

Lay Leadership and the Foundations of American Congregationalism

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The study of early New England religion has traditionally focused on the Puritan clergy and their role in shaping the religious beliefs of the population.¹ This owes much to the fact that the earliest histories of the region—by William Hubbard, Cotton Mather, and others—were written by clergymen who stressed the role of their forbears in creating the “New England Way.” By the late seventeenth century, New England’s clergy had succeeded in parlaying their university education into a justification for increasing their authority over individual congregations and over the churches as a whole, and this success strongly influenced the way that clerical historians viewed the past. For the most part later historians followed this lead, and the fact that the clergy left the preponderance of sources on New England church history in sermons and notebooks reinforced that perspective. But an examination of the earliest years of the region suggests a different story, one of lay believers taking the lead in organizing churches, leading worship, and seeking to better understand the divine plan. And that story begins in the Plymouth colony.

The religious identity of the Plymouth colony was initially shaped by lay leadership. Sermons were preached, prayers were offered, and counsel provided primarily by the congregation’s lay elder, William Brewster. The first New England sermon that we have the text of was preached in Plymouth in December 1621 by a lay congregant who had been a grocer in England and a wool comber in Leiden, Robert Cushman. The responsibility of explaining the Pilgrim church order to the early settlers of

1. NB: references to *OPP* are to Bradford’s *Of Plimoth Plantation*. They will be updated with page references to the new edition being completed.

I am guilty myself, particularly with *Shaping New England: Puritan Clergymen in 17th Century England and New England* (New York: Twayne, 1994).

Massachusetts was entrusted to the Plymouth deacon Samuel Fuller, who had learned enough about medicine to serve as the community's physician. In the 1640s the task of explaining the history and polity of the congregation to the next generation was assumed by the laymen and governor William Bradford in a series of written "Dialogues" between the "Young Men" of the colony and the "Ancient Men." This, then, is a different story about New England's church history. It begins in the earliest traces of lay empowerment in England's pre-Reformation history.

Lay Empowerment in England

The valuation of the laity which was at the heart of Congregationalism had deep roots in English history. While the Lollard movement of the fourteenth century drew inspiration from the Oxford priest and theologian John Wycliffe, it involved lay believers, women as well as men, gathering in secret meetings where they "read and discussed the scriptures, heard sermons, and distributed books."² One of the spokesmen for the movement asserted that "every man, holy and predestined to eternal life, even if he is a layman, is a true minister and priest ordained by God to administer the sacraments necessary for the salvation of man, although no bishop shall ever lay hands on him."³ Lollardy was never completely suppressed, continuing as an underground tradition of friends, families, and neighbors gathering in secret to exchange their understanding of God's will. For lay believers to act in this fashion it was necessary for such individuals to draw guidance from the Scriptures, so a central tenet of Lollardy was the demand that the Scriptures be made available in the vernacular.

We can assume that the Lollard underground would have been encouraged by the call of Martin Luther for vernacular Bibles and the priesthood of all believers. Influenced by Luther, and perhaps the Lollard heritage, the English reformer William Tyndale set out to translate the Bible into English, stating that his goal was to enable "the boy who drove the plow to know more of the scriptures" than many clergymen, arguing that "there are many found among the laymen which are as wise as their officers."⁴ He opposed the monopoly on authority claimed by ordained clergy, and went

2. Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1998), 169.

3. Quoted in Claire Cross, *Church and People, 1450–1660: The Triumph of the Laity in the English Church* (Hassocks, England: Harvester, 1976), 9–10.

4. William Tyndale, *The Whole Works of W. Tyndal, John Frith, and Doc. Barnes* (Iohn Daye under Aldersgate, 1573), 285–86.

so far in one statement to argue that women could preach and administer the sacraments “if necessity required.”

Efforts to advance what many perceived as further reforms of the church continued, following Henry VIII’s break with Rome, the reforms that were instituted by Edward VI, the Catholic counter-Reformation of Mary Tudor, and into the reign of Elizabeth, whose state church was deemed insufficiently reformed by the hotter sort of Protestants. There were university graduates, ordained clergy, and even some bishops who worked within the structures of the church to achieve reforms such as the abandonment of clerical vestments, signing with the cross in baptism, the provision of an educated preaching ministry in all parishes, and a more rigorous denial of the Lord’s Supper to those who were deemed spiritually ineligible.

From these first days of the Reformation there was a tension between the belief in the ability of believers inspired by the Spirit of God to directly understand the demands of Scripture and the concerns of church authorities to maintain control over doctrine and practice. Henry VIII opposed Tyndale’s efforts and helped engineer his arrest and execution for heresy by imperial authorities. Yet it was a layman, Thomas Cromwell, whom Henry appointed Vicegerent in Spirituals, who helped shape the structure of the Protestant Church of England. Thomas Cranmer, Henry’s Archbishop of Canterbury, was skeptical of lay empowerment but during the reign of Edward VI welcomed to England continental reformers such as Martin Bucer, who had a broader view of the role of the laity. When Mary Tudor succeeded Edward and sought to restore Catholicism, it was lay men and women who organized underground churches to sustain the Protestant spirit in England while prominent reformers such as Cranmer were executed and others departed into exile on the continent.

Following the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558 the Protestant character of the Church of England was restored, but not all reformers were satisfied with the extent of the changes. Unable to gain the support of the church hierarchy, those who were seen as the hotter sort of Protestants—Puritans as they were called—drew upon lay support and emphasized the role of the laity. Some laymen used their right to install clergy in parishes that they controlled to appoint Puritan ministers. In these and other parishes fervent lay believers often pressured their ministers to resist episcopal demands to conform to matters such as wearing prescribed vestments and requiring that recipients of the Lord’s Supper kneel to receive it.

Some believers, finding themselves in parishes where reform was successfully resisted, separated themselves from the church and began to

worship on their own. Such gatherings, branded conventicles by the authorities, who deemed them illegal, were a way for men and women to engage in proper worship without tarrying for changes that might eventually be approved by the bishops. In some cases a group of friends and neighbors could all be laypeople; in other cases someone who had held a ministerial living could be part of the group. In the early years of the seventeenth century such a group came together in Scrooby, Lincolnshire, where believers were hosted for prayer, psalm singing, and the sharing of spiritual insight by William Brewster.

Brewster and the Scrooby Congregation

Brewster was a layman who had studied for a year or so at Peterhouse College in Cambridge at a time when the university had a strong Puritan presence. He left his studies to take up a post in the household of William Davison, a prominent figure in the court of Queen Elizabeth who eventually became the Queen's Secretary of State, and was inclined to support Puritanism.⁵ Brewster accompanied Davison on two separate missions to the Netherlands in the mid-1580s and there observed the practices of the churches there. But any hopes Brewster may have had for his own advancement were ended when Davison was scapegoated by the queen for his role in delivering the death warrant for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587. Brewster returned to Scrooby by 1588.

A decade later the churchwardens of St. Wilfrid's in Scrooby reported the parish curate for not wearing the surplice during services, and Brewster for "repeating sermons publicly in the church without authority." Puritans were known for taking sermon notes and meeting with family and friends to discuss the points raised, and often these discussions could stray into other areas of faith and practice. Justifying such efforts, the layman Robert Cushman would write "that if the country and kingdom where we live take no public course for preaching, yet the Gospel may still be found in families, and from neighbor to neighbor."⁶ The complaint against Brewster also noted that on occasion he traveled to neighboring churches to hear

5. Davison is said to have been an elder of a Puritan church in Antwerp. Winnifred Cockshott, *The Pilgrim Fathers: Their Church and Colony* (London : Methuen, 1909), 57, citing add. MSS. 6394 for elder & on Cartwright SP Dom (July 22, 1586).

6. Robert Cushman, *The Cry of a Stone: A Treatise showing What is Right Matter, Form and Government of the Visible Church of Christ*, ed. Michael R. Paulick, transcribed and annotated by James Baker (1642; repr., Plymouth, Mass.: General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 2016), 147.

sermons preached, likely referring to nearby Babworth and Bawtry, where the Puritans Richard Clyfton and John Deacon could be heard.⁷ At the time Brewster only received an admonition.

By 1602 there was clearly a group of godly men and women who had gathered around Brewster to enrich their spiritual lives. In 1603 they were probably among the many Puritans who hoped that the new king, James I, would bring about the type of religious changes they had lobbied for. But the king dashed those hopes at the Hampton Court Conference, and in the aftermath the church authorities began to demand and enforce closer conformity to prescribed practices, with many clergymen who refused removed from their positions.

Puritans were forced to decide whether or not to continue in the church or to separate. According to William Bradford, the Scrooby conventicle organized into a congregation around 1605 or 1606 when “the Lord’s free people joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways made known, or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them.”⁸ The process they used—what would become the norm in Congregationalism—was described by John Murton, a disciple of a neighboring Separatist clergyman, John Smyth: “Do we not know the beginnings of [Robinson’s] Church?” he wrote, “That there was first one stood up and made a covenant, and then another, and these two joined together, and then a third, and these became a church, say they, etc.”⁹ In a world where parishes and ecclesiastical jurisdictions were created from above, the lay believers gathered in the Scrooby Manor House formed their own church. The congregation then chose Richard Clyfton, who had been deprived of a clerical living in nearby Babworth in 1604 as their minister. John Robinson, who had been ejected from a curacy in Norwich, joined the congregation. Both had been troubled by the implications of Separatism and had discussed it with fellow Puritans but finally accepted the need for it.

To understand the expanded role of the laity in the period we are looking at, it is helpful to realize that this was a time in which there were no

7. Jeremy Dupertius Bangs, *Strangers and Pilgrims, Travellers and Sojourners: Leiden and the Foundations of Plymouth Plantation* (Plymouth, Mass.: General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 2009), 13.

8. *OPP*, 9.

9. William Eleazar Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants* (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1917), 44.

hard and fast barriers between the individual self and the spiritual cosmos. Ordinary men and women believed that they could be touched by the divine—and potentially by the devil. Belief in being led to truth by the power of the Holy Spirit was the more positive side of a continuum that included belief in demonic possession. As valuable as university training was, natural reason was deemed insufficient alone to understand Scripture. It was possible for ordinary believers, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern God's will to a degree that could be greater than that of formally educated clergy. Robert Cushman wrote of the clergy that "not one of twenty of them that are trained up in the university are fit to be Preachers, seeing as it is not human learning that maketh a man a preacher but other helps of nature and grace, without which human learning makes a man play the fool rather than the wise man."¹⁰

At the same time, the lay and clerical leaders of congregationalism recognized that even with the guidance of the Spirit, men were fallible and agreement was not always possible, for, as Cushman explained, "whilst we are here, we are frail men and some frailties will still appear in us."¹¹ Rob-
inson himself, according to Bradford, recognized his insufficiency "and was ever desirous of any light, and the more able, learned and holy the persons were, the more he desired to confer and reason with them." Another member of Robinson's congregation, Edward Winslow, captured the point in a recollection he published of Robinson's teachings. Robinson, he remembered, "was very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word." Robinson bemoaned "the state and condition of the Reformed Churches, who would come to a period in Religion, and would go no further." Thus, "for example the Lutherans they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw, for whatever part of God's will he had further imparted and revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it. And so also," Robinson lamented, "you see the Calvinists, they stick where he left them, a misery much to be lamented; for though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them." He exhorted his own congregation "to take heed what we received for truth, and well to examine and compare, and weigh it with other Scriptures of truth, before we received it. For, saith he, *It is not possible*

10. Robert Cushman, *The Cry of a Stone*, 141.

11. Robert Cushman, *The Cry of a Stone*, 147.

the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick Antichristian darkness, and that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once."¹²

When believers approached discussions of faith with such humility, recognizing that others might have better insight than they did, they could unite in dynamic discussions of their faith. Individuals needed to test their insight against the insights of other godly individuals. In cases where agreement was not a possibility, the advice of John Eliot to someone who disagreed was "brother, learn the meaning of these three little words, bear, forbear, forgive."¹³ Similarly, Robert Cushman wrote that "in things therefore probable and doubtful, it better becomes us to seem ignorant than to grow presumptuous."¹⁴ When a congregation included some who discarded such advice because they were closed-minded, presumptuous, and convinced that their beliefs were true reflections of God's truth, the result could be schism.

The Way to Leiden and Plymouth

Having formed themselves into a separate congregation, the Scrooby believers found themselves, as Bradford wrote, "hunted and persecuted on every side;... some were taken and clapped up in prison, others had their homes beset and watched day and night,... and the most were fain to flee and leave their habitations, and the means of their livelihood."¹⁵ After two failed attempts, most successfully left England. They first settled in Amsterdam, worshiping with the congregation of the "Ancient Brethren" as it was called. That congregation had existed in some form since 1593, but in welcoming new arrivals from England—not merely the Scrooby congregation, but others such as members of John Smyth's Gainsborough congregation—the unity of the church was challenged. Bradford tells us that after about a year Robinson, Brewster, and other leaders of the Scrooby group, seeing "that the flames of contention were like to break out in that

12. Edward Winslow, *Hypocisie Unmasked* (London: Printed by Rich. Cotes, for John Bellamy at the three Golden Lions in Cornhill, neare the Royall Exchange, 1646), 97–99.

13. Cotton Mather, *The Life and Death of the Renown'd Mr. John Eliot* (London, 1691), 39. In an email communication David Luper has suggested that this is a Christian adaptation from the advice of the Stoic Epictetus to "Bear and forbear." Also see David A. Luper, *Greeks, Romans, and Pilgrims: Classical Republicanism in Early New England* (Brill, Leiden: 2017), 117–21.

14. Stone, *Cry of a Stone*, 173.

15. *OPP*, 10.

ancient church, . . . thought it was best to remove, before they were any way engaged with the same."¹⁶

They chose to move to Leiden, a city that Brewster had visited when in Davison's service. Clyfton chose to remain in Amsterdam. Those who moved to Leiden chose Robinson as their new pastor, and Brewster as their elder.¹⁷ In Leiden the openness to further light led Robinson and Brewster to engage in dialogue with faculty at the University of Leiden and discussions with other English exiles such as Henry Jacob, William Ames, and Robert Parker, and with the Dutch Mennonite Pieter Twisck. Robinson shifted his position on engagement with non-Reformed churches and their believers as a result of such exchanges. Robinson had previously subscribed to the positions that had been set out by early separatists such as Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, labeling parish church buildings as "idol houses" which no godly believer should enter. But during the Leiden years he came to accept that it was acceptable for saints to listen to sermons and join in prayer in such churches, condemning only the sharing of the sacraments.¹⁸ This was the position of Henry Jacob, who allowed the members of the separatist church he established in London to have such interaction with parish assemblies, and it was an important concession for the Scrooby believers when they settled in New England.

This was a shift that was undoubtedly discussed within the congregation because Robinson was one of the strongest advocates of lay preaching and discussion, which was referred to as "prophesying." This practice was one in which, as Cushman (who was a deacon of the church) wrote,

all the gifts and graces of the spirit are freely shown forth without restraint; there the Word of God is not bound in by policy, tradition, custom, &c.; . . . if you have a word of wisdom or exhortation, there you may utter it. If you would learn anything, there you may ask and receive freely. . . . Stand you in need of instruction, exhortation or comfort, they are ready to give it to you. Do you stumble or fall, either by error of judgment, of failing in conversion? Why, they will help both to raise and hold you up. Have you need of some gentle rebukes as a balm to your soul or of some sharp and severe threatenings to beat down your proud flesh, yea, need you aught either for soul or body?

16. *OPP*, 16.

17. By far the best study of the Pilgrims in Leiden is Bangs, *Strangers and Pilgrims*.

18. Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), 184.

Why, there it is to be had freely, and whatsoever is wanting in the outward glory is supplied seven-fold in the inward grace.¹⁹

After about a dozen years in Leiden, some members of the congregation proposed moving yet again. While these Englishmen were able to exercise their faith freely in the Netherlands, life in other ways was difficult. Most hadn't learned to speak the language, earning a living was more difficult than what it had been in England, and their children were drawn to the looser cultural standards of the Dutch, among other things. The fact that a truce between Spain and the Netherlands would soon expire cast a further cloud over them. Discussions about various options, negotiations to obtain a charter, and efforts to gain financial support for a move to the New World eventually led to the departure of the *Mayflower* and the eventual settlement at Plymouth.

Organizing the Plymouth Congregation: The Plymouth Way

John Robinson remained in Leiden with those members of the congregation who did not choose to emigrate at the time. While he hoped that he would later join the group in Plymouth, he died before he could realize that plan; he blamed this in part on the unwillingness of the colony's English investors to bear the cost of sending other members of the congregation to America. This meant that when the settlers held their first service in the New World they were led in their prayers by Elder William Brewster. Not having an ordained clergyman did not hinder the members of the congregation from having the spiritual communion that they valued, but it did mean that the sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper—were not available to them, at least in their traditional form. Brewster evidently wrote to Robinson to solicit his views as to whether he, as Elder, could administer the sacraments, but the pastor responded in December 1623 indicating that as he understood the Scriptures, this was not a duty an Elder could perform.²⁰

It has been suggested by one scholar that Robinson's concern only related to the Lord's Supper, since Robinson, Jacob, and others had acknowledged the appropriateness of lay baptism in cases where a congregation did not have a minister.²¹ At the same time, there is some evidence

19. Stone, *Cry of a Stone*, 87.

20. *OPP*, 376–77.

21. Stephen Brachlow, *Communion of Saints: Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology, 1570–1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 195. But it is to be noted that the English investors recorded complaints of the lack of *both* sacraments.

suggesting that having children baptized was not as urgent a priority as we might suggest. Charles Chauncy came to the colony in 1637 and ministered at Plymouth and then Scituate before moving on to become president of Harvard. He advanced the controversial view that baptism should be by full immersion. Many felt that this was inappropriate in the winter given the harsh climate in New England, and the records indicate that some declined to rush their infants to be baptized at certain times of the year.²²

Of course, not all of the colonists were former members of the Leiden congregation, which raises a question about who attended the religious services. Strict separatists would have forbidden sharing prayer with the ungodly, but presumably Robinson's willingness to have members of his congregation listen to sermons and pray in parish churches would have also meant that non-members could join the members in praying together and listening to sermons in Plymouth. They would not have been allowed to receive the sacraments, but that was not relevant if they were not available.

The fact that Brewster asked Robinson about whether or not he could administer the sacraments might indicate that the non-congregants were complaining about the absence of the sacrament—no Lord's Supper, and in the case of baptism, no baptism or a disorderly administration of it. This appears to have been the rationale when the colony's English financiers sent a clergyman over in 1624. The individual was John Lyford, who may or may not have been a Puritan, but who believed that his ordination as a Church of England minister gave him the authority to administer sacraments.²³ But Lyford was not called to the ministerial office by the Plymouth congregants. The separatist settlers had not formed a new congregation by entering into a new covenant. They still considered themselves part of the Leiden congregation with John Robinson as their pastor, which would explain why they were not willing to empower Lyford, but also why they didn't elect William Brewster as their pastor. Lyford gathered the support of some colonists and evidently began to preside over separate religious meetings. It is possible that he administered or planned to administer the sacrament of baptism

22. I have benefitted from discussion of the issue of baptism in emails from Jeremy Bangs, April 21, 2014; and Diarmaid MacCulloch, May 25, 2018.

23. Michael Winship disputes the accounts that label Lyford an "Anglican"—a term not in use at the time—and suggests that he was a nonconforming Puritan who believed his powers derived from his acceptance by the members of a godly parish. But there is no direct evidence of this and we don't know enough about the parish he had served to make it persuasive. See Winship, *Godly Republicanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 120–33.

to children born in the colony. While the details of his actions are unclear, it is well documented that he wrote letters to the colony's English backers that were harshly critical of the Pilgrim leadership and church. Those letters were intercepted by Governor Bradford, leading to Lyford's eventual expulsion from the colony.

John Robinson died in 1625.²⁴ Some members of the Leiden congregation had trickled into Plymouth during the 1620s, but the colony did not receive its first acceptable clergyman until July 1629, when Ralph Smith was chosen to be pastor of the congregation. So, with the exception of the brief time in which Lyford was in the settlement, William Brewster presided over the colony's religious life throughout its first decade. What was that like?

What had emerged as the Plymouth Way rested on a congregation being formed by believing Christians who came together to draw up and subscribe to a covenant. Members were admitted on the basis of an assessment of a profession of faith but were not required to offer a personal narrative claiming that they were saved. The members then chose church officers based on an assessment of their gifts. Worship was in a plain, unadorned meetinghouse which was not considered to be holy ground. The service itself featured prayers, the singing of psalms, a sermon, and on occasion discussion of doctrine with questions and contributions made by members. Discipline of erring members was ultimately the responsibility of the congregation as a whole, though before it came to that, efforts would have been made by individuals and then the church officers to correct the individual.

The Role of Women in the Congregation

There is a mystery surrounding the early life of the congregation, and it centers on the role of women. There was a strain in the English reform movement that gave significant opportunities to women. There was certainly no gender bias when it came to urging Christians to read the Scriptures. William Tyndale so distrusted the authority of ordained clergymen that he accepted that in special circumstances, "if necessity required," women could preach and even administer the sacraments.²⁵ Stephen Geree believed that

24. The members of the congregation still in the Netherlands did not find a replacement, and eventually merged with the English Reformed Church in Leiden in 1644.

25. Ethan Shagan, "The Emergence of the Church of England, c. 1520–1553," in Anthony Milton, ed., *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume I: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520–1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 38.

the grace that enabled believers to understand Scripture was available to women as well as men, so that “sharpness of apprehension and soundness of judgment” was found among them as well as men.²⁶ Certainly women often played a significant role in gatherings of godly men and women who came together to discuss religious matters. We have examples of this in Bridget Cooke in Kersey, England and in Anne Hutchinson, first in Alford, England and then in Boston, Massachusetts.²⁷ It comes from a later period, but it is worth noting that John Bunyan recounted how his own progress in faith had been prompted by encountering a group of women sitting in a doorway talking “about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts, and also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature.”²⁸ The Dedham Conference debated but could reach no conclusion on the proposition that a woman could lead family prayers if she had a greater gift than her husband. There was no disputing that a woman *could* have a greater gift.²⁹

Certainly, if such a group of believers organized into a congregation, women were expected to swear to the covenant to establish themselves as members. But what was their role once the church was formed? It is generally believed that they had a subordinate role, but there is no actual policy statement denying them rights. A striking piece of evidence to the contrary is to be found in the reconstitution of the English church in Rotterdam in 1633 under the leadership of Hugh Peter. John Forbes, representing the classis of English churches in the Netherlands, presided over the election of officers. The vote favored Peter’s selection as pastor. But Forbes addressed the congregation, saying, “I see the men choose him, but what do the women do?” at which point the women raised their hands as well.³⁰ This is one case, but there is no way of knowing how representative it was.

The next question is whether women could express their views in a congregation and vote on disciplinary and other matters. As for voting they may well have been able to vote, since the principle that distinguished

26. Stephen Geree, *The Ornament of Women* (London: Printed by T. B[adger] for L. F[awne] and S. G[ellibrand] and are to be sold at the signe of the Brazen Serpent, in Pauls Church-Yard, 1639), 20. As quoted in Diane Willen, “Godly Women in Early Modern England: Puritanism and Gender,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 43, no. 4 (1992), 567.

27. See Bremer, *Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

28. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 10.

29. Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 266–67.

30. Stephen Goffe in the Hague to William Laud, 26 April 1633, SP 16/286/202.

Congregationalism from Presbyterianism and other polities was the understanding that Christ had entrusted the keys of discipline to the whole church and not just its elders. As for speaking, John Robinson never went so far as to allow unrestrained participation by women (or men, for that matter) in congregational discussions, but did allow that in cases where they were "immediately, and extraordinarily, and miraculously inspired," women might speak without restraint.³¹ He further held that despite Paul's strictures against the role of women in the church, women were free to speak up against perceived injustice or impropriety of doctrine. He wrote that "It may seem most plain that he [Paul] hath no eye, nor respect at all, to these extraordinary gifts and endowments of prophecy authorizing even women furnished with them, to speak publicly, and in men's presence, as appears in Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna, as also in Jezebel herself in regard of order, and others."³² With the breakdown of ecclesiastical controls during the English Civil Wars, many women took to the streets to preach. It is likely that they had some experience of sharing their beliefs in less public settings, in conventicles and congregations, earlier.³³

Ministries of the Word and Charity

The Plymouth congregation met twice on the Sabbath and likely for a Thursday lecture. According to an account by Isaack de Rasieres, secretary at New Amsterdam, who visited the colony in the late 1620s, the settlers worshiped in the lower level of a large square house which served as the colony's fort, the upper level holding cannon that commanded the surrounding countryside. As was common among Puritans, the congregation gathered Sunday for services in both the morning and afternoon. De Rasieres noted that the settlers "assemble by beat of drum, each with his musket or firelock, in front of the captain's door; they have their cloaks on and place themselves in order, three abreast, and are led by a sergeant without beat of drum. Behind comes the Governor, in a long robe; beside him, on the right hand, comes the preacher with his cloak on, and with a small cane."³⁴ The actual service would have consisted of prayer, a sermon by Brewster or another lay preacher, and psalm singing. As was the case

31. George, *John Robinson*, 149–50.

32. Bangs, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 167.

33. See Keith Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects," *Past & Present*, 13 (1958), 45; Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (1992).

34. Sydney V. James, Jr., ed., *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth* (Plimoth Plantation, 1963), 76–77.

in Leiden, individuals were free to raise questions or add insight by way of prophesying.

According to Bradford, Brewster's sermons were plain and direct, and capable of moving the emotions. As for leading the congregation in prayer, Bradford wrote that Brewster "had a singular good gift in prayer, in ripping up the heart and conscience before God in the humble confession of sin and begging the mercies of God in Christ for the pardon of the same." He believed that it was better "for ministers to pray oftener and divide their prayers, than be long and tedious in the same."³⁵ Brewster, of course, was not the only one to preach. Robert Cushman had written that "every Christian that hath received a gift of God for that purpose may preach the word, and so consequently be heard in any assembly where there may be an audience."³⁶ During a brief stay in the colony in the Fall of 1621 he preached a sermon on *The Danger of Self-Love, and the Sweetness of True Friendship*. It is likely that Samuel Fuller and Bradford also offered lay sermons in the 1620s.

Cushman's sermon captured the essence of what may be called the Puritan social gospel, a call to serve community above self. The text he took was 1 Corinthians 10:24: "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth." Like other Puritans he opposed the growing individualistic ethic that was gaining strength at this time. He urged his listeners to "let this self-seeking be left off, and turn the stream another way, namely, seek the good of your brethren, please them, honor them, reverence them, for otherwise it will never go well amongst you." He feared that the hardships the colonists had faced in their first year had tempted many to focus on their personal welfare rather than the common good. It was this temptation that Cushman feared and addressed. He warned that "that bird of self-love which was hatched at home, if it be not looked to, will eat out the life of all grace and goodness. And though men have escaped the danger of the sea, and that cruel mortality which swept away so many of our loving friends and brethren, yet, except they purge out this self-love, a worse mischief is prepared for them." In words very similar to those that John Winthrop would utter in 1630, Cushman exhorted the Plymouth colonists to "labor to be joined together [as one body] and knit by flesh and sinews. Away with envy at the good of others, and rejoice in his good, and sorrow for his evil. Let his joy be your joy, and his sorrow thy sorrow. Let his sickness be thy

35. OPP, 327–28.

36. Cushman, *Cry of a Stone*, 139.

sickness, his hunger thy hunger, his poverty thy poverty. And if you profess friendship, be friends in adversities; for then a friend is known and tried, and not before.”³⁷

A sense of how prophesying fit into the service can be found in an account John Winthrop recorded in 1632 on a visit to Plymouth on which he was accompanied by Boston’s Rev. John Wilson. Ralph Smith was the pastor at the time, with Brewster the Elder and Roger Williams a member of the congregation. During the afternoon service Williams “(according to their custom) propounded a question, to which the pastor, Mr. Smith, spoke briefly, then Mr. Williams prophesied, and after, the Governor of Plymouth [Bradford] spoke to the question; after him the Elder [Brewster], then some two or three more of the congregation.” Brewster then invited Winthrop and Wilson to speak to the issue, “which they did.”³⁸

The congregation held itself responsible for supporting members in special need, and Winthrop’s account of his visit indicates how funds were gathered for the purpose. At the end of the afternoon service, “Mr. Fuller put the congregation in mind of their duty of contribution whereupon the Governor and all the rest went down to the deacon’s seat and put it into the box and then returned.”³⁹

Beginnings of the Salem Congregation

Samuel Fuller had served as a deacon in the church in Leiden and had been engaged in some of the religious disputes that troubled the separatist congregations in the Netherlands. In New England he would play a key role in informing the first settlers of Massachusetts of what Plymouth congregationalism consisted of. In 1628 the Massachusetts Bay Company dispatched an advance party of settlers to New England. They were led by John Endecott and settled on the coast at Naumkeag, which was soon renamed Salem. No clergyman accompanied them and they were not

37. Robert Cushman, *A Sermon Preached at Plimoth in New-England December 9, 1621. In an Assembly of his Majesty’s faithful Subjects there inhabiting. Wherein is Showed the Danger of Self-Love, and the Sweetness of True Friendship. Together with a Preface Showing the State of the Country, and Condition of the Savages. Rom. 12. 10. “Be affectioned to love one another with brotherly love.”* Written in the year 1621. (London: Printed by I[ohn] D[awson] for Iohn Bellamie, and are to be sold at his shop at the two Grey-hounds in Corne-hill, neere the Royall Exchange, 1622), 11–12.

38. John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630–1649*, edited by Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge, 1996), 82.

39. Winthrop, *Journal*, 82.

provided with any blueprint detailing how they were to worship. It is likely that they gathered together informally to pray and Endecott or someone else may have preached. Such conferences of lay believers were common in areas of strong Puritan influence in England, and had been recommended by the clergyman Richard Rogers in his popular *Seven Treatises, containing directions out of Scripture, leading to true happiness* (1610).

As had been the case in Plymouth, the Salem settlers soon found themselves suffering from disease. Endecott wrote to Governor Bradford seeking assistance, and the Plymouth Governor dispatched Samuel Fuller, who served as the Pilgrims' physician as well as a deacon of the church. We don't know how Fuller diagnosed and treated the Salem colonists, nor how successful he was. But there is clear evidence of the impact he had on the faith of the settlers. On May 11, 1629 Endecott wrote to Bradford expressing his sense of unity with the Plymouth colonists, believing that they were "servants to one master, . . . marked with one and the same mark, and sealed with one and the same seal." They had, "for the main, one and the same heart, guided by one and the same spirit of truth; and where this is there can be no discord, nay, here must needs be sweet harmony." Thanking Bradford for sending Fuller, he rejoiced that Fuller had satisfied him, and presumably many other Salemites, of the validity of "your judgments of the outward form of God's worship." The Plymouth Way—if we can so designate it—was "no other than is warranted by the evidence of truth, and the same which I have professed and maintained ever since the Lord in mercy revealed himself unto me." Furthermore, he was pleased that Fuller had made clear that the Plymouth Way was "far differing from the common report that hath been spread of you touching" church practice.⁴⁰ During this period there were other contacts between the two settlements (as noted in the letter from Charles Gott, discussed below), during which Salem residents may have learned more about the congregational practices of the Plymouth church.

Shortly after this, on June 29, six shiploads of colonists arrived in Salem, including three English clergymen—Samuel Skelton, Francis Higginson, and Francis Bright. It is likely that they found that there already existed a covenanted church in Salem, formed in accord with the congregational principles that had led to the organization of the Scrooby congregation, members of whom were then resident in Plymouth. Evidence for this can

40. Governor William Bradford's Letter Book, reprinted from *The Mayflower Descendant* (Bedford, Mass.: Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, 2001), 46–47.

be found in Governor Bradford's *Letterbook*. Immediately after copying out Endecott's letter of May 11 the Plymouth governor wrote that some in Salem "quickly grew into church order and set themselves roundly to walk in all the ways of God."⁴¹

The way in which this occurred was set out by Charles Gott, a resident of Salem who would become a deacon of that church and who wrote to Bradford on July 30. Gott began by thanking Bradford for the hospitality that had been shown to him and his wife when they had visited Plymouth earlier, another indication of contact between the two groups of English colonies. Writing of the religious situation in Salem, Gott indicated that "it hath pleased God to lay a foundation, the which I hope is agreeable to his word, in every thing." This included the formation of a church and, likely, some form of covenant. Francis Bright, who had been a curate of John Davenport's at St. Stephen's, Coleman Street, in London, left Salem and soon returned to England. Davenport was still a conformist, and if Bright shared that rector's views Bright may have found the proceedings in Salem troublesome.⁴² A congregation having been formed, Endecott had set aside July 20 "for a solemn day of humiliation for the choice of a pastor and teacher." The Salem congregation did not accept the validity of the English ordination of Higginson and Skelton, and members questioned the two men "concerning their callings" to the ministry. The two men agreed with the laity and acknowledged the Lord gives a two-fold calling, "the one an inward calling, when the Lord moved the heart of a man to take that calling upon him, and fitted him with gifts for the same; the second (the outward calling) was from the people, when a company of believers are joined together in covenant to walk together in all the ways of God, every member (being men) are to have a free voice in the choice of their officers."⁴³

After Skelton and Higginson addressed the issues of their two-fold calling, every "fit member wrote, in a note, his name whom the Lord moved him to think was fit for a pastor, and so likewise, whom they would have for a teacher." Skelton was chosen to be pastor, and Higginson teacher. "Three or four of the gravest members of the church"—often called the pillars of the church—then ordained the two with an imposition of hands. Some elders and deacons were chosen, but not ordained, August 6 being

41. *Bradford's Letterbook*, 7.

42. Francis J. Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 95.

43. *Lettrbook*, 47–48.

set for that. According to Nathaniel Morton, William Bradford's nephew, the Plymouth governor "and some others with him" planned to attend that ceremony, but "coming by sea, were hindered by cross winds, [so] they could not be there at the beginning of the day, but they came into the Assembly afterward, and gave them the right hand of fellowship."⁴⁴

Williston Walker, in his magisterial *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, argued that a reading of Gott's letter makes clear that the congregation had been formed after Fuller's visit and before the selection of Skelton and Higginson to be pastor and teacher.⁴⁵ When, in the 1630s and 1640s, English and Scottish Presbyterians sought to discredit the New England Way by emphasizing the role played in its establishment by the Plymouth separatists, defenders of the colonial churches such as John Cotton rejected that narrative and argued for other, non-separatist Puritan influences. Many scholars, notably Perry Miller in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* (1933), followed this lead, contending that there was a sharp difference between the separatism of Plymouth and the related but very different non-separating Puritanism of the Bay colony and the sister Bible commonwealths of Connecticut and New Haven. Miller not only sought to establish a separate, distinctly intellectual, line of thinking that led to Massachusetts orthodoxy, but also to prioritize the role of a hierarchical elite in crafting that orthodoxy. Others, such as Michael P. Winship in *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (2012), have reasserted the role of Plymouth, though those who write on the subject generally date the formation of the congregation as occurring on August 6, thus (like Miller) emphasizing the role of the clergy and diminishing the importance of what Walker clearly demonstrated was the lay formation of the church.⁴⁶

The Plymouth Pattern, the New England Way, and Congregationalism

The influence of Plymouth on Salem, and therefore on all of the churches later formed in New England, is important not only for properly understanding the history of the region, but the broader history of Congregationalism.

44. Nathaniel Morton, *New-Englands Memorial* (1669) Morton, 75.

45. Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 102–7.

46. Nathaniel Morton, Bradford's nephew, who acquired his uncle's papers, wrote an account of the formation of the Salem church in which he implied that Higginson and Skelton played a large role. But this was written long after the events, at a time when enhanced clerical authority had been established in the region.

There are a number of other incidents that reinforce the role that Brewster, Fuller, and the congregation that was first formed in Scrooby played in the shaping of the New England Way.

A good indication of the fact that Salem had largely copied the Plymouth model is to be found in the story of how later Puritan arrivals in Salem were allowed to worship there. In June 12, 1630 the *Arbella* and other vessels carrying John Winthrop and the first large influx of settlers arrived in Salem. The Salem congregation welcomed the arrivals, but, as John Cotton soon complained in a letter to Samuel Skelton, denied “the Lords Supper to such godly & faithfull servants of Christ as Mr. Governour [Winthrop], Mr. [Isaac] Johnson, Mr. [Thomas] Dudley, Mr. [William Coddington],” and “denied baptism to Mr. Coddington’s child.” The justification, as Cotton understood it, was because they were not “members of any particular reformed church.” Moreover, the church had “admitted one of Mr. [John] Lathrop’s congregation, not only to the Lord’s Supper, but his child unto baptism, upon sight of his testimony from his church.” Trying to understand the reasons for these decisions, Cotton concluded that “your change hath sprung from new-Plymouth men, whom though I much esteem as godly & loving Christians, yet their grounds which they received for this tenant from Mr. Robinson do not satisfy me.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, and ironically, Samuel Fuller was again in the Bay in the summer of 1630 and reported to Bradford that Coddington himself had told him that “Mr. Cotton’s charge [to the departing Winthrop fleet] at Hampton “was, that they should take advice of those at Plymouth, and should do nothing to offend them.”⁴⁸

After he arrived in Massachusetts, Cotton’s tune changed. He accepted the same practices that he had complained about, while later denying that the New England Way drew its inspiration from Robinson and Plymouth. But a close look at the behavior of the Salem congregation shows that it had in effect adopted the policies of their friends to the south. Robinson had concluded that members of his church could interact with non-covenanted individuals in listening to sermons and joining in prayer in parish churches—and presumably welcome such individuals to join in those aspects of their own services—but not share in the sacraments with them. All of the newcomers were evidently allowed to join in prayer with the Salem church members and to attend sermons. The exclusion of Winthrop

47. Cotton to Skelton, in Sargent Bush, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 141–49.

48. Fuller to Bradford, June 28, 1630 in *Bradford’s Letterbook*, 56–57.

and others from the sacraments until they had been accepted as members of covenanted churches is a reflection of the Plymouth Way, as was allowing a member of Lathrop's recognized covenanted congregation in London (originally organized by Jacob) to share in their sacraments.

As for the administration of Baptism, we are told that "letters did pass between Mr. Higginson, and Mr. Brewster, the reverend Elder of the Church of Plymouth, and they did agree in their judgments, viz. concerning the church-membership of the children with their parents, and that Baptism was a seal of their membership, only when they were adult, they being not scandalous, they were to be examined by the church-officers, and upon their approbation of their fitness, and upon the children's public and personal owning of the Covenant, they were to be received unto the Lord's Supper." A result of this exchange was the admission of the young Francis Higginson Jr. to the Salem church based on the membership of his father.⁴⁹

During Fuller's 1630 visit in Massachusetts, he did indicate that there were mixed views in the Bay colony on adopting the Plymouth pattern, "opposers there is not wanting, and satan is busy." In Mattapan, the Rev. John Warham held "that the visible church may consist of a mixed people, godly, and openly ungodly"—a mix that replicated the situation in England's parishes. In Watertown, the Rev. George Phillips told Fuller "in private, that if they will have him stand minister, by that calling which he received from the prelates in England, he will leave them." Fuller had "conference with them till I was weary." But though Plymouth had "some privy enemies in the Bay but (blessed be God), more friends." Among the latter was John Winthrop, "a godly, wise and humble gentleman," and "Captain Endecott (my dear friend, and a friend to us all), is a second Burrow," a reference to the Separatist pioneer and martyr Henry Barrow.⁵⁰

Fuller remained in Massachusetts for a time, discussing religious matters while ministering to the many new arrivals who had fallen ill. He, along with Plymouth's Edward Winslow and Isaac Allerton, were in Charlestown to witness the first steps in the formation of the church there, which would soon move to Boston. A day was set apart, Fuller wrote on July 26, for the settlers to "humble themselves before God, and seek him in his ordinances," and "then also such godly persons that are amongst them and are known each to other, publicly at the end of their exercise, make known their godly desire, and practice the same, viz. solemnly to enter into covenant with the

49. Morton, *Memorial*, 76.

50. Fuller to Bradford, June 28, 1630 in *Bradford's Letterbook*, 56–57.

Lord to walk in his ways." Rather than proceeding rashly, they determined to advise with the Plymouth representatives already there and to ask that the Plymouth church would raise its voice to God to "direct them in his ways." On August 2 Fuller reported that "Some are here entered into a church covenant, the first four, namely, the Governor, Mr. John Winthrop, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Dudley, and Mr. [John] Wilson; since that, five more are joined unto them, and others it is like will add themselves daily."⁵¹ As in the case of Scrooby, and Salem, the congregation was formed by laymen (and John Wilson, acting here as a private believer) entering into covenant. In that last letter Fuller announced his plans to return to Plymouth and that he would be accompanied by John Endecott. Over the following years there would be numerous visits between the key figures in both colonies and each would turn to the other for advice.

Most New England Puritans shared the belief that over time God might provide further light that could lead to modifications in belief and practice. During the seventeenth century there were modifications to Congregational practices regarding membership and the administration of baptism. There was also a movement toward emphasizing the role of clergy over the laity and that of clerical associations over individual congregations. The controversy that centered on Anne Hutchinson led many clergy to take positions against prophesying. In June 1647 the Rev. Ezekiel Rogers addressed the re-assembled Cambridge Synod, denouncing among other things the practice of lay congregants "making speeches in the church assemblies." William Bradford was at that session as an observer and would have seen this as a clear attempt to roll back the influence of Plymouth on the New England Way.⁵² Bradford defended lay prophesying strongly in his unpublished "dialogue" between the young men of Plymouth and the colony's ancients.⁵³ That distinguished layman was not willing to abandon that key element of Plymouth's legacy.

51. Fuller to Bradford, July 26 & August 2, 1630 in *Bradford's Letterbook*, 57–59.

52. Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, 182. It is interesting that the two congregations most worried about changes that might be made in the New England Way at the synod were those of Boston and Salem.

53. William Bradford, *First Dialogue (A Dialogue or the sum of a Conference between some young men born in New England and sundry Ancient men that came out of Holland and Old England Anno dom. 1648)* in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 22 (Boston, 1920), 120.