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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES IN NEW ENGLAND

DOUGLAS L. WINIARSKI

CHAPTER SEVEN

Timothy Mather Cooley knew well the challenges that he faced when, in 1796, he accepted a call to serve as the third pastor of the Congregational Church of Granville, Massachusetts. Founded during the tumultuous religious decade of the 1740s—a period of intense revival activity known as the “Great Awakening”—Granville had struggled to maintain a settled ministry over the next two decades. Competing factions of parishioners had wrangled over religious doctrine and fought to control key church offices; seemingly petty squabbles among neighbors had erupted into disputes that lasted for decades. In fact, Granville had been without an ordained pastor since the dismissal of the controversial Jedidiah Smith in the mid-1770s.

The task of restoring discipline to what in previous decades would have been Granville’s sole established, tax-supported religious institution began with an inventory of the extant church records. Smith had failed to keep a formal record book. Instead, Cooley inherited a chaotic collection of manuscripts, and organizing them into an orderly system required concerted effort. Carefully sorting the loose papers into neatly folded docketts, the young Yale graduate proceeded to label each with a brief notation regarding its subject matter. He would follow this procedure meticulously over the course of his six-decade pastorate, and by the time of his death in 1859, the Granville clergyman had assembled one of the largest and most detailed collections of church papers in antebellum New England. There were letters of recommendation from neighboring churches, depositions and confessions relating to cases of church discipline, minutes of church

meetings, correspondence with colleagues, sermon notes, and most important, brief autobiographical narratives submitted by candidates for full church membership.

Cooley's endorsements on this last group warrant careful scrutiny. During the eighteenth century, parishioners seeking access to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in New England's Congregational churches were required to compose a brief written statement in which they described their personal beliefs and religious experiences. Jedidiah Smith initially had referred to the short narratives as "Relations"; but four decades later, Cooley wrote the word "Experiences" beneath his predecessor's original notations. What was the significance of the changing terminology? The question becomes even knottier when we stop to consider that during the seventeenth century, Puritan clergymen called these same church-admission testimonies "confessions." Adding to the confusion, modern historians have classified this distinctive genre of New England religious literature as "conversion narratives," but even a cursory examination of their theological arguments, autobiographical content, and physical appearance suggests that their meaning and significance changed dramatically over the two centuries in which they were employed as a formal test to gauge the spiritual fitness of prospective church members.

Fig. 7.1. Timothy Mather Cooley served as pastor of Granville's First Congregational Church for sixty years. By 1845, he had admitted more than 330 people to full communion. Courtesy of Denison University.



This chapter examines the shifting language of conversion in New England Congregationalism—the bastion of Puritan culture in North America—from the period of settlement in the 1630s to the eve of the Civil War. Evidence is drawn from a database of more than a thousand church-admission narratives from nearly three dozen communities scattered across Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire.¹ Throughout this period, most Congregational ministers remained committed to a Calvinist theology that emphasized innate human depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace. Yet the importance of conversion—the sacred calculus through which God winnowed saints

from sinners—waxed and waned through the centuries, and New Englanders affiliated with local churches for a variety of reasons, including, but not always limited to, their hopes for eternal salvation. By the mid-1800s, recurrent waves of religious revivalism had recast the extended Puritan “morphology of conversion” into a discrete and often instantaneous temporal experience of being “born again” in the Holy Spirit—the hallmark of American evangelicalism. In tracking the generic conventions of New England church-admission narratives over two centuries, we can begin to appreciate the important role that early American evangelicalism played in mediating larger processes of cultural change and modernization. (See plate C in gallery.)

PURITAN CONFESSIONS

The Granville church-admission narratives were part of a unique genre of American Protestant devotional literature with deep roots in the history of New England Congregationalism. The peculiar practice of relating experiences of divine grace emerged slowly from the shadowy world of the English Reformation. By 1600, a few independent churches required candidates for full membership to assent verbally to the doctrines defined in the church covenant. Radical reformers—particularly English separatists living in exile on the continent—extended this practice one step further by urging their members to explain their personal beliefs “in their own words and way.” In addition, many early Reformed churches demanded a formal confession of sin before admitting members to the Lord’s Supper. During this second, autobiographical oral performance, prospective communicants lamented their innate sinfulness and expressed their desire to repent of past misdeeds, employing events drawn from personal experience to convey the depth of their sorrow.

By 1640, New England Puritans had knit these disparate strands of English dissenting practice into a vigorous church-admission standard through which they sought to differentiate God’s predestined saints from the mixed multitude of unregenerate sinners. From their inception, Puritan communities recognized a distinction between “congregation” and “church.” The former was a geographical term

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referring to the collective body of settlers who, by law, were required to attend Sabbath meetings. The more restrictive notion of a church, by contrast, denoted an inner circle of “visible saints” who voted on ecclesiastical issues, placed themselves under the holy watch of their neighbors, and enjoyed privileged access to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. According to the first systematic exposition of New England ecclesiology, *A Platform of Church Discipline* (1649)—commonly known as the Cambridge Platform—those seeking access to the “doors of the Churches of Christ upon earth” were expected to make their “calling” as members of the elect visible to the community by reciting a “personall & publick *confession*” in which they declared “Gods manner of working upon the soul.”²

The daunting public-speaking performance capped a lengthy period of preparation. Prospective communicants first appeared before the ruling elders in a private meeting several weeks in advance, where they articulated their desire to join the church and responded to a series of “probatory questions.” Successful applicants were then “propounded” for a period that usually lasted a fortnight but occasionally stretched over several months. In the intervening weeks, candidates labored to resolve existing disputes with other members of the community or acknowledged scandalous behavior in a formal confession of sin. On the appointed Sabbath, men and women stood before the congregation, recited their spiritual experiences aloud, and answered questions. In some churches, friends, neighbors, and family members offered testimonies endorsing the sincerity of the candidates’ narratives. Finally, the elder called for a “handy” vote, asked the applicant to assent to the church covenant, and extended the “right hand of fellowship” to the newly admitted church member.

New England church-membership testimonies conformed to a narrative pattern that drew upon the works of notable English theologians in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Eminent scholars such as William Perkins argued that the experience of regeneration unfolded through a series of discrete stages. This “morphology of conversion” typically began with an awakening incident that wrenched sleepers from their spiritual security and initiated a period of intensive introspection. Convicted of sin and languishing under legal fears of impending divine wrath, the penitent faithful consulted

with friends and family members and sought the advice of local pastors. Devotional routines such as Bible study, meditation, secret prayer, journal writing, and private rituals of covenant renewal, in turn, provided brief sanctuary from the anxieties of living in bondage to sin, as broken sinners learned to rely on Christ alone for divine grace and salvation. They labored incessantly to recreate and routinize these spiritually refreshing moments. In Perkins's morphology, conversion was characterized by a distinct narrative plot involving a gradual progression from one stage to the next. Despite occasional periods of backsliding and persistent anxieties that slowed them down, true saints would "grow in grace" over time and exhibit their transformed souls through sanctified behavior.

Parishioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts, displayed a familiarity with the stages of Perkins's developmental theory of conversion in their church-admission testimonies. Town minister Thomas Shepard recorded more than seventy such "confessions" in a pair of small notebooks during the 1630s and 1640s, and these narratives were saturated in the Calvinist language of human depravity. Candidates often associated "worldly" misfortunes and "afflictions"—illnesses, deaths, or failed business enterprises—with the preliminary legal stages of conviction. Although they frequently resorted to various devotional routines to assuage their fearful consciences, many of these first-generation New England emigrants equally feared the danger of "resting" in "duties" and the empty forms of religious practice. Like many zealous English Protestants, Shepard's congregants began their narratives by recalling their growing attraction toward the Puritan movement. Some admitted to living in "popery" or "ignorance" for years before encountering "godly" laypeople or ministers who convinced them of the need to separate themselves from the "mixed ordinances" of the Church of England and the necessity of conversion.

Inspired preaching guided the faithful through the stages of conversion. Cambridge parishioners cited an astonishing array of biblical texts—more than eleven per testimony—nearly half of which were related to sermons. Repeated references to "hearing" the Word suggest that the Puritans listened carefully and labored to apply what they heard each Sabbath to their individual spiritual situations. Laymen and laywomen envisioned sermons as a medium of divine

communication, as Abram Arrington explained when he stated in his confession that “the Lord spake” through Shepard’s weekly performances. The power of the Holy Spirit, “opened” through the preached Word, roused secure sinners to their dangerous condition, “stayed” the despondent, “answered” the questioning, and “cheered” the hopeful. If any of the Cambridge confessors had become “gainer[s] in a spiritual way” and managed to glean evidence of their divine election, it was the result of the preached Word.

Church-membership candidates such as Harvard student Comfort Starr knew that God redeemed his saints “from wrath by certain stages and degrees,” yet few laypeople claimed to have followed Perkins’s path to its final destination. Instead, the New England confessions deviated in striking ways from their transatlantic counterparts. In the flush days of the English Commonwealth, zealous Protestant dissenters on both sides of the Atlantic spoke of intensive inner struggles to gain assurance of salvation. They spiritualized the political turmoil of the era and sought out the fervent preaching of Calvinist clergymen. Yet English Puritans who had suffered under an oppressive Anglican regime expressed greater confidence in their hopes of being counted among God’s elect, and they willingly testified to miraculous encounters with the sacred in dreams, visions, and other ecstatic forms of spiritual rapture. Parishioners in John Rogers’s transplanted Puritan congregation in Dublin, for example, frequently concluded their testimonies on a high note, claiming that they were “*fully satisfied*” and had received “*full assurance*” of “*Gods love to me in Christ*.”³

In contrast to the confidence of these English confessions, early New England testimonies were often narratives of failure, as speakers lingered on the initial halting steps in the conversion process rather than its culmination. Dozens of prospective communicants in the Cambridge and Wenham churches offered vivid descriptions of their efforts “to enjoy the presence of the Lord in the liberty and purity of his ordinances,” yet they often experienced disillusionment and alienation following their arrival in the New World. Many spoke of falling into “*trials*” and “*discontent*”; they were buffeted by worldly temptations and languished through “*unprofitable*” periods of carnal security—despite living under the “*means*” of grace. “I found my

heart dead and sluggish,” admitted Elizabeth Dunster, sister of the first president of Harvard College. Deacon Gregory Stone’s daughter concurred, asserting that the promise of religious liberty in New England had led only to complacency. “I was sure of water,” she explained in a particularly evocative statement, “dry, though not thirsty, [in a] state of sin” and yet “not troubled for particular sins.” “Since I came hither,” Nathaniel Eaton summarized, “I have not found my heart to walk so closely with God as I should.” Still committed to the developmental model of Puritan conversion described by writers such as William Perkins, few church-membership candidates in New England during the 1640s claimed to have reached the final stages of assurance, election, and union with the divine.

The somber tone of the New England confessions—indeed, the very impulse to regulate the narration of religious experience through a formal ritual—developed in the context of an unusually acrimonious ecclesiastical dispute known as the Antinomian Controversy (1636–1638). Just two years after his arrival, Shepard participated in the prosecution of the charismatic Boston church member, healer, and midwife Anne Hutchinson. During her trial, Hutchinson voiced a short experiential narrative that bore a family resemblance to the testimonies that Shepard would record in the Cambridge meeting-house a few years later. Like many of her neighbors, she chronicled her struggles to conform to the Church of England, and she framed her decision to immigrate to New England as a religious quest to rejoin her former minister, Boston’s prominent theologian John Cotton. But where the Cambridge confessors hedged their accounts with stories of spiritual backsliding, Hutchinson brazenly claimed to have received definitive answers to her deepest spiritual concerns in the form of “immediate revelations”—biblical passages that were “opened” to her alone through the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit. And to make matters worse, she channeled her unusual supernatural communications into a blistering critique of Shepard and his more conservative Puritan colleagues in a series of weekly conventicles during which she debated the sermons of local ministers in the mixed company of men and women.⁴

In the wake of the protracted ecclesiastical dispute that banished Hutchinson and her supporters to Rhode Island, Shepard and his

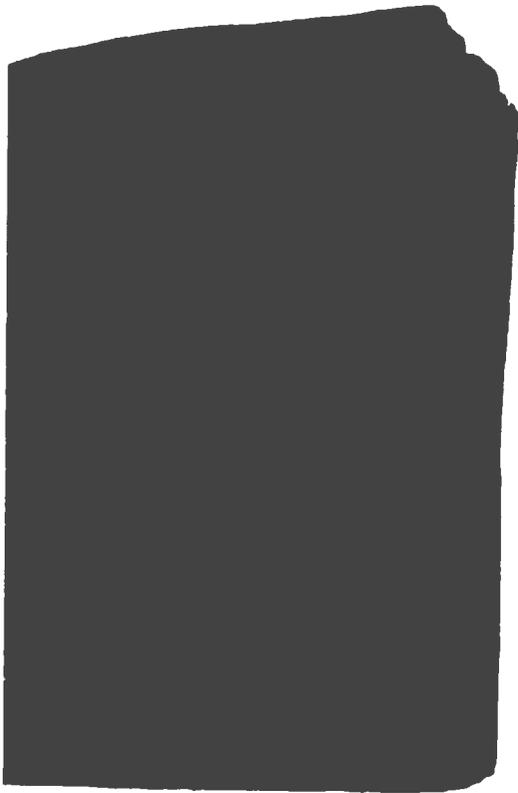


Fig. 7.2. The crabbed handwriting of Cambridge minister Thomas Shepard is typical of seventeenth-century orthography, yet his ca. 1640 transcription of Edward Collins's "Confession" also appears to have been written hastily—perhaps as his parishioner spoke the words himself. Courtesy of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Mass.

ministerial colleagues instituted the practice of reciting confessions as a prerequisite for church membership. The word "Confession" fronting the narratives that Shepard inscribed in his church-admission notebooks reinforced his growing concern that fallible human beings could or even should hope to gain full knowledge of their eternal estates in this sinful world. Increasingly, he retreated into a theological model of conversion that emphasized "preparation" for salvation through a lifetime spent in diligent introspection and dogged devotional practices, and he expected that the confessions of his parishioners would conform to this pattern. In an extended sermon series on the *parable of the foolish virgins* that he preached during the late 1630s, the Cambridge minister inveighed against the "wearisome," "uncomely," and "odd confessions" of the Hutchinsonians. Members of his congregation cited this sermon series repeatedly in their church-admission

narratives, and the overall pattern of these texts conformed closely to his conservative model of conversion.

Bold expressions of individual inspiration would eventually take hold in New England, but in the 1630s, ministers succeeded in keeping them down. In swift reaction against the inspirations that Hutchinson and her followers claimed, Shepard and his New England colleagues reinforced the boundaries of appropriate religious expression and seldom tired of preaching on limits of assurance. The dominant trope of their new preparationist paradigm was the "weary pilgrim," an image made famous in both the haunting poetry of Anne Bradstreet and John Bunyan's classic allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Shepard, too, described conversion as an earthly pilgrimage toward a heavenly destination in his poetic masterpiece, *The Sound Beleever* (1645). Drawing on Hebrews 11, he likened the saints to "strangers" who "have no abiding city" in this world, but rather "live alone as Pelicans

in the wilderness,” patiently awaiting the final resolution of their spiritual yearnings at the day of atonement.⁵ Similar metaphors of spiritual asceticism and ceaseless striving colored the confessions of the Puritan laity. When Wenham goodwife Trypbean Geere hinted that her “broken heart” was perhaps a sign of her saintly status, an unnamed church member challenged her to explain the difference between “a legal and a[n] evangelical breaking.” “Ice, if broken by a breath may congeal again,” he explained. Only when the sun rose high enough in the sky would the thaw be lasting. The message was clear. True Christians in this world should not expect to bask endlessly in the glorious sunshine of divine grace like the confident saints of Rogers’s Dublin congregation. Nor should they expect to receive immediate revelations like Anne Hutchinson. Not even the solemn ritual of church affiliation would relieve the faithful from what Shepard called “winter seasons,” for, in his words, “very few living Christians have any settled comfortable evidence of God’s eternal love to them in his Son.”⁶

Puritan Conversion as Solemn Preparation for Salvation

I confess it is not fit that so holy and solemn an Assembly as a Church is, should be held long with Relations of this odd thing and tother, nor hear of Revelations and groundless joyes, nor father together the heap, wherein they have got any good; nor Scriptures and Sermons, but such as may be of special use unto the people of God, such things as tend to shew, Thus I was humbled, then thus I was called, then thus I have walked, though with many weaknesses since, and such special providences of God I have seen, temptations gone through, and thus the Lord hath delivered me, blessed be his Name &c.

—Thomas Shepard,
The Parable of the Ten Virgins
(London, 1660), in *The Works of Thomas Shepard*, ed. John Albro
(Boston, 1853) 2:200.

PROVINCIAL RELATIONS (1690–1740)

From the outset, a vocal minority of ministers and laypersons balked at New England’s restrictive, anxiety-inducing church-membership standards. The practice of reciting confessions in public provoked bitter criticism from moderate reformers and earnest laypeople on both sides of the Atlantic, who questioned its scriptural foundation and accused their zealous Puritan brethren of excessively narrowing the gates of the church. In response to the host of problems that emerged from the new membership “tryall,” the Cambridge Platform encouraged church members to exercise a “judgment of charity” in the examination of prospective candidates and accept new communicants

on the basis of the “weakest *measure* of faith.” In addition, the results of the Platform included a provision allowing unusually fearful candidates to narrate their religious experiences in private meetings with the minister and elders.⁷ Over the next fifty years, churches throughout New England adjusted their admission criteria. By 1700, written “relations”—formal statements drafted by or on behalf of candidates by their ministers—had supplanted the oral performances of the founding generation. Increasingly, these paper instruments assumed a contractual form whose rigid structure, theological content, and narrative organization rapidly overshadowed the Puritan morphology of conversion.

The clergy’s role in regulating the admission process expanded in direct proportion to the extent that oral confessions receded from public view. A new professional class of Harvard-trained clergymen took command of the task of interviewing candidates for full membership in the privacy of their studies and drafting relations on their behalf. Nearly two-thirds of the 235 extant church-admission narratives from the Essex County town of Haverhill—the single largest collection of eighteenth-century relations—were composed in the steady hand of minister John Brown. These brief documents were laced with terse biblical citations, frequent abbreviations, and shorthand symbols. The Haverhill pastor composed each relation separately on small, uniform pieces of paper measuring four by six inches. On the reverse side, he identified each candidate, numbered the relation, and noted the dates on which the applicant was propounded and admitted to the church. In cases where parishioners

Fig. 7.3. John Brown’s system for recording the written relations of parishioners is evident in Martha Roberds’s 1727 narrative. Courtesy of Haverhill Public Library, Haverhill, Mass.

ack. I have been a great sinner, God has made me sensible
 to my duty to come to the Sacrament in His solemn, I desire to come
 to him for the pardon of my sins: I thought of that place Jer
 55 (17. 4. mat. 5. 6. which was encouraging to me. God was pleas
 ed to lay me under a burden of languishing, and awakened me to some
 purpose and resolution of a new life, and the late earthquake
 seemed extraordinary surprising and awakening to me, a loud call
 when God has been waiting for us, to awaken us out of our slumber
 I desire fully to express my faith, and my
 desire prayers that I may have grace to do so and lead my life
 and conversation accordingly

Martha Roberds wife
 of David

identified each candidate, numbered the relation, and noted the dates on which the applicant was propounded and admitted to the church. In cases where parishioners

drafted their relations independently, Brown occasionally altered the content, marking grammatical errors, substituting words, striking phrases, and in a few cases, introducing entirely new material. Ministerial gatekeepers like Brown, in short, created a genre of devotional literature that was characterized by rigid formalism in physical appearance as well as uniformity in rhetorical style and narrative content.

References to the lively stirrings of grace declined as church-admission standards became more regulated. Most early eighteenth-century written relations bore little resemblance to the descriptions of conversion outlined in the works of Perkins, Shepard, and other Puritan divines. Instead, they frequently consisted of basic Reformed doctrines strung together in a series of credal affirmations. Church-membership “professors,” as the candidates were often called, typically asserted that the Bible was the “word of God and a perfect rule of faith and practice.” In addition, a number of Haverhill candidates described the trinitarian essence of the divinity and God’s role in creating heaven and earth in seven days. References to original sin, the authority of Scripture, and other basic Calvinist tenets also appeared with regularity. Eighteenth-century candidates continued to express their desire for “growth in Grace,” yet few of their professions mentioned seasons of hope and despair, awakening sermons heard, or rapturous experiences of ecstatic release. Indeed, there was little to differentiate many of these documents from the formal church covenants that local clergymen inscribed at the beginning of their parish record books.

Statements of belief rarely appeared in church-admission narratives before 1720, but within a decade relations containing doctrinal professions outnumbered purely autobiographical narratives by a margin of two to one. Demands by local clergymen that candidates display a mastery of basic Reformed doctrines, in turn, gradually transformed the meaning of church affiliation from a signifier of visible sainthood into a mandatory obligation incumbent on all believers regardless of their eternal estate. In the massive Haverhill collection, for example, the word “duty” appeared over two hundred times, and candidates occasionally resorted to contractual language to describe the meaning of church fellowship. “I hope I am desirous & willing to Embrace Jesus Christ on his own Terms,” wrote the prominent surveyor Richard Hazzen, and “to Yield Sincere Obedience to all his

Commands.” Terms, obligations, contracts, commands, duties—the intensely legalistic language of early eighteenth-century relations heralded the dawn of a new era in which the formal performance of outward devotional practices eclipsed the introspective conversionist piety of the founding generation.

Among the Christian duties mentioned in surviving relations, none was more important than the observance of the public ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. Scores of books on the subject poured from New England presses between 1690 and 1740. Widely distributed and eagerly consumed by the laity, these works included sermons, informal dialogues, and devotional handbooks that were designed to help prospective communicants prepare to receive Christ’s body and blood. Statements regarding the significance of the sacraments in the lives of the faithful—absent in seventeenth-century narratives—occupied an increasingly prominent position in later written testimonies. One in five Haverhill candidates cited Christ’s command to commemorate his death by consuming his body and blood (Luke 22:19) as the primary reason for joining the church, while prospective communicants in Lynnfield, Medfield, Westborough, and Boston claimed to have read sacramental handbooks in preparation for admission or glossed the theological significance of the Lord’s Supper in their doctrinal professions.

At the same time, the late-seventeenth-century renaissance in Puritan sacramental theology generated a new type of anxiety for the laity. Ministers repeatedly exhorted their congregants to fulfill their commanded duties through church affiliation; yet they also issued stern warnings urging prospective communicants to examine their hearts before approaching the Lord’s Table, lest they, in the words of 1 Corinthians 11:29, “eateth and drinketh” their own “damnation” by receiving the elements unworthily. No other biblical verse was cited more often by church membership applicants in the central Massachusetts village of Westborough, and it ranked among the top five most frequently quoted passages in all towns for which relations survive in the period from 1690 to 1740. “I have had many thoughts of Joining to the Church of Christ in this place, and to draw near to God in special ordinances,” explained George Barber of Dedham, “but was discouraged” by Paul’s stern warning to the Corinthians. “I thought in

the consideration [of this text] that if I should come unworthily to the Lords Table it would be far worse for me in the day of Judgment than if I had never come.” Puritan sacramentalism thus created a hopeless dilemma for many would-be saints, and no one exposed the conundrum better than Haverhill’s Mary Sanders, who lamented that “I sin in Coming unworthily & I sin in staying away unworthily.”

It was for this reason that scrupulous laymen and laywomen in the early eighteenth century approached the communion table with great reluctance, if at all. Although they were knowledgeable in doctrine and sensible of their sacramental obligations, even deeply pious women such as Haverhill’s famed Indian captive Hannah Duston elected to defer their decision to close with the church until the “Eleventh hour.” “Many Years ago I had a Desire to join with the Church,” explained one of Duston’s neighbors, “but I tho’t twas time eno’ for me Yet.” Others proceeded cautiously, electing “to Live a Litle Longer In the neglect” of the ordinances, or to “stay [away] till I was better prepared.” Potential church-membership candidates thus hung suspended between fear and duty, and only a dangerous period of affliction or a major change in family status could tip the scales in favor of affiliation.

By the early decades of the 1700s, admission rituals marked an important life-course transition that signified both temporal and spiritual maturation. On rare occasions, candidates echoed the private sentiments of Boston magistrate Samuel Sewall, who noted in his diary that his decision to apply for the privileges of church membership was motivated by a desire to secure the right to baptize his children.⁸ Demographic studies have shown that these family strategies were never far from the candidates’ minds. Three out of four men and women were married at the time they joined the church. Spouses often covenanted on the same Sabbath, and during the 1730s, this practice gave rise to the creation of joint relations drafted on behalf of husband and wife. In some parishes, upwards of 75 percent of all new communicants presented a child for baptism within a month of joining the church.⁹

The period of family formation also exposed men and women to emotional stress and physical danger—perhaps for the first time in their lives. Marriage, of course, brought children, a third of whom

would sicken and die before their tenth birthdays. New brides spent the next two decades of their lives in a relentless and often frightening reproductive cycle that brought dangerous periods of childbirth “travail” every twenty months. It was during these years, too, that men inherited or purchased farms, adopted trades, and entered the military. The emotional anxieties of family life, when coupled with an increased risk of accident, illness, or sudden death, drove many to close with the church. Mary Rocket of Medfield offered a powerful reflection on the relationship between life-course transitions and church membership in her 1697 relation. She began by lamenting that she had delayed her “repentance time after time.” Only after entering “into a married estate” did she finally consider performing her duties at the Lord’s Table, for she had “met with many sorrows, troubles, and afflictions” following her marriage, and these misfortunes “did something awaken” her. Benjamin Phinney of Barnstable echoed these sentiments two decades later, writing that he “met with new duties & new difficulties” in the years since God had been “pleased . . . to bring me into a married State.”

Temporal afflictions, especially the death of a parent, sibling, spouse, child, neighbor, or favorite minister, also stirred reluctant parishioners to embrace their sacramental obligations. Meditating on the “passages of Providence” in her life, Lynnfield’s Mehitable Osgood recalled the “heavy Stroke” of her father’s recent passing. “This moved me to Resolve to give up my Self to God in an everlasting Covenant”—a “resolution” that she “put . . . in practice” when she joined the church in 1728. A few years later, Margaret McHard watched with growing alarm as a diphtheria epidemic claimed the lives of thousands of children along the northern New England frontier. Among the more than forty new communicants who swelled the ranks of the Haverhill church in a brief two-year period in 1736 and 1737, she noted in her relation that she had “been awakened to my duty by sundry Instances of sudden Death of late which are loud calls to me to prepare.” Overall, nearly half of all candidates in Medfield and one-fifth of the applicants in Haverhill cited the death of a family member or neighbor as an awakening event that impelled them to join the church.

In times when God’s afflictive hand gripped entire communities—as was the case with droughts, Indian raids, or epidemics—

dramatic surges in church membership often followed. One of the largest religious revivals in New England history was triggered by a powerful earthquake that rattled buildings and toppled fences throughout the Merrimack Valley on October 29, 1727. In the ensuing weeks, Haverhill town minister John Brown reported that he was “fully employ’d in discoursing” with distressed parishioners “about their souls . . . by night & day,” “rain or shine,” and “some Days from Morning till 8 a clock at Night, without so much as time to take any bodily refreshment.” More than two hundred people joined Brown’s church in the next year, and at least one-quarter of these candidates described the “Great Earthquake” as a “loud call” from the “awfull & Dredfull voice” of God that “quickened” the rhythms of their devotional lives and banished all fears of spiritual unworthiness.¹⁰

Provincial New Englanders fully recognized that their heightened devotional activities could never merit salvation for them, yet prospective church members persisted in the belief that fulfilling ritual obligations might lift the heavy hand of divine affliction from their families and villages. Consequently, eighteenth-century relations were filled with solemn vows in which candidates agreed to perform their sacramental duties in exchange for divine protection or restored health. “It Pleased God . . . to lay me on a bed of sickness, for a Considerable time,” explained Medfield’s Joanna Kingsbury in what was a typical case. She prayed to God to spare her life “a Little Longer that so I might make my Peace with him.” Fearing that he would bleed to death after receiving a “bad wound” in combat, James Stewart of Rowley “beged the Lord to spare my life,” promising in return that “I would not sin against him as I had [previously] done.” In all, thirteen of the fifty-seven extant Medfield relations composed between 1697 and 1740 mentioned accidents or personal illness, and more than



Fig. 7.4. Eighteenth-century laypeople associated earthquakes with the voice of God, calling loudly for repentance and moral reformation. The 1727 shocks triggered powerful religious awakenings in churches throughout northern New England. © New York Public Library / Art Resource, N.Y.

half of these testimonies incorporated an explicit promise to join the church if raised to health again. Smaller percentages of healing vows appear in surviving collections from Haverhill, Rowley, East Windsor, Connecticut, and Boston's First Church.

Previous generations of New England divines like Thomas Shepard undoubtedly would have found these seemingly self-serving narratives deficient, for unlike their oral predecessors, written relations seldom reflected experiences beyond the preliminary stage of legal terror in the morphology of conversion. But in the irenic and cosmopolitan culture of provincial New England, early eighteenth-century relations also spoke to practical issues; for many, assurance of salvation was a secondary concern. Consider the testimony submitted by Elizabeth Dwight of Medfield in the winter of 1715. Previously, she had been awakened to her sacramental duties by the sermons of local ministers and the sudden death of an infant. Yet through it all, she had never experienced conversion, and she frankly admitted as much in her testimony: "Although I cannot find the clear manifestation of the Love of god to my soul which I do desier . . . yet have I some comforttable hopes which arises from the burden of sin." For Dwight, closing with Christ "on his own terms" was the "most reasonable" thing to do. In one sentence the Medfield goodwife encapsulated the dramatic transformation in popular piety that had taken place during the early eighteenth century. Church affiliation had become a carefully measured, voluntary decision that was influenced by a variety of factors, not all of which involved the eternal disposition of one's immortal soul.

NEW LIGHT CONVERSION NARRATIVES (1740–1790)

The arrival of the famed British revivalist George Whitefield in Newport, Rhode Island, on September 14, 1740, marked the emergence of a new vocabulary of religious experience in the lexicon of New England church-admission narratives that enabled many Christians to find relief from the oppressive weight of religious guilt and anxiety. Over the course of his six-week sojourn, the "Grand Itinerant" traveled the length and breadth of the Puritan colonies and performed an

estimated 175 well-publicized and aggressively marketed sermons to eager audiences numbering in the tens of thousands. A masterful orator, Whitefield eschewed written notes in favor of a direct, flamboyant, and emotionally engaging rhetorical style that capitalized on English theater techniques. Doctrinally, his sermons revolved around a cluster of traditional Reformed doctrines—the authority of the Bible, original sin, the necessity of divine grace, justification by faith, and sanctified moral behavior—repackaged in a concentrated description of what he called the “new birth.”¹¹

The impact of Whitefield’s 1740 preaching tour on New England’s Congregational churches was unprecedented. Local clergymen such as Harvard tutor Daniel Rogers adopted his artful rhetorical tactics and began itinerating in parishes from downeast Maine to southern Connecticut. Churches organized protracted meetings that lasted for days on end and included late-night singing and prayer exercises, as well as sermons delivered by visiting ministers. Many of these dramatic preaching performances included lurid images of hellfire and damnation, and the expressive power of the new sermon style made a powerful impression on audiences. In the two years following Whitefield’s electrifying preaching tour, towns across the region experienced an extraordinary surge in church membership. In striking contrast to prevailing patterns of religious affiliation, most of the new communicants were unmarried young people in their teens and early twenties. And in some cases, the euphoria of the revivals temporarily overturned existing hierarchies as inspired women, children, and African slaves arrogated to themselves the authority to preach and exhort their unconverted neighbors. Collectively, the revivals of the early 1740s generated bitter divisions among the ranks of Congregational clergyman. When Whitefield returned to New England several years later, he encountered a landscape rife with acrimonious infighting between Old Light revival opposers and New Light advocates.

Early observers of Whitefield’s unique ministry claimed that he preached “much like that of the old English Puritans,” yet it is clear that his theology of the new birth represented a significant departure from the Puritan morphology of conversion.¹² To be sure, the Anglican evangelist was rightly credited with restoring the concept of the new birth to theological preeminence over and against the prevailing concern for

Evangelical Conversion as Experience of New Birth

Upon the road [to Middleborough] I felt a Burden heavy on my Heart beyound what I had ever Experienced before preaching, which lead my Thots to Matthew 11:28. This oppression went off before I began. I was enlarg'd to speak upon the Subject. I hope God made It a word in season to weary Souls. A number of Awakened sinners cry'd out the greatest part of the Time. The rest of the Assembly gave great Attention. I felt much of the Presence of God in my soul [and] heard afterwards that 30 persons were Awakned with this sermon. Blessed be God who makes his Word quick and powerfull.

—Diary of itinerant preacher
Daniel Rogers, October 31, 1741.

formulaic professions of belief. In fact, he and his itinerating New England colleagues roundly castigated church-membership candidates for what they considered to be their excessive preoccupation with doctrinal orthodoxy and the outward performance of empty religious duties. They disparaged doctrinal knowledge, sacramental duties, devotional practices, healing vows, and family concerns as the sandy foundations of faith. But while the Anglican evangelist shared many of the Calvinist sentiments of his seventeenth-century predecessors, he telescoped the Puritan notion of conversion as a lifelong pilgrimage into a single transformative event: the descent of God's Holy Spirit into the bodies of the regenerate faithful.

Whitefield's truncated model of conversion dramatically reshaped the theological content of the relation genre. Ardent New Lights believed that the saints could identify the specific time and place of their conversions, and church-membership candidates after 1740 incorporated a keen sense of temporal events into their testimonies. Freetown

parishioner Irene Shaw, for example, claimed to have received "Comfortable Satisfaction" that she had "become a new Creature in Christ Jesus" after hearing a sermon preached by her local minister on April 15, 1753; Lucia Thomas of Middleborough obtained a "Clearer Sence" of her original sinfulness "Last Summer"; while fellow parishioner Nathan Eddy labored under conviction for "2 years & ½." Others dated their moments of spiritual illumination to "last winter," "about four years ago," "the 7th of May last," or at "the Lecture where Dr. Turners Child was Baptized." Relief from the terrors of conviction, in other words, arrived at precise, datable moments that, in the words of one Middleborough parishioner, the candidate would "never forget."

In addition, virtually every spiritual autobiography penned during the 1740s contained allusions to passages from Scripture that leapt to mind with "sweet power" in a moment of blackest despair to dispel the author's spiritual darkness. These "impulses" or "impressions," as

revival critics derisively labeled them, appeared with regularity in now-classic spiritual autobiographies by Isaac Backus, David Brainerd, Nathan Cole, Hannah Heaton, and Sarah Osborne. Nor was this emerging New Light exegetical trope a peculiarly American phenomenon, for “darting” Scriptures were ubiquitous among the narratives that William McCulloch recorded during the famed Scottish revivals at Cambuslang in 1742. As one minister summarized in *The Christian History*, one of several magazines that broadcast revival intelligence to a transatlantic audience, conversion “Discoveries” generally were triggered by “some Texts of Scripture: Or if they had no Text of Scripture as they remember at first, there immediately came many flowing in upon their Minds.”¹³

These darting biblical texts were more than just examples of the Puritan tradition of *sola scriptura*. Often, they dominated Awakening-era church-admission narratives, and the metaphors that laymen and laywomen used to describe their unusual encounters with Scripture were equally provocative and instructive. Bible verses “rained” down from the heavens and “dropped” into the converts’ heads unexpectedly, without conscious thought or preparatory meditations. They came with “thunder” or “uncommon power”—and most often in moments of darkest spiritual despair. Sinners wallowing in conviction spoke of being “pierced,” “touched,” or “struck down” by the Word and miraculously transformed, often in the blink of an eye. Others described biblical texts that “ran in my mind for sum time” or “followed me & kept sounding in my mind” as they went about their daily routines.¹⁴

Church-membership relations composed during the revival years and in the decades that followed registered the growing popular fascination with this radical new form of supernatural communication. Statistically, references to biblical impulses and impressions reveal a significant break with the literary conventions of the past. Prior to

New Light Sermons Convey Religious Power

I desire to Bless God that I was born in a land of light and that my parents took Care to have me Babtised in my minority and that I was Instructed to Read Gods word. But notwithstanding of all these pr[e]cious privileges I Remained a stranger to the power of Godliness till it pleased God to send his servant mr Daniel Rogers who preached in our meeting house upon these words in mathew the 11 and 28 . . . under which sermon it pleased God to Convince me of my danger in living a stranger to Jesus Christ under which Distress . . . I Continued not many days. Then it pleased God to Reve[a]l Christ to my soul as a sufficient saviour with application to my own soul.

—Relation of Priscilla Booth,
Middleborough, Mass.,
August 16, 1747.

the revivals of the 1740s, church-membership professors throughout New England typically spoke of the Bible as a “rule” of Christian faith and practice, and they scoured the Scriptures for “encouraging” texts that validated their decisions to conform to Christ-mandated duties. Yet the overall universe of cited passages was quite limited. In the pre-Awakening Haverhill relations, for example, the top quartile of frequently quoted texts accounted for almost 85 percent of all biblical references. In fervent pro-revival parishes such as Middleborough and Granville, by contrast, that same figure dropped to 29.4 and 20.0 percent respectively during the decades prior to the American Revolution. New Lights, in other words, engaged the Scriptures in highly personal, selective, and idiosyncratic ways.

In addition, men and women claiming to have experienced the new birth cited chapter and verse not to confirm their measured decisions to apply for full membership, but as the trigger mechanism of their nearly instantaneous conversions. More than 40 percent of all biblical texts cited by Middleborough candidates had been “impressed” on their hearts or “came with power” to their minds in a flash of supernatural illumination. “God has I think opened to me some of his precious promises & particularly set home on my [heart] that word in Isaiah 55:3,” reported Middleborough’s Elkanah Shaw in what was a typical reference. Deborah Billington heard the distressing words of Isaiah 50:11 “sound in mine ears,” and the experience instantly convicted her of sin; but she was speedily delivered by Matthew 11:28, which “came into my mind.” Among the New Light faithful, such supernatural biblical impressions were not abstract “promises”; rather, they signaled the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit “speaking” to the converted saints, “opening” and “enlightening” their hearts, and allowing them to “see” their glorious future estate.

The result was empowering. Conversion was, in the language of the day, an “enlarging” experience. For Shepard’s seventeenth-century Cambridge congregants who doggedly plied the means of grace through countless seasons of hope and despair, complete assurance of salvation always lay around the next corner; they spoke with an accent of constant uncertainty. Coming of age in the heady decades following the Great Awakening, eighteenth-century evangelicals were far more confident of their future estates, and they narrated their

experiences in an assertive idiom. John Leach's testimony is a classic example. The Middleborough layman could find "no effectual relief" from sin until "one Morning after I awoke from sleep, when a New Sense, & I think, Divine Light Shone into my mind. My [heart] felt Changed, it now seemed easy to turn to god. I asked myself, if I chose Christ for my only Portion? My [heart] answered yes."

Occasionally, these seemingly mystical infusions of divine grace were accompanied by palpable sensations of what one woman called "unspeakable Joy." A few New Light converts described feelings of being physically "overcome" and "ravished" by divine love. More often, however, early evangelicals described their conversion experience as a "great Change." Revival participants in Medfield, for example, claimed to have seen the entire world in a new light after receiving converting texts of Scripture that spoke directly to their spiritual conditions. "I think I can plainly see Things look quite otherwise than they used to do," admitted Keziah Bullen after two passages from Isaiah leapt to mind and convinced her of the vanity of earthly desires. Likewise, a Middleborough woman was converted by a series of biblical impulses, whereupon she "Immediately felt a Change in my heart. I found Submission to the will of God." "I felt my soul go out after [Christ]," explained one of her neighbors the following year; "I felt as if I was in a new world."

For a small contingent of radicals, the Holy Spirit was manifest through dreams, trances, and visions. During the peak months of the Great Awakening in New England, dozens of young men and women fell to the ground and languished in cataleptic trances that lasted for hours and even days at a time. When revived, the visionists reported to astonished onlookers that they had traveled to heaven in spirit form and seen their names written the Book of Life as described in Revelation. Despite the fact that such events were universally branded as delusive "enthusiasm" by revival proponents and critics alike, they appeared with increasing regularity in the diaries of radical New Lights, Congregational separatists, and separate Baptists over the next two decades.¹⁵ Dreams and visions occasionally intruded into church-membership relations as well. Harvard student Samuel Fayerweather, for example, hinted in his narrative that he had seen the devil in the likeness of a bear during the college revival in the winter of 1741. Two

decades later, Ichabod Billington of Middleborough reported a series of miraculous encounters with God that culminated in a dramatic nighttime vision in which he saw the door to heaven standing wide open before him. Likewise, Granville parishioner Timothy Robinson described an unusual event in which “all Nater semd to vanish” and he beheld a vision of Jesus and Satan vying for his soul. For some, these unusually vivid and controversial images appeared only to the “eyes of faith,” although laymen and laywomen like Robinson often struggled to determine whether or not they were simply conjured by their “Emagination.”

In the wake of Whitefield’s 1740 tour of New England, Congregational laypeople began to harness their church membership testimonies to a distinctive narrative form that championed conversion as a discrete event. An early example of this transformation appears in the diary of a Boston merchant who visited York, Maine, during the peak months of the Great Awakening in the fall of 1741 and listened to the “affecting Relations of 10 young Persons admitted into the Church.” Unlike those of their parents and grandparents, the testimonies of the youthful candidates eschewed the standard litany of doctrinal knowledge and healing vows. Instead, the anonymous diarist noted that they “Declar’d there Exp[er]riance of the Grace of God, upon there souls” during the recent remarkable work of the Holy Spirit in town. “Most of them” claimed to have been “awakened” by the “Powerfull Preaching” of nearly a dozen traveling preachers who visited the town in a brief two-month period. As nineteen-year-old Abigail Brewer of Boston’s prestigious Old South Church explained earlier that spring, “God has of his great mercy ben pleased by the powerful preaching of his servants which of late has ben sent among us to convince me of my wretched estate both by nature and by practis.”¹⁶ Evangelicalism had taken root in the stony soil of Puritan New England.

EVANGELICAL EXPERIENCES (1790–1840s)

By the time Timothy Mather Cooley began reclassifying the Granville church-admission narratives as “Experiences,” a dramatic shift had taken place in the physical appearance, theological content, and

emotional tenor of the genre. Of course, New Englanders had been experiencing religion all along—even in the early eighteenth century when the Puritan morphology of conversion had fallen into acute decline—but the revival innovations of the Great Awakening reshaped the very idea of what constituted an authentic religious experience. To talk about religious “experiences” now meant speaking of conversion as a discrete event, one that usually unfolded during an intensive period of religious revitalization.

The religious landscape of New England had changed as well, as the young nation lurched into the modern era. The centripetal forces of the early national period—industrial development, the transportation revolution, a burgeoning but volatile national market economy, and frontier migration—conspired to uproot the once-stable Puritan communities of the colonial era. Religious disestablishment further transformed the region into a competitive religious marketplace in which Congregationalists vied for souls with upstart denominations and sects, including the Baptists, Methodists, Shakers, and Universalists. For most of these groups, revivals had become a routine part of church life, as evangelicals during America’s Second Great Awakening adopted the “new measures” of Charles Grandison Finney—Whitefield’s nineteenth-century successor—and mastered the art of engineering periodic harvests of eager young converts.¹⁷

No longer the dominant religious institution in Jacksonian New England, Congregational churches now catered to the tastes of the individual, and church-admission narratives followed suit. Granville parishioners, for example, delivered their testimonies to Cooley in the form of a personal letter, a stylistic device that underscored the growing distance between individual experience and ministerial control. Revival innovations found their way into the Granville experiences as well. Laymen and laywomen frequently dated their conversions according to revival seasons, and they referenced a greater variety of revival venues as well. Cooley’s parishioners attended “anxious meetings,” “young Peoples” meetings, “school House” meetings, “protracted” meetings, and a host of informal private meetings. And, of course, there were those like the people of Granville’s Abijah Church who “loved to see those trembling Christians” at revival meetings. It was during these church gatherings that many people claimed to have

“gotten” religion—an emerging evangelical catchphrase that signaled just how far New England “Yankees” had drifted from their Puritan roots.

By 1850, few Congregationalists continued to speak the language of sacramental duties, healing vows, or family pedigrees as their ancestors had done a century before; nor were they content to trudge toward an unknown eternal destination as the Puritan founders had done in the seventeenth century. Instead, antebellum evangelicals experienced conversion as an instantaneous moment of transformation. They learned to compartmentalize and commodify their spiritual lives, as they spoke of “getting religion” through the newly bureaucratized revivals that periodically swept through the region. And in direct contrast to anxious seventeenth-century Puritans, nineteenth-century church-membership candidates rarely experienced protracted seasons of terror before resting “Safe in the hands of a Sovereign God.” In short, they mastered the tropes of the conversion narrative—the revival contexts, the brief period of conviction, the despair of failed devotional routines, the precise moment of supernatural release, the world transformed—and adapted those conventions to suit the needs of an increasingly mobile, fragmented, competitive, individualistic society.

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