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“The Most Glorious Church in the World”: The Unity of the Godly in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1630s

Michael P. Winship

The dominant historiographical trend in Puritan studies, started by Patrick Collinson, stresses the conservative nature of Puritanism. It notes Puritanism’s strong opposition to the separatist impulses of some of the godly and the ways in which it was successfully integrated into the Church of England until the innovations of Charles I and Archbishop Laud. Far from being revolutionary, Puritanism was able to contain the disruptive energies of the Reformation within a national church structure. This picture dovetails nicely with the revisionist portrayal of an early seventeenth-century “Unrevolutionary England,” but it sits uneasily with the fratricidal cacophony of 1640s Puritanism.¹

The picture also sits uneasily with the Antinomian Controversy, the greatest internal dispute of pre–civil wars Puritanism. That controversy shook the infant Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1636 to 1638. Accusations of false doctrine flew back and forth, the government went into tumult, and by the time the crisis had subsided, leading colonists had voluntarily departed or had been banished. In terms of its cultural impact in England, it was probably the single most important event in seven-

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teenth-century American colonial history; publications generated by the controversy were reprinted in England into the nineteenth century.\(^2\)

The Antinomian Controversy, evoking civil wars cacophony but occurring in the previous decade, offers a bridge across the current interpretive chasm between civil wars and pre-civil wars Puritanism. The crisis has generated a wide range of scholarly interpretations, but there is broad agreement that the Boston church, storm center of the crisis, was the source of its disruption. At issue is only the relative degree of responsibility of its minister, John Cotton, and the lay prophet and theologian, Anne Hutchinson. The few scholarly dissenters from this interpretation, who see the Boston church as more victim than aggressor in its relationship with the Massachusetts ministerial and governmental power structures, ignore the peculiarities of the church.\(^3\)

This article takes from both the interpretive mainstream and the dissenters; it recreates the church in all its singularity, while problematizing its role as an initiator of disruption. It first examines the Boston church as working in a Collinsonian fashion—nurturing a unity of the godly that contained the Reformation’s disruptive tendencies within a national church structure: the radical Reformation co-opted by the magisterial Reformation. Yet the unity of the godly in the Boston church was a painfully achieved and easily disrupted accomplishment. The church and the controversy within which it became enmeshed offer the best documented examples in pre-civil wars Puritanism of the mechanisms by which the unity of a fragile coalition of hot Protestants was maintained and the ways in which contingencies and personalities could disrupt it.


The Antinomian Controversy foreshadowed, and thus its dynamic helps account for, the civil wars breakdown of Puritanism. Moreover, it contributed to that breakdown, something hitherto obscured by the disciplinary divide that exists between historians of American and English seventeenth-century history.

* * *

Certainly the unity of the Boston church did not grow out of doctrinal uniformity. Perhaps the central issue in Puritan practical divinity was assurance of salvation. Indeed, the possibility of such assurance was one of the chief claims of Reformed Christianity. But the godly had by no means settled what constituted assurance and how it was attained. The Boston church maintained a wide variety of opinions on those questions.

The position of the pastor of the church, John Wilson, reflected the complexity of mainstream Puritan teaching on assurance. Most seventeenth-century Puritan divines, like Wilson, stressed achieving assurance through self-scrutiny. The Bible promised that certain conditions, love of the brethren or hunger and thirst after salvation, for example, were the effects of the sanctification that followed God’s justification of a sinner. They proved that one belonged in God’s covenant of grace. The challenge of this approach was distinguishing the effects of sanctification from the ‘‘legal’’ righteousness of those still unconsciously expecting to be saved by their own works and so still under a covenant of works. In practice, resolving that problem meant a cycle in which strict piety, attendance on the ordinances of the church, and soul-searching generated assurance that in turn generated suspicion that one was relying on one’s own righteousness, which anxiety generated further strenuous effort, until an equilibrium might be reached between doubt and confidence.

But Wilson did not only teach assurance through self-scrutiny. The halting and incomplete experience of assurance for many of the godly insured that there was never a single path toward assurance within the Puritan mainstream. A few prominent ministers advocated a more Christocentric approach, similar to that of earlier Puritan and Reformed divines. Ezekiel Culverwell and John Archer, for example, criticized the emphasis on introspection as unlikely to lead to settled comfort. Believers should not search themselves for signs whose interpretation was questionable.

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4 For an overview of seventeenth-century Puritan practical divinity, see Stoever, ‘‘A Faire and Easie Way.’’

but rely instead on the promise of salvation in Jesus. Others, including Richard Sibbes and John Preston, while chiefly emphasizing assurance through self-scrutiny, stressed that the witness, or seal, of the spirit (Romans 8:15) was much more certain, if far rarer. It gave an overwhelming joy, an overpowering revelation of God’s love, that afforded an assurance far beyond the capacity of syllogistic reasoning from conditional promises. Wilson, like Sibbes and Preston, saw the witness of the Spirit as a superadded experience of assurance.

Wilson represented the eclectic middle of Puritan practical divinity, but the Boston church’s teacher, John Cotton, was the most soteriologically radical of prominent Puritan ministers by the time he emigrated to Massachusetts in 1633. Self-scrutiny for conditions of salvation, Cotton claimed, could never in the first instance give assurance. Developing a position that Culverwell and others had made in the 1620s, Cotton claimed that believers could apply conditional promises only after knowing they were justified; hypocrites under a covenant of works might self-deceptively mimic all the effects of sanctification. The Holy Spirit first had to reveal to believers through intuition or through a revelation that they were beneficiaries of God’s absolute promise to save his elect, irrespective of any condition in them. Believers could then take comfort from the confirmatory evidence of sanctification and perhaps might experience a further, more powerful witness of the Spirit. Cotton defended the primacy of absolute promises over conditional ones by citing Calvin, for whom the evidence of sanctification was secondary, but he was challenging a half century of Puritan practical divinity.

If Cotton was the most extreme of mainstream Puritan ministers, Anne Hutchinson demonstrated how far a layperson with a theological

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bent could extend his position. Hutchinson, who had admired Cotton in England, pursued her gift for theology through the interpretation of scripture verses flashing up in her mind as divine revelations; through the same medium she made temporal prophecies. For Hutchinson the only difference between the self-willed, legal sanctification of hypocrites and the sanctification of saints was that the latter was continually energized by Christ. She therefore magnified Cotton’s stress on the delusive power of the covenant of works and the intimacy of the union of Christ and the Holy Spirit with the saved soul. Drawing on her own failure to find assurance through sanctification, Hutchinson argued that it was always safer to stay focused on Christ, the source of sanctification: “the darker our sanctification is, the clearer is our justification,” she was said to have asserted.

Hutchinson is not likely to have been the source of all unusual opinions among the Boston laity. The creativity of hot Protestantism and the lack of consensus within the Puritan mainstream on assurance insured that by the 1630s marginal ministers and laypeople had developed what amounted to a godly soteriological underground. That underground, in its quest for assurance and a proper Christian life, read the Bible through other lenses than Reformed ones—Luther on Galatians, the *Theologica Germanica*, the writings of Henri Niclaes and other members of the Family of Love, and apocryphal Biblical books. It was drawn to arguments that God no longer judged the justified by the moral law, and, consequently, they need not worry obsessively about sinning, a position given the abusive term of *antinomianism* by its opponents, and to famalist and medieval mystical motifs of immediate revelations via the Holy Spirit, union with God, and perfectionism. In place of the usual Puritan stress on continued doubt about one’s election, it stressed the certainty and joy that the justified enjoyed. While its arguments about the relationship of sanctification to assurance and the nature of assurance were not completely foreign to the mainstream, to many orthodox Puritans, this under-

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9 The most satisfactory account of Hutchinson’s religiosity is in James Fulton Maclear, “‘The Heart of New England Rent’: The Mystical Element in Early Puritan History,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42 (1956): 641–43.

ground evoked moral anarchy and the dissolution of ecclesiastical structure. Some ministers in the underground, in turn, took an oppositional stance to the Puritan mainstream.  

It is safe to assume that this underground was familiar to people in Boston—the number of people from London, where clashes in the godly community between antinomian/familist preachers and mainstream Puritans spilled over into print at the turn of the 1630s, practically guarantees it. While laypersons of any persuasion only rarely left doctrinal paper trails behind them, among the handful of Boston “opinionists” we can clearly identify as prominent, a number show traces of not entirely conventional backgrounds.  

The rallying cry of the most prominent of the “antinomians,” John Eaton, “God sees no sin in his elect,” was heard in Massachusetts during the controversy, and Hutchinson, whose teachings can be explained adequately as an outgrowth of Cotton’s, is not likely to have been the source.  

This is a wide range of views in a church belonging to a movement whose spokesmen were among the most zealous heresy hunters in the Church of England. What could keep such a church together? The usual answer is nothing. The Antinomian Controversy is commonly portrayed as an irrepressible conflict propelled by a antinomian fringe. Hutchinson and her “Hutchinsonians” denounced Wilson as a “legal” preacher, the usual line of interpretation goes. They tried to install a more sympathetic minister, and they walked out whenever Wilson preached. They aggres-


12 Jane Hawkins in England gave trance prophecies of the downfall of the bishops while the local Puritan vicar and his curate took notes. See Public Record Office (PRO), State Papers (SP) 16/141 fols. 96–97, 16/142 fols. 24–25; John Hacket, *Scrinia Reserata* (London, 1692), pt. 2, pp. 47–48. She was denied admission to the Boston church because of “unsound opinions” (AC, p. 437). William Coggeshall emigrated from Castle Geddings, in the vicinity of Colchester, a site of antinomian activity. Coggeshall, it was said, had been a “great professor” in England (William Hubbard, *A General History of New England: From Discovery to MDCLXXX*, ed. William Thaddeus Harris [1815, 1816; reprint, Boston, 1848], p. 343. He settled in Roxbury in 1632 but was dismissed to the Boston church in May 1634. Winthrop recorded that in spite of his being “well knowne & approved of the Churche,” he still had to give a “Confession of his Faithe” (Dunn et al., eds., *Journal*, p. 114). In the 1620s William Dyer, a London Puritan (he visited William Pynne during the latter’s imprisonment in 1633) had been apprenticed in the London parish of Saint Michaels, Crooked Lane, while the alleged antinomian minister, Robert Shaw, preached from its pulpit. See William Allan Dyer, “William Dyer,” *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 30 (1937): 25. Mary Dyer was raised in the London parish of Saint Martin’s in the Fields, where John Everard had been the vicar.  

sively proselytized and attacked the other ministers of Massachusetts. As
the New Jerusalem began to catch fire, Cotton, rather than siding with
his fellow ministers, played fiddle, if he did not actually stoke the flames
himself.

Some, but not all, of the above elements are based on surviving
documents, although their interpretation is not as straightforward as is
usually maintained. More important, for a conflict assumed to be irre-
pressible, the Antinomian Controversy was slow to emerge. Cotton ar-
rived in Boston in 1633. Hutchinson arrived in September 1634 and had
made her opinions known on the boat coming over. Yet John Winthrop,
Boston church member and at the time ex-governor of Massachusetts,
noted no disturbance in his journal until the end of October 1636. Wilson
does not seem to have fallen out of favor with the congregation until a
few months later.14 The Boston church, for all its diversity, flourished
for a surprisingly long time.

That flourishing, although unremarked by historians, is significant.
It invites a turning of the standard account of the Antinomian Contro-
versy on its head to ask not why the Boston church fell apart but what
were the elements that allowed it to hold together as long as it did. What,
in other words, were the elements of Puritanism that allowed it to restrain
the fissiparous impulses of the Reformation within a national church
structure?

Much credit must go to the ministers Wilson and Cotton. They had
much in common. Memorialists of Cotton praised his mildness and hu-
mility, while those of Wilson highlighted his love for his congregation.
Both descriptions suggest ministers inclined to lead by example rather
than by fiat. Both Wilson and Cotton were noted for their charismatic
inclinations, including prophetic gifts, powers of prayer, and acceptance
of revelations, all qualities perhaps more frequent in lay and sectarian
than in clerical piety. Wilson and Cotton did not make an issue of their
theological differences. While it appears that just about any theological
point could be raised in the Boston congregation “by way of inquiry,”
there also appears to have been a settled consensus among the laity that
the official stance of the church remained within Cotton’s parameters of
orthodoxy.15 Some scholars have assumed that the legalism of Wilson’s

14 Thomas Dudley claimed at Hutchinson’s civil trial in November 1637 (AC, p. 317)
that within six months of her arrival, or by the spring of 1634, she “had made parties
in the country.” No other statement locates the beginning of controversy remotely so
early.

15 Nathaniel Morton, The New England’s Memorial (1662; reprint, Plymouth, Mass.,
1826), pp. 148, 188; Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana, 2 vols. (1702; reprint,
Hartford, Conn., 1853), 1:272, 276, 295, 312–14; AC, pp. 29, 323; Dunn et al., eds.,
Journal, pp. 205–6; Allyn B. Forbes et al., eds., The Winthrop Papers, 5 vols. (Boston,
preaching led to conflict with the congregation, but his few surviving manuscript sermons reveal a compassionate minister not given to extreme moral rigorism.\textsuperscript{16}

If tact and highly visible piety distinguished Wilson and Cotton, they distinguished, likewise, the radicals in the community, of whom there were probably not very many.\textsuperscript{17} The minister Thomas Weld, in his introduction to \textit{A Short Story}, the official account of the controversy, stated that the "opinionists," when talking with others, would stress common ground and back off when they sensed disagreement, an argument for tact and moderation as much as for the heretical deceitfulness he saw in such behavior. Weld also acknowledged that the more extreme free grace advocates "would appeare very humble, holy, and spirituall Christians, and full of Christ; they would deny themselves farre, speake excellently, pray with such soule-ravishing expression and affections."\textsuperscript{18}

They were performatively orthodox, in other words, whatever their opinions; good reason for others simply to treat them as godly, learn from their piety, and not worry overmuch about the occasional odd statement they might make. What applied to radicals in general applied to Hutchinson specifically. Her attenuated conception of sanctification, her emphasis on revelations, and her high conception of union with God made it easy to see her as antinomian and familist. Yet there was good reason to avoid scrutinizing her doctrinal peculiarities too closely. Widely respected for her judgment, her exemplary piety and strictness of life, and her usefulness in women's circles, her mistrust of sanctification gave her an aptitude, much appreciated by her ministers, for convincing people


\textsuperscript{17} John Cotton (\textit{AC}, p. 419) later claimed that only a few in his congregation adhered to doctrines more radical than his own, as opposed to admiring the individuals who held them. Historians arguing for a large body of "Hutchinsonians" cite the seventy-two signatures on a petition protesting the conviction of John Wheelwright (see below). But that petition only demonstrates support for Wheelwright; Cotton also protested his conviction.

that they were still unconsciously relying on their own works to save them; she certainly felt that she shared Cotton’s agenda.\(^{19}\)

Cotton at least (Wilson’s opinion on this is unknown) encouraged a pietistic motif, millennialism, which united diverse elements of the Boston congregation. Millennialism, which postulated a glorious state for the church before the Second Coming and after the final conversion of the Jews, was by no means generally accepted in the 1630s—the thesis that the Puritan migration to Massachusetts was a millennial errand in the wilderness, first raised by Perry Miller, is lacking in contemporary evidence. But it played a role in Massachusetts. Cotton, a millennialist before he emigrated, was crucial in shaping the Massachusetts church order into congregationalism. The minister Thomas Shepard in the summer of 1636 remarked that some colonists believed their perfected church order meant that “the daies we live in now, are not only the daies of the Son of man, but part of the daies of the coming of the Son of man [i.e., part of the approach of the Millennium].” John Wheelwright, brother-in-law of Anne Hutchinson, a minister who was at the time a member of the Boston congregation without any official status in Massachusetts, preached a fiery fast-day sermon on 19 January 1637, at the height of the Antinomian Controversy. He cast the crisis as part of the struggle with Antichrist that preceded the conversion of the Jews and the coming “glorious Church.” English scholars had speculated that God might raise up a prophet to convert the Jews, and sect leaders claimed that role. Hutchinson was a millennialist, and, according to Winthrop, “many of the most wise and godly” considered her “a Prophetesse, raised up of God for some great worke now at hand, as the calling of the Jewes, &c.”\(^{20}\)

The unity of the Boston congregation thus came from mutual forbearance, common standards of behavioral orthodoxy, and a shared


sense, in this newly established Puritan commonwealth, of the impending Kingdom of God and Boston’s role therein—“the most glorious church in the world,” as some said at the time. These factors were powerful enough to make differences in theology petty and provisional. It is in this context, perhaps, that we should read the claim, given as evidence of heretical deceitfulness, that Boston radicals always asserted that John Cotton fundamentally agreed with them, even when confronted with statements of his that clashed with their opinions. And perhaps it was in the same spirit that Wheelwright, whose theology was virtually identical to Cotton’s, cited Ephesians 4:3 in his fast-day sermon: “Let us have a care, that we do not alienate our harts one from another, because of divers kind of expressions, but let us keepe the unity of the spiritt in the bond of peace.”\(^{21}\)

Radical lay prophets and university-trained ministers bonded together through the protean absorbent capacities of Puritanism in a thoroughly respectable church—a Collinsonian idyll and, moreover, one that evidently existed not only within the Boston congregation but in its relationship with the other churches of Massachusetts. Between 1634 and 1636 the town grew from four hundred to eight hundred people, while the colony itself grew from about three thousand to six thousand people. By 1634, there were fourteen ministers in the colony. Given the controversy that Cotton’s theology later created, there must have been ministers who wondered about it—the positions he advanced had already generated controversies in England. But Cotton himself appears to have been loath to seek controversy with his brethren, and his formidable stature both in England and Massachusetts probably made his fellow ministers loath to seek controversy with him. With their ministers at peace, and the Boston congregation serving as an outlet for the spiritist pole of Puritan piety, there was no reason for significant lay discontent or agitation.

But the unity of the godly in principle was not supposed to rest on tact and forbearance; it was supposed to arise out of shared truth. Correct doctrine helped define God’s true visible church, and since Puritans to a pronounced degree tended to elide the true visible church with the invisible church of God’s elect, correct doctrine helped define the contemporary community of the saints.\(^{22}\) Doctrine also defined the enemies

\(^{21}\) Hubbard, *General History*, 1:280; AC, pp. 207, 381, 168.

of the godly by clarifying the boundaries past which loomed awful heresies—antinomianism, familism, Arminianism, popery, Socinianism—that served as polemical "others" against which the godly constructed themselves. Varieties in doctrines of assurance not only threatened the conceptual unity of the godly, they carried varying practical implications that could be seen as reinforcing or subverting the social and religious order: Could assurance come through reading and meditation, or did it come only through ministerial preaching; was it a once-and-for-all event or did it require ongoing attendance on the ordinances of the church; should one continue to doubt after experiencing assurance, or should one never question one's salvation, even if fallen into a heinous sin?

Already by the 1610s in England the strain in Puritanism between the diversity of paths to assurance and the commitment to theological unity began to show. The clashes between antinomians and their mainstream opponents that started in that decade are well known, but tensions over assurance spilled into the mainstream itself. Culverwell's arguments about the priority of absolute promises formed part of sometimes vituperative debates in the early 1620s over absolute and conditional promises. Philip Nye was reported to the High Commission in 1629 by another Puritan minister, Stephen Denison, for preaching that one should never doubt one's election. Sibbes chided divines whose standards of sanctification, he thought, were too severe, while he and other ministers who exalted the witness of the Spirit guarded themselves from criticism by insisting that this should not be confused with enthusiasm or "Anabaptist frenzies."  

Although those strains were genuine, the unity of the Boston church was no fluke. Tolerance for idiosyncracies among persons perceived as brethren could override commitments to doctrinal uniformity. When Denison prosecuted a layman, John Etherington, with very odd opinions, he complained that some persons criticized Etherington in private but remained silent in public, while others said that although he held "absurd points," he "held nothing against the foundation"—probably the attitude of many in Boston to their more radical brethren. Irenical ministers like Sibbes worked hard to keep doctrinal differences from breaking godly unity. Divines employed more formal methods to keep the peace. An informal panel of ministers cleared the innovative divine Anthony Wotton of charges of Socinianism and Arminianism. The royal censor,

Daniel Featly, a future Westminster Assembly delegate, intervened heavily in the debate in 1620 over evangelical promises. He cut the passages on absolute promises from Culverwell’s *A Treatise of Faith* in 1623, and that same year, in a preface to a treatise by an extreme conditionalist, William Chibald, he put a strongly centrist spin on Chibald’s doctrines, while announcing that ongoing attacks on him were inappropriate—Chibald’s opponents did not get into print. The fairly scanty evidence for disputes itself suggests that tensions, while real, were usually successfully contained.

Neither orthodoxy nor radicalism, in other words, rose up automatically in conflict with the other, and, certainly, as divines like Cotton and Culverwell demonstrated, the boundary between them was by no means clear. It took interested parties, convinced that doctrinal purity overrode the practical realities of a diverse movement, to agitate conflict. In London, for example, the minister George Walker acted as a fierce partisan of orthodoxy in at least two disputes a decade apart. Denison, besides pursuing Etherington and Nye, was active in the investigation of the alleged antinomian minister, Peter Shaw. When such activists arrived in Massachusetts, Puritanism’s harmony and control mechanisms, feeling the strain of building a new heaven and new earth, proved very fragile, indeed.

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To be more precise, harmony in Boston lasted until Henry Vane and Shepard, both arriving in October 1635, had acclimatized themselves. Vane, son of one of Charles I’s privy counselors, came to New England with Archbishop Laud’s blessings; Laud hoped it would get Puritanism out of Vane’s system. Vane was also acting as an agent for a group of Puritans, including Lord Saye and Sele and Lord Brooke, who were considering emigrating to the Warwick patent, and they had just acquired in what was to become Connecticut. Vane, twenty-two years old, yet with “an unusual aspect, which . . . made men think there

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was somewhat in him extraordinary,’” as Edward Clarendon later described him, quickly took on a leadership role in the colony. On November 30, Boston passed an order requiring that all legal disputes be first submitted to Vane and two elders for arbitration. In January, he took it on himself to reconcile two of the leading magistrates in the colony, Winthrop and Thomas Dudley. Vane was elected governor in May 1636.26

Vane’s influence in England waxed steadily after he returned in 1637. Discretion required that he remain at the periphery of, or completely unmentioned in, official accounts of the controversy; historians have tended to leave him thus marginalized in favor of more accessible figures. Yet contemporaries were privately clear about his heavy part in the crisis. Vane was deeply attracted to the fervent and liberating zeal of Boston, the sense of a new order of things being made possible by Puritans finally free to shape their own destinies. Millennialism became, and remained, a central part of his piety. Vane developed elements of Boston lay theology that could be very easily glossed as heresy: a personal union of the Holy Spirit with the soul, similar to familism, and a conception of Christ’s redemptive work that could be interpreted as Socinian. Moreover, he fostered the institutionalization of radicalism by encouraging Hutchinson to set up her own conventicles, spreading her influence beyond the informal Boston women’s networks. These conventicles, it was later alleged, became the focal point for speculation and agitation.27

With Vane’s arrival the most problematic elements in the coalition of hot Protestants in Boston were taken from the periphery and thrust to the center of visibility. That was precisely why contemporaries assigned him a large role in generating a controversy. The controversy began with Vane, the minister Hugh Peters told him. Vane was raised “to great heights,” Shepard later said in an autobiography written for his children, “too suddenly,” and, as a letter to England complained, he promoted Boston doctrines “with such violence, as if they had been matters of that consequence that the peace and welfare of New-England


27 Thomas Hutchinson, “Hutchinson in America,” British Library, Egerton MS 2664, p. 13, gave credit to Vane directly; Winthrop in *Short Story, AC*, p. 264, stated that Hutchinson set up her conventicles after she had the support of “some of eminent place and parts” —Vane is not mentioned openly in *Short Story.*
must be sacrificed, rather than they should not take place.’’ Vane’s readiness to rend the functional unity of ministers and magistrates generated intense animosity. A minister made a dark prophecy on his departure from Massachusetts that was fulfilled in his execution in England as a traitor a quarter of a century later.\(^28\)

As the letter writer above suggested, the catalyst for the crisis was not doctrinal differences, per se, but the intrusion of polarizing absolutism within the ruling magisterial/ministerial alliance. Yet that polarization cannot be assigned exclusively to Boston radicals. The earliest document from the controversy shows not Vane, but the document’s author, Thomas Shepard, threatening the peace of New England by his doctrinal rigidity. Gauging by surviving documents, Shepard was the most dominant minister opposing the Boston church, and if the controversy was not inevitable, then to be an activist was to be a creator; Shepard was an accomplice to the chaos he battled so fiercely.

In the late winter or spring of 1636 Shepard wrote a letter to Cotton on behalf of himself and members of his congregation. The letter grilled Cotton on his attitude to various lay Boston theological stances, but it centered on Cotton’s own teachings. It was prompted by a sermon of Cotton’s that focused on the superiority of absolute over conditional promises—the argument that got Culverwell censored in the early 1620s. Shepard found Cotton’s argument wrong for pastoral and scriptural reasons. Moreover, it was dangerous in the inferences that could be drawn from it, plainly a reference to antinomian disregard for assurance via self-scrutiny. Shepard “conceived I had no call publicly to reply” at the sermon and thus start an open ministerial dispute, but he placed the sermon in an alarming larger context.\(^29\)

Shepard made that context explicit with his final inquiry. The thrust of Cotton’s teaching was to emphasize the revelation of the Spirit behind the word of the Bible, rather than the word itself; did he not realize, Shepard asked, that familists did not deny the word of the Bible but professed to find extraordinary revelations in it? Shepard, while claiming, surely disingenuously, that he knew of no one holding heretical opinions in Massachusetts, warned Cotton that someday there might be some such people in his congregation and, then, they would do irreparable harm with Cotton’s doctrines.\(^30\) Cotton and other ministers may not have been aware up to this point that Cotton’s preaching threatened the unity of

\(^28\) Dunn et al., eds., Journal, p. 203; McGiffert, ed., God’s Plot, p. 65; Thomas Hutchinson, History, 1:58; Hubbard, General History, p. 236. See also Forbes et al., eds., Winthrop Papers, 3:415–16.

\(^29\) AC, pp. 26–27.

\(^30\) AC, pp. 28–29.
the Massachusetts ministry. Shepard announced that it most dangerously did. He explained to Cotton that he grilled him in order to "cut off all seeming differences and jars." "You will not thinke," he ominously ended his letter, "I have thus writ to begin or breed a quarrell, but to still and quiet those which are secretly begun."

Shepard phrased his letter deferentially and courteously, but there was no deference in his meaning. He was trumping the actual diversity among the godly, which Cotton had managed hitherto with good effect, with the Puritan commitment to a tightly defined orthodoxy whose borders were defined by the awful heresies that surrounded them. Moreover, he was informing the most prominent minister in Massachusetts that his opinions fell outside those borders. What motivated him? He clearly brought a personal agenda to his confrontation with Cotton. Historians have often pointed to his flirtation with the soteriological underground while a student at Cambridge in the early 1620s to explain his sensitivity to anything looking like a manifestation of it. Shepard may have also been driven, in part, by envy; while he believed in the seal of the spirit, in his tormented journal, which survives from the 1640s, he mourned that he had never experienced the witness of the spirit's absolute promise of assurance. Yet, although historians often take Shepard as representative of Massachusetts orthodoxy, he himself had doctrinal peculiarities that help explain both how he could perceive Cotton as so dangerous and why Cotton was to show so little inclination to accommodate him.

Shepard, like all Puritan ministers, including Cotton, preached that sinners must prepare for justification. But most ministers argued that preparation had no intrinsic connection with justification—elect and reprobates could experience it alike. Shepard's preparationism, on the other hand, was idiosyncratic not only for its severe elaboration—at its ultimate stage the soul accepted damnation—but for the argument that the preparation of the elect was qualitatively different from the experience of the damned. In its final stage it included a genuine turning away from sin that most Puritans placed after faith. This argument prolonged preparation and created observable conditions to the covenant of grace before justification; it sat uneasily with the Reformed emphasis on justification's

31 AC, pp. 27, 29.
pristine, absolute nature, which Cotton magnified. Shepard probably learned his preparationism from his future father-in-law, Thomas Hooker, who had learned it from the Essex Puritan patriarch, John Rogers. It put a wide theological distance between Cotton and Hooker and Shepard; Thomas Goodwin, a friend of Cotton’s sharing his theological emphases, if not his absolutism, attacked Hooker’s distended preparationism in the 1630s, and more moderate divines voiced skepticism. Hooker, perhaps, encouraged Shepard to attack Cotton: he led an emigration to Connecticut in May 1636 in part, it was believed, because he and Cotton did not get along; a letter to England in 1637 identified the Antinomian Controversy as between Cotton and Hooker and “their parties”; and, as will be shown below, Hooker, like Shepard, had a pronounced dissatisfaction about its resolution.\(^34\)

Cotton responded temperately to Shepard’s letter, given that his teaching had just been compared to a heresy Puritan ministers had been denouncing for a half century. He was unaware of any quarrel between himself and his brethren and doubted that there was any disagreement “if wee understand each other.” But he cautioned Shepard not to compare the “faithfull practise” of Christians to familist “delusions” and warned that he was not going to change his preaching because Shepard claimed that it resembled familism and that Cotton was breaking the unity of the ministry.\(^35\)

Cotton’s response might have been temperate, but what had previously been at most a “secret quarrel” fostered by laypeople was now a ministerial collision, and Shepard had a personal interest in driving this new conflict to a head; his challenge to Cotton put his reputation on the line, both colonywide and with his own congregation. Moreover, the way he assimilated Cotton to heresy insured that Cotton and his supporters would interpret any attack on more radical lay opinions as a coded attack on Cotton, an interpretation for which Shepard would continue to provide ample justification. Cotton was to assimilate criticism of himself to Shepard’s preparationism, a maneuver Shepard tried to forestall. We


\(^35\) AC, pp. 31, 33, 32.
do not know how many other ministers shared Shepherd's doctrine, but it was rare in England, and Shepard knew that foregrounding it endangered his own efforts at party building. Ministerial clashes of this vehemence were not unknown in England, but there they had been contained by divines of sufficient stature to restrain the parties involved. The only minister in New England of Cotton's stature, Thomas Hooker, was hardly going to serve as a peacemaker.

A crisis would also be difficult to avoid because, although Shepard was scarcely unique among English ministers in his zeal to purge the godly of deviance, he arrived into a situation pregnant with possibilities not available in England. Just as Puritan empowerment in Massachusetts heightened the extravagance of Boston, it held open the possibility of ideological control unimaginable in England, where Puritan access to official mechanisms of power had always been problematic. Once in Massachusetts Shepard demonstrated a sharp concern with a united façade of orthodoxy and an ability to catch the ear of the government. In early 1636 he was at the forefront of efforts to increase government supervision of the gathering of new churches and to insure their doctrinal soundness.

The attack on Cotton was an escalation of this campaign, and after the failure of the letter to Cotton, Shepard, presumably along with like-minded ministers, continued to disseminate their vision of a Boston heretical fifth column in the ranks. Shepard began sniping at Boston doctrines and the spiritual status of their adherents near the very beginning of a lecture cycle he started in June 1636; presumably he was more aggressive in private conversations. He was helped in his efforts by the correspondingly increasing immoderation of Boston radicals. Hutchinson apparently became more speculative in her opinions, while in her new conventicles, she compared the other ministers of Massachusetts unfavorably to Cotton—Cotton had always worried about her censoriousness. Much later a militant defender of orthodoxy, Edward Johnson, recorded conversations he claimed to have had with "opinionists" from the early fall of 1636. In one conversation a proselytizing opinionist touted the superiority of the Boston manner of assurance and dismissed the other ministers as legalists; in another conversation, a layperson simply said that he preferred Hutchinson to the ministers, although they might preach with the aid of the spirit. If the "erronists" collapsed opposition to themselves into legalism, some lay opponents saw their objections to ministerial

36 Forbes et al., eds., Winthrop Papers, 3:328.
doctrines as only envious anticlericism.\textsuperscript{38} Boston doctrines do not seem to have gathered too much support outside the immediate environs of Boston.

Nevertheless, with laity in Boston, the chief town and port of entry in Massachusetts, adding attacks on ministers to fringe theological opinions, and with at least one influential minister openly attacking Cotton, as well as Boston lay opinions, it is not surprising that more clergy got drawn into the conflict and that state power appeared to be a reasonable means of resolution. Some clergy, including Shepard, gathered others at the end of October to confront Cotton prior to taking their grievances to the General Court. Cotton persuaded them that going to the court was “not according to God.” Instead, they held a conference with Hutchinson, Wheelwright, and leading Boston laity. Hutchinson told them that they were like the apostles before Pentecost and could not preach the covenant of grace clearly, for which Cotton rebuked her. Wheelwright, who had arrived in May, was more confrontational than Cotton and had greater terminological recklessness. He got into a dispute with the other divines about the nature of the seal of the Spirit, which left an impression with at least a few ministers that he, along with Hutchinson, had an overly intimate (i.e., familist) conception of union with the Spirit. But Cotton later claimed that at least some of the ministers concluded that things were not as serious as they had been reported—an indication that the clergy were not yet agreed that diversity and dissension added up to a controversy. Yet, he added, “afterwards some of them did say they were less satisfied than before.”\textsuperscript{39} The ebb and flow of clerical opinion indicates that the Antinomian Controversy was not the clash of two inexorably opposed camps, but, rather, the outcome of determined party building.

Shepard’s party needed not only the support of the ministers but also the magistracy in order to prevail, and probably the most influential of the magistrates was John Winthrop, ex- and future governor and member of the Boston church. Winthrop seems to have been slow in perceiving a controversy. He had profitably sat under the ministry of Culverwell, whom he deeply admired, in Essex; thus, he might have been reluctant to follow Shepard in constructing a high road from absolute promises to antinomianism. However, John Knewstub, one of the first Puritans to attack the Family of Love, was an old family friend, which perhaps ex-


\textsuperscript{39} AC, pp. 63-64, 320, 322, 333, 344, 364.
plains why his intervention at the end of October 1636 took the form it did.  

Winthrop’s intervention was to block a motion making Wheelwright coteacher with Cotton in the Boston church. Historians routinely interpret his move as the thwarting of an effort by partisans of Hutchinson to humiliate Wilson, but that reading is guided by assumptions about the static nature of partisanship in the controversy, rather than by a shred of contemporary evidence. Winthrop himself was explicit about why he acted. He had heard “‘very lately,’” he told the church, that Wheelwright agreed with Hutchinson, whom Winthrop regarded as dangerously erro-
neous on this point, about union with the Holy Spirit being personal. As a result of being persuaded that Wheelwright was heretical, Winthrop found familist “necessary consequences” in sermons by Wheelwright that he had previously considered unproblematic. Wheelwright argued in vain that he was discovering meanings that were not intended.

While Winthrop had gotten off, or been nudged off, the fence, he never took sides as firmly as Shepard would have liked. He was to pursue Wheelwright with a vengeance, yet he protected Cotton, and his Journal consistently minimizes Cotton’s oppositional attitude. Shepard, on at least two later occasions, restrained Winthrop’s impulse to moderation: once, by squashing a theological tract by Winthrop mediating between the opposing camps; once by chiding him for being too gentle on Vane in a manuscript pamphlet.

Winthrop may have never been Shepard’s ideal ally; nevertheless, by assimilating Wheelwright to the most radical opinions in the Boston church, as Shepard had done with Cotton, he shattered the church’s fragile unity. A month later Wilson warned the General Court of dangerous opinions circulating in the colony. Cotton, increasingly sensitive to the efforts of Shepard and others to conflate his and Wheelwright’s opinions with familism and antinomianism, took the warning as aimed at him, although Wilson denied it. Cotton moved to have the congregation ad-


41 Dunn et al., eds., Journal, pp. 195–97. See also John Wheelwright, A Brief and Plain Apology (London, 1658), p. 23. The residents of Mount Wollaston, where Wheelwright preached, may have wanted Wheelwright authorized to administer the sacraments as an interim measure in their effort to separate from Boston and form their own town. See Dunn et al., eds., Journal, p. 187; Thomas Lechford, Plain Dealing: or, Newes from New-England, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (1642; reprint, Boston, 1868), p. 41. Dunn et al., eds., Journal, p. 196, recorded that the church “‘gave way’” to Winthrop with the understanding, perhaps not entirely given in good faith, that a church would be gathered at Mount Wollaston with Wheelwright as minister. The church was not gathered until 1639.

42 Forbes et al., eds., Winthrop Papers, 3:326–32, 415.
monish Wilson, a move blocked by Winthrop and a few others. Thereafter, some members of the congregation walked out when Wilson preached, and Cotton had strained relations with him until the summer.43

As Boston’s unity unraveled, Shepard continued to create conflict by assimilating Cotton’s doctrines to the most radical lay opinions in the colony, as he had done in his letter to Cotton. Leading Boston laity had a conference with their brethren in Shepard’s congregation in December 1636, and then complained bitterly that their words were twisted out of recognition and circulated around the colony to make them seem heretical.44 At this time Shepard, along with other ministers, sent a very leading list of sixteen questions to Cotton and received a very testy reply.

Just as some opponents of Boston had convinced themselves that Cotton and Wheelwright were promoting familist and antinomian anarchy, Cotton and Wheelwright persuaded themselves that ministers arguing for sanctification as a first evidence of assurance were betraying the Reformation. As Cotton said in reply to the ministers’ questions, they clothed “unwholesome and Popish doctrin in wholesome and Protestant words.” Wheelwright at his January 1637 fast-day sermon denounced his opponents, unnamed, as under a covenant of works and urged a spiritual struggle against them, even if it led to “combustion in the Church and common wealth.” In February 1637, Cotton may have preached that the distance between him and his opponents was as wide as heaven and hell.45

The escalation of polarizing rhetoric was by no means confined to Cotton and Wheelwright. Shepard in his Thursday lectures around the time of Wheelwright’s sermon denounced the Bostonians as satanically inspired and ripped into their doctrines, lay and clerical; Cotton’s own teachings mangled and bore false witness against God’s truth. “Mr. Cotton’s party,” Winthrop reported unsurprisingly, began questioning and denouncing ministers after their sermons, especially when the ministers challenged Boston doctrines.46

With the level of virulence rising, Boston’s opponents made a concerted effort to pull in the power of the state on their side. After Wheelwright’s fast-day sermon some ministers secretly wrote to the General Court drastically misrepresenting his doctrines and calling him an instru-

43 Dunn et al., eds., Journal, p. 205; AC, pp. 210, 420.
ment of Satan, activated by him to pull down God’s kingdom on earth because he could not do it in heaven. Wheelwright was charged before the General Court with heresy and sedition in March because of his fast-day sermon, helped in no small measure, he later claimed, by the ministers’ secret communication.47

However, just as not all ministers in October had perceived themselves in a serious controversy, neither did a majority on the court in March immediately perceive the need to punish Wheelwright. A deputy to the court attempted to prove the heresy accusation by stating, correctly, that Wheelwright argued sanctification could be perceived only in the light of justification and not vice versa. This was, of course, Cotton’s doctrine, which does nothing to eliminate the suspicion that Wheelwright was being used, at least by some persons, as a means to rein in Cotton. Cotton certainly perceived the connection, for the heresy charge collapsed when he announced that his and Wheelwright’s doctrines were identical. The sedition charge went nowhere at first, as Wheelwright refused to acknowledge that in his fast-day sermon he meant the ministers were under a covenant of works. It succeeded only when all the ministers present, except for Cotton, told the court on the third day of the trial that Wheelwright meant them. Faced with repudiating Massachusetts’ clerical establishment, the court convicted Wheelwright—“some fell from us, so that we were the minor,”’ a supporter of Wheelwright on the court said later.48

That conviction gave state ratification of the identification of the Boston church with disorder, if not with heresy. The opponents of the church thereafter consolidated their grasp on state power. Vane and his supporters were removed by the voters from their magisterial positions in May, after hard campaigning by Winthrop and clerics. At the May meeting of the General Court Shepard preached a bitter sermon warning that his opponents were the enemies of the colony and that their complaints about clerical “persecuting Egyptians”’ would lead to all the ministers being massacred. He called for immigration controls that the court passed and applied to friends of Wheelwright when they arrived in June.49

The application of state power to enforce unity among the godly, even though it was going solidly in the direction of Shepard’s party, proved almost as futile in Massachusetts as it was to prove shortly in

47 Wheelwright, Brief and Plaine Apology, p. 7. A list of what appear to be the specific charges by the ministers exists in the Hartlib Papers, 40/1/7A; Groom, Glass, p. 6.
48 Coddington, Demonstration, pp. 12–13; Groome, Glass, pp. 6–7.
England, and for the same reason. Significant numbers of the godly saw it only as persecution. Cotton was furious at what he considered the unjustified punishment of Wheelwright for preaching correct doctrine. Seventy-two colonists signed a petition against the court’s action, respectfully suggesting that the court might have been misled by Satan. Cotton’s party also fumed about the immigration law; Cotton took it as aimed at him. Cotton was no less furious that Winthrop’s status effectively protected him from church discipline. He and his supporters tried to set up another colony in the early summer, a move that might have been fatal to the morale of the colony and its standing among English Puritans.  

But Cotton did not leave, and Massachusetts did not foreshadow the soon-to-follow sundering of the English Puritan clerical establishment. Instead, by August Cotton and his opponents began sending out peace feelers. Cotton softened at least in part because he had no real alternative. The plan for founding another colony fell through, and Vane, his chief magisterial protector, returned to England on 3 August. Cotton was now completely isolated. But perhaps no less important was the arrival at the end of June of John Davenport, a minister of Cotton’s stature and his friend. Cotton Mather claimed Davenport played a large role in pacifying the opposing parties—he had the clout to do it.  

Whatever the causes, bridges clearly began to be built. In August, Cotton patched up his relationship with Wilson. It must have been at this time that Cotton decided that the differences between him and the extreme preparationists were, as he put it, “Logicall, not Theologi-
call”—he and they could be brethren, in other words. The peace gestures did not only come from Cotton. Winthrop and Deputy Governor Thomas Dudley assured him that the General Court had no quarrel with his doctrine. At a synod held at the end of the summer, Cotton’s opinions were clearly distinguished from lay opinions for the first time. The synod condemned a large number of lay opinions, most of which denied the reality of sanctification. They probably represented a radicalization of Hutchinson’s teachings, which, a supporter of Wheelwright later said, “would never have advanced so much, had not the Antiperistasis of your vehement prosecution forced them into a habit.” Cotton gave a qualified consent to the condemnation. He and the other ministers worked out a com-

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51 Dunn et al., eds., Journal, p. 223; Mather, Magnalia, 1:325.
promise theological statement in which he had to yield very little. The ministers, in effect, simply agreed that they were all among the godly, whatever their differences and that, to quote a contemporary letter, "no difference in opinion shall alienate their affections any more." Davenport preached the synod's final sermon, extolling the benefits of brotherly love, even in the absence of doctrinal unanimity.52

But much water had passed under the dam by this time, and not everyone from Boston was willing to participate in the love feast. Now that he was at one with his brethren again, Cotton decided that Boston radicals had been long-settled heretical conspirators and were the root of the colony's troubles; therefore Wheelwright's sermon, which attacked ministerial doctrine without condemning radical errors, had been seditious in its effect and justly punished. Unlike Cotton, Wheelwright never made peace with the extreme preparationists; for him, his punishment remained simply the persecution of the gospel. He was banished at the beginning of November. Hutchinson was also tried at that time and sentenced to banishment. At her trial, she warned the court that she had a revelation that God would destroy them if they punished her. That announcement allowed the court to collapse the causes of an extremely complicated dispute into the impact of a single forceful and influential person and her alleged Münster-like enthusiasm; many historians have been only too quick to follow the court's lead. The petition signers were punished. An exodus of about twenty families followed Wheelwright to New Hampshire, and, initially, twenty others, including Hutchinson, went to Rhode Island.53

Those disaffected laity who remained in Massachusetts were not as quick as Cotton to perceive their persecutors as brethren again. They did come around finally, but, according to Weld and Winthrop, it was not because of the court's exercise of state power or the synod's exposure of heresy. It was because Hutchinson and others finally violated their own sense of appropriate godly opinion and behavior. John Underhill,

52 Dunn et al., eds., Journal, p. 230; John Cotton, cited by John Higginson in the preface to Cotton Mather, The Everlasting Gospel (Boston, 1700), sig. B2iiiv. When the final list of issues between Cotton and the other ministers was drawn up for discussion at the synod, Hooker's preparationism was not among them, yet Cotton had listed it as one of the three issues between him and the other ministers as recently as May. See AC, pp. 175–77; Bell, ed., John Wheelwright, p. 190; Mather, Magnalia, 2:514–16; Hutchinson, History, 1:61.

a prominent opinionist, tried to seduce a woman using arguments that anticipated the ranters, while some opinionists began questioning the linchpin of Puritan morality, the Sabbath. Hutchinson’s opinions grew more extreme and settled after her civil trial—extreme enough that the Boston church examined her in March 1638, shortly before she was to go into exile. The church would have let her off with an admonition, to the distress of Shepard and other ministers present, but Hutchinson appeared to lie about just how heretical her opinions had really been. For that, other laity, who had defended Hutchinson and the handful of genuine radicals “in the simplicity of their hearts,” as Weld put it, were quite prepared to excommunicate her. The public broadcasting in 1638 of Hutchinson and Mary Dyer’s monstrous births gave divine confirmation of a swelling negative lay appraisal of persons no longer behaving as the godly ought; Weld claimed that the births “did much awaken many of their followers . . . from that time we found many of their eares boared . . . to attend to counsell.” By the end of 1639, Winthrop claimed, the congregation had reunited in bonds of love; other sources indicate continuing mistrust over Cotton’s flip-flop and continuing respect for Hutchinson.54

Those who chose exile over reconciliation can be divided into two groups, one loyal to Cotton and Wheelwright’s theology and alienated by their opponents’ behavior, the other group theological radicals. Wheelwright set up a church in New Hampshire with Boston’s blessings, and he eventually patched up his relationship with the Massachusetts authorities. Those who went to Rhode Island, a mixture of Cottonian orthodox and more radical elements, fell into sectarian squabbling in which Hutchinson’s stances were not the most extreme. Despite their own differences, they rejected any effort by the Boston church to make a proprietary claim on them; they were finished with a national church structure. Hutchinson recast her millennialism and identified the Massachusetts churches as “those Cities of the Nations, which the Lord hath said should fall, Rev. 16.19.” Her son-in-law was imprisoned in Boston in 1641 when he visited to share that perspective, adding ominously that Charles I was the king of Babylon.55


55 For doctrinal disputes, see Dunn et al., eds., Journal, pp. 274, 362–64; [John Cotton] to Beloved Brother in Acquethnick, 4 June [1638], Massachusetts Historical Society, Cotton Family Papers, vol. 2, transcript of Boston Public Library, MS. AM. 1506, pt. 2, no. 13. The relationship of the Rhode Islanders with the Boston church can be traced in
The sequence above clearly supports Collinson’s argument about the importance of Puritanism for containing hot Protestantism—the Boston church fell, the radicals rejected a national church structure, and shortly thereafter came the foreshadowing of sectarian axes in England. But it would be misleading to stop the analysis there. We would be left with a picture of Massachusetts Puritanism, lay and ministerial, reconstituting its unity, albeit in somewhat truncated fashion, after the removal of the exiles. The picture would suggest a division between socially problematic radicals and the mainstream, and it fits neither the conclusion of the Antinomian Controversy nor the dynamic of Puritanism.

For radicals were not the only ones bitter about the outcome. In the Antinomian Controversy Wheelwright, lay sympathizers to Cotton and Wheelwright, and a number of doctrinal deviants reacted with bellicosity when pushed hard enough and were disciplined in various ways; for most of those who put their thoughts about the Antinomian Controversy to paper, that course of events validated and satisfactorily resolved the initial aggression against them.

Thomas Shepard did not share that sense of a satisfactory resolution to what had been, at least in part, a controversy of his own making. In his sermons of 1638 and 1639 he continued to attack Cotton’s doctrines, warned that his opponents had not sufficiently confessed and lamented their sins, and made numerous references to Judases—Hooker in Connecticut, meanwhile, was attacking lay and clerical Boston opinion, denying outright the existence of a noetic witness of the Spirit, and even attacking the theological compromise Cotton and the other ministers had reached at the synod, which Hooker had comoderated. Shepard bitterly complained in his diary in early 1639 that Cotton had not repented but continued to preach his old doctrine and that he had attempted to exonerate Hutchinson in her church trial, a suspicion Shepard shared with Hooker. In 1646 Shepard was still tracing the origin of the conflict in part to Cotton’s ‘‘obscure’’ preaching of familism.56

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Shepard’s enduring disappointment marks the extent to which the impulse toward unity among the godly triumphed over the ambitions of its ideologues even in the Antinomian Controversy. Yet the havoc he helped unleash by his construction of heretical “others” out of his brethren shows just how widely dispersed was the capacity for creating disorder in Puritanism. Puritanism not only generated its own radical wing, but with its sharply polarized worldview, it also generated its own Lauds, persons striving to impose a uniformity on the diversity and tolerance of their movement.

Massachusetts was the first polity Puritans controlled, and, as would shortly be the case in England, Puritan empowerment encouraged both those tendencies: on the one hand, millennial fervor and divisive, even ant clerical doctrinal speculation in the Boston church; on the other hand, the chimeric attempt at realizing a previously theoretical commitment to uniformity through state power. The result was the most spectacular Puritan dispute before the civil wars. Puritanism may have represented, as Collinson has recently written, “the mainstream, ongoing thrust of the Protestant Reformation”; the Antinomian Controversy demonstrates how little it took to make the currents of that stream extremely turbulent.57

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Historians have seen the Antinomian Controversy’s impact on English Puritanism as primarily symbolic. Contemporaries certainly used it for symbolic purposes. Congregationalists in London in 1644 may have published *Short Story* to demonstrate that congregationalism was capable of policing itself; Presbyterians seized on it as illustrative of the chaos congregationalism engendered. For the rest of the century, *Short Story* was a source book for antinomian error.58

But the Antinomian Controversy had a causal, as well as a symbolic, role in widening the fissures of English Puritanism. Cotton’s friend Thomas Goodwin organized an English congregationalist church in the mid-1630s, dominated by persons who had been involved in the Warwick patent. Goodwin’s church and Boston had a direct link—Henry Vane. Vane left Massachusetts “ripened into more knowledge and experience of Christ, than the churches there could bear the testimony of,” as an


admirer later said. On his return to England he planned to accompany
the church to Arnhem, Holland. In Holland the church became known
for its pietistic experiments and for a millennialism that discovered con-
gregationalism in prophetic scripture texts, as at least some Massachu-
setts congregationalists had already done, and located the seal of the
Spirit as the climax of the gospel. The Arnhem church’s apocalyptic fer-
vor helped set the congregationalist ecclesiological agenda in the civil
wars.59

Boston was certainly not the only source of millennialist congre-
gational zeal in Holland in the late 1630s, and how much it directly influ-
enced the Arnhem church is impossible to determine. But Vane demon-
strably generated controversy in England as soon as he returned. Among
the Warwick patentees, Lord Say and Sele wrote indignantly to Cotton
in 1638, Vane, together with unnamed friends, disseminated his radical
Boston doctrine with success and controversy, covering it with Cotton’s
mantle. Say and Sele’s fellow patentee, Lord Brooke, who was to work
closely with Vane in the militant parliamentarian party in the civil war,
in all likelihood picked up from Vane his own approving misunder-
standing of Cotton’s theology; only Brooke’s death in 1643, Richard
Baxter later claimed, kept him from coming completely under Vane’s
sway.60 Vane became a major player in both domestic and foreign affairs,
driven by millennial zeal, for the duration of the Long Parliament. He
kept his admiration for Anne Hutchinson while developing his own the-
ology and attracting his own followers. His theology remained firmly
rooted in what he had learned in Hutchinson’s conventicles, and there
are perhaps traces of Hutchinson’s teachings in the writings of Vane’s
close friend, the Platonist Peter Sterry.61

59 Lord Say and Sele to [John Cotton], July 1638, Boston Public Library MS AM
1506, pt. 2, no. 15; Keith L. Sprunger, Dutch Puritanism: A History of English and Scot-
tish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Leiden,
1982), pp. 226–32; and Steven Foster, The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the
Thomas Edwards, Antapologia (London, 1644), p. 32; David Walker, ‘‘Thomas Goodwin
85–97; Stanley P. Fienberg, ‘‘Thomas Goodwin’s Scriptural Hermeneutics and the Disso-

60 George Sikes, The Life and Death of Sir Henry Vane, Kt. (n.p., 1662), p. 8; Say
and Sele to [John Cotton]; Robert Lord Brooke, The Nature of Truth (London, 1641),

61 Baillie, A Dissuasive, p. 64. For Vane’s theology, see David Parnham, Sir Henry
Vane, Theologian: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Religious and Political Discourse
(Madison, N.J., 1997). Parnham notes parallels with Cotton, chap. 7, but does not discuss
lay Bostonian opinions. See, e.g., AC, pp. 222, 228, 264–65, 301. For Vane’s followers
see Baxter, Reliquiae, p. 75. Sterry became Lord Brooke’s chaplain in 1639. For theologi-
cal parallels, see Peter Sterry, A Discourse of the Freedom of the Will (London, 1675),
pp. 173 ff., The Rise, Race, and Royalty of the Kingdom of God in the Soul of Man
Vane developed not only the theological speculation he began in Massachusetts but the polarizing disputes he had encountered and encouraged there. He supported the politically radical millenialist Fifth Monarchy Men, a number of whose leading members had been in Boston at the time of the Antinomian Controversy. As in Massachusetts, orthodox ministers found his speculations mystifying and offensive, while Vane’s conviction, learned in Massachusetts, that most Puritan ministers lived in and preached a damnable covenant of works, underlay his zealous, longstanding campaign for religious liberty. While in prison after the Restoration, he offered his impending execution as proof that the “Reformed part of the Church” was “fiercer enemies [to the godly] than any others whatsoever.” On the scaffold Vane may have recalled Wheelwright’s fast-day exhortation: “Sampson slew more at his death, then in his life, and so we may prevale more by our deathes, then by our lives.” By all accounts, he met the ax of the Reformed part of the Church with exemplary courage—the final scene of a personal script written in the Antinomian Controversy.
