

“What Small Thing is it that Remains to Keep Us Apart?”: New England Congregational Thought on the Need for Continued Parish Reform in England, 1640-1650

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Abstract

The study of Puritan resistance to the Church of England during the reign of the hierarchical episcopacy in the early seventeenth century has been well documented in extant research. Comparatively less attention, however, has been devoted to understanding what encouraged sustained Puritan resistance to English parish churches even after the overthrow of episcopacy and subsequent Puritan rise to power in England in the 1640s. This essay examines the perspective of Puritan Congregationalists who migrated to New England in the 1630s and chose to remain there even after events in England turned in their favor upon the abolition of episcopacy in the following decade. It explores what hindrances New England Puritans perceived as present in English parish churches that prevented them from becoming acceptably reformed churches. It argues that elements such as growing Presbyterian influence, fluid boundaries regarding both membership and the nature of the visible church, nonexistence of church covenants, and increasing disunity and sectionalism collectively influenced New England Puritan Congregationalists' decision to remain in New England where they could construct their own acceptably reformed local churches, free from the ecclesiastical errors they found prevalent in the parish churches across the Atlantic. Such analysis demonstrates that not least among the reasons for sustained New England Puritan rejection of England as a viable ecclesiastical environment remained the desire for continued parish reform in the mid-seventeenth century.

Introduction

Writing during the English Interregnum of the 1650s, the Massachusetts Puritan divine John Cotton warned his fellow New England residents who contemplated a return to their mother country:

And so may I say to such, whether you will goe? will you be gone back againe to Egypt ... If you be once incorporated into any of their Parishes, you will finde such beastly work in Church Government .

. . turn not againe to that from which the Lord by his stretched out arme hath delivered you.¹

Despite the overthrow of episcopacy in the previous decade, Cotton pleaded against a mass return to the “Egypt” across the Atlantic from which he and fellow Puritans had journeyed approximately two decades prior to the time of his writing. Even in the midst of the Puritan rise to power in England in the early 1640s, New England Congregationalists maintained that there remained a void that separated the parish churches awaiting them in England from becoming the type of acceptably reformed churches found in New England. As Congregationalists, New England Puritans remained suspicious of all forms of higher ecclesiastical courts, synods, and certainly episcopal structures of church government. However, the abolition of episcopacy in the 1640s provided these Congregationalists an opportunity to hope that the Church of England might fall into greater alignment with their own Congregational beliefs, thus leading to prolonged debates with Presbyterian factions, a topic that will be discussed later in this paper. With episcopacy abolished and the chance for greater Congregational influence possible, the possibility of returning to England became what would appear a natural choice for transplanted English clergy in the wilderness of New England. However, as this paper will demonstrate, this idea did not gain substantive ground because a variety of ecclesiastical factors led New England Puritans to reject England and its parishes as viable religious climates even after the Puritan rise to political power in the 1640s.

Ecclesiastical polity and practice served as two defining areas of discontent among what Patrick Collinson termed the “hotter sort of Protestants” in early modern England.² These Protestants, collectively known as Puritans, formed a group of reformers whose disdain for the episcopal organization, liturgy, and character of the Church of England increased over the course of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as their own desires for Reformed theology and anti-episcopal polity and liturgy were often ignored within the national church. Though the concept of Puritanism has suffered from ambiguity and lack of a clear definition within past historiography, this paper seeks not to provide an exhaustive definition of its contours, but rather to focus most notably on Puritanism’s rejection of episcopacy in the Church of England and desire for a further reformation within it. Puritans disavowed the perceived papist nature of the institutional church, complete with its liturgy that bordered too closely on the Catholicism that England had ostensibly rejected under Queen Elizabeth in the sixteenth century. The failure of substantive reform pushed many Puritans to immigrate to New England, where they enjoyed freedom to create their distinctively reformed local churches, effectively removed from the control of bishops. Despite their anti-episcopal approach to crafting suitable churches in the New World, Puritans did not completely sever ties with their mother church. Rather, they upheld the legitimacy of a number of English parish churches, which, although belonging under

¹ John Cotton, *An Exposition Upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: Printed for Tim. Smart, at the Hand and Bible in the Old-Bailey, 1656), 20-21. For an extended discussion of Cotton’s apocalyptic interpretation of the problems inherent in English parish churches, see Allan I. Macinnes and Arthur H. Williamson, eds., *Shaping the Stuart World: 1603-1714* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 136-137.

² Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1967), 29.

the umbrella of the institutional Church of England, existed as “true” churches because of the collective piety of their members. Although they viewed the notion of a local church as more than merely a collection of pious members, New England Congregationalists reasoned that a “true” church would contain legitimate converts, which collectively bore witness to the godliness of their assembly.

Although this paper seeks to focus on New England Puritan responses to local parish churches, an understanding of their perception of these parish churches is incomplete if not seen within the broader framework of their response to the national church. While the institution of the Church of England itself was corrupt, New England Puritans reasoned, there still existed local parish churches whose congregants themselves composed what they regarded as a “true” church. However, no matter how valid these parish churches remained, there was still much reform needed to turn them into acceptably reformed churches, according to many New England Congregationalists. While not lumping them into the same category as the institutional Church of England but also refraining from attempts to completely sever ties with them, as had their Separatist counterparts, New England Puritan Congregationalists argued that parish churches were not yet complete in their reformation. This engendered immigration to New England where “true” churches could be formed. Since this type of parish reform encountered much resistance from the hierarchical episcopacy of the institutional church, many Puritans ventured across the Atlantic to form their own churches where they perceived a greater chance for more substantive reform awaited.

While numerous scholars have probed the grievances of New England Congregational Puritans regarding the need for further reform during the period of episcopal control of the Church of England, comparatively less work has been done on how those grievances evolved once the Puritans rose to power in the Church of England in the early 1640s. Thus, a gap exists in understanding how New England Puritan dissatisfaction with English parish churches continued even after the Puritans gained political power in the 1640s. An exploration of these grievances and investigation of what New England Congregationalists thought remained to be done to complete the reform process within the English parochial system lends insight into the development of Puritan thought on what constituted the visible church and how it should be displayed in local ecclesiastical polity and practice. By placing this discussion in a transoceanic context, insight is gained into how the relationship between New England Congregationalists and the English parish churches that they left behind evolved throughout the mid-seventeenth century. This article argues that the New England Congregationalists’ rejection of key areas of polity and practice among English parish churches served as a pivotal factor in their rejection of England as a viable climate for creating their understanding of legitimate churches. The first of these key areas involved increasing influence on English Puritanism from Presbyterianism, the hierarchical ecclesiology of which remained unacceptable to New England Congregationalists. Though English Puritanism contained both Presbyterians and Independents, increasing Presbyterianism displeased strongly Congregational Puritans in New England. The next area of discontent involved fluid boundaries regarding both membership and the nature of the visible

church. In the eyes of New England Congregationalists, not enough scrutiny of prospective members' conversions and characters was performed before allowing them to join English parish churches. Additionally, New England Congregationalists found unacceptable the lack of church covenants, documents that they viewed as necessary to forming a legitimate church. Finally, the increasing disunity and sectionalism among English non-conformists dashed New England Congregationalists' hopes for a unified non-conformist attack on episcopacy. This paper seeks to examine each of these issues to demonstrate the influence of these factors in leading New England Congregationalists to continue to reject England as a viable religious climate even after the Puritan overthrow of episcopacy. While these reasons in no way constitute an exhaustive list, given the equally pertinent family commitments, social obligations, and economic realities surrounding transatlantic travel in the seventeenth century, an analysis of the religious and ideological factors involved aids in presenting a fuller picture of why many New England Puritans chose to remain on the other side of the Atlantic while political and ecclesiastical transformations rocked the British Isles in the 1640s.

Recent Scholarship on Puritan Responses to English Parish Churches

Before exploring each of these facets of discontent, this paper first seeks to examine extant historiography on New England Congregationalists' responses to ecclesiastical developments in England during the 1640s. While a paucity of research exists on the topic of New England perceptions of English affairs, this paper will instead analyze the rich diversity of scholarship on seventeenth-century English Puritanism more broadly on a macro-level before focusing more specifically on the micro-level of Puritan responses to English parish churches.

When surveying English Puritanism in its broadest sense, two basic questions that have been revisited by recent historiography are how to define the very idea of Puritanism and why Puritans established themselves as nonconformists. One of the most thorough responses to the question of how to define Puritanism can be found in Patrick Collinson's aptly titled article, "Antipuritanism", in which he argued that, by understanding both the prehistory of Puritanism and opposition to it in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, insight is gained into the peculiarities that defined and shaped it as a religious and ideological movement. The edited collection in which Collinson's work and other essays addressing similar topics can be found, the *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, is a useful resource for identifying current trends in recent Puritan historiography.³ The additional concern regarding Puritan nonconformity has been addressed recently by Ethan Shagan, who argued that the Puritan belief in internal self-moderation led Puritans to argue that the Church of England was not, in fact, practicing this moderating discipline, either at the national or parish level.⁴

Shagan's analysis raises the question of why Puritans continued to acknowledge the

³ Patrick Collinson, "Antipuritanism," in John Coffey and Paul C.H. Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19-33.

⁴ Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion, and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 151.

Church of England as legitimate and reformable despite its episcopal overtones. Michael Parker asserted possible motivations for Puritans' refusal to completely separate from the Church of England, not least of which remained the position it afforded them to work for its reform in Parliament after the Puritans began to make greater political advances within the English government. Thus, one reason, though not the exclusive or even the primary one, that a number of Puritans chose to remain in England stemmed from hopes for political change that would prove favorable for them.⁵ Also, in regard to the often uneasy relationship between politics and religion facing seventeenth-century Puritans, edited collections such as Charles Pryor's *England's Wars of Religion, Revisited* as well as Stephen Taylor's *The Nature of the English Revolution, Revisited* include a variety of essays focused around the perplexity of the dual motivations of religion and politics within the English Civil War.⁶

Within the ecclesiastical sphere of affairs during the Puritan rise to power in mid seventeenth-century England, Rosemary Bradley's dissertation, "'Jacob and Esau Strugling [sic] in the Wombe': A Study of Presbyterian and Independent Religious Conflicts, 1640-1648", provided an excellent analysis of the multifaceted debate between English Puritans who favored a Presbyterian polity and those who favored one of a more Congregational nature, "Presbyterians" versus "Independents," respectively.⁷ She argued that, despite their extensive pamphlet war over the course of the 1640s, neither side ultimately converted the other to their perspective, thus engendering the need for both to work together, which eventually occurred to a greater extent throughout the 1650s before the tumultuous years of the Restoration in the following decade. However, during the heat of the Presbyterian-Independent debate, tensions between the two sides remained severe.⁸

More recently on the topic of the Presbyterian-Congregationalist divide, Francis J. Bremer produced an insightful analysis of the New England defense of Congregational polity against encroaching Scottish Presbyterianism during the Westminster Assembly of 1643. Bremer argued that this defense caused Puritans in New England to work more closely with the government in England in order to keep Presbyterian influence from finding its way to America. A disdain for hierarchical Presbyterianism thus united Puritans in England and America in a transatlantic anti-Presbyterian stance.⁹ In another work, Bremer also explored the constant interplay of events in England and New England that forced Puritans in both locations to reevaluate their ecclesiology in light of the ongoing debate on Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, leading some Puritans in the New World to focus on the continuities they

⁵ Michael Parker, *John Winthrop: Founding the City upon a Hill* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 34.

⁶ Charles Pryor and Glen Burgess, *England's Wars of Religion, Revisited* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2011); Stephen Taylor and Grant Tapsell, eds., *The Nature of the English Revolution Revisited* (Suffolk: Boydell, 2013).

⁷ Rosemary Bradley, "'Jacob and Esau Strugling in the Wombe': A Study of Presbyterian and Independent Religious Conflicts, 1640-1648" Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kent, 1975.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

⁹ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2013), 131-140.

shared with their English counterparts rather than differences.¹⁰ The divisive issue of ecclesiastical polity between Presbyterians and Congregationalists can also be found in John Coffey's work on the Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford. Coffey noted New England Puritan John Winthrop Junior's communication with Scottish Ulster Presbyterians about potential emigration to America, though the question of how they would assimilate into a highly Congregationalist atmosphere raised questions.¹¹

Additionally, historians have noted the failure of the Westminster Assembly to bring the churches of England and Scotland into closer communion. David Hall noted Massachusetts Puritan Thomas Hooker's defense of Congregationalism against rising Presbyterian influence near the time of the Westminster Assembly. In addition, Polly Ha argued that it was through private correspondence that New England Puritans learned of the Presbyterian leanings of the Westminster Assembly, thus prompting such a defense of congregationalism.¹² In addition to Ha's work on English Presbyterianism, another notable work on the topic is Elliot Vernon's *The Sion College Conclave and London Presbyterianism during the English Revolution*, in which he explored the nature of Presbyterianism in an English context.¹³ Finally, Chad Van Dixhoorn's recent work on the Westminster Assembly shed light on New England perceptions that Presbyterianism would eclipse hope for Congregational reform, thus reinforcing their decision to remain in New England.¹⁴

Regarding Puritan responses to English parish churches at the local level, historians have investigated how Puritan behavior created a new relationship that affected Puritan relations with both churches in England as well as their counterparts in New England. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, many scholars investigated the structure of the parish churches in England that the Puritans embraced as representative of "true" churches, though in need of further reform. In 1977, Murray Tolmie produced an original exploration of the peculiar character of London Separatist churches in seventeenth-century England, noting their radical affiliation as nonconformists.¹⁵ Stephen Brachlow's 1981 article on English Separatism analyzed examples of what he termed "progressive" parish churches in England by asserting that many followed a congregational model without interference from local bishops, albeit dependent upon the leniency of the latter.¹⁶ The following year, Slayden Yarbrough identified a number of these

¹⁰ Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 338.

¹¹ John Coffey, *Politics, Religion, and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 198.

¹² David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 297; Polly Ha, *English Presbyterianism, 1590-1640* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011), 63-67.

¹³ Elliot Vernon, *The Sion College Conclave and London Presbyterianism during the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014).

¹⁵ Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London, 1616-1649* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Stephen Brachlow, "John Robinson and the Lure of Separatism in Pre-Revolutionary England" *Church History* 50 (September 1981): 288.

distinctly congregational elements present within some parish churches, including “acts of covenanting, election of officers by the church, and ordination [by the church]” that allowed Puritans to justify their validity. Since parishes contained some or all of these elements, Puritans could justify terming them “true” churches.¹⁷ The same year, Michael Moody analyzed Puritan behavior in parish churches that held a more Congregational stance by demonstrating that many Puritans selectively chose which portions of church services to attend, avoiding the more episcopal liturgical elements.¹⁸

Within more recent historiography, Michael Winship drew attention to the degree of agency among nonconformists who selectively chose which aspects of parish life in which to participate, noting, for example, the common practice of “attending parish church services in the morning and dissenting services in the afternoon, and even serving as parish church officers while doing so,” thus further indicating a significant amount of choice for Puritans with nonconformist leanings.¹⁹ David A. Weir also focused on Puritan activity in English parishes by noting the failed Puritan attempt at purchasing rights to appoint ministers through patronage, which ultimately met its death upon Bishop William Laud’s realization of what was transpiring among Puritans within the parochial system. However, the fact that Puritans were able to attempt to purchase these rights indicates that they had some degree of agency in influencing parish politics.²⁰ A recent and thorough discussion of these types of parishes and the conflicts within them is found in Peter Lake’s book, *The Boxmaker’s Revenge: ‘orthodoxy’, ‘heterodoxy’, and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London*.²¹

In addition to analyzing Puritan behavior within English parishes, historians have noted Puritan understandings of a division within these parishes between what they considered to be the regenerate and unregenerate. For example, Francis Bremer noted the Puritan minister John Cotton’s practice of identifying a separation between the members of his Boston, Lincolnshire, parish church at large and members of the select group within it whom he deemed “godly”, the latter of whom composed a “true” church.²² An earlier work by Avihu Zakai drew attention to the inherent conflict facing Puritans in England during the era of episcopacy by noting that their conflict with the so-called “unregenerate” affected not only their stances on church polity and practice, but also their approach to living in a worldly society, which they perceived to be in need of reformation, thus in part prompting their migration to New England. Though not all who

¹⁷ Slayden Yarbrough, “The Influence of Plymouth Colony Separatism on Salem: An Interpretation of John Cotton’s Letter to Samuel Skelton” *Church History* 51 (September 1982): 296.

¹⁸ Michael E. Moody, “Trials and Travels of a Nonconformist Layman: The Spiritual Odyssey of Stephen Offwood, 1564-ca. 1635” *Church History* 51 (June 1982): 159.

¹⁹ Michael Winship, “Defining puritanism in Restoration England: Richard Baxter and others respond to a Friendly Debate” *The Historical Journal* 54 (2011): 692.

²⁰ David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 22.

²¹ Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker’s Revenge: ‘orthodoxy’, ‘heterodoxy’, and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2001).

²² Francis J. Bremer, *First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in the Atlantic World* (Lebanon: University of New England Press, 2012), 51.

maintained this belief emigrated, a significant number did.²³ Michael Winship also pointed to the ramifications of Puritan embrace of parish churches by pointing to its connection with the later Halfway Covenant, in which members who had not yet voiced a confession of faith were allowed to become partial members, thus muddying the conception of the visible church, much to the same effect as that of English parish churches in which some but not all members composed a “true” church. As will be explored later, the concept of the visible church and its members remained a highly contentious issue even among Puritans themselves.²⁴

Historians have also investigated the often polemical nature of labels of affiliation used to identify nonconformists. More recently, for example, Winship pointed to the complexity of this position by arguing, “Whether this willingness, at least in principle, to acknowledge true churches scattered here and there among England’s parish churches made these Congregationalists non-Separatists, as they claimed, was a question that could provoke a variety of heated responses from more moderate Puritans and Separatists.” What exactly constituted a nonconformist lacked clarity.²⁵ Francis Bremer argued that one primary motivation behind the affirmation of parish churches involved Puritanism’s attempt to distance itself from the more radical label of separatism.²⁶ Though vocally nonconformist, Puritans remained cautious of identifying with radicals who pushed the bounds of orthodoxy in the seventeenth century. An excellent example of recent work on radical factions is David Como’s *Blown by the Spirit*, in which he investigated the peculiarities of English Antinomians and the important role they played in shaping Puritan responses to both the Church of England and fellow nonconformists.²⁷ As becomes apparent, labels, self-imposed or otherwise, remained an object of contention among the multiple divisions within nonconformity.

Furthermore, adoption of Presbyterianism or Independency at the parish level was not always monolithic. Some parishes chose to selectively embrace certain portions of Presbyterian polity while not embracing it in its fullest scope. For example, Ann Hughes explored the effects of the English Civil War on the local community of Warwickshire, noting in particular what she termed a “quasi-Presbyterian clerical community,” which “could be enjoyed without involvement in any dangerous campaign for overall religious change, and without the drawbacks of formal lay participation in a full Presbyterian system.”²⁸

Finally, though not without struggle against episcopal parish churches in the New World, notably those in Virginia, the New World did in fact provide Puritans with unprecedented

²³ Ahivu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 218.

²⁴ Michael Winship, “Were there any Puritans in New England?” *New England Quarterly* 74 (March 2001): 128-129.

²⁵ Michael Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 11-12.

²⁶ Francis J. Bremer, *Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community, 1610-1692* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 135.

²⁷ David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England* (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2004).

²⁸ Ann Hughes, *Politics, Society, and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79.

opportunities for construction of what they considered to be “true” churches.²⁹ Reflecting on the dichotomy between Puritan visions for churches in New England and the corruption they saw as inherent within the Church of England, David VanDrunem pointed to the fundamental originality of New England church polity by noting “the fact that these were attempts to establish new societies rather than adjustments to already-existing societies.”³⁰ Kevin Shape noted John Cotton’s apocalyptic reading of quarrels over church polity as he viewed New England Congregationalism as evidence of the New Jerusalem on earth.³¹ Therefore, New England responses to English ecclesiastical affairs were shaped by the fact that they sought not to replicate extant parish churches that they saw as having substantive problems, but rather to reformulate the very understanding of a local church.

Thus, as a brief survey of extant historiography reveals, many historians have touched upon the inherent conflict between New England congregationalism and the ecclesiology of the parish churches that they left behind. However, more analysis is needed regarding what New England Puritans thought should be done to transform English parish churches into acceptably reformed churches. Therefore, the transoceanic framework of newer scholarship allows for an as of yet unexplored approach that takes into account the opinions of New England Puritan Congregationalists who felt the need for more substantive ecclesiastical reform in England. Although the more radical areas of England contained a substantial number of dissenting congregations and conventicles, many, though certainly not all, official parish churches remained locations of intense conflict promulgated by Puritans who desired more radical and substantive changes within the congregation.

As mentioned above, this article seeks to contribute to this discussion by arguing that New England Congregationalists’ rejection of key areas of polity and practice among English parish churches such as growing Presbyterian influence, fluid boundaries regarding both membership and the nature of the visible church, nonexistence of church covenants, and increasing disunity and sectionalism, led New England Congregationalists to continue to reject England as a viable religious climate even after the Puritan overthrow of episcopacy. This argument demonstrates that, although conditions in England became more favorable to Puritan values during the middle of the seventeenth century, New England Puritans continued to reject English parish churches as incomplete in their reformation.

Puritan Response to the Overthrow of Episcopacy: Migration to New England

The 1640s in England witnessed a drastic series of political changes as Puritans rose to political power during the tumultuous decade of the English Civil War. Rejecting what they

²⁹ Kevin Butterfield, “Puritans and Religious Strife in the Early Chesapeake” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 109, No. 1 (2001): 19-28.

³⁰ David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 215.

³¹ Kevin Shape, “Transplanting Revelation, Transferring Meaning: Reading the Apocalypse in Early Modern England, Scotland, and New England” in Allan I. MacInnes and Arthur H. Williamson, eds., *Shaping the Stuart World, 1603-1714: The Atlantic Connection* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 117-146.

perceived as King Charles I's misuse of power and neglect of Parliament, anti-royalists and later Puritans led by Oliver Cromwell formed a substantive opposition to the monarchy. Though the political details of the English Civil War do not comprise the central focus of this paper, it remains necessary to understand the context in which Puritans rose to both political and ecclesiastical power in the 1640s. Along with the political realities of Parliamentary opposition to King Charles I, there existed no less fractious divides in the realm of ecclesiastical politics. As part of Puritan political rule in the mid 1640s, episcopacy was abolished, leading to a complex debate over the proper form of church government between Presbyterians, on the one hand, and Independents, who instead favored a Congregational polity, on the other. However, although Puritans did gain a significant degree of political control, this control did not remain stable throughout the entire decade. Rather, Puritans lost control in the latter years, as the years 1648-1649 witnessed the purging of members of the Long Parliament who tolerated the prospect of reaching an agreement with Charles I, many of whom held Presbyterian leanings. The New Model Army's riddance of these members combined with London's sectarian underground led to weakened Puritan presence in political government by the close of the 1640s.

The groundwork for overthrowing episcopacy, however, began much earlier in the sixteenth century with influence from early Puritans such as Thomas Cartwright, whose criticism of the hierarchical organization of the Church of England set in motion Puritan disdain for the established church. Reinforcing his views was the *Admonition to Parliament*, produced (anonymously) by fellow Puritans John Field and Thomas Wilcox in 1572 in which they advocated a Presbyterian polity against that of the current episcopal system of organization.³² Not many decades later, the Puritan argument was strengthened by the work of William Bradshaw, whose 1605 work, entitled *Twelve general arguments: Proving that the ceremonies imposed upon the ministers of the gospell in England, by our prelates, are unlawful*, likewise rejected the episcopal hierarchy of the Church of England.³³

A few decades later, at the same time that a number of Puritans began to emigrate to America, English Puritan William Ames published his attack on episcopacy entitled *A Fresh Suit against Ceremonies in God's Worship*.³⁴ This argument was further advanced in 1641 under the Root and Branch Petition, in which 1,500 persons opined their grievances against what they generally perceived as hierarchical imposition. As the decade of civil wars continued, Puritan Paul Baynes published *The diocesans tryall: wherein the maine controversies about the forme of governement of the churches of Christ are judiciously stated*, in which he argued for the creation

³² John Field and Thomas Wilcox, *Admonition to Parliament*, reprinted in W.H. Frere and C.E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifesto* (New York: 1907, 1972), ix-xxii, 8-9.

³³ William Bradshaw, *Twelve general arguments: Proving that the ceremonies imposed upon the ministers of the gospell in England by our prelates, are unlawfull; and therefore, that the ministers of the Gospel, for the bare and sole omission of them in church-service, for conscience sake are most unjustly charged of disloyaltie to His Majesty* (London: sold in Westminster Hall and Paul's Church-Yard, 1660).

³⁴ William Ames, *A Fresh Suit against Human Ceremonies in God's Worship* (Amsterdam: Printed by the successors of Giles Thorp, 1633).

of a non-episcopal polity for the Church of England.³⁵ The following year, after he had already arrived in America, John Cotton published his defense of Congregationalism entitled *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*, in which he argued that the polity of the apostolic church was in fact congregational rather than episcopal, at least the version of episcopacy present in the manner of the Church of England.³⁶

After defeat in Parliament, the Root and Branch petition failed to rid England of episcopacy, an event that did not occur until the autumn of 1646, at which time Parliament passed a law successfully guaranteeing the abolition of archbishoprics.³⁷ Between these years, a large number of English and Scottish divines held the opening of the Westminster Assembly in 1643, which eventually allowed for a reformulation of the Church of England with considerable Presbyterian influence, although this Presbyterian advancement was later reversed during the Restoration of 1660.³⁸ Although the Westminster Assembly was certainly not representative of all dissenting factions, it did include the two most prominent groups of nonconformists: Presbyterians and Independents (or Congregationalists). Although the Assembly held a Presbyterian majority, it also included notable Independents such as Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye, among others, who opposed the Presbyterian polity defended at the Assembly. While both Presbyterians and Congregationalists opposed episcopacy as the proper system of government for the Church of England, they held varying attitudes toward retaining parts of its organization and liturgy, with the New England Congregationalists keeping the farthest distance from it.³⁹

By the 1640s, however, a number of Puritans had already made the decision to cross the Atlantic in order to find solace from the tumultuous ecclesiastical feud raging in the Church of England. While certainly not constituting a majority, many Puritans chose to remain in England for a variety of geographic, economic, and personal reasons, others chose to sail across the

³⁵ Paul Baynes, *The diocesans tryall: wherein the maine controversies about the forme of government of the churches of Christ are judiciously stated* (London: Printed for John Bellamie, and are to be sould at his shop at the signe of the three Golden-Lyons in Cornehill neare the Royall-Exchange, 1644).

³⁶ John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (London: Printed by Matthew Simmons in Aldersgate Street), 1645.

³⁷ *The Root and Branch Petition*, 1640, in Henry Gee and William John Hardy, eds., *Documents Illustrative of English Church History* (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 537-545; and *An Ordinance for the abolishing of the Archbishops and Bishops within the Kingdom of England, and Dominion of Wales, and for settling of their Lands and Possessions upon Trustees, for the use of the Commonwealth*, in C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait, eds., *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660* (London: Published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, Wyman and Sons, Limited Fetter Lane, E.C., 1911), 879-883.

³⁸ *Concerning Church Government and Ordination of Ministers* (Edenburgh [sic]: Printed by Evan Tyler, Printer to the Kings most Excellent Majesty and reprinted at London for Robert Bostock at the Kings head in Pauls Church-yard, 1647), 10.

³⁹ *A Letter of Many Ministers in Old England, Requesting the Judgement of their Reverend Brethren in New England Concerning Nine Positions: Written Anno Dom. 1637: Together with Their Answer Thereunto Returned, anno 1639: And the Reply Made unto the Said Answer, and Sent Over Unto Them, anno 1640*. London: 1643. Polly Ha argued, "Thus while presbyterians and congregationalists developed varying responses to episcopacy, and arguments against each other, their debate over ecclesiology was also shaped by the concern over separation and their relationship with an to the Church of England." For an extended discussion, see Polly Ha, *English Presbyterianism, 1590-1640* (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2011), 116. Francis J. Bremer has explored the degree of agreement between these two groups on their mutual rejection of episcopacy. See Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 132-133.

Atlantic to journey to New England. For example, the Puritan minister John Cotton, who served a long tenure as parish minister in Boston, Lincolnshire, immigrated to Boston, Massachusetts, in 1633. The year prior, Cotton received a summons by the High Court of Commissions after a parishioner reported his failure to genuflect during Communion.⁴⁰ He then left Boston to go into hiding in London rather than appear before the court.⁴¹ However, Cotton soon made the decision to emigrate to New England, ultimately deciding it best to “withdraw myself from this present storm, and to minister in this country [New England].”⁴²

However, even after emigrating, Cotton did not completely sever ties with the parish churches that he left behind, including his own. For example, Cotton explained in his treatise *On the Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* that Puritans chose to immigrate to New England not to separate from English parish churches in their entirety, but rather to separate from the corruptions that appeared so prevalent within them.⁴³ In another treatise, *Of the Holiness of Church Members*, Cotton asserted that complete abandonment of parish churches would have caused unnecessary internal division among Puritans who, despite their divergent views on the nature of the visible church, needed to work together to support the broader reformation movement against the hierarchical episcopacy. “By hasty withdrawing, Reformation is not procured, but retarded,” Cotton explained.⁴⁴

Thus, if such parish churches remained legitimate enough for New England Congregationalists to refrain from discontinuing fellowship with them, and the abolition of episcopacy in the early 1640s promised an end to hierarchical church polity, why then did New England Congregationalists choose not to return to England? A partial reason for this collective decision concerned the fact that parish churches were not yet acceptably reformed churches in the eyes of a large number of Puritans in New England. Two New England Congregationalists, John Allin and Thomas Shepard, acknowledged that the errors present within these churches that kept them from becoming acceptably reformed churches were not in matters of essential doctrine, “Neither do we understand that these Churches are accused of any Errors about the saving Truths of the Gospel,” they explained, but rather on the more secondary issues of church polity and practice. Even in “in the best reformed Churches, and particularly by our godly Learned Brethren of *England* and *Scotland*,” problems still remained that hindered a “general and holy Reformation” across the Atlantic.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ John Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (London: Printed by Matthew Simmons for John Bellamie, 1648), 104.

⁴¹ John Norton, *Abel being Dead, Yet Speaketh* (London, 1658) reprinted as Enoch Pond, ed., *Memoir of John Cotton*, (New York: Saxton and Miles, 1842), 47.

⁴² John Cotton, *Letter to an unnamed minister*, dated 3 December 1634, reprinted in Pishey Thompson, *The History and Antiquities of Boston* (Boston: Samuel G. Drake, 1856), 417.

⁴³ Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 31.

⁴⁴ John Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 99; John Cotton, *Of the Holiness of Church Members* (London: printed by Francis Neile for Hanna Allen, and are to be sold at the Crown in Popes-head Alley, 1650), 7.

⁴⁵ Thomas Shepard and John Allin, *The Preface of the Reverend Mr. John Allin, of Dedham, and of Mr. Thomas Shepard of Cambridge in New-England, before their Defence [sic] of the Answer made unto the Nine Questions*, 1645, in John Winthrop, Thomas Dudley, John Allin, Thomas Shepard, and John Cotton, *Massachusetts: or The*

In his reflection on the spiritual status of the parish churches in England in 1643, Massachusetts puritan minister Richard Mather asserted:

Which we do not speak to justify the Parishes altogether, as if there were not dangerous corruptions found in them, nay rather ... we may lament it with tears, that in respect of their members and Ministry, in respect of their worship and walkings, in many of those Assemblies there are found such apparent corruptions, as are justly grievous to a godly soul . . . In a word, the corruptions remaining are just causes of repentance and humiliation.⁴⁶

Such corruptions included fluid boundaries regarding membership and the nature of the visible church, nonexistence of church covenants, and increasing disunity and sectionalism. In addition to these corruptions, differences of opinion on church polity separated English and New English perspectives and shaped the ongoing ecclesiastical debates of the 1640s. This essay first examines differences in church polity, specifically the dichotomy between Congregationalism and Presbyterianism before then exploring differences in numerous elements of church practice, frequently termed by Puritans as “corruptions.” It will then conclude by demonstrating the existence of continued reluctance among Puritans to return to England in the 1640s as a result of yet unreformed parish churches.

Congregationalism versus Presbyterianism

One primary reason for the decision to stay in New England stemmed from the increasing Presbyterian influence engendered by the Westminster Assembly that opened in 1643. Although they maintained amicable relations over their mutual affirmation of Calvinism and disdain for episcopacy, Congregationalists and Presbyterians did not share compatible views on church polity. Congregationalists in England and New England alike both argued that power in the church should be allocated in the hands of the congregation, exercised through its elders, rather than in elders ruling through a presbytery or synod.⁴⁷ While the Church of England and the Church of Scotland had maintained considerable distance throughout the early seventeenth century, the Westminster Assembly, beginning in 1643, sought to bring the polity of the two national churches closer together. However, this issue proved complex. Scottish Commissioners became increasingly irritated at the largely Erastian position of English Presbyterianism, which allocated too much power to the state, they lamented. Although Scottish and English Presbyterians joined forces in mutual rejection of episcopacy, such as among the group of Puritans known as Smectymnuuns who published treatises attacking episcopal polity, the proper definition and understanding of Presbyterianism itself remained somewhat muddled as Scottish

first Planters of New England, the End and Manner of their coming thither, and Abode there: In several Epistles (Boston: B. Green, and J. Allen, Sold by Richard Wilkins, at his Shop near the Old-Meeting-House, 1696), 21.

⁴⁶ Richard Mather, *An Apology of the Churches in New England for Church Covenant* (London: Printed by T.P. and M.S. for Benjamin Allen, 1643), 48-49.

⁴⁷ John Cotton, *Of the Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Power thereof; according to the Word of God* (London: printed by M. Simmons for Henry Overton, and are to be sold at his shop in Popes-Alley, 1644), 20.

and English divines disagreed on the role of the state in ecclesiastical matters.⁴⁸ Thus, English Presbyterianism remained peculiar in its distance from both Scottish Presbyterianism and Congregationalism.

In his journal, a New England Puritan leader John Winthrop explained his own hopeful feelings and those of his fellow New Englanders in 1640 upon hearing of the arrival of a vocally anti-episcopal group of Presbyterians known as the Scottish Covenanters as well as the new political body expected to be somewhat more favorable to nonconformists known as the Long Parliament:

They brought us news of the Scots entering into England, and the calling of a parliament, and the hope of a thorough reformation, etc., whereupon some among us began to think of returning back to England.⁴⁹

However, the strong influence of Presbyterianism prompted Winthrop to express a vastly different tone three years later during a large meeting of ministers at Harvard College in 1643. With John Cotton and fellow Congregationalist Thomas Hooker presiding, the ministers addressed the rising tide of interest in Presbyterian polity, noting that some ministers in Newbury, Massachusetts, had begun to model their own systems of church government on that of a presbytery. As moderators, these two avid Congregationalists sought to diffuse Presbyterian fervor from eclipsing the Congregationalism that served as a hallmark of New England polity. Winthrop informed that the meeting adjourned with a general denunciation of Presbyterianism and the collective decision of the Newbury ministers with Presbyterian leanings to reconsider such leanings in light of the Congregationalist arguments espoused during the meeting.⁵⁰

In a later treatise, Hooker reinforced the centrality of the ongoing debate between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism to transatlantic ecclesiology by terming it “the subject of the inquiry of this age.”⁵¹ Hooker likewise focused on the allocation of power within the church. He argued that Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, incorrectly assigned this power to ruling elders rather than to the church itself. While these officers remained vital to the function of the church, Hooker asserted, they should not be regarded as the recipients of the keys of the power of the church. Rather, the congregation should hold this power. Stating the relationship between church officers, the congregations they serve, and the balance of power between the two, Hooker explained:

Office-power is but a little part of the power of the Keyes: like the nibble of the Key: and therefore

⁴⁸ For an expanded discussion of the divergences between English and Scottish Presbyterianism, refer to Ha, *English Presbyterianism*.

⁴⁹ John Winthrop, *Journal, History of New England, 1630-1649* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 19.

⁵⁰ Winthrop, *Journal*, 139.

⁵¹ Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline Wherein The Way of the Congregational Churches of Christ in New-England, is Warranted and Cleared, by Scripture and Argument, and all Exceptions of weight made against it by sundry Learned Divines* (London: Printed by A.M. for John Bellamy at the three Golden Lions in Cornhill, near the Royall Exchange, 1648), 11.

that may well be in Officers, and yet the power of the Keyes not be firstly in them, but in such, who gave that power before, theirs did give what they have, and can take away what they have given.⁵²

Thus, the congregation, “those that gave that power before,” remained the proper recipient of the keys of the church.

In his own writings, Cotton likewise argued that differences over polity severed New England churches from their counterparts across the Atlantic. While jointly celebrating with his English friends the reduction of episcopacy in which “the hierarchical yoke is broken and the Philistine cart of human inventions has been put away,” Cotton avowed that there still remained substantial differences between the churches of New England and those within the English parish system.⁵³ For example, Cotton noted the divergent stances, which he termed the “great chasm”, regarding the allocation of power in church government. Before delving into these, however, Cotton listed the elements upon which New England Congregationalists agreed with their English brethren including the notions that rule by elders remained the most biblical form of church government, synods could at times be useful when necessary, and unsurprisingly, that the hierarchical episcopacy remained a mutual object of loathing.

“What small thing is it that remains to keep us apart?” Cotton then asked. The answer, he asserted, lay in the New England Congregationalist rejection of synods as a normative form of church government. While stating that synods could at times be useful, Cotton argued that power should be ultimately allocated to the elders who in turn sought to bring all matters of decision before the congregation and acquire congregational consent before proceeding in decision making. In extenuating circumstances in which a matter could not be brought before the congregation, a council of elders could make a decision, he explained. He asserted that he and other New Englanders drafted these arguments into writing as a response to an English council assembled to address questions of church government and worship in the interest of “the need for the reformation of religion,” arguably a reference to the Westminster Assembly of 1643, which occurred three years prior to Cotton’s treatise.⁵⁴ He further asserted that these arguments relating to church polity were not mere justifications for New England practices but were rather key elements that Puritans in New England wished to see instituted in the English parishes that they had left behind.

The Visible Church

By attempting to prove the peculiar characteristics that led to what New Englanders generally considered a thorough ecclesiastical reform in the wilderness of America, Cotton and Hooker sought to highlight the differences between these New England churches and the parish

⁵² Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, 200.

⁵³ John Cotton, “An Apologetical Preface for the Reader of Mr. Norton’s Book”, 1645/1646, in John Norton, *The Answer to the Whole Set of Questions of...Mr. William Apollonius*, trans. Douglas Horton, 1648 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 16-17.

⁵⁴ Cotton, *An Apologetical Preface*, 46.

churches in England that had not enjoyed so thorough an internal reform. However, matters of polity were not the only driving wedge between New England Puritans and the parish churches of England. Rather, a host of issues surrounding how parish churches conceived the concept of the visible church remained of vital necessity. For example, in a treatise entitled *Of the Holiness of Church Members*, written in 1650, Cotton sought to dispute what he saw as the erroneous claims of two Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, Samuel Rutherford and Robert Baillie. In his treatise, Cotton attacked Rutherford's equation of an external call with the concept of the visible church. By the term "external call," Cotton referred to the concept of the gospel being presented to listeners through human mediums, such as sermons, lectures, or other means of hearing the word of God. This external call remained only so effective upon its listeners, however, he claimed. Unlike the external call, which was employed by human agents, only God could apply the internal call, in which he called an individual to conversion, Cotton argued. The visible church, then, as a representation of God's saints on the earth, must be composed of those who have responded to the internal call, not merely through outward acceptance of the external call, asserted Cotton. He further explained the problems created by Rutherford's collapse of the two terms together, complaining, "here is indeed an external calling but here be no Saints."⁵⁵ To support his argument, he then created a hypothetical example of the establishment of what he termed a "Preaching Ministry" in Irish parish churches. If such a ministry did exist, he informed Rutherford, the ministry in itself could not transform the parish churches into a visible church, a *Cætum vocatorum*, a "congregation of calling."⁵⁶ Rather, the need for a more structured definition of which persons constituted the visible church remained central to the New England Puritan Congregationalist discourse on ecclesiology and what remained lacking in the parish churches in England.

Membership

Intimately related to determining which persons constituted the visible church was the pivotal issue that Puritans in New England saw failings in the handling of membership in the parish churches across the Atlantic. For example, Cotton refuted what his "brothers of the Presbyterian way" saw fit for church membership. Rather than merely joining in fellowship with a particular church, Cotton asserted, true membership was only valid if accompanied by a profession of personal conversion. Examples of divergences from biblical patterns for ecclesiastical practice led Cotton to make the bolder assertion that Presbyterians like Rutherford refused to acknowledge Christ as the head of the visible church, opting instead to let unregenerate members hinder the purity of Christ's church.⁵⁷ Such failure, argued Cotton, limited the effectiveness of parish churches from becoming acceptably reformed churches. After thus addressing the arguments set forth by Rutherford, he then turned to those made by Baillie.

⁵⁵ Cotton, *Of the Holiness of Church Members*, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ Cotton, *Of the Holiness of Church Members*, 23, 27.

According to Cotton, Baillie saw the prescriptions for church membership outlined by Cotton as relating not to the reformed churches already in place in Scotland, but rather to new churches that were in the preliminary stages of establishing precedents for membership. Cotton spoke for Baillie, who argued, in contrast, “the reformed Churches who take themselves to be so farre true, that they need no dissolution, or erection, they are not concerned in this case of admission.”⁵⁸ According to Cotton, Baillie viewed these members as having already received membership upon their baptism in infancy. To this Cotton responded that while these infants should indeed be afforded the status of baptized covenant children into the church, they should not, however, be “confirmed” members, with privileges of taking Communion, until they individually professed faith. This stance, he argued, “doth not tend to the dissolving, or unchurching of all reformed Churches, but rather to their purifying and reformation according to the primitive pattern.”⁵⁹ Thus, a central contention that Cotton held against parish churches remained the manner in which the unconverted gained access to membership. Argued Cotton, “we could never expect a change and serious Reformation of these evil and difficult times, whilst such vicious Hypocrites are admitted into Churches.”⁶⁰

Hooker likewise entered into the membership debate. After listing the ideas on which he did agree with his English and Scottish counterparts, he then echoed Cotton’s lament over the means by which Rutherford defined membership in the visible church. He asserted that Rutherford argued for the admission to membership of unregenerate persons who “hate to be reformed.” Although denying them the privileges of Communion, Rutherford, according to Hooker, allowed these members to become “ordinary hearers, and so members of a visible Church.”⁶¹ Hooker contested Rutherford’s logic on this admission to membership, arguing that those who did not show evidence of regeneration should not be afforded a place within the membership of the church. “While they hate to be reformed, they have no title,” asserted Hooker.⁶² Rutherford’s reasoning, he argued, implicitly led to the claim that members who had been excommunicated were thus still members, an idea he found unbiblical and ultimately harmful to the purity of the church. If nothing separated members who had voiced conversions of saving faith from those who merely attended sermons, then nothing substantially blocked excommunicants who found their way into church services as habitual attendants, Hooker stated. Furthermore, such a stance weakened the meaning of belonging to a single congregation: members could potentially be admitted to membership in multiple congregations if the only requirement involved attendance; “so a man may be a member of three of four congregations,” Hooker warned.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁶¹ Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, 57.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Church Covenant

In addition to matters of polity, the nature of the visible church, and membership, the role of a church covenant also factored prominently into New England Congregationalists' opinions of the state of English parish churches. Inherently tied to membership, the church covenant served as both an affirmation of orthodox doctrine and a means to pledge responsibility for becoming a participating member of a church. In his emphasis on the nature of the visible church in his 1648 treatise *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, Cotton listed among the distinguishing facets of New England congregational churches a church covenant, required profession of faith, and subjection to the church in matters of discipline. This form of ecclesiastical practices, known as the New England Way, set it apart "so far as it differeth from other Reformed Churches," informed Cotton.⁶⁴

In addition, the Massachusetts Puritan minister Richard Mather addressed this role in his 1643 treatise *An Apology of the Churches in New England for Church Covenant*. Mather argued that a church covenant remained essential to the development of a valid church. Regarding the parish churches in England, Mather noted that many critics argued that the idea of a covenant was not practically feasible because local magistrates forced membership rather than allowed for voluntary acts of joining to local parishes. Mather countered this argument by stating that while some members joined only as a result of fear of punishment at the hands of magistrates if they neglected membership, this phenomenon was not universal in most parish churches and many in fact joined voluntarily. Thus, he claimed, these parishes possessed a form of church covenant in the form of the "Articles of Religion which they profess."⁶⁵

Mather then drew a distinction between English parishes and those of Catholic profession. While the latter remained outside the bounds of what Puritans viewed as legitimate churches, he observed, English parish churches could in fact be called "true" churches because, unlike their Catholic counterparts, they had enough semblance of Protestant doctrine to escape the derogatory label of "papist". While these churches collectively remained valid in the eyes of New England Congregationalists, Mather did not conceal the fact that there remained substantial corruptions within them. In addition to lacking a church covenant as explicit as those found among New England congregations, Mather defined the corruptions of parish churches as a lack of discipline and "church-order."⁶⁶ He asserted that by joining oneself to a particular congregation via affirmation of a covenant, a member therefore placed himself under the discipline of that congregation. Nevertheless, these churches sinned "not out of obstinacy, but of ignorance," Mather explained. Lacking a permanent model to follow in the turbulent years after the Puritan rise to power, these churches, "never having had means to be convinced," remained unaware of the ecclesiastical standards to which they should adhere in order to become

⁶⁴ John Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 99.

⁶⁵ Richard Mather, *An Apology of the Churches in New England for Church Covenant* (London: Printed by T.P. and M.S. for Benjamin Allen, 1643), 47.

⁶⁶ Mather, *An Apology*, 53.

acceptably reformed churches.⁶⁷

Sectionalism

Finally, while issues such as church government, the nature of the visible church, and membership requirements dominated a great portion of New England Puritan discontent with the English parish system, other concerns preoccupied the minds of New England divines as well. For example, in his 1644 treatise entitled *New Englands Lamentation for Old Englands present errors*, Thomas Shepard drew attention to what he termed the “infection” brought about by the development of such heretical sectarian influences as Anabaptism, Separatism, Antimonianism, and Familism. Although the majority of Puritan ministers rejected these sects as deviations from the reformed faith, Shepard lamented that those who did adhere to them created unnecessary divisions and internal disunity in England, which collectively threatened the rise of “worse dayes than ever yet England saw.”⁶⁸ However, toleration of some sects was advanced by their association with the Dissenting Brethren, a group of Independents within the Westminster Assembly. Although these sects could at times claim orthodoxy by association with the Dissenting Brethren, they did not hold the legitimacy needed to exist as legitimate religious factions in the eyes of New England Congregationalists.⁶⁹

By developing incorrect practices in baptism, psalm singing, and administration of sacraments, these sects weakened the legitimacy of English parish churches. Although New England was certainly not immune to sectional strife, given the divergence of Puritan and Separatist ecclesiology, Shepard saw these religious groups as at least congruent in basic doctrine, unlike the widely varying doctrines of Anabaptist, Antimonian, and Familist sects in England. Hooker likewise noted the corruption inherent in the rise of unorthodox sects in England. For example, he drew particular attention to the threat posed by Antimonians and Familists, who “might have proceeded to the subversion of many souls” of those who instead emigrated to New England. Such disunity, Shepard and Hooker averred, effectively prevented the unity needed for the health and growth of parish churches.

Conclusion: Sustained Rejection of English Parish Churches

When analyzing movement patterns of seventeenth-century Puritans, it remains undoubted that a number of the reasons for their resolve to remain in the New World rather than return to England stemmed from a variety of pragmatic dissuasions, not least of which were the realities of transatlantic travel as well as the burden of resettling after return. While these factors

⁶⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁸ Thomas Shepard, *New Englands Lamentation for Old Englands present errors, and divisions, and their featured future desolations if not timely prevented. Occasioned by the increase of Anabaptists, Rigid Separatists, Antimonians, and Familists. Together with Some reasonable remedies, against the infection of those errors, prescribed.* (London: George Miller, 1644), 2.

⁶⁹ For an expanded discussion of this position, see Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 170.

certainly remained pertinent, they do not provide the complete ideological context of why New England Puritans, particularly members of the clergy, chose to remain in New England. The issues raised in this paper regarding New England attitudes toward parish churches provide a significant, though not exhaustive, explanation for their decision to stay in the New World.

Furthermore, it would be untenable to argue that no large scale return to England existed during the early seventeenth century; Susan Hardman Moore's *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home* demonstrated that a significant portion of nonconformists chose not to remain in the New World during the series of conflicts known as the Civil War and Interregnum.⁷⁰ In addition, a number of Puritan ministers, such as the Congregationalist minister Hugh Peters, returned to England for the purpose of fighting against the royalists in the Civil War.⁷¹ However, this paper seeks not to deny the reality of return voyages but rather to investigate the faction of Puritan ministers who instead chose to remain in New England. While the handful of such ministers examined here certainly do not constitute an exhaustive or even majority opinion of all New England clergy, their stories do, however, bear witness to the existence of a Puritan desire to reject English parish churches even after attempts for further reformation began.

After reciting his list of hallmarks that made New England churches unique, including the allocation of power to the congregation, qualification of the nature of the visible church, the necessity of a church covenant, and subjection to the church, including its discipline, Cotton argued, "And these be the chief doctrines and practices of our way, so far as it differeth from other Reformed Churches."⁷² These doctrines and practices indeed proved central to the status of English parish churches and their need for continued reformation.

Thus, New England Congregationalists' rejection of key areas of polity and practice among English parish churches regarding areas such as church government, membership, covenanting, and unity led them to reject England as a viable religious climate even after the Puritan overthrow of episcopacy. This argument demonstrates that although conditions in England began to become more favorable to Puritan values during the middle of the seventeenth century, Puritans in New England continued to reject its parish churches as incomplete in their reformation. These necessary requirements for ecclesiastical legitimacy proved too central to the function of the church, and their absence too prominent, to allow New England Puritans to justifiably return to their native country. Therefore, even after several decades, New England Congregationalists remained convinced that the errors within English parish churches signaled that New England would prove to be not merely a temporary retreat but rather a new permanent home.

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⁷⁰ Susan Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁷¹ Joseph B. Felt, *A Memoir, or Defence [sic] of Hugh Peters* (Boston: Printed by C.C.P. Moody, 52 Washington Street, 1851).

⁷² Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 99.

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