2012

The Newbury Prayer Bill Hoax: Devotion and Deception in New England's Era of Great Awakenings

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The "Tappin manuscript," ca. 1740s.
Courtesy of the Historical Society of Old Newbury.

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Devotion and Deception in New England's Era of Great Awakenings

DOUGLAS L. WINIARSKI

Among the miscellaneous Congregational church papers now on deposit at the Historical Society of Old Newbury is a curious eighteenth-century manuscript. Mounted on cardboard, presumably for display or preservation, and measuring roughly five by seven inches, the single leaf of paper bears the text of an elaborate prayer of thanksgiving for the author's safe deliverance from a riding accident. It is undated, but judging from the handwriting the manuscript appears to have been written sometime during the middle decades of the eighteenth century by a person of modest literary skills. The text reads,

> Cristopher Tappin & wife Desires to return Thanks to god for his goodness to him in preserving of him when the Divil Cast A mist before him and his horses Eyes, throwing of him Down, being in great Danger, Butt God in his good providence and his Angels garding of him Out of the hand of the Divill, and after this I Could nott rest Neight nor Day [thinking] of it what the Cause Should be, Till freyday morning it was reveal'd to me, That it was becaus I Oposed That great work of the Devill, It seem'd that the Voyce came to me and Said, I Need nott Truble my self, it was that Devill did it, that Deseav'd all the people, and Now I hope that god will Enable me to Opose that Great work of the Divill, and the Instruments of it more than Ever I Did.[1]

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The only previous scholar known to have examined this odd manuscript was town historian Joshua Coffin, who published the text in his 1845 *Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury*. Coffin assumed that it had been composed by Christopher Toppan, the 1691 Harvard College graduate who presided over Newbury's original "Old-Town" parish in "uncommon Peace" for a half century until his death in 1747. An obituary described the venerable clergyman as a "Gentleman of good natural Powers for acquiring Learning" and an "instructive and pathetical Preacher." Toppan never published during his long career, and only a few of his manuscript sermons, theological notebooks, and letters have survived. Instead, he was better known as a "prity Injenus jentell man" who supplemented his minister's salary by engaging in extensive land speculation activities on the northern frontier. In 1724, Toppan achieved brief notoriety when he wrote to Cotton Mather claiming to have discovered an amphisbæna, a mythical monster described in medieval bestiaries as a glowing-eyed serpent with heads at both ends of its body. The incident later inspired John Greenleaf Whittier's famous poem "The Double-Headed Snake of Newbury."[2]

Toppan's apparent fascination with preternatural curiosities was typical of the late seventeenth century. News of the amphisbæna circulated widely in New England, and Mather even forwarded an account to the Royal Society in London. But to nineteenth-century observers such as Coffin, who were retreating from the traditions of their "puritan forefathers," the peculiar prayer manuscript smacked of irrational "popular superstitions." For this reason, the Newbury historian hypothesized that Toppan composed it during a period of "partial derangement" that allegedly tarnished the final years of his pastorate.[3] No evidence indicates that Toppan ever suffered from mental illness. But there is a deeper problem with Coffin's attribution, for a careful comparison with the amphisbæna letter and other examples of his handwriting reveals that the prayer manuscript was not composed by the Newbury minister.

The text contains numerous irregularities in spelling, capitalization, and syntax, which make it difficult to believe that it was written by a Harvard-trained clergyman. Toppan's name even appears as "Tappin," a variant spelling that the Newbury minister himself never used in any of his personal writings.

In short, the "Tappin manuscript," as I refer to it in the essay that follows, presents an intriguing puzzle. If Christopher Toppan did not compose the unusual prayer request, then who did? When? Why? Solving the riddle of the Tappin manuscript leads us into the troubled final years of one of New

Detail from Christopher Toppan's July 6, 1724, letter to Cotton Mather describing the Newbury amphisbæna. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

England's most pugnacious ministers and the evangelical underworld of the Great Awakening that he had come to despise.

Classifying the Tappin manuscript seems straightforward. It is an unusually detailed example of an eighteenth-century prayer "note" or "bill." Lay men and women in provincial New England frequently delivered these small slips of paper to their ministers, tacked them to the meetinghouse door, or posted them in special boxes, where they were collected and read during weekly Sabbath exercises. English puritan divines early in the seventeenth century dismissed formal written prayers as a sign of a "*stinted Liturgie*." Yet as early as 1628, the London artisan Nehemiah Wallington described making "many bills" and sending "them to the churches" on behalf of an ailing child. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, recorded several examples of the practice in his diary a decade later. By about 1680, written prayer notes had assumed a unified form in parishes throughout New England.[4]

Like educational primers or financial receipts, prayer bills were ubiquitous and routine, and yet few examples have survived. I have located 189 original

prayer bill manuscripts and more than one thousand references to similar texts in diaries, letters, and various published sources. These examples come from nearly two dozen New England parishes and span the period between 1641 and 1814. The largest collection of prayer bill manuscripts may be found among the papers of the celebrated Northampton minister Jonathan Edwards. Various Congregational clergymen—including Boston luminary Cotton Mather; Benjamin Lord of Norwich, Connecticut; Ebenezer Parkman of Westborough; itinerant preacher Daniel Rogers; Yale president Ezra Stiles; Benjamin Trumbull of North Haven, Connecticut; and Samuel Walley of Ipswich—scavenged their parishioners' prayer notes for use as scrap paper in drafts of sermons, personal correspondence, and theological treatises. But they took them seriously, too. Mather, for example, employed them in his private meditations, and he organized his schedule of weekly pastoral visitations around "Bills putt up in our Congregation."[5]

Diarists both prominent and obscure occasionally recorded posting prayer notes. Perhaps the best known example is the 1697 testimony in which Samuel Sewall repented of his involvement in the Salem witch trials. The Boston magistrate also used his voluminous diary to record dozens of less sensational prayer notes put up on behalf of individuals ranging in status from Massachusetts governor William Shute to enslaved Africans. Sewall composed public prayers for himself, his family, and distant kinfolk, as well as neighbors, Harvard students, and Native American religious converts. Nearly a century later, the Maine midwife and prolific diarist Martha Ballard occasionally remarked that a neighbor "brot a note" to meeting, "Sent a Bill for Prayers," or "Desird prayers" from the Hallowell Congregational Church in response to a variety of illnesses, accidents, and misfortunes. Neither of these notable diarists, however, surpassed John Ballantine. Between 1743 and 1774, the Westfield clergyman scrupulously recorded hundreds of weekly prayer requests in a series of interleaved almanacs. [6]

Unlike New England's restrictive church admission requirements, the practice of submitting public prayer requests was open to virtually anyone. The records of the Salem trials, for example, include several references to prayer notes submitted by bewitched young women. Indeed, the expectation that all parishioners would participate in the practice was so great that one of John Proctor's accusers cited his aversion to "putting up Bills for publick prayer" as evidence that he had made a pact with the devil. Five decades later, Sudbury minister Israel Loring received a prayer note from David Poor and his wife, although they were neither residents in town nor members of his church. A Sheffield man, "providantialy" called on business to Northampton, submitted

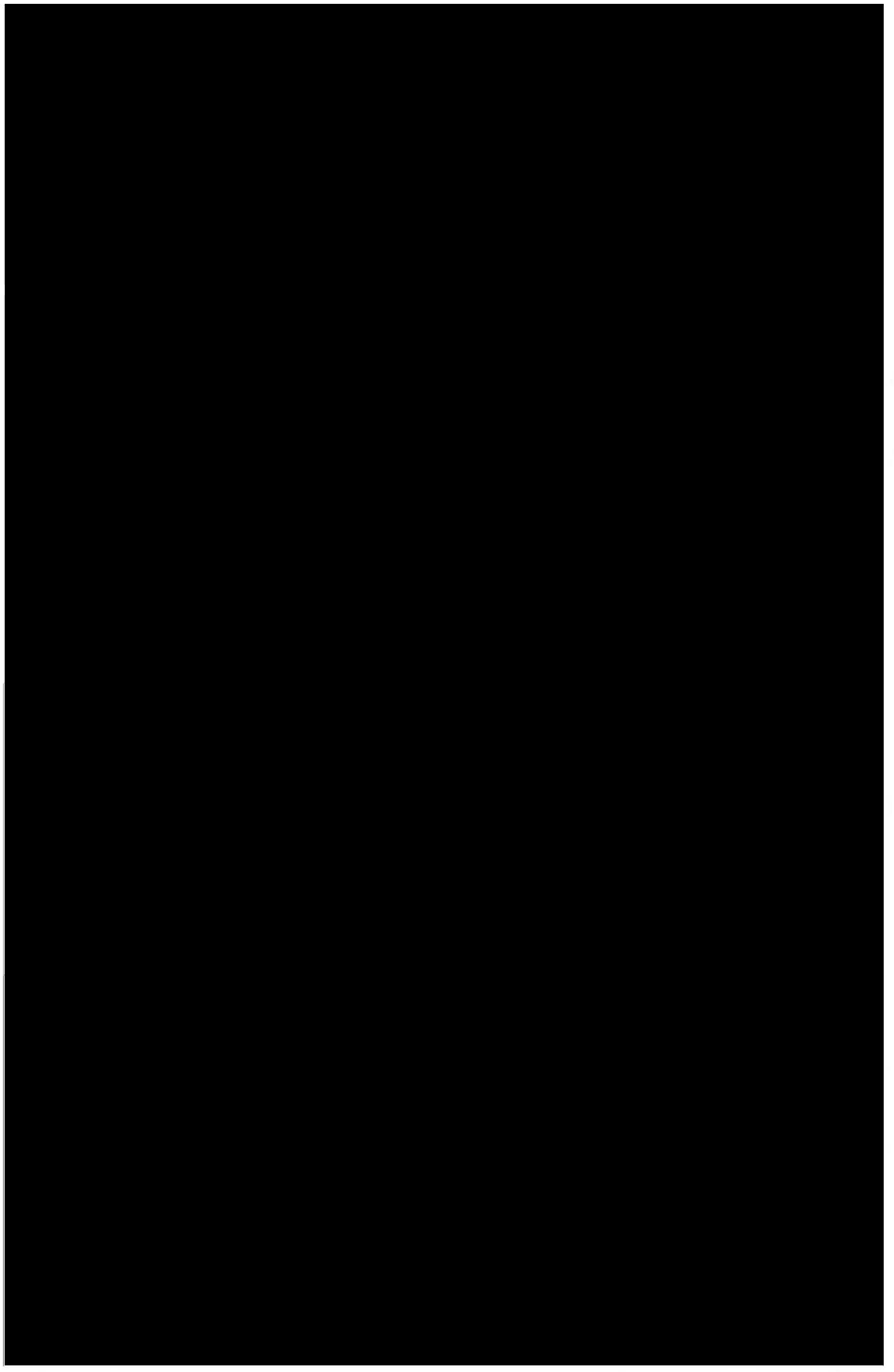
a prayer request to Edwards, as did a woman from the distant town of Bolton, Connecticut, after spending several months with relatives convalescing from the "Long fever." Sewall occasionally sent bills to be read in churches other than Boston's Old South, where he was a full member. Even some of New England's worst sinners and convicted criminals, including a Lynn man accused of molesting two servants during the 1630s and a woman executed for infanticide in 1701, were encouraged to post prayers of repentance.[7]

Despite their broad chronological and geographical scope, most prayer bills worked within a limited range of stock phrases. They ran in length from a terse, eleven-word healing prayer that Sewall presented for his dying daughter to Gideon Hawley's verbose request that God would favor his impending mission work among the Six Nations Iroquois. Averaging roughly fifty words, most prayer bills conformed to rigid generic conventions that were remarkably resistant to change over time. Consider the following two examples, composed more than a half century apart by parishioners in Cotton Mather's Old North Church in Boston and Benjamin Trumbull's North Haven parish:

> A young man bound to see desiers the Prayers of this Congregation thatt God may Ceep him and preserve him and Returne him home in Safty.
>
> Edward Morris Tyler Being Bound on a Voyage to Sea Desiers Suteable prayers might be made for him that God wood preserve him from Sickness and from the dangers of the Sea and Return him in due time to his Country and friends in Safety. His Mother and Sister Joines with him.

Although the Tyler bill included a few additional details, the two texts followed a common script. Both petitioners desired the prayers of their respective congregations, noted the circumstances that had precipitated their requests, and appealed for specific outcomes such as protection from sickness or a safe voyage.[8]

The content of Congregational prayer notes may be divided into two general classes. The sailors' texts cited above are good examples of *petitionary prayers*, or individual appeals for divine assistance in the face of ongoing or impending temporal difficulties. Forty-three percent of all surviving prayer bills fall into this category. Within this group, nearly three in four enlisted divine aid to heal the bodies of sick and injured family members, servants, and neighbors. Jonathan Edwards's Northampton congregants, for example, submitted petitionary prayers on behalf of individuals burned in fires, crushed under falling trees, nearly drowned in river accidents, or languishing under a wide variety of grievous wounds and dangerous diseases. During one of the epidemics that struck Boston with increasing regularity after 1690, Mather



Prayer bills from the Revolutionary era, courtesy of the Medfield Historical Society.

recalled seeing nearly one hundred bills put up for the sick on a single Sabbath. In fact, the practice of submitting prayer notes was so closely associated with petitions for recovery from illness and injury that Edwards and other eighteenth-century ministers gauged the health of their communities based on the number of monthly bills they received from their parishioners.[9]

A second major class consisted of prayer requests written for parishioners who had recently suffered through a period of temporal affliction or who were grieving over the death of a family member. These texts assumed the form of either *prayers of thanksgiving* following divine deliverance from misfortune or *prayers of sanctification* in the wake of bereavement. The former included notes sent on behalf of women such as Sarah Eastman of Haverhill, who had been successfully preserved during the "dangers of Childe birth" and made "the Livinge mother of a Livinge Childe." Although death in labor was statistically infrequent in eighteenth-century New England, women feared the dangers of travail and elevated their devotional routines during the weeks prior to delivery. After passing through their "hour of peril and Danger," new mothers sought to pay their vows to God by submitting prayers of thanksgiving, especially upon the day in which they were well enough to return to the meetinghouse. Requests to give thanks for "Safe deliverance in Child baring" occasionally included additional healing petitions that God would "Continue the Life" of an unusually sickly infant or grant "perfecting mercy" to mothers suffering through a difficult lying-in period. Although they accounted for only 11 percent of all extant manuscripts, childbirth prayers were undoubtedly the most common type of note. Of the more than 1,200 prayer requests that Westfield minister John Ballantine recorded in his diary, nearly 40 percent were offered on behalf of a young mother recently "raised from Childbearing." By the time that Martha Ballard began keeping her diary in 1785, the phrase "Living Mother of a Living Child" had appeared so often in weekly prayer bills that the Maine midwife occasionally incorporated it into her reports of successful deliveries.[10]

At the other end of the life course, deaths of all kinds precipitated nearly one in four prayer bills. Grieving family members pleaded with God to "Sanctify" the death of a loved one, provide "consolation in this afflicting Stroke," grant them "patience under their affliction," and "help them to behave themsellves sutably undder the various dispensations of god." More commonly, the bereaved sought to make what Samuel Sewall called a "suitable improvement" of God's providential "holy Hand." Presented to Norwich minister Benjamin Lord in 1756, Jedidah Deans's note embodied the well-known puritan devotional strategy of preparation for salvation, as she and her husband requested

the "Prayers of this Congregation for them that [God] would be pleas'd to Sanctifie" the death of her mother "for their Spirituall Good." Similarly, Ebenezer Parkman's son was "so far effected" by the tragic death of a Harvard student who drowned in Fresh Pond "that he, by a note, desired Prayers in the Congregation that God would Sanctifie it to him." Death betokened future judgment for the living, and thus many grieving New Englanders responded by submitting prayer bills. In dire cases in which afflicted individuals were "drawing near" to their "grat chaing," as one Northampton man put it, requesters sought divine assistance to be prepared or "fitted" to accept God's "Soveraine will."[11]

Depending upon when they were composed, prayers submitted on behalf of merchant seamen, whalers, and deep sea fishermen could assume either form: petitions for future protection or thanksgiving offerings following a safe voyage. They accounted for a significant percentage of surviving bills from churches located in port towns, such as Mather's Old North Church in Boston or the congregations in Newport, Rhode Island, and Norwich and New Haven, Connecticut.[12] A similar division appears among bills submitted for soldiers mustered into the militia during New England's imperial entanglements with France. Edwards's most prominent parishioner, Maj. Seth Pomeroy, and his militia company gave thanks for God's "wonderfull goodness" in protecting their "Lives & Limbs" from the "Sword of the Enemy" during the successful reduction of the French citadel of Louisbourg in 1745. Likewise, a collection of prayer bills now on deposit at the Medfield Historical Society includes nearly a dozen notes from Massachusetts soldiers who had suffered through the disastrous early years of the American Revolution, including the ill-fated invasion of Canada in 1775 and George Washington's beleaguered New York campaign one year later. Their prayers described harrowing experiences of camp fevers, death on the battlefield, and captivity "in the hands of the Enemy."[13]

Whether petitioning for relief from accidents and illnesses or giving thanks for deliverance from the pains of childbirth or the horrors of war, New England Congregationalists displayed a persistent concern in their prayer bills for alleviating temporal misfortune. To be sure, the prospect of death frequently spurred lay men and women to more traditional puritan devotional pursuits. Notes enlisting prayers to aid the living in preparing for salvation, however, constituted less than one quarter of all known prayer requests. Far more numerous were petitions such as the one penned by Joel Clark of Northampton, who asked God to "ese him of the pain that he labours under and Spaer his Lif and restore his health," or another by Boston mariner Benjamin Elton, who

beseeched God not only to return him home "in Safty" but also to "Bless and prosper him" during his impending voyage. Deliverance, protection, preservation, prosperity, strength: healing, broadly understood, lay at the heart of the ritual, for as one Boston man informed Sewall, public prayer bills were "the best Medicine."[14]

Ministers such as Jonathan Edwards regularly warned their parishioners not to assume that the practice of posting prayer notes would be automatically or necessarily efficacious. Nor was God obliged to answer the petitions of an inherently sinful people, no matter how desperate their circumstances or earnest their appeals for divine aid. "The mercy of God is not moved or drawn by anything in the creature," Edwards argued in a 1736 sermon preached during a devastating diphtheria epidemic. Still, God was "full of compassion to the miserable" and "rich to all that call upon him"—even those who prayed for "temporal good things." For the faithful supplicant, Edwards concluded, the "Most High" was a "prayer-hearing God."[15]

With its fantastical account of Satan and spooked horses, the Tappin manuscript is quite unlike any other known prayer bill. It is more than three times as long as a typical prayer request, and its supernatural content is unique among surviving manuscripts. There is a logical problem with the text as well. Why would a minister need to compose a prayer note? Presumably, any clergyman desiring prayers for himself or his family would simply vocalize his request as he read the slips of paper submitted by his parishioners. Among the nearly two hundred surviving examples of the genre, in fact, only the Tappin manuscript appears to have been composed by or for an ordained Congregational clergyman. But, then again, it is quite likely that this text was not written by Christopher Toppan himself.

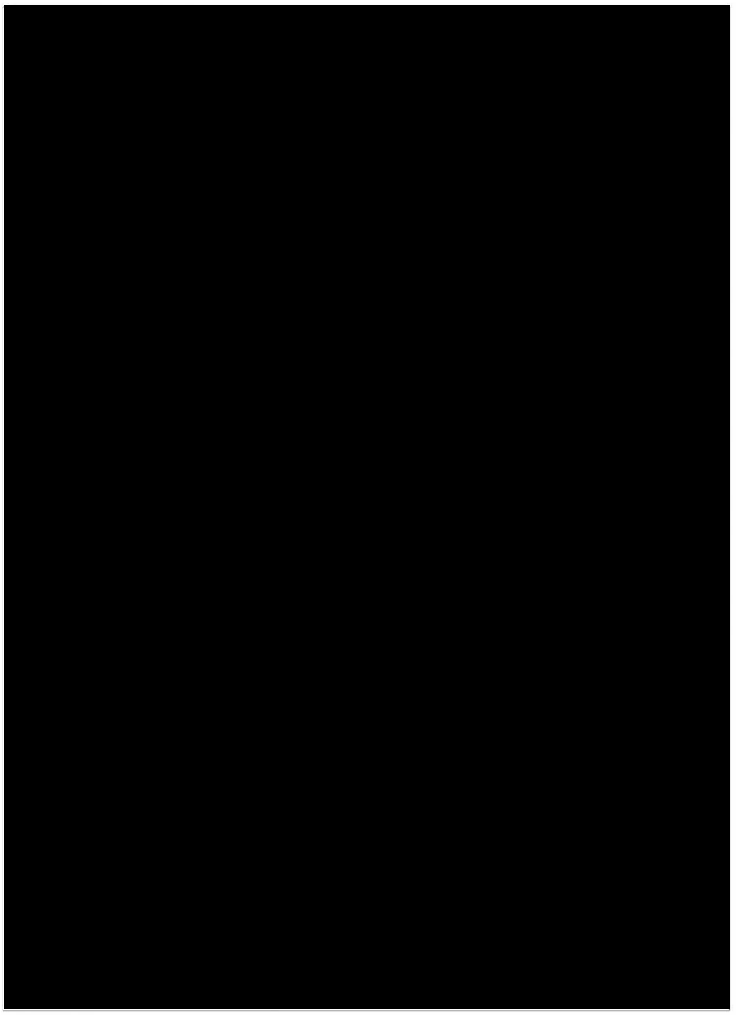
Given the immediacy of their usage in the meetinghouse, most prayer bills are undated. In this case, however, chronological ambiguities in what appears to be a forged text present an especially knotty interpretive problem. When was the Tappin manuscript composed? Since the note purportedly requested prayers for both Toppan and his wife following a riding accident, it must have been written before the Newbury minister's death in 1747 but after 1698, when he married Sarah Angier of Cambridge. For this reason, we can rule out the possibility that the accident took place during or shortly after the Salem witch hunt. Although most New England clergymen understood the Essex County witchcraft outbreak as a vast satanic conspiracy, it is unlikely that this was the "Great work of the Divill" referenced in the Tappin manuscript.

As we will see, Toppan retained a lifelong opposition to witchcraft and allied occult phenomena, but there is no evidence that he either participated in or commented on the infamous 1692 trials, during which he was still unmarried and living at Harvard College.[16]

Instead, there was one major event that dramatically breached the "uncommon Peace" of Toppan's long pastorate and may well have prompted the composition of the Tappin manuscript. It was the Great Awakening, the boisterous and often fractious religious revivals that gripped New England following George Whitefield's celebrated preaching tour in 1740. Partisans of the Whitefieldian awakenings frequently referred to local events in places such as Newbury as a "surprising," "extraordinary," "Glorious," "Marvellous," and "wonderfull" outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. More often, they simply called it the "the Work." Conflicts over the meaning of what, precisely, this "Work" entailed quickly emerged in theological debates during the period, most notably in the published writings of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Chauncy. The distinctive phrase "That great work of the Devill"—repeated twice in the Tappin manuscript—may well have been a carefully coded inversion of prevailing revival discourse.[17]

The Newbury revival ranked among the most powerful, acrimonious, and best-documented ecclesiastical tumults in early American history. Toppan and his younger colleague, John Lowell, the minister of Newbury's "Waterside" precinct (now Newburyport), initially welcomed Whitefield into their pulpits. The celebrated British evangelist preached twice to a "very thronged Congregation" and lodged with Lowell during the fall of 1740. Whitefield was followed in turn by a string of regional itinerants, including Daniel Rogers of neighboring Ipswich, who preached several "sweet melting" sermons to great effect in both parishes nearly a year later. Lowell actively promoted the burgeoning revival season by establishing biweekly lectures for traveling evangelists. Both parishes witnessed a dramatic surge of new communicants during the months that followed. Toppan admitted more church members in 1741 and 1742 than he had in any period since the Great Earthquake of 1727. More than 120 new converts swelled the ranks of Lowell's church, including 53 admitted on a single day in March 1742. Newbury's Anglican rector, Matthias Plant, was scarcely exaggerating when he stated in a letter to his superiors in London that many of his own congregants were "extremly taken with the new Scheme," and he noted that Lowell's parishioners, in particular, were "going their visionary lengths" as well.[18]

Everything changed the following month. On April 27, 1742, Rogers returned to Lowell's parish accompanied by his brother Nathaniel and the no-



Nathaniel Emmons, portrait of Rev. John Lowell (1704–1767), 1728. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Harvard University Portrait Collection, Gift of the Estate of Ralph Lowell, 1978, H646. Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

torious itinerant Samuel Buell. They came itching for a fight. Buell was on his way to the famously awakened town of York, Maine, after nearly four months of inciting powerful revivals from Northampton to Boston. Although Buell claimed to have received "invitations to Preach from all Parts," the two Newbury ministers were not among his ardent supporters. Toppan appears to have reversed his opinion on itinerant preaching during the spring of 1741, when Durham, New Hampshire, clergyman Nicholas Gilman reported that the Newbury minister was "fierce in Opposition to any Strangers preaching

among his People" and "Spoke Slightly of Mr. Whitefield, and very contemptibly of the great Work that is doing in the Land, censuring it as a Delusion." Lowell appears to have developed similar misgivings. He was abroad on business when Buell arrived in town, and Rogers wondered whether Lowell had simply vacated his parish in order to "Avoid asking Br. Buel to preach." The waterside parishioners, however, seemed "Hungry for the word," and they eagerly opened the doors of the meetinghouse to the three itinerants and rang the church bell to summon the waterside congregation to an impromptu weekday lecture. Buell proceeded to preach from the elder's seat and was followed by the Rogers brothers, who alternately exhorted and sang hymns with the assembly. "The children of God," Daniel noted in his diary, "were melted into Love."[19]

The trio attempted to repeat their efforts in Toppan's parish the following day, but the Newbury minister, alerted to the presence of the itinerating interlopers in his parish, barred the meetinghouse doors, forcing Daniel to preach from the steps of the town house. For his part, Lowell was incensed by the events of the previous day. When Buell and Nathaniel Rogers returned to meet with him, the waterside minister "turn'd into the House" and slammed the door. The following week, a newspaper article appearing in the *Boston Evening-Post* declared that Buell and the Rogers brothers had "formed a Party, and took Possession" of Lowell's meetinghouse. A bitter print exchange ensued, as pro-revival partisans in Newbury accused Lowell of lying and attempting to coerce local residents into testifying against the visiting evangelists. "These Itinerants aim very much at dividing the Churches, and disaffecting People to their faithful Pastors," asserted one of Lowell's supporters, "and what wild Scheme they are pursuing next, God only knows."[20]

Things went from bad to worse for Toppan and Lowell during the next two years. Later in 1742, a young Harvard firebrand named Joseph Adams began preaching in Newbury without their consent. He scandalized the town by circulating a letter in which he branded their colleague Thomas Barnard unconverted and claimed that God would "*frown*" the West Newbury minister "*into Hell*" if he did not embrace the revivals. That same month, Toppan drew fire from yet another controversial itinerant evangelist, Andrew Croswell. Flush from igniting highly divisive revivals in Plymouth and Boston, and at Harvard College, the Groton, Connecticut, clergyman praised the Rogers brothers for preaching "in places where Your company is not Desired." Croswell exhorted them to continue inveighing against unconverted ministers who were "leading a Great number of Souls to hell" with their "Self-righteous," unedifying sermons. He singled out Newbury's "Mr. Toppan" among the foremost "Gross and Evident opposers of the Work of God."[21]

Two years later, a Rowley layman named Richard Woodbury descended on Newbury, accompanied by Daniel Rogers and Nicholas Gilman. Together, they spent more than a month laboring to stir up fervent revival advocates in the town's two largest parishes. Woodbury claimed to possess the "Power to bless and curse eternally whom he pleased." He dared to drink "healths to King Jesus" and vehemently condemned to hell anyone who questioned his charismatic authority. Exhibiting what one report called a "strange Emotion," Woodbury frequently fell into trances during which he would roll on the floor and rail against revival opposers, crying out that they had crucified Christ. Other reports suggested that he and his disciples bent to the ground and made crosses in the dust, before kissing and licking the earthen symbols. With Gilman serving as his personal secretary, Woodbury spent much of his time in Newbury sending "monitory Letters" to various local clergymen. Written "In the Name of the King of Kings & Lord of Lords," his apocalyptic missives threatened eternal damnation on any clergyman who denied the "Glorious work of Reformation that has been going on in the Land."[22]

By this time, Toppan and Lowell had banned all itinerant preachers from their pulpits, and thus Woodbury, Rogers, and Gilman were forced to meet in the private homes of a zealous and sizeable contingent of revival supporters who had grown increasingly disaffected with their ministers during the previous two years. Led by Charles Peirce, the prominent Newbury militia colonel and civil magistrate, the pro-revival faction in Toppan's congregation had begun to agitate against him a full year earlier. They formed a vocal and assertive clique. According to Matthias Plant, "nobody is esteemed a Christian by them but who embraces their tenets." In June 1743, Peirce and twenty-eight "aggriev'd Brethren" registered their "great uneasiness" with Toppan's ministry in a document enumerating nine articles of theological error and professional misconduct. Citing Toppan's "great opposition" to the "Glorious work of God," they questioned the orthodoxy of the Newbury minister's sermons and accused him of advancing Arian principles or denying the equality of God and Christ. They also alleged that Toppan had refused to promote qualified candidates to full church membership, suspended the privilege of baptism for several existing church members, and justified a case of incest in town. Most important, the aggrieved brethren were incensed by Toppan's repeated use of "such Language as is not fit to be used among Christians." They gave him two weeks to respond to these "matters of grief & offence" or make a "sincere & hearty Acknowledgement" of his errors.[23]

Toppan reacted angrily, branding Peirce and his fellow agitators lying "Schemers" and threatening to bring charges of slander against the "New-

light-men" at the next quarterly sessions of the Superior Court of Judicature. Throughout the summer of 1743, the Newbury minister resolutely refused to answer the articles of complaint exhibited by Peirce's faction or to call a church meeting to discuss their grievances. Eventually, the exasperated dissenters took matters into their own hands. On October 19, 1743, they sent letters to several neighboring ministers asking for assistance in resolving the dispute.[24]

The unilateral actions of the Peirce faction marked a critical breach in ecclesiastical order. It was also a sign of the times. Both the 1648 Cambridge Platform and the published result of the Synod of 1662 affirmed the formation of councils consisting of ministers and lay delegates from neighboring parishes to adjudicate "emergent Church-difficulties and Differences." Beginning in the mid 1670s and increasing over the next half century, however, the practice of resolving protracted church disputes through mutual councils fell into steep decline. By 1740, aggrieved factions regularly ignored unfavorable results handed down by a council of mutually chosen representatives and, instead, sought to organize *ex parte* "anticouncils" packed with neighboring ministers sympathetic to their cause. The Whitefieldian revivals accelerated this troubling trend. "For as the Country is now unhappily divided into *two Factions*" over the purported excesses of the revivals, grumbled one newspaper correspondent after surveying the situation in Newbury, "it is only for a few Malcontents of *either Side*, to call a Council of the *Warm* and staunch Men of their *own Part*, and they come prepared to *censure the Minister*" and "to *destroy* what little *Discipline* we have left in our Churches." Benjamin Colman of Boston's Brattle Street Church agreed, noting ominously that the Peirce faction's decision to pack the council with "Parties in their own favour is extreamly hazardous to all the Interests of Truth, Peace & Holiness in our Churches."[25]

Lamenting the "Darkness & Difficulty" under which the Newbury church languished, the ministers that gathered at Peirce's imposing brick manor house on November 10, 1743, implored Toppan to convene a mutual council to address all sides of the controversy. In a surprising turn of events, the recalcitrant Newbury clergyman initially agreed, and thus the council adjourned under a "more hopefull Prospect than we had in the Beginning." In truth, the ministers had been wary of contributing to what moderator Samuel Wigglesworth of Ipswich Hamlet (now Hamilton) called a "partial Hearing" of the case. But it was clear from subsequent events that Toppan had no intention of conducting a fair hearing of the Peirce faction's grievances. During the next several months, the two sides squabbled over which churches to send

to for delegates. Toppan proposed numerous schemes, yet each assumed that he and the majority of Newbury church members that continued to support him in the controversy would retain the power to select the larger number of delegates. Indeed, they had good reason to be concerned with these procedural issues. Nearly all of the ministers who participated in the preliminary council the previous fall were staunch revival partisans. By late spring, all talk of "having our Affairs Amicably Accommodated" by a council of "Mutually chosen" clergymen had collapsed. An embittered Toppan even initiated disciplinary hearings against the Peirce faction for withdrawing from communion and absenting themselves from the Lord's Supper.[26]

The dissenters once again broke off their negotiations with Toppan and convened a second *ex parte* council. Although several notable clergymen turned down their invitations, including Joseph Sewall of Boston's prominent Old South Church, others condemned Toppan as "being Unequal to his

David Mason Little, nineteenth-century photograph of the Spencer-Peirce-Little House, Newbury, Mass., residence of separatist leader Charles Peirce. Courtesy of Historic New England.

Engagements" and agreed to attend. They initiated the proceedings on July 24, 1744, by dispatching a committee to meet with Toppan. But the harassed clergyman merely brushed aside their overtures, saying he would "have nothing to do with them as a Council." They condemned him all the same. Writing on behalf of the council, Berwick, Maine, minister Jeremiah Wise criticized Toppan's behavior during the recent revival season as "sinful & scandalous." He had "indiscreetly express'd himself," his sermons contained "very corrupt & Dangerous Doctrine" and were "very Unsound & Dishonourable to the Grace of God," and he had exhibited a "faulty neglect" in withholding the sacraments from qualified parishioners and their families. In short, Wise concluded, "we are so far from blaming the Aggrieved Brethren for their uneasiness under a Pastor who has fed them with such unwholesome Doctrine & Behavd in so Exceptionable a manner" that "we rather rejoyce to see that God has given them understanding to Discern between truth & Error." Facing such "injurious treatment from their pastor," Peirce and the other aggrieved brethren were entirely justified in voicing their complaints, withdrawing from communion, and unilaterally calling a church council.[27]

Toppan and his supporters responded immediately. They called their own council less than a month later. This one was packed with delegates from the east and west Merrimack Valley ministerial associations, all of whom had expressed grave misgivings about the revivals. Not surprisingly, they exonerated Toppan of all charges. But the council also detected a deeper, more insidious force at work. They worried that the aggrieved brethren were motivated by a "secret work of Corruption & Temptation by the Wicked one" that had biased their minds and warped their affections against their venerable minister. Beyond stood the specters of Samuel Buell, the Rogers brothers, Joseph Adams, Nicholas Gilman, and the recently departed Richard Woodbury—"busy men of unstable & unsound minds & disorderly practices" whose "entisements" had led the Peirce faction to stray into unwarranted separatism. They encouraged the aggrieved brethren to exercise a spirit of forbearance with their aging minister and "Return to his Pastoral Care." If members of the Peirce faction persisted in their errors, however, the assembled clergymen advocated a formal disciplinary hearing to admonish the "Disorderly Walkers."[28]

Whitefield's return to York, Maine, later in the fall of 1744 only stoked the growing conflagration in Newbury. The Grand Itinerant's second New England tour set off one of the most bitter print wars of the eighteenth century. In 1740, the newspapers had gushed with praise and virtually no one in New England save a few Anglican churchmen had spoken out against the touring evangelist. The ensuing years, however, brought incessant ecclesiastical tur-

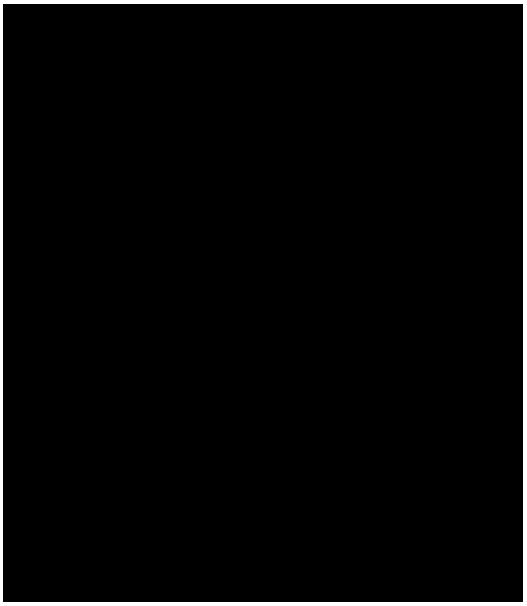
moil, riotous protracted revival meetings, a highly publicized outbreak of antinomian visionary phenomena, James Davenport's notorious New London bonfires, an open split among established clergymen, the scandalous actions of incendiary lay preachers like Richard Woodbury, and an alarming rise in church schisms. By the fall of 1744, most local ministers were in no mood for collegiality. A torrent of anti-Whitefield letters and pamphlets streamed from the presses, and more than 120 clergymen vowed to close their pulpits to the itinerating evangelist. One list included John Lowell and Thomas Barnard of Newbury along with nearly all of their colleagues in the Merrimack Valley and southern New Hampshire. Public discourse had transformed Whitefield into the "source of all our other disorder" and the "grand promoter of all the confusion that has been in the land."[29]

Whitefield initially seemed to be on his best behavior during his second New England tour. He gently parried the criticisms of revival opposers and even apologized for some of the more incendiary passages in his published sermons and journals. Whitefield tempered his fiery sermons, spoke out against extravagant emotional outbursts, and condemned church schisms and illegal separations. Crisscrossing the region, the touring evangelist delivered an estimated four hundred sermons during his nine-month sojourn in New England. But he carefully avoided preaching in opposition to the stated wishes of established clergymen—except, that is, when he went to Newbury.[30]

On February 22, 1745, Whitefield arrived in town and "waited upon both the Ministers." Toppan and Lowell treated him civilly, he noted in an unpublished diary, but they refused to grant him access to their pulpits. After consulting with his entourage of traveling ministers, Whitefield decided to preach in a new meetinghouse that the aggrieved faction in Newbury had recently erected for their separate worship exercises. The following day he delivered two sermons in the fields surrounding Peirce's manor house, where he resided during his visit to town. Whitefield and his supporters claimed that he used the separate meetinghouse merely because of the foul weather and that he had declared his "Disapprobation of rash and unscriptural Separation" at the beginning of his sermon. But newspaper correspondents nonetheless tarred him for the "meer Farce" of preaching against unlawful separations "while his *Conduct* was a vindication of them." In his diary, moreover, Whitefield even justified his Newbury visit using language that closely mirrored that of the Peirce faction. "Our Saviour had much people in and about New-bury," he proclaimed, "who like New-born babes were desirous of being fed the sincere milk of the word. Lord give it to them for the Dear Son's sake."[31]

Church members still loyal to Toppan reacted to this latest insurgency by digging in against Peirce and the aggrieved brethren. Several months before Whitefield's arrival, the pro-Toppan council had recommended appointing an assistant for the aging Newbury minister, and the church moved swiftly to hire a junior pastor following Whitefield's departure. The sole candidate was John Tucker of neighboring Amesbury, a recent graduate of Harvard College, a theological moderate, and an outspoken opposer of revival errors and excesses. Recognizing the "unhappy Division" in town, the "strong opposition" to his settlement by the aggrieved brethren, and the "uncommon obstructions" facing his ordination, Tucker tread cautiously at first. He sought the advice of local clergymen and begged the Newbury church to heal their divisions before he accepted their call. Meanwhile, the Peirce faction stepped up their attacks. Vigorously protesting Tucker's "irregular" calling, they blasted Toppan and his parishioners for failing to consider alternative candidates, improperly warning the church's selection meeting, allowing women to vote, and ignoring the majority opposition that surfaced in a town meeting a few days later. They condemned Tucker's legalistic preaching as neither "Edifying nor safe." "Our Silence in this case," Peirce wrote on behalf of the dissenters, "would be really Criminal."[32]

Tucker's ordination on April 20, 1745, proved to be the final straw. Almost immediately he attacked his opponents, urging the church to admonish the aggrieved brethren for their "disorderly behavior" during the previous three years. One month later, twenty-three members of the dissenting faction for-



Benjamin Tucker, detail of portrait of John Tucker (1719–1792), last quarter of the eighteenth century. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Old Newbury.

mally announced their "Duty to withdraw Communion" permanently from Toppan's church. In a statement justifying their decision, the Newbury dissenters contrasted their "Unwearied Pains" to adjudicate their grievances in a mutual church council with Toppan's imperious refusal to hear their case and Tucker's irregular ordination. Now that "every door of hope for Unity in One Assembly for Religious worship was shut up," Peirce explained, the aggrieved faction looked "upon Our Selves no longer Subjected to your Watch or Discipline." It would be "impossible under our Circumstances that we should ever be united in One assembly for Publick Worship," they stated flatly, given the "Unkindness, Injustice, falsity & partiality we have been treated with." And so the dissenters "Embodyed into a Church" and called one of New England's most radical revival preachers, Jonathan Parsons of Lyme, Connecticut, to their pulpit.[33]

The First Parish separatists eventually relocated to Newburyport. There, they merged with a group of more than thirty members of Newbury's waterside church, who had been embroiled in a similar dispute with John Lowell for nearly two years, and an equal number of previously unaffiliated families from both parishes. Parsons eventually yoked his breakaway church to the fervently pro-revival Boston Presbytery. Parsons described his parishioners as "Honest, Industrious People" and "solid & excellent Christians," wholly different in character from "those wild, friekish People that are scattered about in some parts of the Country." He even suggested that their decision to withdraw from the Congregational establishment had been deemed "Warrantable by some of the most substantial ministers in Town & Country."[34]

In the end, it took Tucker's church several more years to issue a formal statement admonishing the Peirce faction for their "fault in withdrawing." By then, Toppan had died and the matter had long been settled. After several unsuccessful petitions, the Newburyport Presbyterians managed to secure formal status as religious dissenters and tax relief from the Massachusetts General Court. A 1748 assessment list dividing the "Standing Part" of Newbury's First Parish from the dissenting "Petitioners" indicates that the schism precipitated by the revivals of the 1740s had resulted in the loss of nearly 40 percent of Toppan's original congregation. On the eve of the American Revolution, Parsons's Old South Presbyterian Church had blossomed into one of the largest and wealthiest religious congregations in New England. Whitefield's remains were interred in the church crypt in 1770. It remains to this day one of the preeminent Protestant pilgrimage sites in North America.[35]

What, precisely, does the Tappin manuscript have to do with Newbury's riotous revival season? The connection at first seems tenuous, since traditional prayer bills seldom addressed conversion, the most controversial issue of the Great Awakening. New England Congregationalists had long been accustomed to thinking about conversion as a lifelong pilgrimage—buttressed by the diligent performance of devotional disciplines—through which earnest saints slowly grew in grace and nurtured fleeting glimpses of their future spiritual estate. Full assurance of salvation was impossible, since God's divine plot had been sealed at the dawn of creation. For this reason, even deeply pious lay people would have considered it inappropriate and quite possibly unlawful to beg God publicly to carry them through the stages of regeneration. Not even Jonathan Edwards's famously awakened parishioners in Northampton wrote prayer bills for the conversion of individuals or their families. In fact, the only extant prayer bill manuscript that addresses this issue was penned by an anonymous member of Benjamin Trumbull's North Haven congregation during the summer of 1814. "Revd Sir," the note began, "Your prayers & those of your Church are humbly & earnestly requested in behalf of a young person who having been brought under deep convictions for sin has cast them off—grieved the spirit of God & returned back to the world." An exception that proves the rule, this prayer bill was so singular that Trumbull penned a note on the reverse side acknowledging that a request for a prayer of this type was "uncommon."[36]

During the peak months of the New England revivals in 1741 and 1742, however, things had been very different. Whitefield and other leading promoters of the transatlantic evangelical awakening believed that conversion was a discrete, datable, and often physically palpable event. "New converts," as they were often called, marked the time of their "great change" with greater assurance than their puritan ancestors. And this emerging conception of conversion, in turn, had a brief but dramatic impact on the prayer bill tradition. During a sermon preached on Boston Common in October 1740, Whitefield received a "ticket" requesting prayers on behalf of a young ministerial candidate who was "under apprehensions that he was not converted." Over the next two years, hundreds of awakened lay men and women in Boston posted prayer bills for people in the throes of the new birth. Venturing over to the Brattle Street meetinghouse for a midweek lecture one month after Whitefield's departure, physician John Loring encountered the arresting sight of "sixty or seventy notes" pinned to the church doors, each requesting prayers for individuals "under slight convictions" who had yet to experience the ecstatic release of the new birth. The new practice may have spread to other towns as well. Following a fast "to Implore Gods grace for the rising

Generation," Samuel Maxwell "Left a note" in the Stonington, Connecticut, meetinghouse beseeching God to pour out his Holy Spirit and convert his "Posterity." By the time that Thomas Prince wrote his "Account of the late Revival of Religion in Boston" for *The Christian History*, reports of prayer bills "put up in publick" for the unconverted had suddenly emerged as visible markers of a "wonderfully blest" revival season.[37]

But the same gatherings that produced these strikingly original prayer notes also provoked bitter controversies. As the revivals entered a radical phase in towns such as Boston and Newbury during the winter and spring of 1742, most clergymen attempted to corral the boisterous religious enthusiasm of their congregations. The conservative backlash against the alleged excesses of the revivals, in turn, impelled their inspired parishioners to lash out with vitriol. Later that summer, as the controversial itinerant preacher James Davenport languished in a Boston jail, someone slipped a "scandalous Note" into the pile of prayer bills scheduled to be read at a lecture in the Brattle Street meetinghouse. Instead of requesting prayers for unconverted revival participants, the petitioner asked the assembly to pray for the Boston "*Arssosacahsion* [*association*] *of Menesters*," which the scatological manuscript derided as "*the Choase* [*choice*] *Cause of the present Parsaction* [*persecution*] *of X* [*Christ*] *in boston or spirittual Jerusalam*." Witnesses who claimed to have inspected the "malicious and senseless" prayer bill believed that it had been written by an "enthusiastick Zealot," a local man "who too much neglects his proper Business, and sets up for an Exhorter."[38]

Widely reported in the public prints, the satirical prayer bill directed against a group of oppositional clergymen that had condemned Davenport's irregular ministry provides a more immediate context for the Tappin manuscript. Indeed, treating the text as a similar fraud brings into striking relief several of its more peculiar features. As with any good literary hoax, the opening lines of the Tappin manuscript closely mirrored the conventions of traditional prayer bills. After all, the fictitious Toppan was requesting prayers of thanksgiving following a riding accident. And yet like the Boston example the scurrilous note also included seemingly blatant errors of spelling and syntax that clearly signaled that it was a satire. Thus, the opening gambit was a mere pretense. The remaining portion of the prayer, which departed from standard generic conventions in its discussion of diabolic agency and the "Voyce" that convinced Toppan to "Opose that Great work of the Divill," mocked his superstition and gullibility.[39]

To be precise, it was the specific form of Toppan's opposition to the revivals that made the satirical prayer bill so effective. Most notable revival op-

posers, such as Boston clergyman Charles Chauncy, tended to naturalize the extravagant behavior of Whitefieldian evangelicals, asserting that they were distracted by nerves, animal spirits, and overheated imaginations. Toppan, by contrast, reached for diabolic agency. On several occasions during the church councils of 1743 and 1744, the aging Newbury minister attributed the insurgency within his parish to "Spiritual Delusion & Witchcraft" instigated by Satan. He even declared that the "New-light-men" were "possessed with an Evil Spirit." Toppan maintained that the verbal outbursts and bodily exercises of people undergoing conversion could just as easily be excited by the devil as by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, his first response to the aggrieved brethren was to assert that Satan, "transform'd into an Angel of light," had "transform'd his followers into his own likeness in regard of the new Light they pretend unto." The forged prayer bill so closely mirrored the supernatural revival critique that Toppan developed during the protracted controversy with his parishioners as to suggest that it was composed and tacked to the Newbury meetinghouse door during these same contentious months.[40]

Descriptions of Satan as a physical presence had become increasingly rare among Congregational clergymen during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Toppan's recourse to diabolic causation, therefore, made him an easy target for ridicule. The Newbury minister had always been something of a throwback to an earlier time of omens, prodigies, and special providences. Toppan's amphisbæna letter and unpublished theological writings revealed his persistent fascination with the oddities of nature, Satan's direct agency in the world, and the dangers of both witchcraft and judicial astrology. Such issues were increasingly out of fashion in a transatlantic intellectual world whose natural philosophers sought to discover the divine springs of an ordered and rational cosmos.[41]

By nearly all contemporary accounts, moreover, Toppan was an obstinate and high-spirited clergyman. Described in an obituary as "particularly well read in Polemical Divinity," he occasionally let his combative personality poison his relations with parishioners. Toppan's reaction to the petitions of the Peirce faction were cold, calculating, and, by some lights, unfaithful to his ministerial calling. He reportedly flew into a rage during the initial November 1743 *ex parte* council, after two of the assembled ministers "wrung their hands with tears flowing from their Eyes, & told him, It would break their hearts if he still went on in his usual Method opposing the good work" of the revivals. According to Matthias Plant, the Newbury minister "bid them get them to their several Parishes, & mind their own flock, & not come to disturb him & his church." In an otherwise supportive letter written a few weeks

earlier, Benjamin Colman chided Toppan for speaking "so grossly, & harshly, as is reported & written, of the good appearances & Evidences which I think there has been of a Work of Divine Grace thro' the Land in Years past." Even the members of the church council that exonerated his conduct the following year admonished their brash colleague for being "sometimes too severe & harsh in his Expressions." Local folklore suggests that the "superstitious and eccentric" minister "carried a whip into the church under his cloak" during the revival years to "scourge out the enthusiasts" among his congregants.[42]

Stymied in their efforts to resolve the dispute through formal ecclesiastical measures, the separatist wags who likely penned the Tappin manuscript turned to satirizing their aging minister as a superstitious enthusiast. The fictive Toppan of the prayer bill claimed that he had decided to condemn Newbury's powerful revival season—"That great work of the Devill"—following an encounter with Satan on the highways of town. He had arrived at his antirevival position, in other words, not through reasoned argument or scriptural study but after hearkening to an imaginary "Voyce" inside his head. Toppan comes across in the forged prayer bill as much a deluded enthusiast as his scheming antagonists in town. It was a clever attempt by the Newbury "Schemers" to fight fire with fire.[43]

The elaborate hoax also marked a breakdown of civility in what had been, prior to 1740, a flourishing and widely shared religious culture. As the tide of revivalism crested across New England in 1742, critics increasingly resorted to ridiculing the religious experiences of revival participants. Broadsides, pamphlets, and especially the Boston newspapers brimmed not only with lively theological debates and reports of revival triumphs and excesses but also with satirical editorials. Polemicists lashed out at their opponents using many of the tactics that had made London's Grub Street notorious a few decades earlier. Gossipy reports of extravagant religious errors—masquerading as news from the far corners of the British empire—trafficked in the scandalous, the lurid, and the bizarre dimensions of transatlantic evangelicalism. Polemical exchanges with touring evangelists, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, and German Moravians devolved into personal attacks and, occasionally, ethnic slurs. Critics tarred the revivals with the ghosts of notorious heresies and historical examples of religious excess, such as Montanism, the German Peasants' War, the Antinomian Controversy, various Quaker insurgencies, the antics of the French Prophets, or the Salem witch hunt. Others conjured new threats, from pickpockets, confidence men, and imposter itinerants targeting outdoor religious meetings to women, children, and enslaved Africans stepping out of their proper social stations to preach and exhort. Witty pundits

writing under humorous pseudonyms served up mock scriptural biographies of Whitefield, medicinal recipes for making new converts, directions for curing the region's purported religious ills using a "Chinese Stone," and even a Swiftian essay entitled "A modest Proposal for the Destruction of Reason." Laced with sexual innuendo and scatological references, doggerel verses on the revivals circulated widely both in print and in manuscript. New Englanders had remained aloof from the fractious Atlantic religious world for more than half a century. When confronted with evangelical radicalism, they responded with coarse humor and satirical invective, as the public tone of religious discourse took a decidedly darker turn during the mid 1740s.[44]

Nearly every known squib or screed that circulated through New England during the peak months of the Great Awakening reflected the antirevival sentiments of establishment ministers and their lay supporters. The Tappin manuscript, by contrast, is a rare example of religious satire crafted by a group of "New-Light-men." Critics of the Whitefieldian awakening tended to work within established literary genres, but the author of the Tappin manuscript was parodying a religious practice with deep roots in New England's puritan past. Indeed, prayer bills were one of the means of grace. They were part of a broader repertoire of devotional practices ranging from private meditation and scriptural study to the public ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper through which lay men and women nurtured their piety and prepared for salvation. At first glance, then, the Newbury incident seemed to underscore a disdainful attitude among the members of the Peirce faction toward the public "ordinances" around which Congregational life in New England had revolved for more than a century. It must have struck Toppan and his colleagues as a literary hoax that bordered on the blasphemous.[45]

It was not that the Newbury schemers categorically dismissed the performative dimensions of religious ritual. Quite to the contrary, the dramatically embodied and datable conversion experiences described by the first generation of New England evangelicals impelled them to purify and intensify the practices of the purportedly corrupt churches to which they once belonged. Confident of their divine election, new converts seldom expressed trepidation at the prospect of participating unworthily in the Lord's Supper, as had been the case among their puritan progenitors. Instead, they sought to impose greater restrictions on accessibility to the sacraments by restoring the test of a relation as a requirement for church membership and eliminating the practice of owning the covenant. Separate, or "strict," Congregational churches, as well as many established parishes that had experienced unusually powerful revival seasons, restored religious institutions and practices that had

fallen into disuse during the provincial period, including the office of church elder and excommunication proceedings. They readily embraced a variety of what Nicholas Gilman called new "Measures to Promote religion," such as innovative preaching techniques, emotive psalm singing, and protracted outdoor revival meetings. Perhaps the most notable of these developments was the meteoric rise of adult, or believers', baptism among revival converts, many of whom eventually hived off into separate Baptist congregations by 1750. A few zealous evangelicals experimented with foot washing, speaking in tongues, and other innovative rituals that were rooted in the charismata of the primitive Christian churches, while a handful of others—including the notorious Richard Woodbury—engaged in seemingly bizarre worship practices in which congregants rhythmically stamped the devil down to hell or pretended to vomit up their sins.[46]

Nor were Whitefieldian evangelicals opposed to the traditional practice of posting prayer bills. Several manuscripts survive from Isaac Backus's separate Baptist congregation in Middleborough, for example, and each was virtually indistinguishable from those composed earlier in the century by members of established Congregational churches. Members of Daniel Rogers's separatist church in Exeter, New Hampshire, also posted prayers that closely adhered to standard generic conventions.[47] Instead, what mattered most was the experiential status of the men and women who composed and submitted these texts. For ardent revival converts such as the Newbury separates, diligence in the puritan practices of piety counted for nothing without the transforming, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

When viewed from a broader angle, the Newbury prayer bill hoax fits into a larger pattern of radical religious dissent that surfaced during the Great Awakening, as insurgent evangelicals attempted to subordinate all devotional duties and public ordinances to the Whitefieldian experience of the new birth. Prior to 1740, ministers throughout New England had urged their parishioners to practice their Christ-commanded religious duties with diligence, regardless of whether they had reached assurance of their salvation. But "New-Light-men" such as the Newbury dissenters worked from a different logic—a logic of purity in which true converts not only possessed infallible knowledge of their election but withdrew from communion and even social relations with those who could not testify to similar experiences.

The same motives that impelled one member of the Peirce faction to submit a scandalous prayer bill in the name of a notable revival opposer and unconverted minister thus underwrote many of the most notorious revival incidents of the 1740s. It was the exclusionary logic of the Whitefieldian awakening,

for example, that drove James Davenport to separate full church members in his Southold, Long Island, congregation into converted brothers and unconverted "Neighbors," restrict the privileges of baptism and the Lord's Supper to the former group, and re-sprinkle infants who had been baptized by purportedly unregenerate ministers. His injunction to marry only converted saints was founded on similar grounds. The same logic of purity prompted Davenport's closest disciple—the future Newburyport separatist minister Jonathan Parsons—to prohibit "unconverted Persons" from joining in psalm singing during worship services. Concord's Daniel Bliss scandalized his parishioners by denying that the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper were "Seals" of the covenant of grace. He even proclaimed that notorious sinners who persisted in gambling at cards, drinking to excess, profaning the Sabbath, and even rioting in the streets would be redeemed if they belonged "to the Election of Grace." And only the logic of evangelical purity can account for East Haven minister Timothy Allen's seemingly outrageous statement that reading the Bible in an unregenerate state was no better than perusing "an OLD ALMANACK" or Philemon Robbins's equally perplexing assertion that the scriptures provided "*no Direction*" on "*how Men should come to Christ*." The "Ordinances of the Gospel," Davenport summarized, were "of no Efficacy when dispensed by unconverted Ministers." Without the "*concurring Influence and Operation of the Spirit of God*," Robbins agreed, all outward religious practices and duties were hopelessly compromised or, worse, halfway houses on the road to hell for carnal, secure, and sleepy sinners who rested content in their devotional performances.[48]

Unconverted lay men and women who nonetheless persisted in submitting prayer bills on behalf of sick family members, travelers, soldiers, or recently delivered mothers clearly fell within this category of evangelical critique. As Grafton's Solomon Prentice explained, the prayers of the unregenerate were "abominable" in God's eyes. Even to pray in such a condition, he continued, was "as fatal to the Soul as Rats-Bane is to the Body."[49] Of course, puritan theologians had always recognized that devotional performances such as posting prayer bills for the sick and infirm were inadequate in God's eyes, and yet meriting salvation was rarely the point. Instead, most provincial New Englanders hoped that the prayer-hearing God would convey temporal benefits to his earnest petitioners regardless of their eternal spiritual estates.

The willingness of the Newbury "New-Light-men" to satirize a ritual that mainstream Congregationalists considered to be one of the means of grace reinforced a broader theology of insurgent evangelicalism that took root during New England's era of great awakenings. Moderate revival apologists and

opposers alike recoiled from the verbal belligerence of men and women such as the Newbury "Schemers," but it was this same holy boldness that justified their decisions to separate from what they perceived to be the corrupt churches of the standing order. By the time the overheated rhetoric had died down, Charles Peirce and the rest of Newbury's aggrieved faction had broken permanently with the Congregational establishment. Their descendants would carry the quest for evangelical purity through the era of the American Revolution and into the pluralistic and contentious religious marketplace of the early republic.

Notes

This essay began as a lecture presented in 2008 at Harvard Divinity School's Conference on American Religious History: Honoring the Career of David D. Hall. Two years later, the author shared a revised and expanded version with the members of the Columbia University Seminar on Early American History and Culture. He would like to thank the many friends and colleagues who read and commented on these earlier drafts, including Patricia Bonomi, Richard Bushman, Evan Haefeli, David Hall, Ned Landsman, John Murrin, and Stephen Stein, as well as the members of the Fall Line Early Americanists (FLEA) reading group, especially Mathias Bergmann, Terri Halperin, Woody Holton, Peter Kaufman, Mark McGarvie, Sarah Meacham, Ryan Smith, Brent Tarter, Marion Nelson, Jim Watkinson, and, especially, Mark Valeri. During the latter phases of the project, he benefitted greatly from the insights of Conrad Edick Wright, Stephen Marini, and an anonymous MHR *reviewer.*

1. Anonymous, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1743–1744?], "Miscellaneous Papers—Churches," Historical Society of Old Newbury, Newburyport, Mass.
2. Joshua Coffin, *A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury, from 1635 to 1845* (Boston, 1845), 377; *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (Cambridge, Mass., and Boston, 1873–), 4:113–117; Daniel Langdon Tappan, *Tappan-Toppan Genealogy: Ancestors and Descendants of Abraham Toppan of Newbury, Massachusetts, 1606–1672* (Arlington, Mass., 1915), 54–56; *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, Aug. 10, 1747; Christopher Toppan to Cotton Mather, July 6, 1724, Curwen Family Papers, 1637–1808, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.; "The Double-Headed Snake of Newbury," in *John Greenleaf Whittier's Poetical Works* (New York, 1893), 288–290. Toppan's manuscript sermons and theological writings may be found at the Congregational Library, Boston.
3. Joshua Coffin, Popular Superstitions, n.d., Joshua Coffin Papers, Historical Society of Old Newbury, 1–2; Coffin, *Sketch of the History of Newbury*, 377.

4. Thomas Shepard, *A Treatise of Liturgies, Power of the Keyes, and of Matter of the Visible Church* (London, 1653), 35; Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, Calif., 1985), 108–109; John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649*, ed. Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 257, 370. No evidence supports Wilson H. Kimnach's suggestion that the puritans' practice of reading prayers written on small slips of paper derived from English "bidding prayers." Nor did Jonathan Edwards ever use the phrase "bid prayer" in his voluminous personal and religious writings, as several scholars, following Kimnach, have assumed. Instead, I use the interchangeable phrases "prayer note" and "prayer bill" in this essay, since these were the only terms employed by eighteenth-century New Englanders who described the practice in their letters and diaries. See Wilson Henry Kimnach, "The Literary Techniques of Jonathan Edwards" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 98n.
5. Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 2 vols., ed. Worthington C. Ford (1911–1912; New York, 1957), 1:62–63, 2:108.
6. Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729*, ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York, 1973), 1:59, 89, 98, 108, 141, 175, 327, 363, 366–367, 471, 2:631, 659, 695, 699, 720–721, 763–764, 767, 793, 816, 824, 863, 882, 941, 944–945, 951, 983, 1002, 1016, 1020; "Letter-Book of Samuel Sewall," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 6th ser., vol. 2 (Boston, 1888), 148, 264; Samuel Sewall, Jr., quoted in introduction to "The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th ser., vol. 5 (Boston, 1878), xxxviii; Martha Ballard, *The Diary of Martha Ballard, 1785–1812*, ed. Robert R. and Cynthia MacAlman McCausland, Maine Genealogical Society, Special Publication No. 10 (Rockport, Me., 1992), 56, 63–64, 79, 92, 105, 186, 305, 446, 449, 546, 597, 605, 628, 638, 787; John Ballentine, *Journal of Rev. John Ballantine, Minister of Westfield, MA, 1737–1774*, ed. George H. Ballentine, CD-ROM (Bowie, Md., 2002), passim.
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11. Stein, "For Their Spiritual Good," 271, 274–275, 281; Sewall, *Diary*, 2:763–764; Ebenezer Chamberlain, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1781], Persis Adams Divorce Papers, Westborough Town Hall, Westborough, Mass.; Jabez Dean, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1756], Norwich, Conn., First Congregational Church Papers, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Conn.; Ebenezer Parkman, *The Diary of Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, of Westborough, Mass.*, ed. Harriette M. Forbes (Westborough, Mass., 1899), 176.
12. See, for example, [Elizabeth Bursley?], Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1722], West Barnstable Congregational Church Records, 1668–1807, photostats, American Antiquarian Society; and Thankful Hunt, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1755–1776], in *Ezra Stiles Papers*, microfilm, no. 653.
13. Stein, "For Their Spiritual Good," 274–275, 277–278, 281–283; Kenneth P. Minkema and George G. Levesque, *Jonathan Edwards Tercentennial Exhibition: Selected Objects from the Yale Collections, 1703–2003* (New Haven, Conn., 2003), 21;

Samuel Brown, Ebenezer Dorr, Ephraim Forbush, John Gridley, Samson Wheeler, Ephraim Hapgood, Israel Heald, Susanna Heald, Tabitha Proctor, and Nehemiah Wheeler, Prayer Bills, n.d. [ca. 1770s], Miscellaneous Church Records Collection, Medfield Historical Society. See also John Williams, Prayer Bill, n.d. [after 1772], Baxter-Adams Papers, MHS.

14. Stein, "For Their Spiritual Good," 283; Benjamin Elton, Prayer Bill, n.d. [1714–1718], *Papers of Cotton Mather*, microfilm, reel 6, frames 101–102; Timothy Bragg, Jr., Prayer Bill, n.d. [1746–1754], Phillips Family Papers, MHS; Sewall, *Diary*, 2:863. On the centrality of healing in puritan ritual practices, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), 196–204.
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16. Anonymous, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1743–1744?]; Tappan, *Tappan-Toppan Genealogy*, 56.
17. Anonymous, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1743–1744?]; *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, Aug. 10, 1747. Descriptions of revivals as the "Work" of the Holy Spirit were ubiquitous in New England during the early 1740s. For these examples, see Douglas L. Winiarski, "A Jornal of a Fue Days at York: The Great Awakening on the Northern New England Frontier," *Maine History* 42(2004):47, 49, 63, 65, 72.
18. George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* (Carlisle, Penn., 1960), 465, 468; Daniel Rogers, Diary 1740–1753, Aug. 12–14, 1741, Rogers Family Papers, 1719–1955, New-York Historical Society, New York; Timothy Toppan and Enoch Titcomb to John Lowell, Dec. 16, 1743, Massachusetts Archives, 324 vols., microfilm (Boston, Mass., 1977), 12:694; Joshua Coffin, comp., "Facts & Documents Concerning Formation, 1634–74 & Copy of Church Records, 1674–1745," the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.; J. Richard Olivas, "Great Awakenings: Time, Space, and the Varieties of Religious Revivalism in Massachusetts and Northern New England, 1740–1748" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997), 603; Matthias Plant to Philip Bearcroft, Mar. 2, 1742, "The Diary of the Reverend Matthias Plant, Newbury, Mass.," typescript, the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum; *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*, vol. 3: *Massachusetts*, ed. William Stevens Perry (Hartford, Conn., 1873), 368.
19. Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740–1745* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), 44; Nicholas Gilman, "The Diary of Nicholas Gilman," ed. William Kidder (master's thesis, University of New Hampshire, 1972), 208; Rogers, Diary, Apr. 27, 1742. On the York revival, see Winiarski, "Jornal of a Fue Days at York," 46–60.
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seum, [8]; [Thomas Barnard], ed., *A Letter from Mr. Joseph Adams, to the Rev. Mr. Thomas Barnard of Newbury* (Boston, 1743), 3–4; Andrew Croswell to Nathaniel and Daniel Rogers, Sept. 23, 1742, American Colonial Clergy Series, Simon Gratz Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. I thank Erik Seeman for sharing his research notes on the Goodhue diary.

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23. Matthias Plant, in *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*, 3:368; [Charles Peirce], "To the Council of Churches convened at the House [of] Charles Peirce Esqr.," Newbury #2, Essex County Manuscripts, the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum, [4–5].
24. [Peirce], "To the Council of Churches," [3, 6–10].
25. Williston Walker, ed., *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (1893; New York, 1991), 339; *Boston Evening-Post*, Dec. 26, 1743; Memorandum by Benjamin Colman, n.d. [spring 1744], Benjamin Colman Papers, MHS. On the rise of "anti-councils," see James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York, 1999), 186–187.
26. [Peirce], "To the Council of Churches," [12–25].
27. Hamilton Andrews Hill, *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston, 1669–1884* (Boston, 1890), 1:542–543; James F. Cooper and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *The Colonial Church Records of Reading (Wakefield) and the First Church of Rumney Marsh (Revere)*, vol. 72, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston, 2006), 183–184; [Peirce], "To the Council of Churches," [27–34].
28. "Meeting of a Council to Hear Charges against Rev. Christopher Toppan," Aug. 31, 1744, pp. 12, 14–16, Joshua Noyes Papers, 1740–1773, MHS.
29. *A Letter from Two Neighboring Associations of Ministers in the Country* (Boston, 1745), 7; "Original Letters of Dr. Charles Chauncy," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 10(1856):333–334. Thomas S. Kidd sketches many of these events in *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, 2007), 117–173.
30. Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1991), 174–200.
31. Whitefield, *Journals*, 549–550; Rogers, Diary, Feb. 22–24, 1745; *Boston Evening-Post*, Mar. 11, 1745.
32. "Meeting of a Council," [16]; *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 11:78–91; Coffin, comp., "Facts & Documents," 295–303; [Peirce], "To the Council of Churches," [42–46].
33. Coffin, comp., "Facts & Documents," 308; [Peirce], "To the Council of Churches," [46–50].

34. Samuel H. Parsons, "Original Letter of the Rev. Jonathan Parsons," *New England Historical Genealogical Register* 12(1858):299–300; Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Philadelphia, 1858), 252–253.
35. John Tucker to Charles Peirce et al., Apr. 23, 1750, Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, New-York Historical Society; "A List of the First Parish in Newbury," 1748, Massachusetts Archives, 13:716–718; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 188.
36. Anonymous, Prayer Bill, July 7, 1814, box 23, Trumbull Papers. Of the more than 1,200 prayer requests that Westfield minister John Ballantine recorded in his diaries between 1743 and 1774, only one was offered on behalf of a parishioner "exercised about her future State." See Ballantine, *Journal*, July 11, 1762. David D. Hall reviews the extensive scholarly literature on puritan conceptions of conversion in "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 44(1987):213–222; and "Narrating Puritanism," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York, 1997), 67–68.
37. *George Whitefield's Journals*, 470; John Loring to Israel Loring, Dec. 18, 1740, Jan. 22, 1741, Nathan Stone Papers, MHS; Samuel Maxwell, Commonplace Book, 1722–1755, MS C 5045, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, [16]; Thomas Prince, "Some Account of the late Revival of Religion in Boston," *The Christian History* 2(1744):391. For similar reports, see Rogers, Diary, July 8, 1741; Samuel Phillips Savage to Gilbert Tennent, Jan. 30, 1742, Samuel Phillips Savage Papers II, MHS; and James R. Tanis, "A Child of the Great Awakening," *American Presbyterians* 70(1992):128.
38. *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, Aug. 19, 1742; *Boston Evening-Post*, Aug. 30, 1742.
39. Anonymous, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1743–1744?].
40. [Peirce], "To the Council of Churches," [3–4, 16]; "Meeting of a Council," [1, 4]; Colman, Memorandum, n.d. [spring 1744]. For naturalistic critiques of revival errors, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, 1999), 20–46.
41. Toppan to Mather, July 6, 1724; Toppan, "Some Polemical Topics Considered and Determined by some Orthodox Divines Tho Unknown," n.d. [1690–1700], MS 1249, Congregational Library, 445–452, 455–456. On the eighteenth-century decline of puritan wonder lore and beliefs in satanic agency, see Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1996), 124–152; and Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), 164–193.
42. *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, Aug. 10, 1747; Plant to Bearcroft, Nov. 28, 1743, "Diary of the Reverend Matthias Plant"; Benjamin Colman to Christopher Toppan, Oct. 29, 1743, Colman Papers; "Meeting of a Council," [14]; Eliza Adams Little and Lucretia Little Ilsey, *The First Parish: Newbury, Massachusetts, 1635–1935* (Newburyport, Mass., 1935), 34; Coffin, *Sketch of the History of Newbury*, 376–377.
43. Anonymous, Prayer Bill, n.d. [ca. 1743–1744?].
44. Lisa Herb Smith provides a detailed calendar of these examples in "The First Great

Awakening in American Newspapers, 1739–48" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1998). The best-known pamphlet that attempted to connect revival excesses with past Christian heresies was *The Wonderful Narrative; Or, a Faithful Account of the French Prophets, Their Agitations, Extasies, and Inspirations* (Boston, 1742). Several examples of doggerel verses attacking the revivals are preserved among the Colman-Jenks Papers, MHS. For a detailed discussion of the "increasingly corrosive tone" of political discourse in early eighteenth-century Anglo-America, see Patricia U. Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 99–127.

45. On puritan ritual practices in general, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982).
46. Nicholas Gilman, in "Diary of Nicholas Gilman," ed. Kidder, 194. Studies that examine ritual innovations among separate Congregationalists and radical evangelicals include C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740–1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1987); William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971); Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Peter Benes, "Psalmody in Coastal Massachusetts and the Connecticut River Valley," in *The Bay and the River: 1600–1900*, ed. Benes, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, *Annual Proceedings 1981* (Boston, 1982), 117–131; Clarke Garrett, *Origins of the Shakers: From the Old World to the New World* (Baltimore, 1998); Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994); James P. Walsh, "A Communion of Saints: The Move to Restrict Admissions to the Lord's Supper in the Congregational Churches of Connecticut, 1740–1818," *Mid-America: An Historical Review* 78(1996):259–278; and Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore, 1999). For specific references to foot washing and glossolalia, as well as ritualized gestures and dancing, see Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus* (Boston, 1859), 122–124; Joseph Higgins, Letter to an Anonymous Clergyman, ca. 1743, MS C1345, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Mass.; Isaac Backus, "Some facts and remarks about baptisms at Norton and Easton," June 30, 1781, in *The Papers of Isaac Backus, 1630–1806*, ed. Leigh Johnson (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2003), microfilm, no. 1480; and Samuel Chandler, "Religious Excitement One Hundred and Odd Years Ago," ed. Joshua Coffin, *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 15(1861):23–24.
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ton, 1743), 190, 215; William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (New York, 1857–1869), 3:85; *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, Nov. 2, 1741; Hannah Heaton, in *The World of Hannah Heaton: The Diary of an Eighteenth-Century New England Farm Woman*, ed. Barbara E. Lacey (DeKalb, Ill., 2003), 13; Higgins, Letter to an Anonymous Clergyman; "An Eccesiastical Council, 1743: Trial of the Reverend Daniel Bliss of Concord, Massachusetts," *Historical Manuscripts in the Public Library of the City of Boston* (Boston, 1902), 2:3–4; Philemon Robbins, *A Plain Narrative of the Proceedings of the Reverend Association and Consociation of New-Haven County, against the Reverend Mr. Robbins of Branford, since the Year 1741* (Boston, 1747), 23–24.

49. *A Result of a Council of Churches at Grafton, October 2d. 1744* (Boston, 1744), 2.