and bring them into conversation of the ordinances and offices of the church. This began right away as the need for an informed and involved laity was immediate.³⁵

An important letter from John Cotton to Samuel Skelton in October of 1630 sheds further light on the use of the Robinson catechism in early Salem. In it Cotton expressed from England his concern that the Salem church was drifting toward separatism under the influence of “new Plymouth men” who received their church doctrines from “Mr. Robinson.” Cotton addressed three main criticisms that Robinson had leveled at the English church, which were taking hold in Salem. The first was concerning the “visible church, which are saints by calling.” The second was with regard to “the essential form of the church” and the importance of “constitution by mutual covenant.” And the third, less clear criticism, related to the “church government” of England as “a heavy yoke upon

³⁴ Emerson, *Letters*, 38.

³⁵ For an introduction to the debate on Plymouth colony’s influence on the founding of Salem church see: Hall, *The Faithful Sheperd*, 78-86; Sargent Bush Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 141-9.

god's people."³⁶ These concerns matched up precisely with the content of Robinson's catechism which stressed the importance of admitting saints by calling and of the covenant to the starting of a church.³⁷ It seems that the Robinson catechism was being used as the template for the Salem church, and this made Cotton nervous about the probability of Separatism. Though he would later go on to deny it, Cotton indicated in this letter that Robinson was a foundational influence on Congregationalism in Massachusetts, and the direct means was his catechism.

Catechizing with an eye toward Congregationalism continued among those sailing on the *Arabella*. John Winthrop recorded in his journal for 1630 that "We appointed Tuesdays and Wednesdays to catechize our people, and this day Mr. Phillips began it."³⁸ This statement was noteworthy in a number of respects. Designating two days for catechizing suggested its importance for this crew or at least their zeal for the task at hand. Most requirements later on specify one day a week as sufficient for catechizing. It was also important that Winthrop specified that the catechizing was for "our people," not children. This suggested that what was going on here is adult catechizing for the building of a new Congregational structure, like the pattern of the Salem group. Moreover, it was George Philips who was the one catechizing. Philips was known for his zeal for congregational ecclesiology and was "more acquainted with the way of church discipline" than most ministers.³⁹ In fact, Philips got into trouble for his dogmatic assertion of the importance of a church's covenant being so foundational that even

³⁶ Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 143-7.

³⁷ Robinson, *An Appendix*, first question.

³⁸ John Winthrop, Vol. 1, *The History of New England 1630-1649*, ed. James Savage (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1853), 16.

³⁹ William Hubbard, *A General History of New England* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1848), 186.

Roman Catholic churches, founded on a covenant, are true churches.⁴⁰ It seems Philip's was preparing those on board the *Arabella* for their own congregational establishment. It's hard to say which catechism was used on board; it could have been a church catechism of his own devising or even Robinson's catechism.⁴¹

Shortly after landing, the Colony of Massachusetts Bay passed a law for the catechizing of the "companies servants and their children, as also the salvages and their children." The catechizing of children began early but fell into neglect in short order. This law also specified the ordering of "2 dozen and ten catechisms."⁴² Again, it is difficult to know which catechism were referred to here. However, if it was for catechisms meant to teach the children, it was likely not Robinson's. However, as Perkin's catechism, to which Robinson's was appended, was often used for children, both aims could have been in mind. Either way, the catechizing of the people and the children was clearly present at the very start of the Congregational churches.

This pattern of adult catechizing with an aim to preparing people for participation in congregational church government continued through the 1630s. There are at least five extant New England catechisms from the 1630s.⁴³ Only one of these is explicitly for children, while three of them are exclusively about the structures of congregational church government. This breakdown indicates the priorities of these first settlers and the importance of catechisms to the church for their new project.

⁴⁰ Timothy L. Wood, "A Church Still be Her First Covenant," *The New England Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (March 1999).

⁴¹ See above, footnote 30.

⁴² Ford, *The New England Primer*, 9-10.

⁴³ In rough chronological order: Robinson, *An Appendix*; John Cotton, *The Doctrine of the Church Set Down in Question and Answer*, *MHSC* microfilm; Ezekiel Rogers, *The Chief Grounds of Christian Religion: Set Down by Way of Catechising* (London 1642); Henry Dunster Notebook 1628-1654, *MHSC* Microfilm; Hugh Peters, *Milk for Babes or Meat for Men* (London 1630). All these were written and circulated in New England in the 1630s. Some were later printed in London.

The most important of these early catechisms was certainly John Cotton's *The Doctrine of the Church* (1634).⁴⁴ This catechism outdid Robinson's in its thoroughness on ecclesiastical matters. In forty-one extended questions and answers, Cotton covered everything related to church government from "What is the Church of the New Testament?" to its various offices and functions through the proper practice of worship and discipline. It was the earliest and most comprehensive statement that Cotton wrote on church government in the first few years after his coming to the New World. Cotton seems to have written this catechism almost immediately after coming to Boston in 1633 as part of his efforts to push Congregationalism forward. It also seems likely Cotton wrote this catechism not only to aid the building of Congregational churches, but to wean them away from the Robinson catechism toward his own, so as to avoid charges of Separatism. Comparison of the two catechisms reveals that Cotton retained much Robinson's fundamental structure of the church, while avoiding any direct quotation or allusion to him that would invite criticism.

Cotton not only wrote the catechism for widespread use to aid in developing new churches, but he also gave lectures on this catechism starting in 1634. These lectures

⁴⁴ Cotton, *The Doctrine of the Church Set Down*, *MHSC* microfilm. The extant manuscript on microfilm in the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston contains over one hundred pages of catechetical lectures given by Cotton on ecclesiology in Boston. Attached to the end of the long manuscript is a copy of a catechism on the church, summarizing the content of the lectures and intended for wide dissemination. The catechism manuscript was copied many times and is extant in another copy at the Huntington Library. It was also copied in part by Henry Dunster in his catechism and by John Davenport when he drafted his *New Haven catechism* in the early 1640s. The catechism was published in 1643 twice and then again in 1644 and 1714, likely at the prompting of Cotton Mather. While no date is attached to the manuscript, these later publications and contextual evidence give a firm date of 1634. The 1713 publication, although it did alter the catechism somewhat, gave the original date of 1634 for its composition. In keeping with that date, the 1642 edition of the catechism contained in the preface that "Cotton handled these things more fully many years ago." While the catechism enjoyed a long publication career, the catechetical lectures on which it was based were never published. This essay will utilize the 1644 publication of the catechism, checked against the manuscript. Cited hereafter as: Cotton, *Church Catechism*. To cite the manuscript of the attendant catechetical lectures this essay will use: Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*. Citations from manuscripts have been modernized for readability throughout this document.

were expansions of the content of his church catechism, with additional nuance, emphasis, and application. These lectures featured largely in the first histories of New England, even though they have often been overlooked in more recent surveys of New England Congregationalism. Both William Hubbard and Cotton Mather refer to these catechetical lectures as foundational to the New England Way. Hubbard related that Cotton spoke with such authority on ecclesiastical matters that “whatever he delivered in the pulpit was soon...set up as a practice of the church, if of an ecclesiastical concernment.”⁴⁵ These lectures set up all matters of the church “more strictly.” Hubbard also commented that these catechetical lectures became the basis for the later publishing of *The Way of the Churches* (1645).

Cotton Mather, although prone to hyperbole when lauding his grandfather, likewise highlighted the significance of these early lectures by John Cotton. Mather mentioned that during his time at Boston, Cotton “thrice went over the *body of divinity* in a *catechistical way*.”⁴⁶ Preaching the catechism, in a catechetical way (meaning via questions and answers) was his practice and the manuscript of these ecclesiastical records bore this out. These lectures were well attended by both sexes. Apparently one time a woman in the crowd was so guilt ridden during his handling of the sixth commandment that she confessed to murdering her prior husband and thereby “exposed herself to the extremity of being burned.”⁴⁷

The substance of Cotton’s lectures will be handled more fully later, but a brief introduction to their content is in order. The manuscript is just over one hundred pages long and was neatly written. It began by describing the unity of the church as a mystical

⁴⁵ Hubbard, *A General History*, 182.

⁴⁶ Mather, Vol. 1, *Magnalia*, 259.

⁴⁷ Mather, Vol. 1, *Magnalia*, 259.

body “unifying into one church by holy covenant.”⁴⁸ He continued to spend about ten pages discussing the importance of an initial covenant for church life. This he compared to marriage: as “A queen enters into the bed by covenant, but a concubine is taken in by power.”⁴⁹ So too, the church must be gathered by covenant and not by force, lest it be found to be a concubine and no queen. This metaphor of the church as a Queen continued to provide grounds for a church and lay person’s autonomy and authority. For the Queen “hath the keys of the family and rules the affairs in it, but a concubine hath neither.”⁵⁰ After elaborating on the importance of the covenant, he spent most of the document describing the various church offices, their importance and functions. These catechetical lectures and their attendant catechism were an effective means of educating the laity on how to start and run congregational churches.

It is noteworthy to point out that the catechism and lectures do not indicate the existence of relations of faith for church admissions that develop after 1636. Cotton listed the duties of church admission simply as: the confession of sins, the professions of faith, and the taking hold of the covenant. Both in this list and in his subsequent explanation of what exactly this entailed, Cotton does not articulate a desire to express one’s conversion experience or how faith was wrought in the soul. This indicates that the development of the congregational way was very much a work in progress and that by 1634 Cotton certainly did not require or advocate such a practice as would later become predominant.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 1.

⁴⁹ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 18.

⁵⁰ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 19.

⁵¹ The chronology of the introduction of church relations is somewhat contentious. Edmund Morgan’s original date of 1636 has held majority opinion, argued in *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 104-5. Morgan’s date, however, has been challenged by Michael G. Dittmore, “Preparation and Confession: Reconsidering Edmund Morgan’s *Visible Saints*” *The*

It is hard to overstate the importance of John Cotton's church catechism and the lectures he gave explaining it. During a time when it was prohibitively expensive to import published material from England, hand copied manuscripts of this text served as the basis and rubric for starting New England churches. The extant manuscript copies coupled with the numerous later printed versions of the catechism itself show how widespread its use was. Perhaps the most striking example of the influence of this church catechism was the fact that John Davenport used it as the basis for his own catechism.⁵² Davenport wrote his catechism with William Hooke in the mid-1640s for the governing of his New Haven Church. The New Haven catechism copied verbatim many sections from Cotton's church catechism. For example, Davenport's explanation of the Lord's Supper and Church censures were copied word for word from Cotton's catechism.⁵³ While sometimes argued to be quite unique, New Haven's foundational church catechism was largely copied from Boston's.⁵⁴

Both Robinson and Cotton's church catechisms were vital elements in a larger movement to educate the laity and equip them for their governing role in congregational churches.⁵⁵ As James Cooper put it, in the 1630s clergy began to "prepare lay people for their role as watchmen and active participants in government." Cooper listed several methods utilized for this task. One was the public discussions and explanations of the details of all church operations. These were done in "mixed company" to prepare even non-church members for their future participation. Cooper also pointed to the frequent

New England Quarterly 67, no. 2 (June 1994), 318. Ditmore argued for a 1638 initiation date for relations. Analysis of Cotton's catechetical lectures and catechism on the church in 1634 indicate that he had not yet instituted relations of faith in Boston.

⁵² John Davenport, *A Catechisme Containing the Chief Heads of Christian Religion* (London 1659). This catechism was written in a for New Haven with William Hooke, sometime around the year 1644.

⁵³ Compare Cotton, *Church Catechism*, 7,8,11, with Davenport *A Catechisme*, 42-44.

⁵⁴ This was a central focus of Bremer's treatment of Davenport, in *Building a New Jerusalem*.

⁵⁵ Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 28-31.

practice of open letters to and from churches which related to questions about church government. These were read in public and the ecclesiastical issues were addressed openly. The result of all this lay education was effective to the point where “lay people participated in government in meaningful ways, and the right of consent acted as an effective brake upon the authority of ministers.”⁵⁶

Adult catechizing and the circulation of manuscript catechisms were an indispensable part of this lay education. No other medium was as systematic and comprehensive in its treatment of the structure of church government than these catechisms. Each New England household was expected to know and discuss their catechism. Moreover, they were copied and carried by the laity themselves. Thus, they could always have access to a catechism in order to reference it when deciding on church matters.

Henry Dunster’s church catechism indicated that the pattern of a focus on adult catechizing and the widespread use of church catechisms continued through the 1630s. Like Cotton’s, Dunster’s church catechism came at the end of a treatise on the church, clearly intended for dissemination.⁵⁷ Dunster’s catechism was short and not intended for memorization. Only an incomplete manuscript remains, and the extant portions reveal that it was largely copied from Cotton’s church catechism. Dunster attached this catechism to his own manuscript entitled *A Brief Declaration of the Ordinary Offices of the Church of Christ*, in which he listed the church offices, briefly described their function, and cited relevant biblical texts.

⁵⁶ Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 31.

⁵⁷ Henry Dunster Notebook 1628-1654, *MHSC* Microfilm. Dunster’s catechism is found at the end of his own short writings on ecclesiastical matters. It seems the catechism was meant to disseminate the church doctrine in the treatise. The catechism was clearly never finished and seems to have largely been copied from John Cotton’s *Church Catechism*. The manuscript is undated but seems to have been written just before or after Dunster came to the New World in 1640.

Dunster's short catechism and treatise listed a definition of the church and then the importance of the various church offices and their functions, perfectly consistent with the congregational way. What was characteristic about this manuscript was the vast number of proof texts attached to each office. Each church office and its function were defended by a handful of texts. The function of these was clearly to be taken around as a reference for Scripture verses that justify each office of the New England church. In this way it was perfect for facilitating conversation and discussion among laity surrounding church government.

The Robinson, Cotton, and Dunster church catechisms from the 1630s represent a vital body of literature that was necessary to educate the laity on ecclesiology. These catechisms indicated how much time was spent empowering the laity and that much pains were taken to catechize and provide catechisms for adult church members. Their existence also indicated that catechisms were the predominant means by which New England laity were empowered to participate in church government. It was through catechisms and catechizing about the church that the laity were educated on church government and that provided the blueprint for erecting New England Congregationalism.

By the early 1640s, all the emphasis on catechizing laity for church government overshadowed the catechizing of children in the household. The only catechism that we know was produced for New England children in the 1630s was Ezekiel Roger's *The Chief Grounds* (1642). It was Rogers in 1639 who spoke out about the need to catechize children in a letter to John Winthrop.⁵⁸ Moreover, Thomas Lechford commented in 1642 that "there is no catechizing of children or others in any church," noting that many in

⁵⁸ Hall, *The Faithful Sheperd*, 168.

New England “want a direct scripture for ministers catechizing.”⁵⁹ Lechford’s statement has often been taken broadly to suggest near total lack of catechizing in New England in the first decade. However, given the writing and existence of many adult catechisms at that time, it is best to take his statement narrowly, as a reference to the lack of catechizing children and servants.

The General Court of Massachusetts responded promptly to these pleas by passing legislation requiring the catechizing of children in the home. The law specified that “families do once a week (at the least) catechise their children and servants.”⁶⁰ Connecticut was not far behind in passing almost an identical law.⁶¹ The ideal behind these laws was to have the father and mother catechizing the children at home, that they may know religion and the English language. However, the law stipulated that if the household was incapable of teaching the child, they must at least procure a catechism for them to learn on their own. In keeping with Congregational principles, no one catechism was enjoined, but children could learn any “short orthodox catechism.” All town selectmen were to oversee their neighbors in this process and the children were expected to demonstrate such learning of the catechism should any “call them to trial” of their catechetical knowledge.⁶² This law, and reassertions of it in decades to come, associate childhood and servant catechizing much more with civil obedience than with salvation or ecclesiastical involvement.

Ministers responded enthusiastically to this initiative by producing at least fourteen catechisms between 1641 and 1663. Most of these were specifically for children.

⁵⁹ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 53.

⁶⁰ *The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, repr. 1660 (Colorado: Rothman & Co., 1995), 136. Cited hereafter as *CLM*.

⁶¹ *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Hartford: Brown & Parsons, 1850), 521. Cited hereafter as *PRCC*.

⁶² *CLM*, 136.

The most popular and enduring catechism written at the time was by far John Cotton's *Milk For Babes* (1642). As the name implied, this was a catechism for young children to introduce them to the basics of the Puritan faith. It became quite an iconic document and continued to be used through the American Revolutionary era. Although popular, Cotton's catechism was never canonical; it existed alongside other popular children's catechisms such as Samuel Stone's *A Short Catechism* (1684) or John Fiske's *The Watering of the Olive Plant* (1657). The stated goals of these catechisms were typically along the lines of preparing children for eventual church membership.

Though the catechisms were written by the ministers, the laws and social ideal was to have catechizing done in the home. Catechizing was seen as fundamentally the laity's domain in which to educate their children and empower themselves. Richard Mather exhorted his congregation to teach at home "the principles of the catechism."⁶³ Both boys and girls were expected to be catechized, just as both sexes were expected to hear sermons and participate in worship.⁶⁴ As was mentioned, Boston designated selectmen and neighbors to call upon children of the town to demonstrate sufficient catechetical knowledge.⁶⁵ At first this seemed to be an advisory role, as the law specified that selectmen were to see that all children were taught their catechism "under family government."⁶⁶ The law was seldom enforced and there were no fines levied in the immediate years following its passage.⁶⁷

In 1660, Newbury selectmen found that many poor families were negligent in catechizing and among those families where there was "no such occasion of poverty"

⁶³ Richard Mather, *A Farewel Exhortation to the Church and People of Dorchester in New-England* (New England 1657), 12.

⁶⁴ Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write*, 19.

⁶⁵ *CLM*, 136.

⁶⁶ *CLM*, 260.

⁶⁷ Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill*, 23.

they mentioned only four families negligent in this duty. New Haven also placed responsibility for catechizing on the home. The founding generation of that colony agreed in 1639 that the Scriptures do hold forth a perfect duty which they are to perform in “the government of families and commonwealths as in church.”⁶⁸ Although inconsistently executed, the early laws concerning catechizing indicated that the ideal was to have laity and households take responsibility for catechizing.

It was not only the laws that recognized the importance of catechizing, but the laity themselves began to call for more catechisms and catechizing. It was the understanding of the importance of catechisms to lay involvement in church government through the 1630s that led to the groundswell of desire for catechisms among the people, for both themselves and their children. Many of the introductions to catechisms indicated that the ministers wrote them at the request of their people. Thomas Shepard’s *A Short Catechism* was written “at the earnest desire of sundry well-affected persons.” This Cambridge congregation liked having catechisms so much that they even petitioned and got Shepard to turn a sermon on John 16 into a long catechism and publish it for the people.⁶⁹

John Fiske’s Chelmsford congregation showed similar initiative in obtaining a catechism from their minister. Fiske’s introduction showed not only this but also the ideal that catechisms were tools of and for the laity and their empowerment. “What is presented here,” the catechism’s introduction began, “is yours: for looking to the poor-penman, as relating to you: to the external moving cause, as arising firstly & freely from you, to the end & use as centering in you, to the reason of the publishing thereof, as

⁶⁸ *Records of The Colony and Plantation of New Haven*, ed. Charles J. Hoadly (Hartford: Case, Tiffany and Company, 1857), 12. Cited hereafter as *RCPNH*.

⁶⁹ Thomas Shepard, *A Short Catechism...* (New England 1654), 1, 27.

resting with you, and the care & costs, as to that end expended by you: it must not otherwise be determined but yours.”⁷⁰ The Chelmsford laity saw the necessity of the catechism for their own church involvement and that of their children.

Fiske’s notebook revealed that this was no empty rhetoric, it was the church that both initiated and financed the publishing of the Chelmsford catechism. Money was collected from the church to publish copies of Fiske’s catechism in 1657. By 1658, Fiske noted that their meeting discussed “the payment for the catechisms.”⁷¹ The money was collected from all but eight members from whom “the deacons do demand the pay to be brought in.”⁷² Fiske’s catechism became so popular that they ran out of copies. In 1665, the church ordered one hundred copies of the Westminster Shorter Catechism at “6d per piece.”⁷³

Very often the laws mandating the catechizing of children have been interpreted as indicating a people disinterested in catechisms and a frustrated elite attempting to impose it on them. Lay initiative in requesting and financing catechisms, however, suggested a different narrative. The laity realized the importance of catechisms to their own involvement in church life and began to appreciate their importance for their children as well. They appropriated catechisms and learned and taught them themselves. While there was undoubtedly some neglect, there was also much enthusiasm surrounding the practice.

Women played an important role in this New England catechizing culture. They attended catechism lectures and both women and girls were expected to know their

⁷⁰ John Fiske, *The Watering of the Olive Plant in Christ’s Garden* (New England 1657), intro.

⁷¹ Robert G. Pope, ed., *The Notebook of The Reverend John Fiske 1644-1675* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1974), 128.

⁷² Pope, *Notebook of The Reverend John Fiske*, 129.

⁷³ Pope, *Notebook of The Reverend John Fiske*, 200.

catechism. Moreover, New England women themselves catechized in the household. Richard Mather exhorted mothers directly that they “are not exempted from this duty.” Mothers are “more with their children whilst they are little ones” and thus have an obligation to ensure their religious instruction. Would mothers “bear them in their wombs...and not be at some pains for the saving of their souls?”⁷⁴ Mothers often taught the catechism and basic literacy to their children. Increase Mather recalled how his mother, “a very holy praying woman,” did teach him to read.⁷⁵

This role as spiritual educator in the home was particularly influential in New England given the commitment to home worship and education. Scholars have demonstrated that this role of women was “ubiquitous and publicly visible.” Women were seen in the community as the “guardians, interpreters, and insulators of Puritan culture.”⁷⁶ Mothers were consistently teaching and explaining God to the children and servants of the household. They often took ordinary opportunities to teach spiritual lessons.⁷⁷

The very act of catechizing was described in maternal imagery. The most prominent instance was John Cotton’s *Milk for Babes Drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments* (1642). Cotton’s title was far from unique. Many catechisms explained what they were doing in terms of breastfeeding and maternal care. Richard Mather’s catechism reminded the readers of the importance of short and long catechisms by telling them that “babes must have milk before they be fed with stronger meat.”⁷⁸ Thomas Hooker

⁷⁴ Mather, *A Farewel Exhortation*, 13.

⁷⁵ Michael G. Hall, ed., *The Autobiography of Increase Mather* (Proceedings of American Antiquarian Society), 278. <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44525082.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 94.

⁷⁷ Porterfield, *Female Piety*, 94.

⁷⁸ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 2.

described the Church as “a child, and the breasts are the promises of the Gospel; now the elect must suck out and be satisfied with it, and milk it out.”⁷⁹ The act of catechizing was predominantly referred to and conceptualized in these feminine terms.

With the push for child catechizing of the 1640s, it is important to note that the practice of adult catechizing did not wane in the following decades. Many of the children’s catechisms also contained much material for older saints. For example, John Fiske’s catechism contained three appendices for those “with such capacities as are already entered” into the church.⁸⁰ This was also the time in which Samuel Stone finished his massive catechism, *The Whole Body of Divinity* (1656), clearly not intended for children. This popular manuscript was transcribed by candidates for New England ministry and had a significant impact on New England, yet it was never published.⁸¹

Catechetical lectures for adults continued as they were begun by Cotton in 1634. Thomas Shepard preached a long series through his *A Short Catechism* from 1643-1645, which was never published. Additionally, many lay notebooks indicated that laity learned from and took notes on their catechisms. A lay notebook from Ipswich in 1645 recorded notes on the “Catechism” from “Mr. Rogers.” Roger’s series of catechetical lectures apparently extended at least a year. It seems to have been a series on the Ten Commandments, taught from a catechism. The notebook began each talk that was from a “Catechism” by writing the word at the top of the page. Each entry has at least a few pages of summary notes on the catechism. These examples illustrate the continued importance of adult catechizing and lectures alongside the push for child catechizing.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Porter, *Female Piety*, 94.

⁸⁰ Fiske, *The Watering of the Olive Plant*, intro.

⁸¹ Mather, vol. 1, *Magnalia*, 438.

At this time, catechisms also began to be used for the evangelizing missions to the Indians. Through the 1630s, Indian missions had largely been neglected. In 1644, six New England Sachems formally submitted to the General Assembly and the Puritans took this as an indication that they were ripe for a mission's effort. John Eliot of Roxbury spearheaded the project and began to preach to nearby Massachusetts Indians. Literature to procure funding was published in London, which revealed that catechizing was an essential tool in the mission's strategy. The first attempt was made by Eliot and other Englishmen toward "the younger sort of Indian children in catechizing them."⁸² In order not to "clog their minds or memories" they decided to ask them three catechism questions only. About one year later, and the ministers begin reporting that some Indian children were "very ready and expert" at their catechism and can recite much doctrine and the Ten Commandments. This was largely done by the Indians for their own, or so these documents claim.⁸³

Eliot and the New England ministers produced many catechisms in Algonquian to aid these endeavors. Before the production of his famous *The Holy Bible...Translated into the Indian Tongue* (1663), Eliot produced *The Indian Primer* (1669). This work was based on a small catechism that Eliot had developed around 1650. He added a longer catechism for adults and published five editions between 1654 and 1687.⁸⁴ Eliot's catechism was also used by John Cotton Jr. in his time on Martha's Vineyard. Cotton Jr. recorded that Hiacoomes asked him, "what is meant by that phrase in Mr. Eliot's

⁸² Michael P. Clark, *The Eliot Tracts: With Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter* (London: Praeger, 2003), 88.

⁸³ Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 126-7.

⁸⁴ Richard W. Cogley, *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 119.

catechism, when a man dies, his soul goes into a strange country?"⁸⁵ Abraham Pierson likewise produced a catechism in Quiripi for his mission's work in New Haven. *Some Helps for Indians* was published in 1659 and efforts were made to have it rendered into the Narragansett and Pequot language as well for broader impact.⁸⁶ The centrality of the catechism in the mission to the Indians shows that catechisms were part of a larger agenda than merely educating children. The Algonquian catechisms not only taught the Puritan faith by encapsulating enforced norms for social behavior. It is difficult to say, however, if these Indian catechisms shared the ecclesiological focus of many of their English counterparts. It seems reasonable that they would, as Native eldership in their own churches was the ideal.

The first generation of ministers faced the challenge of implementing a church ecclesiology that relied on equipped and engaged church members. Most coming over from England had no real experience in exercising church authority. The English parish system centralized power and handed down decisions about church practice and offices to local churches. In New England's radical new system, it was the members who voted on these vital matters of the church. They met this challenge in large part by catechizing their laity in matters of church government. New England ministers gave many lectures on the church and wrote catechisms distilling their content. The laity responded enthusiastically to this challenge. They not only sat dutifully under catechetical lectures, absorbing necessary information for their new role, but copied, shared, and discussed these ecclesiastical catechisms to prepare and enable the functioning of the Congregational Way. Moreover, it was lay initiative and funding that procured a bundle

⁸⁵ John Cotton Jr., "The Missionary Journal of John Cotton, Jr., 1666-1678," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 109 (1997), 78.

⁸⁶ Cogley, *John Eliot's Mission*, 185.

of catechisms for the children of New England, to prepare them for church membership and its attendant possibilities. What was it precisely that these catechisms prescribed about the church and how do we see that affecting the development of New England ecclesiology?

Chapter Four: Catechisms and Ecclesiology

Even by 1628 the structure of church government for those migrating to New England under Samuel Skelton and Francis Higginson was undetermined. There were varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the ceremonies and structure of the English churches, with no real consensus on how to positively construct a church. This was particularly true for the laity. In contrast to those who settled in New Plymouth, the Massachusetts Company people “were not precisely fixed upon any particular order or form of church government, but, like *rasa tabula*, fit to receive any impression that could be delineated out of the Word of God.”⁸⁷ Though this comment by Hubbard is meant to laud these early migrants commitment to a church founded on nothing but Scripture, he identified a serious problem for this migrating group. How could a church people, uncommitted and informed regarding church government, be expected to participate in its governing? This problem was all the more serious given the aspirations of a Congregational system in which the laity take a significant role. An answer to how these first churches met this challenge is found in the content and prescriptions of the church catechisms.

Throughout the early decades of settlement, New England clergy used catechisms to affirm the importance of lay involvement and to equip them for that role. Though they may have had a basic awareness of the various offices and functions of the church, it was the laity’s use of catechisms that crystallized their understanding and shaped their zeal for

⁸⁷ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 117.

church government. The laity and ministers found catechisms particularly helpful for this task because the laity appropriated them for themselves and used them in a variety of contexts. The ecclesiological prescriptions of the catechisms were often reflected in the speech and actions of the laity, providing a helpful view into the specific ways in which these catechisms were used by the laity to equip them for this experiment in church government. In particular, catechisms were helpful for the laity in starting, structuring, and disciplining the churches.

The quintessential starting point for the New England congregational church was called the church covenant. The covenant took place by the writing out of a formal statement of doctrine and commitment to the church. Then at least seven (though ministers admitted the number to be arbitrary) members would take hold of the covenant by oath and then sign the document. All subsequent members who joined the church had to likewise affirm the church covenant. This became an essential practice of the church and the laity utilized the catechisms to enact it and even demand it be done before church could begin. Before ministers enshrined the importance of the church covenant in the *Cambridge Platform* 1648, ministers relied on catechisms to normalize the practice of church covenanting.

Ministers were emphatic in defining the covenant in the catechisms and defending its necessity for the starting of a church. The first essential element was that it was the laity who initiated the covenant. Robinson specified that it was to be “a company of faithful and holy people (with their seed) called by the word of God into public

covenant.”⁸⁸ These initiators were not ministers but the people, “whether they be high or low, few or many.”⁸⁹

John Cotton’s catechetical lectures and catechism in 1634 set the standard for the importance of the covenant. Cotton defended and explicated the covenant on two grounds: Scripture and reason. He asserted that Scripture showed that a church must be “erected by covenant just as “the Israelites made a covenant with the Lord and he with them.”⁹⁰ In this act, God “takes them to be his people and he giveth himself to them to be their God.”⁹¹ Cotton pointed to the fellowship of Abraham with other and how they needed to covenant with him before joining his church. This practice was enacted by the Israelite nation as well, for “the stranger that would be of that church must lay hold of the covenant” in order to worship with them. Cotton insisted that the practice was continued by the early church, pointing to Acts 2:42 as an instance of public confession before church membership.⁹²

Cotton’s defense of the church covenant from reason and analogy was much more in depth. By an analogy between the church's relationship to God and a queen’s relationship to her husband, Cotton prescribed many principles regarding this initial covenant. The analogy implied consent to this covenant on the part of the church, otherwise the church would not be a queen, but a concubine.⁹³ Church members must voluntarily join this covenant. Cotton saw this as an indispensable element of the church, “A covenant being made and kept makes and keeps a church in its institution.” On the other hand, “A covenant being wanting or broken breaks a church.” The whole of the

⁸⁸ Robinson, *An Appendix*, 1.

⁸⁹ Robinson, *An Appendix*, 1.

⁹⁰ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 14.

⁹¹ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 15.

⁹² Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 14-6.

⁹³ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 18.

church startup depended on this covenant, If “the breaking of the covenant breaks the church, then the making of it constitutes a church.”⁹⁴ Cotton inserted summary statements on the covenant in his later catechism *Milk For Babes* as well.⁹⁵

Ministers followed Cotton’s lead in enshrining the lay initiative and necessity of a founding covenant with little variation other than emphasis. Davenport defined the covenant as the “solemn public action or engagement whereby they [saints] stand voluntarily bound to one another.” He even defended the covenant in a way that echoed Cotton’s catechism, by appealing to national Israel and the idea that “The spouse of Christ, and conjugal union is made by conjugal covenant.”⁹⁶ Likewise, Henry Dunster’s church catechism listed as a necessary element of the church that members “be united into one congregation by an holy covenant.”⁹⁷ By the 1650’s, catechisms still contained sections on the covenant, but they took up relatively less attention. Samuel Stone and Richard Mather’s catechisms both contained summary statements on the covenant without much elaboration or defense. It seemed after the initial beginnings of the process were widespread and enshrined in the *Cambridge Platform* it’s defense seemed less urgent.

Nevertheless, what was said about the covenant in catechisms was appropriated and carried out by the laity. The influence of Cotton and other minister’s emphasis on the covenant in their catechisms can be seen by the increasing insistence and enforcement of church startups opening by covenant. A later transcript of the original 1629 Salem covenant still exists and bears out the importance it had to those starting that church. “We

⁹⁴ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*, 17-19.

⁹⁵ John Cotton, *Milk For Babes. Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments* (London 1646), 10.

⁹⁶ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 29-31.

⁹⁷ Henry Dunster Notebook 1628-1654, *MHSC* Microfilm.

covenant with the Lord and with one another,” the covenant read, “and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways.”⁹⁸ This same covenant was renewed in the year 1660. Thus from the very outset the laity adopted the principle of covenanting to starting their churches

Other early church start ups contained the covenant, but it was not viewed as prominent or as indispensable as it would become in the late 1630s. Winthrop's description of the founding of the First Church of Boston mentions that they “kept a fast,” chose John Wilson as their teacher, and confirmed him by “imposition of hands,” but Winthrop did not mention the covenant. This point is significant because we know that there was a formal covenant and that members were to sign before they were part of this church. Thus, while covenant was perfunctory in the beginning of the Salem and Boston churches, they were not a large part of the lay consciousness or zeal.

After the introduction of Cotton’s catechism and his attendant lectures, the laity were not only informed and active in constructing and participating in church covenants, but even demanded their presence. The covenant of the Dorchester church in 1636 showed this heightened interest in the church covenant. Signers vowed to “freely covenant and bind ourselves solemnly in the presence of God.”⁹⁹ Moreover, the records for the next ten years were kept simply in terms of names who vow to this covenant. That was an elevating of the centrality of the covenant not found in the earlier church startups. That the drafters and signers of this covenant included the word “freely” as well indicated the influence of the Cotton church catechism lectures and his redundant emphasis on the church needing to voluntarily consent to this covenant.

⁹⁸ White, *New England Congregationalism*, 13.

⁹⁹ *Records of the First Church at Dorchester 1636-1734* (Boston, 1891), 1.

Thomas Shepard and the founding of the Newtown church of 1636 likewise showed this increase in lay awareness of the importance of the church covenant. Where Winthrop made no mention of the covenant in the founding of First Boston Church, Winthrop did make much of the covenant when he later described the founding of the Newtown church. The Boston description was only a short paragraph and this Newton one lasted almost two pages. Winthrop highlighted that “the covenant was read, and they all gave solemn assent to it.” Following this, Shepard continued to talk to all who were gathered about “the nature of their covenant,” and their need to “stand firm to it.”¹⁰⁰ Both of these instances of the beginning of a church reveal the increasing importance of this initial covenant, revealing the crystallization of New England ecclesiology as along the lines of the church catechisms.

The founding of the Dedham Church in 1637 provides the clearest evidence of this heightened involvement of the laity in freely covenanted churches. When the church laity gathered to discuss proceeding with the founding of their church they set down principles on which their church would be founded. Among these was a substantial section on the covenant. What “knit them together” was their “mutual consent or profession of the covenant of grace.” Such a covenant was necessary, they continued, because there is no “union of many persons into one body that can be made without mutual consent or some kind of covenant.” Not only is this language of consent and body precisely the same as Cotton had used in his catechetical lectures, but they even refer to the same scriptural proof texts of Abraham, Israel, and the early church.¹⁰¹ The Dedham laity not only knew the content of church founding by covenant as it was laid out in the

¹⁰⁰ Winthrop, *The History of New England*, 215-6.

¹⁰¹ *The Record of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths...in the Town of Dedham*, ed. Don Gleason Hill (Dedham 1888), 3. Cited Hereafter as *RTD*.

catechism, but utilized that information to empower their own initiative and involvement in founding churches.

Mutual covenanting was but the first step in forming a church. The next steps were to call the various church officers. This too was the responsibility of the laity. It was the covenanted church body that had the power to call and institute ministers in the church. This was not a responsibility that the New England laity were used to having. There was no such equivalent in English churches. Thus, not only did the laity have to know the various necessary offices of a church but were expected to know their function and what type of person should fill that role. In this area as well, the laity were informed and equipped for such a responsibility in large part by the prescriptions of ecclesiastical catechisms.

Ministers took great pains in their catechisms to elaborately define the offices and functions of the congregational churches. While this may not be immediately surprising, its significance is better appreciated in light of the fact that this was unique to New England catechisms. Catechisms produced in England, contained little or no details on ecclesiology. While some contained broad statements about the nature of the church, they were clearly not intended to inform laity on how they can be involved in forming a church.¹⁰² The two most popular catechisms from England, *Six Principles* and the Westminster *Shorter Catechism*, contain nothing of church offices and their functions. Against this backdrop the importance of the large contents of church offices in New England's catechisms becomes clear. They were uniquely utilized by ministers to train up their people into effective church leaders.

¹⁰² Green, *The Christian's ABC*, 330.

The catechisms usually began their discussions of church offices by distinguishing between extraordinary and ordinary offices in the church. The extraordinary office was identified with the Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists of antiquity. They had a “higher and more perfection direction” than ordinary ministers.¹⁰³ These offices were immediately called by God and not through a church and because of this, they no longer existed.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, their doctrine was not received mediately though reading or preaching, but immediately through visions or voices. Stone described the role of these extraordinary officers as an “eternal platform” upon which the church and its doctrine would be built.¹⁰⁵ Without similar eloquence, other catechisms affirmed the same idea of these offices as a foundation.

More relevant for the project of equipping laity for their role in church government, ministers described the perpetual, ordinary offices of the church. All agreed on five such offices: Pastor, Teacher, Ruling Elder, Deacon, Widow.¹⁰⁶ Each of these offices was considered perpetual and necessary for the church to function. Although most New England Churches did not have all these offices always functioning, this list was consistently asserted as the ideal church and the laity were being equipped to call and recognize them as such.¹⁰⁷

The office of pastor (or teaching elder) was typically associated with wisdom and exhortation. They were to “quicken the hearts of the people unto all faith and obedience and to reprove and comfort where there is need.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, laity were not to look for one to fill this office who is gifted with merely theoretical knowledge, but practical wisdom.

¹⁰³ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 106.

¹⁰⁵ Stone, *Whole Body*, 278.

¹⁰⁶ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 35-6.

¹⁰⁷ Hall, *The Faithful Sheperd*, 95-7.

¹⁰⁸ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 107.

The ideal pastor spoke to the “head and heart.” It was the pastor’s duty not so much explain scripture as to “let out the sweetness of it upon the heart.” The pastor, therefore, must be one who aimed at the “affections according to the occasion and necessity of the church.”¹⁰⁹ This understanding of the pastor helps explain the laity’s desire for pastors like Thomas Hooker and Thomas Shepard, who were masters at arousing the emotions of their congregation.

Alongside the pastor was the office of teacher, who was to “attend upon doctrine; and therein to dispense a word of knowledge.”¹¹⁰ Samuel Stone, who was himself the quintessential scholarly teacher of Hartford, described the direction of this office as “those who bend themselves to inform the understanding.” The teacher, then, “is to let out the light and truth of the Word that it may shine clearly upon the understanding.”¹¹¹ Thus, between pastor and teacher, the mind and the heart, the intellect and affections were to be both engaged and enlarged. These were important guidelines and descriptors which laity followed when making decisions about calling for church offices.

When it came to offices that were filled by the laity themselves, the catechisms contained much more detail. The chief among the offices filled by the laity was the ruling elder, who was to “rule with diligence.”¹¹² He was to be in “diligent attendance unto all other acts of rule...as become good stewards of the house of God.” He must be a “family man of good government” and “not a young plant” in his faith.”¹¹³ Cotton, and following him Dunster, listed six responsibilities of the Ruling Elder. First, they were to “open and shut the doors of God’s house by admission of members and ordination of officers.”

¹⁰⁹ Stone, *Whole Body*, 331-3.

¹¹⁰ Cotton, *Church Catechism*, 2.

¹¹¹ Stone, *Whole Body*, 332-3.

¹¹² Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 36.

¹¹³ Henry Dunster Notebook 1628-1654, *MHSC* Microfilm.

Second, they had to reprove members where they lived “idly in their calling.” Third, to “heal such offences in life and doctrine” which might “corrupt” the churches. Fourth, to prepare members for trials of membership. Fifth, to “moderate the carriage of all matters in the church assembled.” And sixth, to “feed the flock with a word of admonition.”¹¹⁴ These duties were a high calling indeed, but often a thankless one. The laity were expected to hold those whom they called to be a ruling elder to these standards and to fulfill them when called themselves.

The office of the deacon was likewise filled by the laity and given significant attention in the catechisms. Their duty was primarily one of service and not rule, in which they were to “retain, preserve, and distribute the outward treasures of the church, for the relief of the poor.”¹¹⁵ These deacons were to receive from “the wealthy, and supply the wants of the poor.” It was their responsibility that such wealth did not “spoil under their hands” and that it was distributed not in an arbitrary manner, but “according to the mind of Christ.”¹¹⁶

The final office listed in the catechisms was the office of widow. In the lively debates surrounding the role of women in New England church and life, the existence and function of this office for women is often overlooked.¹¹⁷ The widow was the only office in the church that women could hold in New England. It was mentioned and described in nearly every catechism. They were to be “Ancient women of sixty years of age.”¹¹⁸ They also had to be “well-reported of for good works, for nourishing their children, for lodging strangers, for washing the Saint’s feet, for relieving the

¹¹⁴ Henry Dunster Notebook 1628-1654, *MHSC* Microfilm.

¹¹⁵ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 107.

¹¹⁶ Stone, *Whole Body*, 333.

¹¹⁷ For a helpful overview of scholarship on women in New England see: Porter, *Female Piety*, 82-7.

¹¹⁸ Cotton, *Church Catechism*, 4.

afflicted,[and] for following diligently every good work.”¹¹⁹ In return, these widows would be provided for by the church for food and shelter.

The common understanding of the function of the widow quickly became associated with caring for the sick. Medicine was considered a feminine domain and one which was “more suitable to be performed by women than by men.”¹²⁰ This was consistent with the popular New England understanding of female aptitudes. In the well used New England book *The English Housewife 1613*, among the “principal virtues” of the English housewife was “the preservation and care of the family touching their health and soundness of body.”¹²¹ A study of gender and work in colonial New England has shown the prevalence of female nurses, midwives, and remedies.¹²²

This cultural affinity between women and medicine became the primary lens through which the office of the widow was conceived. Samuel Stone gave the largest explanation of the office of widow. He defined the office as “those that minister to the necessity of the sick.” Stone taught that these widows could expect special protection and blessing even when ministering to those with infectious diseases. While some “dare not resort to the sick person,” for fear of perishing themselves, the widow “may with comfort and boldness.” This seemingly miraculous power of the healing widow was to be attended with a spirit of “Largeness of heart...Pleasantness...[and] Gentleness.”¹²³ In Stone, then, we find the highest view of the widow as one who can expect divine protection from infection when carrying out her office in the church. Thus, the cultural

¹¹⁹ Cotton, *Church Catechism*, 4.

¹²⁰ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 108.

¹²¹ Gervase Markham, ed. Michael R. Best, repr., *The English Housewife* (London: McGill, 2003), 8.

¹²² Gloria L. Main, “Gender, Work, and Wages in Colonial New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 51, no. 1 (January 1994), 58.

¹²³ Stone, *Whole Body*, 333-4.

understanding of medicine as predominantly a feminine domain combined with this new desire to enshrine an office in the church given uniquely to older women.

While the official office was restricted to “Ancient Women,” it had implications for all women in the church. Cotton took time in his catechetical lectures to spell out its importance for all women of the church. First, he showed how it was a swipe against the Catholic doctrine of celibacy for spiritual women. For these women bore children and yet were considered holy in their office and service. Secondly, these widows were to be models for the young women to aspire toward in their charity and spirituality. Cotton embedded in this discussion quite high praise of the office:

Observe what is the honor Christ reserves for the best woman, such as are well reputed for their good works, Christ calleth them in their old age to minister to the church and the high honor of the deacons in showing [illegible] with cheerfulness; some high spiritual women may count this an high testament to them, and their hearts may rise at this ordinance of God¹²⁴

It was considered a loss for any church that does not have this office. Not only widows, but women in general are thus given this importance in church life. They were imbued with unique gifts of healing and were to aspire to the lofty position of holding a church office. Cotton’s teaching here, though technically only applied to widows, served to elevate the legitimacy of women’s service in the church, at least in theory.

While it was difficult in practice to have widows in churches at age sixty, the cultural esteem of them that was taught did seem to permeate the culture. Church records indicate the widow status of members, given the large number of entries such as

¹²⁴ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*.

“Elizabeth Purton a widow” it was likely that some of these filled that office.¹²⁵ A glimpse of how the culture viewed widowhood can also be seen in the extant petitions from widows to the General Court at Boston. Many of these petitions seem to appeal to the Court’s sympathy and understanding of the dignity of widows by highlighting their status as such. One such petition, the petitioner identified herself as “Elizabeth Cole widow.”¹²⁶ These many petitions of women through the 1640s and 1650s show women taking hold of the cultural attitude toward widows and calling the General Court to recognize that with property or some other request.

In defining all these offices, the New England ministers were self-consciously laying out the rubric for how the laity were to judge their ministers and teachers. These were standards to which the laity could hold them to account. Moreover, in defining the offices that were filled by the laity themselves, the catechisms gave great detail so that they could fulfill such a role. These offices of ruling elder, deacon, and widow gave significant authority and influence in the church. Even women were elevated in their spiritual status and given an office of church government.

Catechisms not only contained the qualifications and descriptions of offices in the church, but also limited the power of the ministers over the laity. The most significant way this was done was by giving all authority to call and fill these offices to the laity. Davenport described in detail that the laity choose their ministers “upon due trial of their fitness, choosing them to their office, and solemnly investing them with the power of office.”¹²⁷ This power of the church was derived from the laity and this gave them great

¹²⁵ *The Records of the First Church in Boston 1630-1868*, Richard D. Pierce ed., vol. 1 (Boston 1961), 16. Cited hereafter as *RFCB*. There are at least 37 women who are given the epithet, “widow.”

¹²⁶ Photostats 1647-1650, *MHSC*.

¹²⁷ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 36.

power and certainly necessitated their education in these church offices. Ministers also wrote into the catechisms means by which the laity could reprove or even oust their own ministers. After due rebuke and continued ill behavior, “the same power that set him up” can proceed to see that he is “deposed.”¹²⁸ This common power invested in the laity was couple with the power to restrain elders.

Many examples could be given of the laity exercising such power over their ministers. One such instance occurred in 1634. A young and zealous John Eliot of Roxbury church began to preach to the nearby Pequot and was vocally critical of some policies among the New England ministry. The problem was that he did so “without the consent of the people.” It came to pass that the “people began to murmur” because of this and Eliot ended up being rebuked by the New England ministry and forced to apologize to the church for his rashness.¹²⁹ Another episode occurred in 1635, when the laity left the church in Saugus and called for intervention against their ministers because the church had not been founded in “due order” (probably a reference to a lack of an initial covenant). The church seemed to make reconciliation by “supplying that defect; and so all were reconciled.”¹³⁰ Together these episodes provide a glimpse of an active and informed laity policing their ministers on matters of ecclesiology. This kind of laity was precisely the one taught and equipped by the church catechisms.

These outlines of church offices and the respective power relations between ministers and laity were taken seriously by the laity and taken by them to help them structuring the churches. A clear example of the impact these church catechisms was evident in the founding of the Dedham Church in 1638. The church body met with one

¹²⁸ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 36.

¹²⁹ Winthrop, *The History of New England*, 179.

¹³⁰ Winthrop, *The History of New England*, 180.

another in order “that we might gain further light in the ways of Christ’s kingdom and government of his church.”¹³¹ Here we see deliberation among the laity taking place regarding the role and function of church government. Part of their conversation was what offices ought to be instituted in the church and they agreed on the five listed in all the catechisms: “which officers are pastors, teachers, rulers, deacons, and widows.”¹³² They even went on to discuss the particular roles that each office has within the church and the various qualifications that each office carries. It’s also worth noting that this whole discourse was carried on in question and answer format. It seems that not only much of the content that circulated these ecclesiological discussions among the laity were informed by the early church catechisms, but even the mode of discourse, being question and answer, was one that the laity picked up and utilized for their own purposes. The Dedham example is an excellent case in which the intent of the catechisms to empower the laity to learn, discuss, and implement the intricacies of congregational church government worked in practice.

This precision for church government quickly showed up repeatedly in the lay consciousness. In 1647, one layperson asked John Winthrop if “government in church and common weale...[was not] that new heaven and earth promised...?”¹³³ Similarly, in John Hull’s autobiography, he expressed sentiments regarding the lay view of ecclesiology. He recalled how important it was that when he came to New England that “they gathered into several churches, according to the gospel rules, having pastor, teacher, ruling elders, and deacons, to every church.”¹³⁴ Hull not only stated his pride for

¹³¹ *RTD*, 1.

¹³² *RTD*, 4.

¹³³ Quoted in Hall, *The Faithful Sheperd*, 88.

¹³⁴ John Hull, *The Diaries of John Hull* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1857), 168.

New England ecclesiology in this way but even recorded God's judgement against a man who ridiculed it. He wrote that "Henry Bull and his company...did deride the churches of Christ...[by acting out] the gathering of a church and calling officers."¹³⁵ For this, their ship was wrecked on the shore the next day and they were slaughtered by Indians. Hull seemed perfectly vindicated that the mocking of New England church gathering and instituting their offices should be met with judgement.

The lay commitment to ecclesiology was neither cold nor begrudging, but enthusiastic. In an early spiritual narrative from Ipswich, written in 1659, William Adams reflected on the importance of church government to the laity in New England. He mentioned that when he came to New England he began "hearing of the work of God's grace upon Offices, which I had thought so slightly of before."¹³⁶ Adams reflected that he did not think much of church government while back in England, but upon coming to New England, such zeal for "offices" was much in the culture. Church Government did not become something necessary but lackluster for Adams, rather his thoughts about church government did "much affect my heart."¹³⁷ These lay statements of ecclesiology speak to the high view of the church and its offices inculcated in large measure by the church catechisms. Clearly the laity appropriated those ideas and sentiments.

Lay reliance on church catechisms to found and structure churches continued through the 1660s. In 1667, a group of Newbury laity rose up to defend their congregational liberties and the church government from the first generations of New England. They were rigid in not departing from traditional New England congregational

¹³⁵ Hull, *Diaries*, 169.

¹³⁶ Robert Strong, "Two Seventeenth-Century Conversion Narratives from Ipswich, Massachusetts Bay Colony," *New England Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (March 2009): 146.

¹³⁷ Strong, "Two Seventeenth-Century Conversion Narratives," 146.

polity as enshrined in previous catechisms. They claimed, “We own Mr. Hooker’s Polity, Mr. Mather’s catechism, and Mr. Cotton’s Keys.”¹³⁸ From these documents they derived and stood by “God’s appointment for his churches to walk in...proved by the scriptures in books of controversy, in catechisms by the synod, by the ecclesiastical laws confirmed, and approved of by the practice of all the churches in general.”¹³⁹ For these laity, and those before them, catechisms on church government formed the bedrock on which they stood to assert their ecclesiastical power. The catechisms, therefore, not only informed the laity what the structure of the churches ought to be, but empowered them to fulfill those roles and to assert their boundaries, even against the ministers.

The laity used catechisms not only to inform them how to start and structure a congregational church, but also to enact church discipline within that structure. Discipline was of supreme value to New England Puritans and was essential to the Congregational ideal of a church full of visible saints. Church discipline had been a mark of the church in the Reformed tradition since Calvin and its absence was a key criticism for the Puritans of the Anglican system.¹⁴⁰ Discipline in England was not handled in the local congregation and thus was rather detached from the reality of the lives of the people. As a consequence it was not only neglected, but many people who were not visible saints were taking part of the sacraments when they, in the view of the Puritans, should not have. In the congregational system, Puritans knew this had to be remedied. They had to devise a system of church discipline that was active and close enough to the laity to be effective in local settings. Here too, inexperienced laity were being tasked with carrying out the vital

¹³⁸ *A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury from 1635-1845* (Boston: Samuel G. Drake, 1845), 87. Cited hereafter as *SHN*.

¹³⁹ *SHN*, 87.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 45-7.

church function of discipline. For this task, the laity had to be informed on how discipline functioned and how it was to be carried out.

The early New England catechisms contained large sections outlining the biblical model of church discipline. Based on Matthew 18, the minister's catechisms agreed that the fundamental responsibility of the practice was on the laity. Davenport gave a good and representative, threefold explanation as to why the laity had this power "without dependency on other churches, elders, or Synods." First, Davenport argued, was because Christ gave the power to them (a reference to Matthew 18). Second, because the primitive church had it within themselves. And third, because each church has right to the word and sacraments, "which are greater."¹⁴¹ Stone made a more reserved statement that "thought the people give the voice [of assent, yet] the performance" is by the leadership."¹⁴² Nevertheless, even for Stone, the laity had to be informed and involved in cases of church discipline. Discipline, then, represented another great area of church life in which the laity had great authority.

The purpose of discipline was manifold. The first one listed was usually simply "the removing of scandals out of the church."¹⁴³ This was often reiterated in more broad terms related to keeping order in the church. Samuel Stone made an analogy between church discipline and civil government. As "government cannot stand without punishment," so too, the church cannot stand without discipline.¹⁴⁴ Beyond this, however, the unanimous ultimate goal of discipline was not punishment, but restoration. All the catechisms agreed on this. Mather explained the end of censures as for "the healing of the

¹⁴¹ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 45-6.

¹⁴² Stone, *Whole Body*, 262.

¹⁴³ Cotton, *Church Catechism*, 11.

¹⁴⁴ Stone, *Whole Body*, 262.

offender, and the preserving others from sin, and for the glory of the name of God which is blasphemed because of the sin of church members.”¹⁴⁵ Stone likewise asserted that the ideal is that the offending brother be “gained” and his soul saved.¹⁴⁶

The steps that were to be taken when an offense occurred were given in such detail that there can be little question that the purpose for which ministers put them in catechisms was to train laity how to carry out such church discipline. If an offense was a private, then the offended party is to go privately to his brother and see that the offender “hold forth his repentance to his brother.”¹⁴⁷ If this takes place then all is well and there would be no need to move forward. If repentance was not made, the offended party was to take “one or two more” so as to have witnesses. This failing, the whole church was to be told and excommunication was to take place.¹⁴⁸ This system effectively enacted a means of self-policing and social regulation among Puritan churches. They not only identified the sins of their brothers and sisters but could bring them to discipline for it.

The power to bring fellow saints to discipline was also in the hands of women. With the system of lay discipline being so new, it was not surprising that the question came up; can women initiate this process of discipline in the same way men could? In 1641, Peter Bulkley noted that a woman in his church had done this and he wrote Cotton to ask his opinion of its legitimacy.¹⁴⁹ Cotton answered in the affirmative; “a sister has the like power of dealing with an offending brother, as a brother has to deal with a brother.” Cotton went on to explain that by this she does not “usurp authority over the brother...for though such an admonition be an act of power yet it is not power usurped by

¹⁴⁵ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 110.

¹⁴⁶ Stone, *Whole Body*, 266.

¹⁴⁷ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 44.

¹⁴⁸ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 44.

¹⁴⁹ Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 352.

her, but is put upon her as by the offender, so by God.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, in this narrow realm of church discipline a woman in a New England church had equal authority to initiate the process of church discipline. This meant that as far as the educational process of the why and how of church discipline, women were an intended audience alongside men.

The catechisms further specified which sorts of sins could come under discipline and which ones should be overlooked. Stone reminded the laity that “every transgression of the law deserves not admonition, as inevitable human frailties.”¹⁵¹ Stone laid emphasis on the need to rebuke those sins which are voluntary and against the light that one has, meaning those who should know better ought to be rebuked. Thus, sins that did not fall into these categories ought to be overlooked. Even when rebuke was needed, however, the catechisms insisted that it be done with “due solemnity...so that the winning of the party must be the thing aimed at.”¹⁵² Stone was emphatic that the church practice “Absolution” and restore any penitent offender back into church fellowship, for “God loses the prisoner upon their repentance, so should we.”¹⁵³ With these detailed explanations of how to carry out discipline in their beloved catechisms, the laity were equipped to engage in the procedure themselves.

A number of instances of lay initiative in church discipline showed that the laity knew and executed effectively the exact steps of discipline that were outlined in the catechisms. In 1640, Mistress Ann Hibbins was called before the First Church Boston congregation to give her side of the story after being accused of “an untruth” by accusing

¹⁵⁰ Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 355.

¹⁵¹ Stone, *Whole Body*, 264.

¹⁵² Mather, *A Catechisme*, 110.

¹⁵³ Stone, *Whole Body*, 267.

Brother Davis of overcharging for some work that he did for her house.¹⁵⁴ After the offense, Brother Davis brought along another with him to see if the situation could be reconciled. Brother Davis was “not satisfied because her satisfaction was constrained and not free.”¹⁵⁵ Unable to achieve reconciliation, Brother Davis brought the matter to the church that they may “call for satisfaction.” Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the extended proceedings that follow is the degree to which it is directed by the laity. It was various members of the congregation and not Wilson or Cotton who did most of the questioning of Mrs. Hibbins. The laity sought precisely what the theoretical goal of discipline was, her repentance and restoration. A number of times, the laity themselves policed the protocols of the case, as when Mrs. Leveret voiced that “It is offensive to many that these things which have been agitated again and again in private...should take up so much time on this day.”¹⁵⁶ This statement questioned whether a seemingly private offense should be tried in public. The episode revealed that by the early year of 1640, most laity had gone from relative ignorance and inexperience in matters of church discipline to being able to run it from start to finish. Part of the explanation for the laity’s aptitude and initiative was certainly the education on church matters from catechisms.

Other instances of church discipline revealed the laity’s aptitude in initiating the process and that it typically proceeded according to the prescribed manner. In 1635, Boston church excommunicated Robert Parker for his “scandalous oppression of his wives children in selling away their inheritance from them.”¹⁵⁷ Parker repented after this

¹⁵⁴ *Remarkable Providences: Readings on Early American History*, John Demos, Revised ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991.), 263.

¹⁵⁵ Demos, *Remarkable Providences*, 264.

¹⁵⁶ Demos, *Remarkable Providences*, 269.

¹⁵⁷ Richard D. Pierce, ed., “The Records of the First Church in Boston 1630-1868, volume 1” (1961). *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, 20. Cited hereafter as *RFCB*.

censure and was “received again to the fellowship of the church.”¹⁵⁸ Another case revealed that a woman brought her husband into church discipline for “he denied conjugal fellowship unto his wife for the space of 2 years.”¹⁵⁹ This and other scandals led to the man’s excommunication.

The fullest picture that we have of the proceedings in church discipline were not from Boston, but From John Fiske’s church in Wenham. Fiske’s notebook indicated that church proceedings in discipline took more time than any other ecclesiastical activity.¹⁶⁰ Early in 1645, Fiske related some basic principles to the church regarding the proceedings of discipline, these were wholly consistent with those laid out in the catechisms. He said that any offender was to be immediately cleared if the charge against her “be unjust” or if she confesses. Moreover, he insisted again on the importance of the lay involvement, every answer must be given “to the church, and every answer to be given to the church and not one brother to another.”¹⁶¹ These injunctions were carried out repeatedly in Wenham, with the laity once again demonstrating their aptitude and experience in running church discipline.¹⁶²

Some instances in Wenham show that catechisms not only prepared laity for how to engage in church discipline, but that knowing a catechism could even help one get out of punishment. In 1658, just after John Fiske published his catechism, Nathaniel Shipley was brought before the church “to give satisfaction about his offense.” He publicly repented for his crimes and begged for the church’s leniency. As part of considering what to do, the church checked to see how well he knew his catechism. Apparently, they were

¹⁵⁸ *RFBC*, 20.

¹⁵⁹ *RFBC*, 27.

¹⁶⁰ Pope, *Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*, xxxviii.

¹⁶¹ Pope, *Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*, 26.

¹⁶² Pope, *Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*, xxviii-xxxvi.

satisfied with “his proficiency in the hearing of his catechism in answering to diverse questions.”¹⁶³ This, in part, earned him a respite for “one month longer.” Knowledge of the catechism functioned here as a means of showing one’s sincerity and utility as a church member. Thus, catechisms not only equipped the laity for carrying out church discipline but could also be used by them to mitigate a censorious sentence.

The ministers who wrote catechisms in the early decades after settlement knew that they had to equip the laity for their new role in congregational church government. These were inexperienced persons and they were being asked to participate in a novel church system. It was not sermons or long treatises that did this. These catechisms proved an effective means for equipping the laity for this new role. They demonstrated ability to guide the laity in starting, structuring, and disciplining churches. The laity appropriated copies of the catechisms and used them to facilitate discussions among one another and then executed that knowledge in various fundamental areas of church government. Even women were part of this educational process as they were expected to participate in church life as widows and to initiate the process of discipline when necessary. Without the catechisms, the laity would not have been able to fulfill their vital role in church government as they had. While clearly playing a role in helping the laity run the church, what role did the catechisms play for those attempting to enter the church?

¹⁶³ Pope, *Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*, 128.

Chapter Five: Catechisms and Church Relations

One could not casually walk into an early New England church and expect to be received as a member. Instead, the prospective member had to first relate the story of their conversion and how faith was wrought in their soul. The standard for these relations was high. They could not simply recite basic Christian doctrines and show a life free from outward scandal. Instead, the candidate had to reveal their soul, showing how faith was worked in them and how they were brought through the Puritan “morphology of conversion.” The necessity of these relations was the accepted narrative of New England ecclesiology since Edmund Morgan’s brilliant work on the topic.¹⁶⁴ Since then, scholars have thoroughly studied the extant relations to understand New England lay piety.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ The argument was first put forward and the phrase “morphology of conversion” introduced by Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 88-91. Morgan’s claim quickly became the accepted account of understanding admission into New England churches and has been consistently reaffirmed, see Michael McGiffert, ed. *God’s Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge*, rev. ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 136; Francis Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards*, rev. ed. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995) 109-10.

¹⁶⁵ For a sampling of scholars who used the relations for direct access to lay piety see: Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginning of American Expression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Charles Loyd Cohen, *God’s Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Abram C. Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For some recent works that have sought to problematize these early relations and the access they provide to genuine lay piety, see Jacqueline M. Henkel, “Represented Authenticity: Native Voices in Seventeenth-Century Conversion Narratives,” *New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (March 2014): 5-45; Andy Dorsey, “A Rhetoric of American Experience: Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge Confessions and the Discourse of Spiritual Hypocrisy,” *Early American Literature* 49, no. 3 (2014): 629-662. For analysis of relations from the 1680s through the 1740s, see Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

While scholars have done a masterful job at analyzing these relations for their insights into popular religious life, they have overlooked the process by which the laity prepared themselves for this task and what tools they employed to shape and express their religious experience. Catechisms became a consistent element in these relations of faith and played an important role in shaping the content and character of the relations. Moreover, the catechisms functioned not only as a tool that the laity used to express their religious experience, but also acted as a standard by which they could hold those judging the sincerity of their experience accountable. In shaping relevant doctrinal content, prescribing necessary emotional expression, and equipping for discursive question and answer sessions, catechisms were a major means by which the laity were empowered to both give and judge these relations.

The practice of requiring a relation upon church admittance began around 1636 in New England church life. It was rejected by prominent ministers before then. John Robinson did not require relations in his catechism, but merely that “by his personal and public profession adjoin himself to some particular fellowship.”¹⁶⁶ This statement contained nothing of holding forth one’s religious experience. Francis Higginson and the early Salem church followed Robinson. In 1629, Higginson wrote a persuasive treatise against the whole practice entitled, *A competent knowledge and blameless life are sufficient qualifications to render a man worthy of admission into a church of christ without a peculiar relation of the order and manner of conversion/ explained* (Figure 4.1). The key requirements that he argued for were “a competent knowledge and blameless life.” By these he meant knowledge of basic Christian doctrines and freedom from any scandalous sinful behaviors. For Higginson, a church ought not to seek to know

¹⁶⁶ Robinson, *An Appendix*.

one's soul for there will always be mixture in the church. The church ought even to admit one who is an unknown sinner "as judas, because the church judgeth not of secret things."¹⁶⁷ The treatise continued to refute various places in scripture that were brought up in defense of the need for relations.

Even as late as 1634, John Cotton did not advocate the practice of requiring a relation of faith for church admittance. His church catechism and its attendant lectures do not mention such a practice. Indeed, the requirements for church admittance that he listed were much closer Robinson and Higginson than they were to his own position in the late 1630s. Cotton listed three requirements of those to be admitted: "confession of their sin, and profession of their faith, and laying hold of his holy covenant."¹⁶⁸ While certainly more elaborate than the twofold requirement of Higginson, Cotton's explication of each of these carried no hint of a testimonial of one's religious experience. The fact that these relations gained so widespread acceptance by the end of the decade requires explanation as they were not contained in the original ecclesiology push in the first wave of church catechisms.

The most persuasive explanation of how the practice became standard in New England has been Edmund Morgan's in *Visible Saints* (1963). Morgan essentially argued that John Cotton was responsible for promoting the practice as a means of keeping Separatists like Roger Williams out of the church in March 1635/6.¹⁶⁹ While agreeing with Morgan's timeline, his suggestion that it was John Cotton who introduced the test now seems unlikely. In light of Cotton's 1634 catechism, he was clearly not pushing for

¹⁶⁷ Miscellaneous Bound 1629-1658, Copy of Mr. Higginson's Work, *MHSC*.

¹⁶⁸ Cotton, *Doctrine of the Church*, *MHSC*.

¹⁶⁹ Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*, 2nd ed. (Mansfield: Martino Publishing, 2013), 92-102.

the test that early. Morgan argued that Hubbard made Cotton the progenitor of the relations test, but Hubbard made no such mention of the practice. Hubbard merely stated that Cotton was largely responsible for the early forms of Congregationalism.¹⁷⁰ Cotton Mather, on the other hand, was explicitly giving a narrative account of the genesis of the practice, the earliest one we have. Perhaps cliché to agree wholly with Cotton Mather's history on this point, but his explanation does fit the extant documentation. Mather claimed that it was the laity who upon discovering the utility of hearing the experiences of conversion in those seeking membership "always expected the liberty of being thus particularly acquainted with the religious dispositions of those with whom they were afterwards to sit at the table of the Lord."¹⁷¹ Thus, in Mather's telling, it was the laity in 1634 who began to request and then demand that church applicants give their relation. Based on the evidence of the Cotton Catechism in 1634, Mather's story seems to be the best option.

By the 1640s, as the practice had become quite widespread, most catechisms not only had statements about the necessity of these relations, but also described what sorts of content they should contain. Cotton's second catechism, *Milk For Babes*, contained a statement that indicated the need to show forth religious experience. This short catechism listed that one needed to show "confession of their sins, profession of their faith, and of their subjection to the Gospel of Christ."¹⁷² Cotton had no such clause in his first catechism, although he did talk about admission practices in his catechetical lectures. Davenport also inserted a section requiring church relations in his catechism. Although he copied much from Cotton, he added a section in which those applying for church

¹⁷⁰ Hubbard, *A General History*, 181-2; Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 95-6.

¹⁷¹ Mather, Vol 2. *Magnalia*, 244.

¹⁷² Cotton, *Milk For Babes*, 11.

membership must “approve himself to the church.”¹⁷³ Fiske also contained a statement that members must be “giving up themselves and their seed” before the church in order to join in covenant.¹⁷⁴ Shepard’s statement was the most explicit, specifying that prospective members must hold forth “a threefold work” of humiliation, vocation, and obedience.¹⁷⁵ Thus, with variations in wording, the catechisms almost universally contained a statement about the need for relations.

The notable exception to this is Samuel Stone. This was a predictable difference. Hooker and Stone were known to have openly rejected the practice of church relations. Stone argued that all should be allowed admittance who “have a competent knowledge and a blameless life.”¹⁷⁶ For Stone this was sufficient, and it put him out of the New England mainstream.¹⁷⁷ This dual requirement, without telling of one’s experience, was precisely what Francis Higginson and the early Salem church required. In fact, Stone used the same phraseology that Higginson did when opposing relations.¹⁷⁸ Thus, the phrase “competent knowledge and a blameless life” seemed to be a standard formula for describing church admissions for those who rejected the practice of requiring a narrative of religious experience.

It is noteworthy here that John Davenport’s catechism indicated that he required relations of faith.¹⁷⁹ The general phrase “approve himself to the church,” added in his

¹⁷³ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 29.

¹⁷⁴ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 12.

¹⁷⁵ Shepard, *First Principles*.

¹⁷⁶ Stone, *Whole Body*, 256.

¹⁷⁷ Baird Tipson, “Samuel Stone’s ‘Discourse’ against Requiring Church Relations,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 1989), 789-99.

¹⁷⁸ Compare Stone, *Whole Body*, 256 with Francis Higginson Work, *MHSC*.

¹⁷⁹ Francis Bremer first advanced the argument that the New Haven church did not require experiential relations of faith in his excellent biography of John Davenport, *Building A New Jerusalem: John Davenport, A Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), chapter 12. The significance of Bremer’s claim did not go unrecognized, but was noted and affirmed by a reviewer, see Walter Woodward, review of *Building a New Jerusalem*, *New England Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (June 2013),

New Haven catechism, together with the fact that he cited Acts 8:37, argue that Davenport required religious experience during church admissions. Davenport used the language and arguments of John Cotton and not the notion of “competent knowledge and a blameless life” utilized by Higginson and Stone. Had he sided with the latter, he would have used the phraseology that they did, which was clearly standard. Moreover, Davenport often used Acts 8:37 to look at one’s heart and religious experience, not merely their profession.¹⁸⁰ This being true, the relations were indeed a staple practice of New Haven.

As the practice of relations became established in New England Congregationalism, so to did the content of catechisms become more noticeable in them. Extant relations reveal the trend of increasing importance of catechisms to church relations.¹⁸¹ In the 1630s relations often quoted English ministers or made tangential references to being catechized while growing up in England. Typical was Edward Collin’s comment that “God did by his catechizing dropped somewhat unto me about

325. Bremer’s argument was strongly challenged by Michael Winship, “Did John Davenport’s Church Require Conversion Narrative for Church Admission?: A Challenge,” *New England Quarterly* 87, no.1 (March 2014): 132-9; Bremer ably defended and reasserted his conclusion, “Did John Davenport’s Church Require Conversion Narrative for Church Admission?: A Response,” *New England Quarterly* 87, no.1 (March 2014): 140-6. Not long after the biography, Bremer made the case again in “‘To Tell What God Hath Done for Thy Soul’: Puritan Spiritual Testimonies as Admissions Tests and Means of Edification,” *New England Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (December 2014), 650-3. Bremer’s argument has already been repeated in notable studies such as Baird Tipson’s most impressive study of Hartford, *Hartford Puritanism: Thomas Hooker, Samuel Stone, and Their Terrifying God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 298-301.

¹⁸⁰ Davenport, *Knowledge of Christ*, 8.

¹⁸¹ The surviving church relations from this time include: George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley have edited and published fifty-one that range in date from 1638-1645 in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, Vol. 58 (Boston: The Society, 1981). Mary McCarl edited and published an additional sixteen, that range from 1648-9, McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 432-466. John Fiske’s notebook contains an additional twenty-three relations from 1644-1675. Although most are dramatically summarized by Fiske himself, they are still of much value, see Robert G. Pope, ed., *The Notebook of Reverend John Fiske 1644-1675* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1974). An additional five are appended to Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth 1653-1657: The Conscience of a Puritan* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), 107-25. We also have forty-two “Praying Indian” relations, edited and published in Michael P. Clark, *The Eliot Tracts: With Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter* (Westport, Praeger, 2003), 269-95, 360-96.

fundamentals.”¹⁸² There was no extended engagement with the content or emotions prescribed in the catechism, simply a reference to it taking place while growing up in England. This changed by the 1640s. The confessions of the mid to late 1640s show a marked increase in the utilization of the catechism by the laity during their relations. Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge relations showed this most dramatically, ten of the sixteen from the late 1640s referenced Shepard’s own catechism. It seems the practice of doing so had become standard or expected.

The laity strategically used catechisms to shape and express their own relations of faith in ways that would be most persuasive, both in matters of doctrine and in displays of emotion. Potential church members often used the catechisms to dispassionately structure and display their doctrinal knowledge. Toward the end of his seemingly brief relation, Abram Smith wanted to ensure that he hit all the required doctrinal points. For this, he made sure to relate “Several things in catechize.”¹⁸³ He continued to list several points of doctrine that he knew were requisite, including that “Though Christ offered and held forth, yet my heart could not lay hold on Christ, but unable to believe.” Here Abram resorted to the catechism in order to reassure himself that he had covered all the necessary grounds of a relation. In this way, the catechism empowered him to ensure that he passed. Thus, catechisms not only empowered the laity in their relations, but served as a check on the minister or any other that would seek to turn away a relation. If the catechetical knowledge was there, there proved no ground to turn the person away.

Elizabeth Oakes likewise used the catechism as a means to hold those judging her relation to a fair standard. Oakes invocation of the catechism was a way for her to ensure

¹⁸² George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley ed., “Thomas Shepard’s *Confessions*,” in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: The Society, 1981), 82.

¹⁸³ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 458.

that she covered all the requisite grounds of doctrinal knowledge and therefore precluded any charge that she is doctrinal unqualified for church membership. She confidently asserted that “hearing out of catechise (1) the Lord make me see (2) to be sensible, I thought I fell short.” Then continued to assert that on her own she continued “reading catechise” to answer her questions related to the second death.¹⁸⁴ Thus, Oakes utilized the catechism to interpret her own journey and as a template to help structure how she would relate that journey to the church. Her self-confident assertions of spiritual discovery could not be challenged for their orthodoxy, for they were taken out of the catechism themselves. Thus, New England women turned to the catechism for their spiritual self discoveries and it was to them a source of empowerment.¹⁸⁵

It has been suggested that the theological discourse of the ministers created the spiritual experience that the laity then held forth during their relations.¹⁸⁶ Thus, it was the ministers who essentially created the spiritual experience of the laity by their preaching. To be sure, certain prominent themes of religious experience found in the preaching appeared in the relations, but this thesis overlooks the creativity with which the laity crafted and relayed their own experience and, moreover, how they appropriated the catechism written by Shepard for their own ends.

There was no monolithic set of doctrines or experiences that laity used the catechisms to hold forth, rather they all seemed unique. Mistress Smith utilized the catechism to open up and find comfort in the covenant. She knew from the catechism that

¹⁸⁴ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 441.

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 107-15. Rivett argues that the female relations demonstrate feminine passivity that is reluctant to make authoritative statements regarding their own spiritual condition. However, this essay argues that women used catechism in the same way men did to interpret and explain their own spiritual condition with authority and persuasiveness.

¹⁸⁶ Dorsey, “A Rhetoric of American Experience,” 632.

God promised, “opening the covenant, i’ll be sought, and this sent me aseeking.”¹⁸⁷ This statement was Smith referencing Shepard’s *Short Catechism*’s section on the Covenant of Grace, in which he wrote that in this covenant, “all that do or shall believe” will be saved.¹⁸⁸ While Shepard did not intend that section to be preparatory for church relations, it was so for Smith. She grabbed hold of that section of the catechism and used it to interpret and express her own religious experience. It turned out that doing so proved a great means of comfort to Smith.

While the catechism was a means by which Mistress Smith interpreted and explained her journey to comfort, Mistress Joseph Cooke used the same catechism to understand her ending in a “sad condition.”¹⁸⁹ “But out of catechize,” Cooke came to understand, “that it was not measure so much as brought the soul to Christ as was supposed.”¹⁹⁰ Here her reading of the catechism actually brought into doubt her genuine union with Christ. She had reinterpreted her past religious experience of assurance in light of the catechism’s information about what really coming to Christ meant. Cooke thus used the catechism in her own way to cast doubt on her own experience and reinterpret it as one that left her with “many fears,” rather than comforted.

In both of these instances Smith and Cooke utilized the catechism for understanding their own religious experiences and doctrine in a unique way. Where Shepard discussed the doctrinal elements of the covenant, Smith took that as her grounds of confidence and assurance. Where he wrote about union with Christ, Cooke took it as a means of casting doubt on the genuineness of her previous religious understanding.

¹⁸⁷ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 464.

¹⁸⁸ Shepard, *A Short Catechism*, 16.

¹⁸⁹ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 461.

¹⁹⁰ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 461.

Neither of these utilizations of the catechism by these women was predictable or intended by Shepard. These women utilized the catechism to understand and express their own religious experiences. Moreover, the catechism acted as a shield against rejection from the ministers as they could not condemn experiences or doctrines drawn from their own catechisms. Consequently, in the hands of the laity, catechisms served as a form of empowerment in crafting their own relations and as a check on the ministers and others in rendering their judgements.

Though this doctrinal knowledge and religious experience was vital to articulate, relations also required proper demonstration of emotion. In this tacit requirement as well, catechisms were a helpful tool in the hands of the laity. Laity often pointed to how catechisms informed them that doctrine was not enough, but that proper emotion was requisite in a true conversion. Speaking of his being convinced of his sin, Sir Starr “questioned whether [it was] a thorough conviction.” The depth of the emotion felt was vital for Starr, and it was his reading the catechism that helped him realize and search for this depth of emotion.¹⁹¹ Elizabeth Dunster understood the need for emotion perfectly when she echoed Shepard’s catechism in saying “I had a knowledge of a savior but not that he belonged to me.”¹⁹²

So what emotions did Shepard’s catechism emphasize were necessary for conversion? Typically, he explicated those emotions that related to the doctrine of Preparation, namely humiliation and conviction. Shepard repeatedly emphasized the need to feel such emotions before one was ripe for conversion. He even listed as the first requirement of what people ought to “hold forth unto the Church, that so they may be

¹⁹¹ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 463.

¹⁹² McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 465.

joined to it” as “Humiliation, under their misery, death, and sin.”¹⁹³ Thus, the catechism prescribed the proper emotions to be felt and the laity often displayed them in turn.

Many instances in the Cambridge relations show that the laity displayed humiliation and conviction of sin as marks of their genuine spiritual journey. John Jones was clear that the Lord did “break off soul by contrition and self by humiliation.”¹⁹⁴ Both of which, he assured the church he had felt. On hearing of the catechism teaching on original sin, John Shepard finally “knew the filth of that sin as then the Lord let me see.”¹⁹⁵ It was this that led to him declare that “the Lord “broke my heart.” This sense of humiliation and broken heartedness could not be shallow. Shepherd's catechism specified that this “sight and sense of sin” must be such that it becomes “a burden unsupportable to the soul.”¹⁹⁶ Abram Arrington ensured his audience that he felt his burden thusly, “concerning sight and sense of sin,” he recounted, “it must be an intolerable burden to make it restless to seek after Christ.”¹⁹⁷ These laity found in Shepard’s catechism a proper template of emotional display that allowed them to demonstrate that their faith was deeper than a mere head knowledge.

Many displays of emotion were quite intense. In his catechism, Shepherd made it clear that coming to Christ truly often meant “mourning under my sin and misery.”¹⁹⁸ This prescription was present repeatedly in relations. The intensity of the display of emotion served to show the genuineness of the faith of these applicants. John Jones related a time when “going to the fields to recreate myself there being a youth used to

¹⁹³ Shepard, *First Principles*.

¹⁹⁴ Selement and Woolley, *Confessions*, 202.

¹⁹⁵ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 444.

¹⁹⁶ Shepard, *Short Catechism*, 36.

¹⁹⁷ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 450-1.

¹⁹⁸ Shepard, *Short Catechism*, 21.

keep cattle and finding him often weeping of catechism.”¹⁹⁹ Jones here pointed to the catechism to validate his weeping experience and to commend himself to the church as genuine. Jones was certainly no anomaly. The famous Captain Daniel Gookin also related a weeping experience in his spiritual narrative. He assured the listeners that he “was affected and had tears in consideration of my misery.”²⁰⁰ John Shepard mentioned that he did “mourn for sin as it did grieve God” twice in his relation. Both times in the context of showing the genuineness of his feeling the burden of sin. In these ways the intense displays of emotion and recounting of a weeping experience was a mark of genuine conversion as the catechism had described. In this way we see how Shepard’s catechism was used by the laity both to relate their doctrinal and emotional religious experience. The catechism gave them categories by which to do that and ensured that it would not be rejected as inauthentic.

While the influence of Shepard’s catechism on the laity was quite clear in the Cambridge relations, John Fiske’s catechism’s influence on the Wenham relations is more subtle. This was the case for two reasons. First, Fiske did not publish his catechism until 1657 (though it likely circulated before then) and, therefore, there was not a standard catechism for those who were to give relations to utilize from Wenham. Second, the relations recorded in Fiske’s notebook were written by him in very summary fashion. With these qualifications, it is still possible to draw some helpful inferences on the relationship between catechisms and relations of faith at Wenham.

Where Shepard’s relations tended to use the catechism for doctrinal and emotional emphases, the Wenham practice seemed to put more emphasis on having to

¹⁹⁹ Selement and Woolley, *Confessions*, 202.

²⁰⁰ McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations,” 452.

recite a catechism by memory. At Wenham, after a candidate had given their relation of experience, they were expected to restate the entire catechism, this likely meant *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* or Fiske's own *The Watering of the Olive Plant* after 1657.²⁰¹ No such procedure took place at Cambridge and demonstrated that attitudes toward the utility of rote memorization of a catechism differed church to church. Knowing a catechism was often referred to as knowing "the principles of faith" or religion.²⁰² While knowing this catechism was indispensable, it was not enough if not accompanied by understanding. Nathaniel and Jonathan Butterfield discovered this when they "answered beyond expectation as to understanding, though short of what is required."²⁰³ Both seemed to be rejected for knowing merely the memorized catechism.

While the Wenham church required this recitation of the catechism, they also required evidencing grace in the soul, and here too the catechism appeared to have been used by the laity. Here we see the laity, like the Cambridge relations, utilize the catechisms to interpret and express their relations in a way they know will be acceptable because it is sanctioned by the catechisms. An unknown catechism used by Peter Bulkeley featured prominently in the relations of Mr. and Mrs. Hinksman. Thomas recalled that "Mr. Bulkeley in his catechising handled that question how may one know whether he hath faith or no?" it was also Bulkeley's answer to that question that brought Thomas comfort. Mrs. Hincksman leaned even more heavily on Bulkeley's catechism by listing in number form all the ways in which it answered, "the question, how no you have a part in the blood of Christ."²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Pope, *Notebook of Reverend John Fiske*, xvii.

²⁰² Pope, *Notebook of Reverend John Fiske*, 61, 186.

²⁰³ Pope, *Notebook of Reverend John Fiske*, 187.

²⁰⁴ Pope, *Notebook of Reverend John Fiske*, 148.

The use of Bulkeley's catechism in these relations to join the church in Wenham show how universally accepted the practice was. Here was a couple coming from another church that clearly expected catechetical content in order to join a new church and they shared that they had done something similar in both places. It also revealed the recurring influence of congregationalism. No one catechism was deemed canonical while the others were cast aside. Ministers and laity alike had no problem with potential church members citing the catechisms of other churches.

The relations of the Indians in Natick were different than both those of Cambridge and Wenham. Most of these relations were contained in Eliot's tract *Tears of Repentance* (1653). The tract was a collection of Indian relations of faith and their understanding of Christianity in their desire to join the church. They are problematic a resource for several reasons. For one, they were published as a means to gain funding for further support for the missionary efforts in New England. This different audience effected the content of the relations. They were also translated and written by Eliot, which posed unique problems of its own.²⁰⁵ At the outset then, these are difficult sources. Nonetheless they reveal some additional insights into the relationship in New England between catechisms and relations of faith.

One important difference between the Indian and Anglo uses of the catechisms was the doctrinal points emphasized in them. Where Anglos tended to emphasize personal experiences using the catechism's categories, Natick Indians seemed to focus more on theologies of creation and the story of Adam and Eve. The importance of the Christian view of creation seemed to be prominent in the catechisms. Ponnampalam

²⁰⁵ For a great summary of the interpretive difficulties with these relations, see: Henkel, "Represented Authenticity," 8-12.

confessed that when he learned “in the Catechism, *That God made all the World*” he “did not believe” because he knew that he had “sprung from my Father and Mother.”²⁰⁶

Emphasizing the Christian perspective on the creation of the world seemed to have been essential, in the Puritan view, to their evangelizing to the Indians. The relation of Magus gave an indication of perhaps why this was so. He stated that “I believed not, that god made the world, but i thought the world was of itself, and all people grew up in the world of themselves.”²⁰⁷ Christian eschatology, so vital to Eliot, required a linear view of history, running from creation in a point in time to an endpoint, Christ’s second coming. In order to structure this basic narrative of Christianity into history, the Eliot catechisms seemed to target Native views of the origins of the world.²⁰⁸

Complementing the importance of a Christian cosmology was the idea that all humanity was descended from Adam and Eve. This too featured largely in what Indians related from their catechisms. Totherswamp confessed that “*The first man God made was named Adam*” and that “we are children of *Adam* poor sinners, therefore we have all sinned and have broke God's Covenant.”²⁰⁹ Here we see that the importance for teaching from the catechism on Adam relates to Puritan covenant theology and their belief that humanity is sinful because of their relation to Adam and his breach of the covenant. The same sentiment, clearly derived from the Eliot catechism, occurred frequently.

Monequassun related that “For the first man was made like God in holiness...but *Adam* sinned...therefore all we Children of *Adam* are like the devil.”²¹⁰ The Eliot catechism was

²⁰⁶ Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 280.

²⁰⁷ Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 289.

²⁰⁸ For an excellent treatment on the importance of eschatology to the Eliot missions, see: Richard Cogley, *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 4.

²⁰⁹ Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 270.

²¹⁰ Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 278.

emphatic on identifying the Natick Indians with the children of Adam and in need of redemption. Thus, for Indians to understand themselves as sinners, they had to understand their relation to Adam.

The third, and perhaps most prominent theme, that was derived from the catechisms and appeared in the relations was that of the Ten Commandments. This came in the form of social control. Totherswamp recalled how he “came to learn the Commandments of God, and then I saw all my sins, lust, gaming...[etc.]”²¹¹ The Ten Commandments were a large part of the catechizing process and apparently emphasized “lust” and “gaming”, as the Puritans saw them. These emphases were consistent with the social conformity require in Eliot’s praying town and no doubt their inclusion endeared these Native converts to Eliot’s English audience.

A final point to be made about this set of relations has less to do with what was being taught in the Native catechisms and more to do with Puritan expectations of what was in relations. Many of these Natick relations were given multiple times, the earlier ones being unsatisfactory. Thankfully, Eliot usually published all the versions. This allowed for analysis of what Eliot changed in between the various attempts and indicated what Eliot felt would make a more persuasive relation. One key difference between the later, more successful and developed relations, and the earlier ones was the demonstration of catechetical knowledge on the part of the person giving the relation. For example, Poonampam's first confession made no mention of the catechism, while his second one mentioned or quoted from the catechism at least five times.²¹² This pattern was often repeated. While, given the nature of these Natick relations, it is difficult to draw out much

²¹¹ Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 269.

²¹² Clark, *The Eliot Tracts*, 279-80.

about the Indian interactions or utilizations of the catechisms, it does provide insight into what Puritans expected to see in a relation. Clearly, Eliot felt that the way to improve these relations and make them more credible was to add catechetical knowledge to them. In this way the Natick relations, like the Cambridge and Wenham ones, demonstrate the tight and important relationship between catechisms and relations of faith.

Catechisms were not only crucial for shaping the content and performance of relations, they also played an important role in equipping the laity to ask and answer questions during the process. This too was a unique and significant element of New England church life. After a relation was given, the hopeful candidate for church membership was subjected to a series of questions that probed their depth of faith and understanding. The importance of the process was significant to the laity because it allowed them to reassure themselves about the genuine faith of this person. Were they not genuinely believers, this would denigrate the whole worship of the church and soil much of the blessing of the sacraments, which was seen as a deeply communal act. Rather than trust a minister's judgement or admit into the church an applicant about whom some maintained reservations as to their spiritual status, congregational churches allowed for this free session of questioning, intended to scrutinize the faith of a potential new brother or sister in the church.

Formulating critical and pointed questions as well as satisfactory answers in matters of faith and practice was an acquired skill. This process was not something that the laity would have been equipped to do coming off of the boat in the New World, at least not with the level of specificity required to weed out the ungodly. Questions and answers for their own sake were not helpful, what these sessions needed was pointed

questions that would reveal genuine faith and answers that would do the same. The laity were taught by catechisms to both ask and answer questions during this portion of the relations.

A chronological analysis of the question and answer portions of church relations demonstrates the importance of catechisms for laity participating in this practice. With a couple of exceptions, relations in the 1630's do not have large question and answer portions recorded in them. However, relations in the 1640s have much more frequent and in depth question and answer portions. This trend fits the expansion and wide appropriation of church catechisms in the early 1640s. It seems many laity had taken these catechisms quite seriously and used them to formulate questions and answers during the relation process. Moreover, a striking feature of the relations was that most questions asked were done by the laity and not the ministers. This was a process largely by and for the laity of the congregation.

These question and answer sessions could be quite long and intense. In 1645, Nicholas Wyeth gave his relation to Cambridge church and was met with a barrage of penetrating questions. He was asked twenty one questions by at least five different persons, nearly all of whom were lay members of the church. The questions could be asking for clarification on a point made during the relation, such as "What did you mean when you said you comfort yourself with vain hopes?" They could also be on topics that were not mentioned at all, but vital to knowing the spiritual state of the applicant, like "What is your chiefest desire in secret when no other?"²¹³ At times, the questions even served to rebuke, "Why do you forget things, brother?" By the 1640s, these became commonplace parts of relations.

²¹³ Selement and Woolley, *Confessions*, 195-7.

Women as well as men could ask and answer questions. During the Nicholas Wyeth's relation, Elizabeth Luxford asked the question, previously quoted, seeking for clarification on Wyeth's comfort and hope.²¹⁴ The Cambridge church was not alone in allowing female participation in asking these questions, John Fiske's Wenham church also did. Fiske even recorded the debate and rationale in his church for why women ought to be allowed to do so. He noted that there had been "some agitation...about women making their relations in public." Doing so was seen as exercising authority and inappropriate for women to do in the church. Fiske's Congregation disagreed and argued that "asking of questions (imparts power also) in the church, but this kind of speaking is by submission where others are to judge &c. And to the glory of God, as Deborah, Mary, Elizabeth, Anne, &c." Thus, women asking questions during relations was perfectly in line with the Puritan views of female church participation, as seen by the example of the women in the Bible that they listed. They thus concluded that women should "make their relations personally in public."²¹⁵

Catechisms equipped men and women for this task by giving them language and questions that sought to reveal the state of the heart of the person giving the relation. Goodwife Jackson was asked, "When the Lord do let you see the sin and misery that is in your heart daily?" This question was plucked straight from Shepard's catechism, that one must mourn under their "sin & miser" until they "see" their need for Jesus.²¹⁶ The laity's questions focused on categories established in the catechisms deemed to be relevant to conversion, such as repentance and "closing with Christ." Laity drew strategically from

²¹⁴ Selement and Woolley, *Confessions*, 196.

²¹⁵ Pope, *Notebook of Reverend John Fiske*, 4.

²¹⁶ Compare: McCarl, "Thomas Shepard's Record of Relations," 458 and Shepard, *Short Catechism*, 21.

the catechisms to formulate their questions and also to generate relevant questions of their own.

The catechisms were often cited verbatim in response to questions given. In this way, they were used by laity to defend their own faith and demonstrate their own competence. Mrs. Hincksman of Wenham was asked “How may we know the spirit to be a comforting spirit to us?” She responded by giving four marks of the comforting spirit that she lifted from Bulkeley’s catechism.²¹⁷ The catechism supplied her with a respectable answer to the question and in that way equipped her to demonstrate her faith by solid answers to spiritual questions. Hincksman expected the difficult questions after her relations and it seems that how she prepared for them was by knowing her catechism well and employed it in a way satisfying to the church. Catechisms empowered the laity not only to ask these probing questions, but also to answer them. Thus, without the catechisms these sessions of question and answer would not have been so dominated by the laity as they were.

Faced with the need to participate in a novel practice of expressing one’s religious experience to join a church, the laity utilized catechisms to equip themselves for expressing their experiences, emotions, and even to participate in asking and answering questions. The catechisms did not create a uniform and dry template for the relations. Laity used them in different and unique ways, in fact no two relations do so in the same way. Catechisms were seen as trustworthy and orthodox and the laity knew that when they cited catechisms, they were expressing themselves in approved categories. The catechisms were the single biggest influence on shaping the content of lay relations. Moreover, laity used the catechisms as a standard against which they could hold ministers

²¹⁷ Pope, *Notebook of Reverend John Fiske*, 150.

and other members accountable to pass a relation. When the candidate used the catechism, they could not be deemed erring or heretical. In this way, laity held the ministers accountable by means of their own catechism. The importance of the catechisms to expressing genuine faith was seen clearly in how Eliot created more persuasive Indian relations by simply adding catechetical knowledge to them in certain areas. Finally, the laity became increasingly confident in asking and answering questions during the relation process. Both men and women leaned on catechetical knowledge to probe the state of an applicant's heart and to express the orthodoxy of their own when asked questions. The whole process of church relations and lay participation would not have been possible without the way that catechisms equipped the laity.

Chapter Six: Catechisms and Sacramental Piety

The first generations of New England Puritans sought a church free from what they saw as the corruptions of the Anglican and Catholic churches. Much of this involved what they viewed as erring uses and understandings of the sacraments. Coming to the New World, these Puritans hoped to enjoy the church ordinances in all their “purity.” This included the two sacraments acknowledged by the Puritans, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They wanted these two sacraments to be used as they believed the first century church practiced them, which meant free from doctrines of Transubstantiation or surrounding rituals of adoration. In order to teach the sacramental piety that was to predominate New England, ministers utilized catechisms. Catechisms were used by the ministers to teach and instill a sacramental piety that was robust and focused on the tangible elements and motions of the sacrament, rather than on sophisticated theological nuances. Laity adopted and practiced this sacramental piety of the catechisms for themselves.

Scholars of New England sacramental piety have painted a picture of a people who did not care much for the sacraments and their spiritual value. Still the definitive work on Puritan sacramental thought and piety in New England, E. Brooks Holifield’s *The Covenant Sealed* (1974) summarized the dominant attitudes in the first few decades in New England toward the sacraments as “Ambivalence and Affirmation.” Ambivalence in that the ministers neglected much of the theological tradition and piety surrounding the sacraments and Affirmation in that they still affirmed the use of the sacraments in their

churches. Referring to the first decades of New England, Holifield argued that the Puritan theology of conversion, an intense religious experience like that of John Winthrop, “did not comport with a vigorous sacramental piety.”²¹⁸ Rather than looking to any grace conferred by the visible sacraments, or looking to them for comfort, the Puritans “dramatic experiences of conversion...suggested that the essence of religion consisted in inwardness.” This focus on internal scrutinizing one’s religious self led to a “distrustful posture toward visible symbols of any kind.”²¹⁹ Holifield also famously coined the term “Sacramental Renaissance” for the sudden emergence of manuals on the sacramental piety in the 1690s. Prior to this, he argued, no such manuals for laity existed and that this was indicative of the general disregard for sacramental piety in early New England.

More recent works on lay piety have reached a similar conclusion. Relying largely on Edward Taylor’s poetry and statements from Cotton Mather, Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe used exclusively late seventeenth century sources for his conclusions about sacramental piety.²²⁰ David D. Hall’s magisterial work on lay religious belief, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* (1989), focused on the increasing disinterest in the sacraments among the laity, after the 1650s. Hall also highlighted the intense self-scrutiny requisite for participation in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which discouraged laity from partaking at all by the end of the 17th century.²²¹ Amanda Porterfield has shown a robust connection between increasing female participation in

²¹⁸ E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 141.

²¹⁹ Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 168.

²²⁰ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 206-18.

²²¹ David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 156-62.

churches, and understanding and explaining the Eucharist in terms of feminine imagery.²²² While she does revise Holifield's timeline to include two sermon sources from the 1670s and 1680s, she does still rely on end of the seventeenth century sources to establish New England sacramental piety.

The common thread among these treatments of New England sacramental piety was that they relied on late seventeenth-century sources while largely overlooking the catechisms and their role in instructing the laity in sacramental piety. Holifield utilized almost exclusively the sermons of Cotton and Hooker to draw his conclusions about the early decades and reasoned that the sudden emergence of sacramental manuals in 1690 marked the first interest in sacramental piety. Hambrick-Stowe focused on the works of Edward Taylor from the 1670s to show the importance of "preparation" in taking the sacrament. Hall utilized English devotional manuals that likewise emphasized "worthy partaking," but these did not begin to be imported until the 1660s.²²³ While Porterfield introduced new sources into the discussion, she continued to overlook the first three decades in favor of the last three. Catechisms were the earliest sources teaching the laity sacramental piety in a New England context.

The catechisms contained robust sections on sacramental piety and served as the devotional manuals surrounding the sacraments for the laity during New England's first three decades. Nearly all the New England catechisms contained extended statements on the sacraments, both Baptism and the Lord's Supper. John Cotton's 1634 church catechism contained substantial prescriptive descriptions of how the sacraments should be utilized and observed. Nearly all the subsequent catechisms followed the same pattern.

²²² Porter, *Female Piety in Puritan New England*, 127-37.

²²³ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 158.

The two largest treatments of sacramental piety were John Fiske's *The Watering of the Olive Plant*, which contained an entire ten-page appendix specifically "Touching the Nature and use of the two Sacraments of the Gospel" (Figure 5.1)²²⁴ and Samuel Stone's *Whole Body of Divinity* (Figure 5.2) and *Short Catechism*, which together contained close to thirty pages on the topic. This chapter will ignore many debates about which the Puritans spilled much ink concerning the sacraments, namely infant baptism and the Halfway Covenant. These topics have been covered at length elsewhere, and the catechisms are not our best sources for understanding those issues.²²⁵ Instead, this chapter will focus on the sacramental piety contained in the catechisms and argue that they shaped the lay understanding and practice of piety surrounding the sacraments. The catechisms indicated that the predominant piety surrounding the sacraments in early New England was not around deep theologies of the sacrament, but rather the physical elements used and their attendant ritual motions.

The first striking feature of the sacramental piety in the catechisms, was that they stressed the importance of broad participation over self examination. Historians have stressed the importance of self examination for the sacrament and highlighted the fact that this idea began to preclude widespread participation by the latter seventeenth century, but the theme was not predominant in catechisms.²²⁶ In fact, Fiske claimed that he wrote his catechism on the sacraments in part to "redress much unpreparation touching

²²⁴ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 41-50.

²²⁵ See especially, Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) and Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, chapters 5 & 6.

²²⁶ See: Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 206-18; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 50, 156-62. Both of these works emphasized the importance of intense self-scrutiny as requisite for participation in the Lord's Supper. Consequently, many were believed to have been precluded from partaking. This thesis, however, is based primarily on late seventeenth-century sources and without considering the teachings and importance of the catechisms in developing sacramental piety.

them.”²²⁷ Thus, the problem was not overly anxious persons not partaking, but too many people partaking without any self-examination. In fact, Fiske does not include any question on self examination, so he seemed to be redressing not introspection, but lack of knowledge of the physical symbolism, as will be demonstrated. Stone’s *Whole Body’s* very last question briefly mentions examining one’s self.²²⁸ But the theme is strikingly absent in all the early catechisms, even Thomas Shephard’s.

Moreover, catechisms presented the sacraments as a meal for those with weak faith that needed to grow and not as an aristocratic “meal for the holy,” as some have claimed.²²⁹ Thomas Shepard wrote that the Lord’s Supper should be “administered and received often that we may grow.”²³⁰ Fiske likewise viewed the sacraments as a means of growth for weak faith. The end and use of “the Supper” was “concerning nourishment and growth by Christ.”²³¹ In explaining the relationship between the Covenant of Grace and the Lord’s Supper, Stone emphasized that “notwithstanding the weakness of their faith and grace” persons ought to partake in the Lord’s Supper. These statements were far more common in the catechisms than any detailed explanation of necessary steps of self examination before partaking. The meal was a help to make persons holy and to comfort those struggling in faith and not as an exclusive meal for those who have already achieved some spiritual status.

The combination of a lack of reference to self examination and the emphasis on the weak in faith needing to come indicate a much more liberal and open Lord’s Supper in the early decades than was present by the end of the seventeenth century. Historians

²²⁷ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 42.

²²⁸ Stone, *Whole Body*, 540.

²²⁹ Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 164.

²³⁰ Shepard, *First Principles*, 17.

²³¹ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 51.

have pointed out that by the 1690s ministers were decrying the lack of participation in the Lord's Supper.²³² However, this pattern seems not to have been the case in the first few decades of the seventeenth century. In fact, Fiske's notebook recorded during the 1640s that the pattern was to partake shortly after being admitted into the church and that discipline was enacted for not doing so.²³³ Like William Adams, many laity were encouraged to partake in the Supper to combat their doubt and weakness, not to stay away from it.²³⁴ Thus, the catechisms and experience of laity indicate a far more broad participation and different attitude toward the Lord's Supper than developed in the later seventeenth century.

Sacramental piety was focused primarily on the visible and physical elements of the sacraments. The sacraments appealed to their senses and helped them to understand spiritual realities in a more tangible way. Fiske described the power of the sacraments in terms of their "Sensibleness." By them, Christ gave himself "to diverse senses at once."²³⁵ Stone likewise taught that the sacraments were a means by which sacred mysteries were "pointed out to the bodily senses."²³⁶ The physicality of the sacraments was tied to human nature as embodied and sensory. By instituting these signs, Stone argued that the Lord "had respect to our nature, which is not only spiritual as Angels, but also corporeal." Therefore, they were given as corporeal signs that enter our understanding "through the gates of the senses."²³⁷ This focus on the physicality of the sacraments was the primary emphasis on the sacraments in nearly all the catechisms.

²³² Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 56.

²³³ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 13, 34.

²³⁴ Robert Strong, "Two Seventeenth-Century Conversion Narratives from Ipswich, Massachusetts Bay Colony," *New England Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (March 2009), 157.

²³⁵ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 43.

²³⁶ Stone, *Whole Body*, 525.

²³⁷ Stone, *Whole Body*, 529.

They explicated much more how these visible elements affected our senses and what we can learned from them as sensory creatures, rather than touching on any abstract doctrines of the sacraments.

Both the physical elements (bread, wine, water) and the actions accompanying them conveyed spiritual truth and were to be understood for true sacramental piety. Many statements highlighted the importance of each element and their attendant actions. Richard Mather's catechism, which also contained a significant section on sacramental piety, stated that the "Bread and Wine with the actions pertaining to them" were the noteworthy outward signs of the sacrament.²³⁸ Stone agreed that "Not only the substances but also the actions...signify some spiritual excellency and good in Christ."²³⁹ Moreover, these tokens to one's visible senses were aimed to move them emotionally, as the "people express their inward affections in receiving, owning and embracing these tokens of his love."²⁴⁰ This focus on the outward elements and actions was a way of rejecting the focus on what happened to the substance of the elements during the sacraments or on what power they conveyed and rather to build a robust piety on what the symbolism of the actions meant.

The minister's described and applied both Puritan sacraments in their catechisms, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism was typically described as a "sign and seal" of the Covenant of Grace and was viewed as an initiation into the visible church. The washing away of sins, engrafted into Christ, participation in the Covenant of Grace, and regeneration were all said to be symbolized in Baptism, with different ministers including all or some of these. John Cotton's famous *Milk For Babes* listed all of these and then

²³⁸ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 92.

²³⁹ Stone, *Whole Body*, 529.

²⁴⁰ Stone, *Whole Body*, 526.

added “rising up out of affliction; and also of my resurrection from the dead.”²⁴¹ It was always to these spiritual realities that the outward symbols were to be tied.

So important were the ritual actions associated with Baptism, the ministers seemed to disagree more on the mode of Baptism than on its efficacy. Stone argued forcefully that only “washing” was agreeable to the institution’s proposed meaning. While maintaining that full immersion was not necessary, he claimed that “sprinkling seems not to answer to the institution of Christ.”²⁴² For the purpose of the visible action was to symbolize “washing the body with water...and putting away the filth of the flesh.”²⁴³ These realities were not symbolized by a mere sprinkling water on someone. John Fiske disagreed. He allowed Baptism to be by “Washing or sprinkling” as sufficient modes of baptism. Neither Stone nor Fiske lingered on or defended any view of the efficacy of baptism, but merely its visual symbolism. This disagreement indicated the importance of physicality to early Puritan sacramental piety.

The predominant view of the proper mode of Baptism, presented in the catechisms, was Stone’s argument for the importance of washing over sprinkling. Mather wrote that Baptism was “Water, and washing therewith.”²⁴⁴ John Davenport, following Cotton’s catechism, likewise specified “washing with water” as the proper mode.²⁴⁵ While the mode of baptism was typically only debated between those for and against the baptizing of infants. It seemed that because of the importance for piety surrounding the ritual actions of Baptism, ministers debated the proper mode. The consensus in the catechisms was certainly in favor of washing.

²⁴¹ Cotton, *Milk For Babes*, 12.

²⁴² Stone, *Whole Body*, 534.

²⁴³ Stone, *Whole Body*, 534.

²⁴⁴ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 92.

²⁴⁵ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 40.

The importance of “washing” over “sprinkling” was not, for the Puritans, arbitrary, but significant because of what Baptism was supposed to symbolize. James Noyes expressed succinctly what most catechisms taught when he wrote that Baptism signified “the blood of Christ washing away our sins unto eternal life.”²⁴⁶ The physical pouring of water onto the head represented the cleansing of the body and soul from sin. Though the importance of the water as a cleansing agent and the act of pouring itself were emphasized often, no one elaborated on the importance of this ritual to the extent that Samuel Stone did. Stone specified that not merely washing ought to be used, but that it must be done “to the flesh...and to the face of the person baptized.” Stone specified the face because the whole body may be said to be washed when “the noblest and principal part is washed.” Stone even contemplated needing to be naked when baptized but concluded that this would not be “comely and modest.”²⁴⁷

While the physical element of Baptism and the ritual action of pouring meant little to the infant that was being baptized, it did have implications for the community of persons who observed. By stressing the importance of viewing Baptism, the ministers instilled a sacramental piety around baptism, even when denying its efficacy for salvation. After giving special instructions for the parents to fast and pray for the baptized child, Fiske wrote that the members of the church ought to use the occasion to remember their own Baptism to their “own spiritual advantage.” Thus the watching congregation ought to “by humble confession, prayer, and thanksgiving to look up unto God for the infant (or who other) presented to Baptism.”²⁴⁸ Thus, Baptismal piety became a

²⁴⁶ James Noyes, *A Short Catechism* (Cambridge 1661), 11.

²⁴⁷ Stone, *Whole Body*, 535.

²⁴⁸ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 47-8.

communal experience as the watching church as well as the family receiving Baptism where to internalize the ritual that they witnessed.

These sentiments about the physical and communal elements of Baptismal piety were adopted by the laity and created a culture of robust piety surrounding Baptism. William Adams often remembered his Baptism in times of doubt. He would “plead his Covenant which he [God] had made with me in my Baptism.”²⁴⁹ Laywoman Lydia Gaunt was concerned that her Baptism may have been invalid because she was not a believer at the time and so she wrote to John Cotton for reassurance, which he promptly gave her.²⁵⁰ Gaunt and Adams both reveal the practice of remembering one’s baptism was a significant element of sacramental piety in early New England. One layman in Ipswich wrote in his sermon notebook that in “the washing” of baptism, God “promises to be the God and Father of you.”²⁵¹ The notebook revealed a focus on the ritual act of “washing” over and against theological speculation. These statements did not reveal indifference to the sacrament, nor theological questions about its efficacy, but rather what the sacrament meant for their personal piety.

A fascinating petition from 1646 to the Boston General Court also revealed how much the laity were concerned with the ordinance of Baptism. Signed by dozens of persons, the petition took aim at the “errors of the Anabaptists.”²⁵² The petition called for more government action against the spreading of Anabaptist literature and ideas that had “spread in this country.” While the petition could be read merely as a political document, meant to keep those who would challenge congregational sway in the General Court, this

²⁴⁹ Adams, “Two Seventeenth-Century Conversion Narratives,” 146.

²⁵⁰ Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 404-8.

²⁵¹ Notes on Sermons delivered at the First Church in Ipswich, Mass. 1645-1646, *MHSC*.

²⁵² Photostats 1644-1646, Petition Against the Anabaptists, *MHSC*.

would be to read it too narrowly. Puritans were deeply concerned with the purity of their ordinances of worship and Baptism was one of the chief ordinances. The Anabaptists were not merely a political threat, to the Puritans, but a spiritual one because they tinkered with the mode of Baptism. These “errors and heresies” surrounding Baptism would not lead to loss in political power, but as a “forerunner of God’s judgement.” Baptismal piety was important enough to these laity for them to fight to defend it.

The catechisms contained even more robust discussions of the Lord’s Supper and its attendant piety. The benefits for the Lord’s Supper were described in terms of a sacrament for growth and not one of initiation, as was Baptism. Surprisingly, the language was always more inviting than exclusive, as the sacrament’s purpose was usually couched in terms of a help for the weak and growth for the small in faith. Although John Davenport copied most of what he wrote on the Lord’s Supper from Cotton’s 1634 catechism, he added that the primary purpose of the sacrament was “our spiritual nourishment and growing up in Christ.”²⁵³ John Fiske likewise taught that the Lord’s Supper was primarily used to “confirm the promise” and “concerning nourishment and growth by Christ.”²⁵⁴ Always the academic, Stone even referred to the Lord’s Supper as the “sacrament of our education.”²⁵⁵ The common thread of these broad purpose clauses was the theme of growth.

Piety surrounding the Lord’s Supper was taught in terms of the importance of the physical elements and their attendant gestures. In the absence of theological precision and depth, the catechisms inserted the importance of the physical and visual. When introducing the Lord’s Supper, Richard Mather highlighted its importance in the “Bread

²⁵³ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 42.

²⁵⁴ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 50.

²⁵⁵ Stone, *Whole Body*, 539.

and Wine with actions pertaining to them.”²⁵⁶ Fiske also highlighted the importance of the elements and actions during the sacraments and added that their importance was “to set forth the application and reception of the grace represented under those elements.”²⁵⁷ The visual elements and actions were to be instructional aids that taught the story of redemption. Thus, in the Lord’s Supper we have the Puritans fully embracing visual aids to spiritual life. In their sacramental piety, then, Puritan’s focus was not introspective, but on the sensuous experience of the sacraments.²⁵⁸

The elements of the Lord’s Supper, agreed to by all the ministers, were bread and wine. These physical elements were not random, but signified spiritual realities in themselves. Catechisms contained instruction on how the laity were to view the bread and the wine and what each meant for them spiritually. For example, Fiske’s asked in his catechism why Baptism has one element and the Lord’s Supper has two? The answer he provided was that the Lord’s Supper was to symbolize the souls full spiritual satisfaction in Christ, neither “bread, nor wine apart would do, the one being the staff of life, the other the cherisher of spirits.”²⁵⁹ Bread and wine are each necessary for full satisfaction to the body and both are given to show the full spiritual satisfaction is given in Lord’s Supper. The “general sum” of the bread and wine, as Richard Mather put it, was “Christ himself and our communion with him.”²⁶⁰

Stone was even more elaborate in his explanation of the significance of bread and wine. For him, the bread and wine demonstrated that Christ was the “choicest and dantiest provision,” as are good bread and wine. He continued to list six reasons these

²⁵⁶ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 92.

²⁵⁷ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 45.

²⁵⁸ Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 165.

²⁵⁹ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 48.

²⁶⁰ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 92.

elements were significant. First was the “Royal wine,” which was to remind the laity of Christ’s kingship. Second was “strength, comfort, and gladness” as one receives from eating and drinking bread and wine. The combination of the two elements showed Christ’s ability to provide “A royal feast, in all varieties.” Fourth, the two together provided “Fullness of satisfaction to all our desires.” Fifth, they were to apply “all his excellencies” to “our necessities.” Sixth, as they eat and drink daily, so one must communion daily with Christ.²⁶¹ In Stone, we find the fullest explanation of the symbolism. Here we have much being taught about Christology and Anthropology all in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. Stone directed the laity not to internal speculations of their own spiritual condition but bids them look at the objective elements and see how they confirm spiritual realities.

The bread and wine not only taught the communing Puritan of their need, but also much about the theology of the Incarnation. As the bread and wine are “common stock” with other bread and wine, so too “Christ took our common nature on him.”²⁶² Stone sought to teach deep theological arguments of consubstantiality through the analogy of bread and wine. As the bread and the wine are consumed by us to nourish us and give us life, so too Christ assumed a human nature and was “full of spiritual virtue.”²⁶³ Even the taste and smell of the elements were argued to be aids in understanding the physicality of the incarnation.

²⁶¹ Stone, *Whole Body*, 539.

²⁶² Stone, *Whole Body*, 540.

²⁶³ Stone, *Whole Body*, 540.

A great deal of piety involved the physical communion cup as well. Puritans had fine silver cups that contained the wine for communion (Figure 5.3).²⁶⁴ They were usually quite expensive and highly valued by the congregation. Upon seeing the expensive cup when taking communion, the ordinary Puritan imbued it with religious meaning and symbolism. Seeing the one silver cup reminded of the glorified body of Christ. As the silver symbolized Christ's glorified body, so it reminded the partaker of their sinful and unworthy one.²⁶⁵ Puritans made the importance of the body most apparent during the Lord's Supper by inscribing the names of dead church members onto the silver cups. This symbolized the resurrection and union with the glorified body of Christ.²⁶⁶ Another symbolic element was that the expense of the silver was to remind the partaker of the costliness of Christ's sacrifice and should encourage them to make sacrifices for him.²⁶⁷

Early church debates in John Fiske's congregation demonstrated the centrality of the silver cup, or "vessel," for the partaking of the Lord's Supper. The Wenham congregation voted to dismiss Brother Read from his position as deacon in part because of his inability to procure the necessary objects for the Lord's Supper "such as flagon, bottle, &c."²⁶⁸ A few years later, the same congregation disappointedly voted to have the Lord's Supper administered only nine times that year instead of twelve because of inability to procure "cloth and vessels for the table."²⁶⁹ The Wenham congregation was not alone in their intense interest in the visible vessels for the Lord's Supper. In

²⁶⁴ This section seeks to summarize and expand insights surrounding the silver communion cup are taken from Mark A. Peterson, "Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England: Reflections on Communion Silver," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (April 2001).

²⁶⁵ Peterson, "Puritanism and Refinement," 317.

²⁶⁶ Peterson, "Puritanism and Refinement," 320.

²⁶⁷ Peterson, "Puritanism and Refinement," 322-3.

²⁶⁸ Pope, *Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*, 96.

²⁶⁹ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 128.

describing church life generally in New England, critic Thomas Lechford noted that he often saw “a fair gilt cup with a cover...which is still used at the Communion.”²⁷⁰ These churches included in the visual piety of the Lord’s Supper not only the elements, but even the communion silver.

Actions played an equally important role for the lay piety surrounding the Lord’s Supper. Most of the catechisms summarized the attendant actions of the Lord’s Supper, as Mather did, “breaking and pouring out, giving and receiving, eating and drinking.”²⁷¹ Other catechisms also added the action of “blessing.”²⁷² These actions were given symbolic significance in the catechisms that the laity were to pick up and incorporate into their religious experience during the Lord’s Supper.

The catechisms typically began by describing the minister’s actions and their meanings. The “taking” of the elements by the minister symbolized “that Christ is taken and set apart by the Father” for his task of redemption. Even in James Noyes’ children’s catechism, the symbolism is made very clear. He wrote that the “bread broken” symbolized “the Body of Christ broken on the Cross.” The “wine poured out” symbolized “his blood shed for our sins.” The giving of the bread and wine to the church represented Christ “offered to sinners.”²⁷³ Each of the actions of the minister had an attendant meaning that was so pervasive among the culture that it was even taught to the children.

The actions of the church members receiving the bread and wine also had spiritual significance. Puritans rejected the practice of the English church of the kneeling posture during communion. This they thought to be superstitious and unbiblical. Rather than

²⁷⁰ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 49.

²⁷¹ Mather, *A Catechisme*, 92.

²⁷² Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 42.

²⁷³ Noyes, *A Short Catechism*, 11.

leave the question of posture during the Lord's Supper neutral, they inserted the necessity of a sitting posture. As the disciples sat to receive the Supper, so must they. Davenport's catechism, again copying Cotton's earlier one, specified that communing members must be "sitting down with him at the Lord's table."²⁷⁴ Sitting was prescribed not only on the grounds that it was the original posture of the ritual, but also because the act of sitting and receiving conveyed accurate theology of being needy and receptive.

Taking and eating also had spiritual referents. These actions were said to refer to obtain, by faith, the "free communication of the benefits thereof to so many as do receive him."²⁷⁵ In other words, as the bread and wine were taken by the church member, so too they were spiritually united to Christ by receiving him. Stone explicates the analogy in the most detail. The eating and drinking, wrote Stone, signified the "full application of Christ, whereby we taste his sweet, and digest him, in our hearts, that we may live well."²⁷⁶ Even the taste buds were significant for the Lord's Supper, as "tasting signifies our sweet meditation of his excellencies."²⁷⁷ After the tasting, the "digesting" signified our bringing Christ into the understanding. At every point, the piety of the Lord's Supper was taught in terms of the physical and visual.

The catechisms were the primary means that the lay people in New England developed their sacramentology and attendant piety surrounding these foundational rituals. There were very few sermons in the early decades on the sacraments and no manuals on how to partake in them until the 1690s. There were, however, many catechisms extant that contained significant portions on sacramental piety. Rather than on

²⁷⁴ Davenport, *A Catechisme*, 42.

²⁷⁵ Fiske, *Watering of the Olive Plant*, 50.

²⁷⁶ Stone, *Whole Body*, 540.

²⁷⁷ Stone, *Whole Body*, 540.

focusing on judgement and keeping the table pure for a religious aristocracy, the catechisms taught laity to approach with a weak and doubting faith. Indeed, catechisms almost never contained warnings of judgement for unworthy partakers, as is so often stressed in the historiography. These catechisms taught a sacramental piety that was almost exclusively interested in describing the objective and symbolic meanings of the sacrament. In place of concerns about the theology of the substance that had dominated the church, Puritans focused on the physicality and visual elements of the sacraments. Through to the 1660s, Puritans had a robust sacramental piety that encouraged broad inclusion and a view toward the visual elements themselves.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

A primary goal of this paper has been to show the importance of catechisms to New England church life beyond educating children how to read. Although this was an important part of the catechism's function in New England, it was not its only one. Catechisms have been largely neglected by both archivists and historians because of this perception that they contain little substance as they were largely for children. This essay attempted to show that in fact they were at the heart of building the New England congregational system. They were often written specifically for adults and not children and even those written for children were read by adults. They contained substantive material that changed how people experienced religion.

Without catechisms, lay involvement in New England Congregationalism would not have been as effective as it was. Through dozens of copies of catechisms and reading through them endlessly the lay persons of New England were equipped in their new task of church involvement. Few of those who came to the New World had any experience at all in structuring government or giving relations of faith in order to join a church. In order to equip themselves for this task, the New England laity turned to catechisms to help them. This was an effective method as they were able to take from the contours of a church and gained consequential knowledge on how churches ran. Catechisms were not one medium among many but were uniquely utilized by the laity for these tasks as they covered topics and mechanics that were rarely discussed in pulpits.

The catechisms prescriptions regarding sacramental piety offer a major revision of the historiography in terms of lay sacramental piety. Most of the literature on sacramental piety focuses on the later decades of the seventeenth century and makes those decades representative of the whole century. The typical picture of lay attitudes regarding the sacraments has been one of scared Puritans who were largely unwilling to partake in the sacrament. The catechisms embodied the opposite dispositions. This essay also revises the idea of the absence of sacramental piety or the idea that it was eclipsed by introspection and a distrust for visible symbols. Both of these assumptions about early Puritan piety are undercut by the content of the catechisms.

These catechisms offer an exciting avenue by which to reassess lay piety and New England ecclesiology in general. Their content covered topics on deep theology and various social issues that were unaddressed here. They also were very early and give information about the earliest decades of New England that has a relative scarcity of sources. Much change over time also occurred and there is much room to be done on how catechisms changed in content and use by the end of the century. Comparative analysis is another avenue to be explored with the catechisms. Each minister drawing up his own allows for a great opportunity to look for surprising differences or similarities.

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