Within Patriarchy: Puritan Women in Massachusetts's Congregational Churches, 1630-1715

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On November 8, 1638, at the first gathering of the new Congregational church in Dedham, Massachusetts, the wife of Joseph Kingsbury was received into church membership along with five other women and four men. The event was the culmination of a rigorous process of weekly hearings in which hopeful applicants testified to their spiritual fitness for church membership. It was a solemn occasion preceded by much fasting and prayer because the decision about who was admitted into church membership was not taken lightly. In his account of the founding, minister John Allin, who along with Ralph Wheelocke was appointed to hear "confessions" from the first applicants, described Mrs. Kingsbury as "a tender harted soule full of feares & temptations but truly breathing after Christ." In contrast to his wife, Joseph Kingsbury was denied membership in the church because he was "too much addicted to the world" and remained "stiffe and unhumbled." Joseph Kingsbury was rejected despite the fact that he had donated the land upon which the new meeting house was to stand and that he was "good [and] hon[orable]…in the maine." Thus, in the newly evolving society of Puritan Massachusetts, where nothing was more significant than the "visible sainthood" conferred upon new church members, Mrs. Kingsbury became one of the elect prior to, and independent of, her husband. Paradoxically, Mrs. Kingsbury's humility in the face of cross examination by church officers afforded her a status within the fledgling community of approximately thirty families that was denied to many others, including

her husband, who would not be fully admitted to church membership for three more years.[1]

Mrs. Kingsbury's story is not an anomaly. The historical record throughout the seventeenth-century reveals numerous examples of women who both attained church membership prior to their husbands and who sought membership even when their spouses did not. Throughout the 1630s and 1640s, men and women joined the Congregational church in fairly equal numbers, with female admissions slightly outnumbering male in three of the first five Massachusetts churches. Sometimes wives preceded their husbands, as in the case of Mrs. Kingsbury, and sometimes husbands preceded their wives. By the 1650s, however, a clear shift began to take place where female applicants outnumbered male applicants, and by the 1660s, female admissions easily exceeded male admissions.[2] While church membership did not confer social equality upon the female sex, it did signify spiritual equality within a patriarchal society and offered, as one historian has written, "one of the few public distinctions available to women" during this era.[3]

Historians have long recognized the theoretical potential for spiritual equality inherent within Calvinistic Puritanism.[4] This equality is best expressed in the Pauline epistles of the New Testament, which state that "you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all

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[1] Dedham, Mass., *The Early Records of the Town…Dedham, Mass.* (Dedham Transcript Press, 1886), 14, 6, 7. John Allin's account of the founding on p. 1-21

[2] Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," in *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 35-36; Gerald F. Moran, "Sisters' in Christ: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century New England" in *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James, 48-49.

[3] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 216

[4] See, for example, Marilyn Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

one in Christ Jesus."[5] But while historians have acknowledged the concept of spiritual equality inherent within Puritan religious doctrine, they have tended to emphasize the gendered inequality and patriarchal nature of Puritan society as exemplified by Massachusetts governor John Winthrop. In Winthrop's conception of liberty within marriage, for example, "The woman's own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom."[6] For many historians, this formulation of liberty, which was circumscribed by submission to authority, extended to the Puritan Congregational Church where women were free to become members but could not formally vote on important matters of church doctrine. They could attend church but, unlike men, were prohibited from teaching or asking questions during the service. Historian Linda Kerber, for example, emphasizes women's submissiveness when she states that while a Christian woman was "responsible for placing herself in the path of salvation and the knowledge of grace, just as each man was," the self that she realized within the bonds of Christianity "was to be characteristically submissive."[7] It would be a mistake, however, to interpret the kind of "tenderhearted" humility displayed by Mrs. Kingsbury during her conversion narrative as somehow indicative of female submissiveness, since male converts were also required, as Christians, to submit to the authority of Christ and by extension to earthly authority. In

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[5] Galatians 3:26-28 NIV

[6] John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal, "History of New England," 1630-1649,* ed. James Kendall Hosmer (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 2:239.

[7] Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 203-204.

other words, both men and women were expected to express a deep sense of "humility and dependence on God."[8]

Within an institution such as the Congregational church, however, emphasizing the patriarchal nature of Puritan society often obscures as much as it reveals. It obscures the viewpoint of men such as the Reverend John Fiske, who was open to the idea of "less limiting policies for women," or the more progressive ideas of Puritan divine Cotton Mather, who advocated in *Bethiah* that women should "copiously Handle the Pen of the Writer; as well as the Needle and the Distaff."[9] It tends to obscure more subtle attempts by women to assert their individuality and authority, and the result is that women such as Mrs. Kingsbury become invisible to modern historians.[10] It creates a false dichotomy of power and powerlessness that belies the complicated nature of human relationships. Since patriarchy assumes a stable, unchanging power hierarchy over time, it makes it difficult to see how power is refused or renegotiated. It also makes it difficult to see how ministers became increasingly responsive to the needs of their predominantly female congregations or how women benefited from late seventeenth-century ecclesiastical and liturgical disagreements within the Congregational church. In short, as historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich states, historians "need to move from static concepts like 'patriarchal New England society' to more intricate questions about the interplay of values and practice over time."[11]

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[8] Sarah Moore Scott, *A Thematic Study of the Writings of Puritan Women from the Time of the Original Settlers to 1770* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1981), microcard, 24.
[9] Dunn, "Saints and Sisters," 33. Cotton Mather, *Bethiah,* 59. Quoted in Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion: A Facsimile Reproduction with an Introduction by Pattie Cowell* (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1978), xviii
[10] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly,* Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring, 1976), 20, quotes Cotton Mather when she refers to Puritan women as "Hidden Ones" because they have been largely forgotten by history.
[11] Ulrich, "Vertuous Women," 40

This essay proposes to examine the status of women within Massachusetts's Congregational churches by interrogating the "interplay of values," as promulgated by Puritan divines and governmental authorities, with the practices of women and men over time – especially the increasing tendency of women to join as members in the Congregational church. Between 1630 and 1710, despite the patriarchal nature of Congregationalism's governing structures, women continued to claim a place for themselves within the Congregational church and by extension in Puritan society that allowed for a degree of agency, authority, and individuality in their relationships with their husbands, their ministers, and with each other. Congregational women's few extant writings reveal that from an early age, many sought individual assurance of salvation irrespective of the actions of the men in their lives. As Sarah Moore Scott reveals in her 1981 thematic study of Puritan women's writings prior to 1770, Puritan women "explored many paths in their attempt to find the right one for their souls to follow in order to receive their own experiences of that grace."[12] Despite the hanging of Congregationalist turned Quaker Mary Dyer, women continued to challenge church policy on issues like baptism. Denied the power of a formal vote usually expressed by the raising of hands, the women in one church stood silently to express their assent or dissent on a particular matter of discipline brought before the congregation for a vote.[13] Although unaccustomed to public speaking, many summoned the courage to give their "confession" of grace in front of the church elders and congregation, as required by

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[12] Scott, *A Thematic Study,* 148. In contrast to Scott, Linda K. Kerber argues that Puritan women were not "engaged in an intense search for their own individual religious voices or their own idiosyncratic conversion experience." Her conclusion, however, is based on the work of other historians who only examined sermon literature and not conversion narratives or women's writing, as this essay will do. Kerber, *Toward An Intellectual History,* 204.

[13] Many Congregational ministers interpreted I Timothy 2:11, 12 NIV, which states that women "must be silent" and "learn in quietness" during the worship service, to mean that they should not vote.

policy and custom. And like Mrs. Kingsbury, whose first name, but not her story, has faded from the historical record, they joined churches as independent souls, irrespective of whether their husbands could join or desired to join.

For women, the currency generated by church affiliation and its concomitant spiritual equality proved even more important than the economic opportunity or political advantage that men gained through church membership. In a society where the most important thing was one's relationship with God, the very "intensity of Puritan spirituality, opened the doors of religious power and authority to all persons…female and male." Thus, from the founding of the first churches in Massachusetts, women were quick to claim this power and authority by seeking church membership and the status of "visible sainthood" that accompanied it in numbers that were often equal to or greater than men. Throughout the seventeenth-century, women continued to claim this status because, as Marilyn Westerkamp perceptively notes, "in a community that valued holiness, piety, and virtue, the high achievers in religion could well hold moral authority even without explicit political, economic, or social power."[14] Church membership, for example, gave women the social cachet and moral standing to counsel other women in spiritual matters, a task not just reserved for the clergy.

Thus, in November of 1638 when Mrs. Kingsbury was received into church membership in Dedham, Massachusetts, she was taking the same path to "visible sainthood" taken by hundreds of Puritan women before and after her. Moreover, that woman outnumbered men six to four on that cool fall day in Dedham was no anomaly. In fact, as historian Robert Pope demonstrates, "the preponderance of women appeared

[14] Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions*, 12, 202.

almost from the beginning." For example, between 1640 and 1660 in the church at Roxbury, established in 1631, fifty-nine percent of the new communicants—those who sought membership on the basis of a conversion experience—were female, while just forty-one percent were male. At the Congregational church in Charlestown, established in October of 1632, Pope states that, as at Roxbury, "religious participation centered increasingly on the women," and that this practice dated to "the first decade of the church's existence." Between 1632 and 1646, for example, fifty-seven percent of new communicants were female, while forty-three percent were male. The percentage of women communicants increased steadily as the decades advanced. Between 1650 and 1669, sixty-five percent were female while thirty-five percent were male, and by 1689, the percentage of male communicants had fallen to just thirty-three percent, meaning that women comprised sixty-seven percent of all new church members at Charlestown.[15]

Pope examines data from four Congregational churches in Massachusetts – Roxbury, Boston First, Charlestown, and Dorchester – in his effort to understand how the New England churches responded to the innovation of the Half-Way Covenant. Under the Half-Way Covenant, individuals were allowed to apply for an abbreviated form of church membership as long as they had been baptized as infants or children. By "owning" the covenant, they were then entitled to have their own children baptized, thus increasing the likelihood that their offspring would eventually experience conversion and seek full church membership.

Although Pope's study is not directly concerned with the gendered dimensions of church membership, his work suggests that the implementation of the Half-Way

[15] Robert G. Pope. *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 225, 217-218.

Covenant in the mid-seventeenth-century, rather than being responsible for an increase in female membership, tended to parallel preexisting gender balances established in the first decades of the church through traditional conversion, even in the church whose *raison d'etre* was the covenant: Boston Third. In the Third Church of Boston, for example, of the number of new members admitted "owning" the covenant between 1669 and 1689, 131 were men and 226 were women. Similarly, for those admitted via the traditional "regenerative experience" of conversion between 1669 and 1689, 114 were men and 226 were women. This ratio of men to women echoes the ratio of male/female admissions established in earlier decades at other Massachusetts churches. In short, while the Half-Way Covenant brought more men and women into the church, especially toward the end of the century, it did so at roughly the same gender ratio as traditional admissions, thus reinforcing the view that women sought church affiliation in numbers equal to or greater than men, as they had from the beginning of Puritan settlement.[16]

Mary Maples Dunn's study of Congregational and Quaker women in Massachusetts and Connecticut finds evidence on female admissions consistent with Pope's findings. In her study, Dunn found that in eighteen Massachusetts churches, women constituted fifty percent of the overall church membership in the 1630s, fifty-five percent in the 1640s, and sixty-one percent of new admissions by 1650 with the percentage of women who joined never falling below sixty-one percent for the remainder of the century.[17] Gerald F. Moran, in his study of women in seventeenth-century New England, comes to a similar conclusion. In the Congregational church at Salem, founded in 1629, fifty-two percent of those who joined between 1630 and 1639 were female. In

[16] Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant*, 219, 282, 225.
[17] Dunn, "Saints and Sisters," 36

Dorchester, founded in 1630, fifty-eight percent were female. And at Charlestown, founded in 1632, fifty-six of those in this same decade were female. Clearly, women's participation in the church increased as the century wore on, but from the outset of settlement, women were no less active in seeking church membership than men.[18]

Significantly, of the women in Pope's study who first entered the church through the Half-Way Covenant, more than half eventually went on to experience conversion and full church membership, while only four in ten men did likewise, demonstrating the intrinsic value of full church membership to women in the early decades of settlement. In seeking to explain the preponderance of women as full church members, historians have postulated various theories, among them that women were motivated to join the church by the desire to secure church membership for their offspring. According to one historian, "anxieties about death, the afterlife of the soul, and the spiritual welfare of the child were the constant companions of women in marriage."[19] Yet if the spiritual welfare of their children was the motivating factor in women's church membership, simple status as half-way members would have been sufficient. In addition, evidence exists that men were equally concerned about the eternal fate of their children. The substance of "The Legacy of a Dying Father-Bequeathed to His Beloved Children," published in Boston in 1694, for example, sounds strikingly similar to that of Mrs. Grace Smith's *The Dying Mother's Legacy*. While Smith instructs her children to "make the pleasing of God the business of your life," the anonymous author of "The Legacy of a Dying Father" begins by telling his children to "know the God of your father, to serve him with a perfect heart and willing mind" for "as your actings are here so will it be with you in eternity. No

[18] Moran, "Sisters' in Christ," 49.
[19] Moran, "Sisters' in Christ," 57.

sooner did you begin to live, but you began to die." According to historian J. William T. Youngs, "The very anonymity of the author is significant … for it suggests the widespread influence of Puritan religious thought." Both legacies are suggestive of the responsibility that mothers and fathers felt for the spiritual welfare of their children. While women may have been motivated in part to join the church out of concern for their children, for women, as stated previously, church membership also signified something else: the spiritual equality of the sexes.[20]

Church membership and "visible sainthood" meant that an individual had experienced conversion, "the very essence of Puritanism," that they were assured of God's grace or forgiveness in their life, and that they had made a public confession or personal statement of religious experience before their ministers, elders, and fellow congregants: a confession of grace.[21] Although the confession of grace often encompassed no more than an "anxious 'quarter of an houre, shorter or longer,'" the process leading up to confession involved intense individual soul-searching and introspection that often spanned years.[22] Given that the Puritans believed in predestination—the idea that before the foundation of the world God had already determined who would be saved and who would not—the process by which an individual became convinced that they were one of the elect, and therefore rescued from hell, was

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[20] Mrs. Grace Smith. *The Dying Mother's Legacy. Or the Good and Heavenly Counsel of that Eminent and Pious Patron, Mrs. Grace Smith, Late Widow to Mr. Ralph Smith of Eastham in New England: Left as a Perpetual Monitor to her Surviving Children; as it was Taken From her Own Mouth a Little Before Her Death, by the Minister From That Town Where She Died* [Evans Digital Edition] (Boston: Printed and sold by Timothy Green, 1712), 11. "The Legacy of a Dying Father Bequeathed to His Beloved Children" (Congregational Library, Boston, 1694), opening remarks, quoted in J. William T. Youngs, *The Congregationalists* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 55-56, 76

[21] Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago, 1955), 2

[22] Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing or News from New England* (1642), J. Hammond Trumbell ed. (Boston, 1867), 20-22, quoted in Thomas Shepard, *Thomas Shepard's Confessions* ed. George Selement & Bruce C. Woolley (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1981), 19

fraught with uncertainty. Believers prayed, read scripture, attended church, and counseled with their ministers and professing Christians in order to determine if they were predestined for salvation. By giving a formal confession of grace the believer reaffirmed both to themselves and to the larger covenanted community that God's saving grace had come to them. Living a good life was not evidence of salvation. Salvation was an act of faith, not works. The believer must manifest certain internal qualities, such as humility, that would then become externally visible to others. The very process of giving ones' confession of grace, therefore, reaffirmed the spiritual equality of the sexes since all must pass through the same spiritual journey. No one who desired full church membership was exempt.

The act of public confession also identified the confessor as someone who possessed spiritual power and authority, as is evident from a debate in the Reverend Fiske's Wenham Church over whether or not women should give their confessions in public. Someone in Fiske's church feared allowing women to speak for themselves in giving their confession on the grounds that "such a speaking argues power."[23]

While the confessions were highly personal and individual, they usually contained some common literary modes, such as a reliance on scripture, self-examination, and organized arrangement, and they usually described three different stages in the applicant's life, what Edmund Morgan calls the "morphology of conversion."[24] Generally speaking, the applicant began by relating past experiences that brought him or

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[23] John Fiske, *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske, 1644-1675* ed., Robert Pope (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1974), 4-5, 106, 151.

[24] Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 66-73, 90-92. See also Patricia Caldwell's *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 41, for a literary analysis of American conversion narratives which contain, according to Caldwell, "the first faint murmurings of a truly American voice."

her to an awareness of their sin against God. This was followed by the applicant expressing the belief that their sin had been forgiven by God, or justified, due to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In the final portion of the confession, the applicant often expressed the conviction that only through living a godly life and doing God's will could they be fulfilled. In many churches, public confession was followed by a second step, which involved a confession of faith whereby applicants demonstrated their "knowledge of Reformed doctrine and church polity." Following this portion of the process:

> The church voted by their 'usuall signe,' which was the 'erection and extention of the right hand,' on the candidate's admission. If admitted into the congregation, the candidate pledged to fulfill all the obligations required in the church covenant, and with that he or she became a full-fledged member.[25]

According to the Cambridge Plan, a Congregational platform adopted in 1648, confessions could be given in private to the church elders and/or minister "In case any through excessive fear, or other infirmity, be unable to make their personal relation of their spiritual estate in public."[26] Some historians have interpreted this option as evidence of women's inferior status, especially since ministers such as John Cotton barred women from public confession. Cotton believed that it was "against the apostle's rule, and not fit for women's modesty" to give their confession in public, and requested that his own wife be allowed to give her confession in private.[27] However, the Cambridge Plan did not distinguish between men and women regarding who may give their testimony in private. It was a gender-neutral policy that allowed but did not advocate private confession.

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[25] Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 20-22. 23-25, 28-29, quoted in Shepard, *Thomas Shepard's Confessions,* 1, 19, 21

[26] Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 223.

[27] John Winthrop, *John Winthrop's Journal,* 1: 107.

Despite the allowance for private confession which the Congregational platform provided, opinion among the clergy about whether or not to permit private confession was divided. Unlike John Cotton, many ministers who allowed private confession did so reluctantly. Some, such as Thomas Shepard, rejected it outright, requiring everyone, man or woman, to give a public confession of faith. The result was that women, like men, routinely gave their confessions in public, for it allowed them to claim their share of the communal covenant.

Church membership and the public recognition that accompanied identification as a "visible saint" was one of the few avenues by which women could gain social status, assert their voice, and claim authority. As the example of Mrs. Kingsbury indicates, most women did not shy away from this requirement, despite their inexperience with public speaking or their nervousness. Six women, in addition to Mrs. Kingsbury, were received into membership in John Allin's Dedham, Massachusetts church in November of 1638. As recorded in the church records for Dedham, Margret Allin, the wife of the minister John Allin, gave "a clere and plentifull testimony of the gracious dealings of the Lord with hir." The wife of John Frayry gave "good satisfaction both in publike and private." The wife of John Luson was "much humbled and constant in hir affections to the Lord Jesus," so that the church "tooke satisfaction in her and received hir." The wife of John Hunting, in spite of "some scruples while sticking in some of the church yet at length gave good satisfaction and was received." And lastly, the wife of Eleazar Lusher, after various dealings in private, "appeared to the church much humbled" and was received with "great satisfaction."[28]

[28] Dedham, Mass., *The Early Records,* 14, 15.

Despite the applications for membership made by numerous potential saints, only four men were able to satisfy the elders that their souls were truly breathing after Christ. In contrast to the women, only two of the men were easily received. Robert Kempe had to overcome objections to his private life, and although the elders apparently had some kind of unnamed concerns about John Dwite, he was finally allowed to offer his confession and was received. In short, sainthood was not to be obtained cheaply.[29]

Thomas Shepard's underutilized *Confessions* contains the public confessions of fifty-one of Shepard's congregants—twenty-two by women, twenty-eight by men, and one unknown. These confessions permit a rare look at the spiritual struggles and thought processes of common Puritan men and women as they worked through the process of salvation.[30] Shepard served the flock at the Congregational church in Cambridge from 1636 until his death in 1649. It is not clear exactly why Shepard decided to start recording the confessions, but it appears that they were made at the time that the applicants gave their confession, rather than afterward. Shepard's use of idiosyncratic shorthand and his lapses between first and third person narrative support this contention. Perhaps Patricia Caldwell comes closest to understanding Shepard's motivation for recording the confessions when she asserts that these were "ordinary people in community who, during a few decades in our history, tried to act on the idea that their lives were worth writing-or talking-about."[31] Regardless of the circumstance of their

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[29] Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill*, 44, 45.
[30] Shepard's *Confessions* is an important yet underutilized source as it contains the voices of otherwise unknown and unremarkable Puritan men and women, even if they are filtered through the pen of the recorder.
[31] Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 41.

production, the confessions recorded and preserved by Shepard in his small notebook constitute the most comprehensive source of first-generation narratives available.

The confessions also allow the historian a fleeting glimpse into the interpersonal relationships of women during this era in a way that few other extant documents do. A close reading of *Confessions,* for example, reveals that women counseled and influenced each other regarding spiritual concerns. While women turned to their ministers for spiritual guidance, they also turned to each other, and in the process, they reinforced the right of women to possess moral authority in the spiritual realm.

Church membership and religious affiliation afforded women a platform from which to influence their community without appearing to step too far outside the bounds of acceptable behavior. Counseling a neighbor regarding spiritual concerns, for example, was unlikely to earn the charge of behaving "beyond the custom of your sex," the accusation that Thomas Parker, minister of Newbury, Massachusetts leveled at his sister Elizabeth Avery of England when her book was published. Thus one way that women exercised moral authority was by counseling and influencing other women regarding their spiritual condition.

The narrative of Martha Collins (1609-1700), for example, demonstrates the important role that women played in each other's lives and is probably typical of many women's experiences. Martha began to "seek the Lord in private" at the tender age of nineteen, more from the example of other Christians around her than from any internal compulsion. After marriage, her husband witnessed to her. She attended the religious lectures of John Shaw and counseled with the Reverend Shepard, all the while believing that it was too late for her to receive salvation, "that surely now [the] gate is shut for me."

Finally, towards the end of her confession, Shepard records Martha as saying, “meeting with another[,] she said…‘tis not in man to direct His ways-it answered my objections against inability.’” Note Martha’s use of the word "she" to indicate that it was another woman who was finally able to help Martha overcome her feelings of unworthiness, rather than a man.[32]

In her confession, Mary Anglier (d. 1644) states that she was counseled by one of her neighbors who spoke to her about “her condition” and told her that she should “leave the Lord to His own ways,” that through Mary’s “condition” the Lord might cause her to “see her blindness and hardness” because that was how God worked. Mary Anglier’s “condition” was most likely some kind of a reproductive problem since Mary later states that upon “hearing [the] sermon of the woman that had the bloody issue, [she] saw it was her condition.” Shepard’s tendency to switch between first and third person makes this narrative confusing to read, but Martha saw her own condition when Shepard preached a sermon on “the woman with the bloody issue.” In Mark 5:25-34, which Shepard cites in Mary’s confession, a woman who had bled constantly for twelve years touches the clothes of Jesus as he passes by and is immediately healed. Given the sensitive nature of her problem, it was most likely a female neighbor who counseled Mary Anglier and cautioned her to be cognizant of the spiritual dimensions of her physical condition.[33]

Jane Holmes (d. 1653) relates that a Puritan neighbor “told me of a new birth … and that all righteousness out of Christ was nothing. And so I thought that I would enquire after that way.” Jane refers to the neighbor several times as "she," and since Jane had lost her own mother at an early age and did not get along with her stepmother, who

[32] Shepard, *Confessions*, 130-132.
[33] Shepard, *Confessions*, 65-69.

Jane says "was an affliction to me," it makes sense that a female neighbor may have taken an interest in Jane's spiritual condition. Mary Griswald (d. 1677), in contrast, was able to turn to her own mother for spiritual guidance who told her that she "must be born again" and cited John 3:3 and 1 Peter 1:23 to her daughter.[34]

Katherine, the maid of John and Elizabeth Russell, states that she grew up in ignorance and darkness so "I went to an aunt" that possessed the light of salvation, and "I was made by her to seek the means, praying with us before we went to the word. And she speaking of misery out of Christ, and so I saw many sins and so saw more, and knew not whether the Lord would pardon them." It appears from Katherine's confession (notice that she says "praying with us") that she met with a group of others—likely all women—who sought spiritual guidance from Katherine's "aunt." While no precise date is recorded for Katherine's confession, it seems likely that it was given around 1641, since her confession comes at the mid-point of Shepard's book which spans the years from 1638 to 1645. The confessions recorded by Shepard are presumed to be compiled in the same order that they were given, according to the book's editors. Thus, Katherine's confession lends support to the idea that despite the banishment of Anne Hutchinson to Rhode Island in 1638 women continued to meet together for spiritual guidance. Like Martha Collins' narrative, Katherine's narrative also illustrates the degree to which women recognized the spiritual authority of other women.[35]

Not only did women recognize the spiritual authority of other women; men such as the Reverend John Fiske and many of the brethren of his congregation were "seemingly more open to the formulating of less limiting policies for women" and

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[34] Shepard, *Confessions*,77-80, 187-189.
[35] Shepard, *Confessions*, 99-101.

advocated that women should be recognized as having an individual spiritual identity apart from that of their husbands.[36] Take, for example, the case of Joan White and the two women known only as Sister Young and Sister Fairfield. Prior to the establishment of a new church at Wenham, where Fiske was the newly installed pastor, White, Young, and Fairfield had been members of the church at Salem. Upon her request to receive a dismissal from the church at Salem so that she might join the new church at Wenham, Joan White was surprised to learn that her membership from Salem had automatically been dismissed or transferred to Wenham by the leadership at Salem as part of a group dismissal. The Reverend John Fiske along with the brethren at Wenham rejected the idea of a group dismissal from the church at Salem that included women who may or may not have requested a transfer. Instead, Fiske asserted that women should receive individual dismissals, not dismissals tied to the wishes of their husbands or other influential men within the community. As Fiske stated, "Hereupon this question: whether these sisters having yet never their desire propounded to the church at Salem were orderly dismissed and so whether it is orderly for us to receive members of another church before they be orderly come of thence?" Fiske was also concerned about those women "whose husbands were not members" at Salem, as appears to have been the case for Joan White. How could White be part of a group transfer, presumably initiated and agreed to by the men at Salem, to which she had not been privy since she had no husband in the congregation? Any presumed automatic submission of the women in the community to the wishes of the men was complicated by the women's status as independent visible saints. As it turned out, Sisters Young and Fairfield "desire for present rather to stand as

[36] Dunn, "Saints and Sisters," 33

they are" and continued to worship in Salem, according to Fiske. In the eyes of men such as Fiske, women should be able to determine their own religious destiny and be free to choose which church they would or would not attend. Ultimately, White was successful in securing her dismissal from the church at Salem, and on the second day of February, 1645, Joan White's individual dismissal was read publicly and she was "admitted and propounded an actual member of this church" at Wenham.[37]

While men such as the Reverend Fiske willingly acknowledged the spiritual individuality of women, even Puritan leaders such as John Winthrop, who had a reputation for silencing female voices of dissent, were pressed into acknowledging the spiritual prerogatives claimed by women. In September of 1637, for example, in the midst of the Antinomian controversy involving Anne Hutchinson, Winthrop records in his diary that a group of church elders met in Boston and decreed:

> that they [women] might some few gather together to pray and edify one another, yet such an assemblage as was then in practice in Boston, where sixty or more did meet every week, and one woman (in a prophetical way by resolving questions of doctrine and expounding scripture) took upon her the whole exercise, was agreed to be discreditable and without rule.

Thus it was agreed that women might continue to gather together for prayer and edification; however, the form—fewer women—and the function—for prayer and edification only, not for the resolution of doctrinal issues—were to be distinctly different from the kind of meetings conducted by Mistress Anne Hutchinson. Implicit within the decree is the idea that women were not only the participants in these meetings but also the leaders. Perhaps the women themselves brought the issue to the forefront of the elders' attention. In any event, Winthrop records that the matter was "debated and

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[37] Fiske, *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske,* 14, 16, 17, 31

resolved," and thus the decree constitutes an acknowledgement of women's right to continue to meet together apart from the guidance and authority of men.[38]

Despite the banishment of Anne Hutchinson, women continued to claim the right to decide doctrinal issues, such as baptism, on their own, even if they were unsuccessful in swaying the lay and church leadership. For example, John Winthrop records in his diary that "the lady Moodye [Lady Deborah Moody], a wise and anciently religious woman, being taken with the error of denying baptism to infants, was dealt withal by many of the elders and others, and admonished by the church of Salem." Moody willingly removed herself to the Dutch colony of New Netherlands where she "rendered help to Peter Stuyvesant." The following year, in 1644, Anne Eaton, the wife of Governor Theophilus Eaton, also was tried and excommunicated for her opposition to infant baptism and for her refusal to discuss the matter at trial. Although both of these women were subsequently excommunicated from the church, it is interesting to note how Winthrop refers to Moody as a "wise and anciently religious woman," lending support to the idea that women were recognized for their moral authority even while defying church authority and without any concomitant political authority.[39]

As the seventeenth-century advanced, the prescriptive literature of leading Puritan divines, such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Willard, began to openly acknowledge the spiritual equality of men and women. Their actions are indicative of larger controversial ecclesiastical and liturgical changes within the Congregational church that came to the forefront at the turn of the eighteenth-century, changes which demonstrate the increasing responsiveness of ministers to their predominantly female congregations.

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[38] Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal*, 1: 234.
[39] Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal,* 2, 126.

Mather and Willard were two of the first Puritan ministers to espouse a scriptural interpretation that fostered spiritual equality within the bonds of marriage, one which, ironically, undermined patriarchy. As stated by historian Roger Thompson, "by being in this vital area no respecter of persons, or of sexes" the Puritans were "subtly and unconsciously an underminer of that very patriarchalism [they] publicly championed."[40] Within marriage, men and women shared a spiritual equality rooted in fundamental Christian beliefs, namely that "each saint enjoyed a direct, personal relationship with God"; that on the day of judgment, each saint would stand alone before God to give account of his or her life on earth; and that God would judge the believer individually.[41]

Undoubtedly, some men stressed the patriarchal and hierarchical nature of the marriage relationship in interactions with their wives, rather than spiritual equality. Cotton Mather acknowledges as much when he warns in *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* that a man who beats his wife was "a Rascal" and it was better that he should be "buried alive, than show his Head among his Neighbours any more." According to Mather, "there is no Fault so great, as may compel you to beat your Wives."[42] As evidenced by Mather's admonition, within the covenanted community, internal controls assumed to operate within each spirit-filled believer should provide a check upon abusive behavior. Failing that, the "neighbours" in community with the abusive husband would provide external pressure to induce a change of behavior. In practice, abuse existed, but conceptually, men and women were equal in the sight of God. In turn, belief in the

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[40] Thompson, *Women in Stuart England,* 86.
[41] Westerkamp, *Women and Religion,* 18
[42] Mather, *Ornaments*, 98, 99. *Ornaments*, originally published in 1692, was the first piece of American conduct literature for women. A compendium of "dos' and don'ts," it promoted ideal types that women should emulate and warned of consequences to be avoided by "virtuous" behavior. It follows in the style of English self-help books and is imitative of Allstree's *The Ladies Calling*.

spiritual equality of the sexes perhaps encouraged women to voice their needs to their ministers who, like Cotton Mather, responded in kind to the needs of their female congregants.

By the time that Mather published *Ornaments* in 1692, it is likely that both he and Samuel Willard, whose *Compleat Body of Divinity* was published in 1726, were familiar with and influenced by William Secker's sermon, *A Wedding Ring Fit for the Finger*, published in London in 1658. Although ideologies promoting the spiritual equality of men and women had been circulating in English society since the Reformation, they were still controversial in England, and it is significant that New England Puritan divines did not actively promote this message until around the time that women's predominant presence in the church became the status quo.[43] As Mather observed, "in a church of between three or four hundred communicants, there are but few more than one hundred men; all the rest are women."[44] Thus, the confluence of sermons such as Mather's *Ornaments* and Willard's *Compleat Body* and the increasing numerical preponderance of women in the Congregational church is indicative of both the responsiveness of some ministers to the needs of their female congregants and, conversely, of the assertiveness of women in making their needs known.

In *A Wedding Ring Fit for the Finger* (1658), Secker instructs the reader that although the wife may be a "sovereign in her Husband's absence," Eve was made out of Adam's rib. The analogy, according to Secker, meant that women "were not made to be

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[43] Westerkamp, *Women and Religion,* 4-6. Protestant reformers, convinced that every individual, male or female, could "reach union with the Holy Spirit," found New Testament evidence of "many women honored as preachers and community leaders, women to whom "the 'gifts of miracles and tongues were common to many as well as the gift of Prophecy."' Yet these ideas remained contested and controversial.
[44] Mather, *Ornaments,* 48.

our Rulers. They are not made of the head to claim superiority, but out of the side to be content with equality." Secker goes on to write that a husband and wife were to be "as two springs meeting, and so joining their streams that they make but one current." He warns the male reader who may be tempted to "sayeth women are evil"—due to her affiliation with Eve—that he would never "take that Mariner for my pilot." In other words, only a fool would speak of his wife or another woman in such a manner. Thus, in a style later echoed by Mather, Secker simultaneously acknowledges the wrongs men committed against their wives while admonishing men for their foolishness and calling them to a higher standard of behavior. Finally, Secker again invokes the image of equality in stating that Eve is "a parallel line drawn equal" with Adam. "The Angels were too much above him, the Creatures were too much below him," but woman was Adam's equal, according to Secker. The essence of Secker's advice on marriage is that it should be one of reciprocity and equality, not domination, by either sex.[45]

Cotton Mather goes even further than Secker by instructing wives that they had a moral responsibility to witness to their unconverted husbands. In *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692), one of the traits of the "virtuous wife" is a concern for the "eternal salvation of her husband." Although women were generally not permitted to speak in church, if her husband was an unbeliever or did not attend church, "the Wife is to remind her Husband of what was delivered in the Church … [S]he may humbly repeat unto her Husband at home what the Minister spoke in the Church, that may be pertinent to his Condition." Furthermore, "if her Husband be a carnal, prayerless, graceless Man;

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[45] William Secker, *A Wedding-Ring Fit for the Finger, or, The Salve of Divinity on the Sore of Humanity [electronic resource] : Laid Open in a Sermon at a Wedding in Edmonton / by William Secker ... To which is Adjoyned The None-Such Professor in his Meridian Splendor, or, The Singular Actions of Sanctified Christians, Being the Substance of Seven Sermons on Mat. 5. 47* [Early English Books Online] (London : Printed for Thomas Parkhurst, 1661), 17, 19, 22. 25

she will not leave off her ingenious Persuasions, till it may be said of him, Behold he prays!" In this sense, Mather recognized the moral authority and responsibility of the believing wife within the marriage relationship.[46]

Some of the Reverend Samuel Willard's sermons strike a similar chord. In addition to serving as the Vice-President of Harvard from 1701-1707, Willard was called to minister to the believers at the Old South Church in Boston from the 1670s until his death in 1707, and thus was an influential voice in eastern Massachusetts.[47] In a sermon on marriage that was delivered sometime in the late 1690s, for example, Willard states that "of all the Orders which are unequals, these do come nearest to an equality, and in several respects they stand upon even ground. These do make a Pair, which infers so far a Parity: They are in the Word of God called Yoke-Fellows, and so are to draw together in the Yoke." Willard goes on to explain to the listener that the mutual duties shared by husbands and wives within the yoke of marriage included "A Mutual endeavor to promote each others Eternal Salvation." Perhaps the wife "shalt save thy husband" or the "husband shalt save they wife."[48] Like Secker, Willard emphasizes the spiritual equality of the sexes to the extent that wives could lead their spouses to Christ, earthly gender hierarchies notwithstanding.

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[46] Mather, *Ornaments, 96, 97*

[47] Perry Miller, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book Company, 1938), 250

[48] Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures on the Assembly's Shorter Catechism Wherein the Doctrines of the Christian Religion are Unfolded, their Truth Confirm'd, their Excellence Display'd, their Usefulness Improv'd; Contrary Errors & Vices Refuted & Expos'd, Objections Answer'd, Controversies Settled, Cases of Conscience Resolv'd; and a Great Light Thereby Reflected on the Present Age. By the Reverend & Learned Samuel Willard, M.A. Late Pastor of the South Church in Boston, and Vice-President of Harvard College in Cambridge, in New-England. Prefac'd by the Pastors of the Same Church* [Eighteenth Century Collections Online] (Boston, New England: printed by B. Green and S. Kneeland for B. Eliot and D. Henchman, and sold at their shops, 1726), 609, 610.

As stated previously, the prescriptive literature of Mather and Willard acknowledging women's equality was symptomatic of other changes occurring within Congregationalism at the turn of the eighteenth-century. At this time, the intellectual climate in New England was beginning to reflect "English tolerationist influences," which fostered the new idea that man might seek his own happiness and self-fulfillment consistent with the will and to the glory of God. In other words, personal happiness was not inconsistent with man or woman's highest earthly purpose: to glorify God. In fact, Christ's sacrifice had set men free from certain legalisms. These ideas led some New Englanders to the conviction that requirements such as public relation of faith, limited baptism, and limited voting rights were an infringement upon "important personal Christian rights and privileges." As the next paragraph will demonstrate, the founding of the Brattle Street Church was occasioned by just such concerns. While ideas about personal freedoms continued to be debated by the ministry of New England, both Mather and Willard agreed that they must be addressed and began to incorporate them into their teachings and practices. Doctrinally, both Mather and Willard remained orthodox Calvinists, yet Willard was "quick to relax the strict requirements for church membership based on a recitation of saving faith." He also maintained a more "liberal style" and openly welcomed the controversial Benjamin Colman at the new Brattle Street Church. And while Mather claimed to be the "first minister in Boston to publicly advocate tolerance," he remained at odds with many of the ideas promoted by Colman.[49] God was

[49] James W. Jones, *The Shattered Synthesis: New England Puritanism Before the Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 59, 54, 93. Samuel Kirkland Lothrop, *A History of the Church In Brattle Street, Boston* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1851), 52. Thompson, *Women in Stuart England,* 92.

still sovereign, but a new form of ecclesiastical and liturgical toleration that would benefit women was in the air, especially at Colman's Brattle Street Church.

Benjamin Colman, a native of Boston, was in England when he received an invitation to return to the colony and assume the pastorate of a new church. The group of Bostonians who extended the invitation were motivated by a sincere desire to make changes related to church order and discipline. As Samuel Kirkland Lothrop, pastor of the Brattle Street Church in 1850, noted, the founders hoped to see the Congregational church move in a more "liberal" direction, yet they were not aiming for radical change, "not to be in advance of their age, but to be up with it," a statement which implies that Lothrop believed that an important shift in public values regarding key ecclesiastical issues had taken place among some members of the community. Specifically, the "undertakers," as the men who invited Colman referred to themselves, desired that public confession or recitation of conversion experience be made voluntary, not mandatory, for church membership, that baptism be administered to "the children of any parents who would make a genuine profession of their Christian faith," and most significantly for women, that all members of the church had the right to a voice and a vote in the "choice of a pastor and the direction of parish affairs."[50] As the *Manifesto* of the Brattle Street Church states, "we cannot confine the right of choosing a Minister to the Male Communicants alone, but we think that every Baptized Adult Person who contributes to the Maintenance, should have a Vote in Electing."[51] It was an innovation that some, such

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[50] Lothrop, *A History of the Church In Brattle Street, Boston* , 17, 50, 9. The "undertakers" who signed Colman's letter of invitation included Thomas Brattle, Benjamin Davis, John Mico, Thomas Cooper, and John Colman

[51] Benjamin Colman, *A Manifesto or Declaration, Set Forth by the Undertakers of the New Church Now Erected in Boston in New-England, November 17, 1699* [Evans Digital Edition] (Boston: Printed by B. Green and J. Allen? 1699?), 3. In his *History of the Church in Brattle Street, Boston*, the Reverend Samuel

as the Reverends John Higginson and Nicholas Noyes of Salem, feared would "lead to chaos: 'the females are certainly more than the males, and consequently the choice of ministers is put into their hands.'"[52] In making such a statement, Higginson and Noyes imply that if allowed to choose the minister, women might pick someone whose agenda was at odds with that of the men, which suggests that women had achieved a certain influence with some Congregational ministers.

Perhaps it was the opportunity to vote that attracted women such as Elizabeth Hirst, the daughter of Samuel Sewall, to join Colman's church. Or maybe she joined because her husband, Grove Hirst, was already a member.[53] Regardless, consistent with earlier patterns of church admissions, within the first five years of its founding the Brattle Street Church had admitted forty-three male communicants and forty-five female communicants. Ten years later the discrepancy between male and female admissions had grown even greater. Eighty-three women had joined by December 7, 1710 compared to just fifty-six men. It was a pattern that would continue at least throughout the tenure of Benjamin Colman. In accordance with the changes and innovations advanced by the Brattle Street *Manifesto*, an entry in Dr. Colman's *Church Book* for July 4, 1715 indicates that women, as part of the "whole Congregation," openly voted on the direction of parish

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Kirkland Lothrop credits the authorship of the *Manifesto* to Colman, but its contents also reflect the sentiment of the larger group of "undertakers" who founded the church (26, 27)

[52] Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 243.

[53] Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall: 1674-1729. Newly Edited From the Manuscript at the Massachusetts Historical Society by M. Halsey Thomas* Vol. I (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 522. Sewall notes in a diary entry for April 1, 1705 that his "daughter Hirst is join'd to Mr. Colman's Church. The good Lord Accept her in giving up her Name to his Son." Elizabeth Hirst's name also appears on page 102 of *Records of the Church in Brattle Square, Boston with Lists of Communicants, Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals 1699-1872* (Boston: University Press, 1902).

affairs and on the choice of an assistant pastor.[54] It was a far cry from the earliest decades of Puritanism when the brethren in one church voted by a show of hands while the women silently rose up from their seats protesting their exclusion from the voting process.[55] Brattle Street, although initially controversial, grew rapidly and would eventually become an established part of the community, while other churches "silently imitated" its practices, according to Perry Miller.[56]

In the earliest decades of the Congregational church, women found public recognition, power, and personal agency by claiming status as "visible saints." From the founding of the first churches in Massachusetts, they joined as spiritual equals alongside men, and they sought their own individual religious experience of God. They counseled each other, interpreting scripture and divining God's will, and they continued to press — even in the face of persecution — for their views to be heard, whether it was over infant baptism or the right to receive an individual dismissal from one church in order to join another. Their right to claim status as spiritual independents was supported by men such as the Reverend John Fiske. Their contributions to the larger Congregational community and their organizational skills were recognized by men such as Cotton Mather who wrote in a diary entry for December 1706 that "an all-day meeting for Thanksgiving [was] organized by a group of devout women."[57] And their desire for spiritual edification was noted by Samuel Sewall who wrote that on January 15, 1707 during "a great Storm of Snow … not one of our Meeting ventured to come to our House where it was to be"

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[54] *Records of the Church in Brattle Square,* 96, 103, 13. Colman distinguishes between meetings of "the Congregation" or "the whole Congregation" and "the Church." Thus it appears that some votes were still restricted to a smaller group of individuals who constituted "the Church," possibly the Brethren.
[55] Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill,* 176.
[56] Miller, *The New England Mind,* 241
[57] Thompson, *Women in Stuart England and America,* 97.

except for Mrs. Deming, her daughter-in-law, and Mrs. Salter, who "waited till six a-clock, and then sung the 2 last Staves of the 16 Ps."[58] With the relaxation of church policy that began to emerge around the turn of the eighteenth-century, prescriptive literature reflected the concerns and needs of women, especially with respect to spiritual equality within the bonds of marriage. Throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth-century, women subtly pressed against the patriarchal structure of Puritan society, and ministers responded by giving sermons that admonished men and uplifted women regarding the spiritual equality of the sexes. As historian George Selement states, "the clergy published works 'responding to colonial needs,'" including those of women.[59] The policy of the Brattle Street Church in allowing women to vote on parish affairs and on the choice of a pastor indicates a move on the part of some men towards a fuller recognition of women's presence and voice within the congregation. The Puritan women of the Congregational Church have remained "hidden" only to a modern generation. They were quite "visible," however, to their own.

[58] Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall,* 559, 560
[59] George Selement, *Keepers of the Vineyard: The Puritan Ministry and Collective Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: U Press of America, 1984), 61.