REMAINING PURITAN:

THE HISTORY OF A SEPARATIST CHURCH IN

MASSACHUSETTS, 1620-1895

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Abstract:

Most of the attention directed at the churches of New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth century has focused on their initial success and subsequent decline—if not a decline in the membership of the churches, or the spirituality of the populace, then at least a decline in communal and covenant piety. The First Church of Middleboro, Massachusetts provides a counter-example to that model. The First Church was unique in its covenant fidelity through several centuries. The purpose of this paper is to answer the question of how this church managed to maintain its conservative, Calvinistic, Congregational, Separatist identity. The church was established under the guidance of Plymouth, and therefore had strong ties to a Separatist past; a past that was more intent upon church and state distinctions, progressive views of religious truth as revealed by experience, and endeavors to evangelize. The church also had the privilege of being influenced by powerful preachers, an educated laity, and practices that strengthened its covenant identity. This paper looks at the background of the initial group, the founding documents that helped to lay a cornerstone for the church's development, the adaptability of the church to new practices, the charismatic preachers, and the rituals that strengthened its covenant and church purity. Ultimately, this thesis is designed to give a greater understanding of the inner workings of a church body as it progressed through several decades, and to further demonstrate the diversity among churches in New England that is often neglected in favor of broad studies of New England's religious history.

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INTRODUCTION

Whatever our church has left undone…will anyone deny that she has stood for righteousness, for God, and for God's work, ever since that winter day in 1694, when those nine women and eleven men organized under the leadership of revered Samuel Fuller, whose dust on yonder hill-top is yet awaiting the Master's word to arise?[1]

Massachusetts's spiritual and social landscape underwent significant changes through the colonial and revolutionary eras. The region moved increasingly toward a commercialized, individualistic, pluralistic society and away from its Puritan foundations, with its emphasis on close-knit communities and strictly Calvinistic doctrines. The aftermath of the Great Awakening in the 1740s brought a rise in individual spirituality and opposition to dogmatic orthodoxy. And as Massachusetts approached the Revolution new prospects presented themselves: a new nation meant new opportunities, and some churchgoers sought out a *rational* religion to go along with their enlightened philosophies and commercial enterprises. Churches rejecting staunch Calvinism and historic Congregationalism increased in number.[2] Those maintaining the communal or doctrinal principles of the founding generation dwindled steadily, making any remaining loyalty to the first settlers' ideals a compelling study

[1] G.W. Stearns, "Two Centuries in God's Work," in *Two Hundredth Anniversary of the First Congregational Church in Middleboro, Mass.* (Middleboro: Published by the Church, 1895), 8.
[2] Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards to Emerson," *NEQ*, vol. 13 (December, 1940), 610, "Errand into the Wilderness," *WMQ*, vol. 10 (January, 1953) and *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1939); also George L. Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts: A Study in Tradition and Design* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1960), ix-x; Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679-1749* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 7-11.

It is this shift in the religious atmosphere that provides the context for the present study. The question of how churches that originally ascribed to the beliefs of the Puritan founders moved away from those beliefs could be asked and it would surely turn up fascinating studies—indeed it has.[3] But perhaps a more interesting question, one that has not as commonly been addressed, and one this paper considers, is how a church remained true to Puritan doctrine and communalism despite waning covenant fidelity and growing theological challenges in the eighteenth century.

Over forty years ago, Kenneth Lockridge published his research on the town and church of Dedham, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In it, he described the church's original foundations, which were closely tied to the town, and its subsequent change, or "decline," over several generations. Due to the close bond between the town and church, and the town's efforts to create a utopian community through religious policy (i.e. the church), the breakdown in one inevitably affected the other.[4] Similarly, this paper evaluates a specific church in a Plymouth Colony town, Middleboro, Massachusetts, and endeavors to understand why it, despite having similar beliefs as Dedham, remained relatively unchanged.

Unlike the Dedham church, Middleboro First Church possessed an ability to adapt its theology and character to the changing times without sacrificing the historic positions enumerated in its church covenant and articles of faith. Throughout its history the church

[3] See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* and *From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, 1970); Bruce C. Daniels, *The Fragmentation of New England: Comparative Perspectives on Economic, Political, and Social Division in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[4] Lockridge, *New England Town*, 22-24, 79-90, 116.

encountered scandals in the pulpit, a split in membership,[5] changes in church practice, and the shifting spiritual landscape of New England before and after the Revolution. They faced every obstacle any other church in New England faced. However, while the experiences of many churches tend to support an interpretation of change resulting in movement away from Puritan values, the First Church resisted the trend. Its perseverance in the historic beliefs of New England makes it rare among churches established before the eighteenth century, causing a historian to wonder how.

The answer to that question is greatly aided by the discovery of extant sources from the church. Recently, scholars have located a cache of records, member relations, and sermon notes in the possession of the First Church, dating from the early eighteenth century and extending through the nineteenth. The quantity and variety of these sources provides a glimpse into the mind and practices of the church, corporately, individually, and from both sides of the pulpit. They allow for a greater understanding of the church with respect to its foundations, practices, and the context that might allow for its idiosyncrasies and continuity to develop. They also reveal a church that tenaciously guarded its Congregational rights, its covenant fidelity, and its historic understandings of church/state relations, truth, and evangelism.[6]

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How churchgoers in Middleboro remained faithful adherents to the church covenant, articles of faith, and communal identity is the central question of this study, and it is a question answered, in large part, by examining their historic connection. The First Church descended from the Separatists, a sectarian group within a sectarian group

[5] Harold F. Worthley, *An Inventory of the Records of the Particular (Congregational) Churches of Massachusetts Gathered 1620-1805* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 372.
[6] Credit for collecting much of this material must go to the Congregational Library in Boston. Middleboro is one of many in their digital archives [http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/collections].

(the Puritans), and that connection was a major contributor to the church's identity. There has been a tendency in surveys of New England to recognize the doctrinal similarities between the Non-separating Puritans of the Bay Colony and the Separatists of Plymouth, without drawing necessary distinctions, thus blurring any differences that could prove useful in explaining the First Church's constancy. Historian J.M. Bumsted laid some blame on Perry Miller, who "demolish[ed] Plymouth's…claim to fame: its influence in the establishment of congregational church polity," and relegated the distinguishing marks of Plymouth to the fringe. This practice, followed by many influenced by Miller, is unhelpful in understanding the factors that might contribute to Middleboro First Church's identity.[7]

If the influence of Separatism in Plymouth-related churches is not properly recognized, it becomes difficult to understand the character of the First Church and the qualities that enabled it to sustain itself. Bumsted argued that the Separatist influence was underestimated, and that it "indirectly influenced church-state relations and ecclesiastical history [in southeast Massachusetts] far beyond 1691." This, he said, was due to "the Plymouth system" being "far less insistent upon a territorial church and uniformity than…its neighbor to the north," displayed by their ambivalence toward a university-educated clergy, synods, and state-sanctioned religious policy.[8] Noticing similar notions of Plymouth Colony's Separatist peculiarities, Mark Peterson argued, "the distinctive separatist background of the Plymouth colonists…guaranteed that Plymouth's

[7] John M. Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress: The Ecclesiastical Hisory of the Old Colony, 1620-1775*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989; Dissertation at Brown University, 1965), 4. This trend has changed since Bumsted made his argument, but still the distinctions are often disregarded as irrelevant in many studies of New England.

[8] Ibid, 1-5. For the analysis that Bumsted challenges, see Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959), 125-140

religious culture would differ from that of Massachusetts and the other New England colonies." He went on to examine the life of the Plymouth church, before and after incorporation with the Bay Colony, to defend his understanding—concluding that lay participation heavily influenced the church. According to these historians, Plymouth churches were distinct from Bay Colony churches, in both ideology and culture.[9]

As we will see in the first chapter, the different views of church-state relations—between Separatists and Non-separatists—contributed to the First Church's ability to develop with a degree of freedom from outside forces, ecclesiastic or civil. The concern for Non-separating Puritans in Massachusetts was drawn from Winthrop's "city upon a hill" and the imperative that they provide an example, in both state and church, for the rest of the world, particularly the Church of England, to emulate. Plymouth did not share the same concern for a uniform society, nor of being an example for the rest of the world; it was not as initially interested in the state's involvement in the church; churches, therefore, possessed a greater ability to form according to the mentality of their respective members, who had congregated into voluntary associations.[10]

The Middleboro First Church, then, provides a convincing case study for Bumsted and Peterson's conclusions: that certain qualities inherent to Plymouth's Separatism transformed the region that encompassed Middleboro, and affected churches differently, even after Plymouth was incorporated into the Bay Colony. The First Church's Separatist heritage was considered vital to its continuance in the faith it held dear. Later

[9] Mark A. Peterson, "The Plymouth Church and the Evolution of Puritan Religious Culture," *NEQ*, vol. 66 (December, 1993), 572. Also Anson Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1950), 153; Stokes, long before Bumsted or Peterson, commented, "Plymouth was definitely more liberal and less theocratic than Massachusetts Bay…In Plymouth the seal of effective authority was in the rank and file of yeomen; while in Massachusetts Bay it was in the magistrates and the ministers."
[10] J.M. Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration: Church and State in the Plymouth Colony," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 10 (1968), 266; this was also Peterson's conclusion in examining the Plymouth church.

chroniclers of the church's history linked its faithfulness back to the congregations of Scrooby and Leyden, attributing its success in large part to the maintenance of Separatist standards. Their covenant and articles of faith were seen as embodiments of the Separatism espoused by John Robinson, and the beliefs held by the earliest settlers of America. Its convictions about the church's relation to the state, its membership standards, its view on evangelism, and the role of the laity were often a product of its Separatist heritage. In fact, the church's Separatist connection provides the most likely evidence for its New Light sentiments, Revolutionary support, the church's selection of ministers, and the prominence of the laity.[11]

To demonstrate the church's Separatist influences, the chapters in this study are organized in a chronological manner, but they are also thematic insofar as they build off one another. The first chapter explains the foundations and trajectory of the church. The second provides important events that strengthened the church's identity. And the third is the maintenance of that identity through resolute defenses of orthodoxy and recalling its history as a Pilgrim church.

The first chapter examines the First Church's close connection to the earliest Separatists through its affiliation to the Plymouth Colony and church, the characteristics of its covenant and the church's adherence to it, and its unique Congregationalism. The affiliation with Plymouth provided greater freedom for the church to develop its culture of evangelism and tolerance, and contributed to a strong notion of the separation of church and state that the church would tenaciously defend in later years. Separatism contributed to the details and importance of the church covenant and articles of faith, the

[11] Separatism's role in the church's New Light sentiment and support of the Revolution is discussed in Chapter II.

two documents that codified the ideal, and set the foundation for an educated laity and membership in the church. And Separatism created a Congregationalism in the First Church intent on its right to develop free from civil or ecclesiastical encroachment, and which also placed a prominence on the laity in the decisions and direction of the church. Within these larger themes we will see the First Church's insistence on a well-educated laity, evangelism, and ministers with Separatist tendencies.

With the foundation set, the second chapter picks up on the themes from the first and adds factors that differentiated the First Church from others—even Plymouth. The church's adaptability was a critical characteristic for the church's maintenance of Puritan ideals, and it relied heavily on its understanding of truth as experiential and progressive. The result was paradoxical: a church committed to its founding principles but fluid enough to adapt those principles to the times. This greatly affected the types of ministers the church selected, resulting in two influential and charismatic preachers: Peter Thacher and Sylvanus Conant. These preachers not only displayed adaptability but they supported the church's covenant purity, the laity's doctrinal familiarity and role, and the church's Congregational freedom.

As will be demonstrated in this second chapter, the laity must be accounted for as a powerful force in preserving the future of the church. In his differentiations between the Bay Colony and Old Colony, Bumsted argued that "doctrine was not the important issue among local saints [in Plymouth]," as opposed to the Bay, but instead "the particular practices of the individual church" were most important.[12] However, the covenant and articles of faith of the First Church reveal a people invested in its doctrine, displayed by the specific detail included in each document; both documents were

[12] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 55.

revisited through the individual member relations and corporate renewals; and the ministers expounded on both in great detail. Doctrine and church practice were vigorously defended against state encroachment, humane innovations, and false doctrine, beginning at the church's foundation, and into the nineteenth century. Rather than being *more* concerned with church practice than doctrine, the laity was *just as* concerned with both. As many churches abandoned the communalism of their covenant promises and the Calvinistic doctrines of their confessions, the First Church became even more intent upon preserving their doctrine and practice; the laity's continuing desire to hear conversion relations and renew the church covenant was a sign of an involved and educated laity, that tenaciously protected its Separatist and doctrinal identity.[13]

In the final chapter, we will turn to the sustaining of its Separatist-Pilgrim identity as the church approached the nineteenth century, and beyond. The church—still rooted in its foundation and standing the test of the eighteenth century—spent much of its time defending its beliefs from liberal theologies that quickly swept up other Congregational churches in the region, as well as cleansing itself of impurities from within. Remarkably, despite a marked increase in disputes between members, the church sustained its communal identity. Recalling its convictions and heritage was a powerful way of maintaining communalism and piety in the consciousness of the congregation, because being in accord with the founders provided a confidence in the rightness of the church's identity, helping to revitalize the members' commitment to each other and future generations. The First Church's numerous publications testify to its consistency, adaptability, and adamant desire to recall its history for the purpose of passing down a

[13] The foundation for the educated laity is laid in the first chapter, but the second goes into greater analysis of the way in which relations were modeled after the church covenant and used as means for preserving communalism in the church.

legacy to its posterity. The importance of "faithfully transmit[ting its covenant] to [its] posterity" was a theme carried on throughout the history of the First Church, and it would continue to be done in the nineteenth century through the relations, the covenant, and the sermons—specifically in anniversary sermons.[14] Although the church in Middleboro did adapt and change throughout its history, it remained a Puritan church in an age when Puritanism was all but a distant memory.

The hope of this study is to shed more light on a corner of the New England religious experience not often mentioned in the annals of its history. Historians often speak of a Puritanism that died out by the eighteenth century, and a way of life that once was, but no longer existed by the end of the seventeenth century. The Middleboro First Church challenges that perception. This study seeks to provide answers for the First Church's conservative nature, communalism, and covenantal fidelity, but also hopes to provide explanations for broader studies of similar churches that may have shown similar tendencies. If nothing else, it will continue to do away with the notion that Puritanism can easily be defined and applied in like manner to all churches in New England.

[14] *Book of the First Church of Christ in Middleborough, Plymouth Colony, Mass. with Notices of other Churches in that Town* (Boston: C.C.P. Moody, 1852), 18.

CHAPTER I

FOUNDING: 1620-1708

And do also by this act of Confederation, Give up our selves unto another in the LORD… Promising and Engaging to cleave and walk together in holy Union and Communion, as Members of the same Mystical Body… Watching one over another, and over all the Children of the Covenant growing up with us…[15]

Understanding the uniqueness and continuity of the First Church of Middleboro requires examination of its founding influences and principles. Those principles were derived from a Separatist connection that greatly shaped the church's development. Despite later changes and adaptations in its practice that came with incorporation into the Bay Colony, its Separatist connection manifested itself in the church's dealings with the civil magistrate, neighboring churches, and its own congregation for years to come.[16]

This chapter explores the First Church's roots in light of three defining attributes: its connection to Plymouth, the church covenant, and its Congregationalism. These three attributes created the foundation from which the church developed, and all three were derived from a Separatist influence. As we will see first, the connection to Plymouth, both politically and ecclesiastically, provided an environment of relative freedom that allowed the First Church to develop its particular proclivities (i.e. evangelism, lay influence, church-state relations). Next, the church covenant supplied the cornerstone

[15] *The confession of faith and church covenant: solemnly made and entered into by the Church of Middleborough, December 26, 1694* (Boston, 1771), 5-6; also in *Book of the First Church*, 18.
[16] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 4.

that kept the autonomous church from abandoning a communal identity. It was the means of preserving the church's purity, of ensuring an educated laity, of delineating the standards for full membership, and it remained the standard for measuring the church's corporate faithfulness to God. Finally, the unique Congregationalism of the First Church was defined by an adamant stance on the separation of church and state, and the church's right to direct itself. The church, moreover, displayed a greater tendency of lay dominance, demonstrated by its practice of selecting church officers and sustaining itself even during the absence of strong direction from the pulpit. In this way the first two attributes contributed to the uniqueness of the third. These three foundational attributes will be considered in turn.

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The First Church of Middleboro was not officially established until 1694, but its story cannot be rightly interpreted from that time. Middleboro as a church—along with its practices, ministers, and membership—existed within Middleboro as a town, and any understanding of the church's ability to adapt or maintain itself must account for the context or framework within which the church began. The connection of the First Church to its town, and the town to Plymouth Colony, provided a framework within which the church could remain isolated and operate relatively free from outside interference to its practices.

Plymouth Colony's initial method of settling new townships was marked by a greater liberality than its Bay Colony neighbors. Unlike the Bay Colony, Plymouth initially exercised lax supervision in the formation of towns, and, by extension, churches. Whereas the Bay held to strict requirements for freemanship (those able to vote), including church membership, Plymouth allowed almost any male landowner with

orthodox opinions to become a freeman, even Baptists.[17] The result was a further divide between church and magistrate, such that the church was untainted by a mixture of saint and sinner.[18]

Contrast between the two regions was a result of conflicting theories of the church and state that developed prior to leaving England. Puritans settling Massachusetts believed it unwise to separate completely from the Church of England, and remained part of that church with the intent of correcting it from America. The Bay Colony founders, for the most part, did not object to a state-established church, they simply wanted a scripturally faithful one.[19] The result was a territorial church that exercised oversight on the policies and practices of new towns and churches, and exacted greater punishment from those who dissented. The Puritans in Plymouth, however, had altogether separated from the Church of England due to its manifold corruptions, and rejected it as a true church. They were less inclined toward a state-regulated church than the Bay; after all, that was the situation they had fled from in England, and they were not quick to return to it, nor did they show the same level of intolerance toward dissent.[20] The sentiment was derived from as far back as Robert Browne, the first prominent Separatist leader, who

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[17] See Michael G. Ditmore, "Preparation and Confession: Reconsidering Edmund S. Morgan's Visible Saints," *NEQ*, vol. 67 (June, 1994), 303; Ditmore explained the establishment of religion in the Bay beginning in the 1630s with regulations passed by the General Court. The regulations required that any fellowship must first notify the magistrate and church elders and gain permission, and that any persons in an "unsanctioned church" would be "denied the privileges of membership in the civil commonwealth." That most certainly included Baptists.

[18] Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration," 267-268; George Langdon, "The Franchise and Political Democracy in Plymouth Colony," *WMQ*, vol. 20 (October, 1963), 517-518.

[19] Miller, *Orthodoxy*, 14, 73-101.

[20] Langdon, "The Franchise," 517-518; Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration," 265-266, 268; see also John Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," *WMQ*, vol. 22 (April, 1965), 264-265; Baptists were one group shown greater toleration in the Old Colony than the Bay, as noted above. It is interesting that upon arrival in the New World, Roger Williams did not find Massachusetts suitable to his Separatist leanings (although Plymouth-influenced Salem defended him), and so he traveled to Plymouth, where William Bradford said his teachings were "well approved;" William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. William Davis (New York: 1908), 299.

argued that all Christians have freedom in considering what is lawful, and that "the Magistrate's commandment, must not be a rule unto me of this and that duty, but as I see it agree with the word of God."[21] Despite the gradual introduction of measures to regulate morality and religion by the General Court after 1650, the Separatist disposition toward greater religious diversity, and the separation of church and state, was not easily rooted out of the Old Colony population by civil decree.[22]

These differences had implications for church practice. Because freemanship was based on membership in a church, Massachusetts Bay churches began the practice of keeping detailed records of their admissions and dismissals; the fact that Plymouth Colony church records are scarce indicates a lack of concern.[23] In the Bay, hearing public relations of conversion experiences was introduced to prevent mixture between saints and unbelievers, which became especially important when compulsory taxation for the ministry was introduced in the 1630s. The first mention of Plymouth churches adopting the practice of relations does not appear until later in the century.[24] Moreover, the towns and churches of Plymouth Colony did not practice compulsory taxation until as late as 1661, because they felt "it is not knowne to be the Churches Judgement; and wee are sure it Never was theire Practice."[25]

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[21] Robert Browne, "A Treatise of Reformation Without Tarrying for Anie…," in *Protestant Nonconformist Texts: 1550 to 1700*, ed. Robert T. Jones (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 66.
[22] Bumsted concluded, the gradual enforcement of Bay standards in Plymouth Colony were often "haphazard" and "halfhearted;" *Pilgrims' Progress*, 4, 26. This seems even more likely in a Plymouth Colony town that not a major commercial or political hub, with slow communication to and from, i.e., Middleboro.
[23] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 5.
[24] The practice of hearing a public relation is first recorded by John Cotton at Plymouth in 1669; *Plymouth Church Records* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1920), v.1:99, 145.
[25] *Records of the Town of Plymouth* (Plymouth: Avery & Doten, 1889), v.1:45, 78, 87; Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saint: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 27.

Many of the issues that the Bay Colony faced in attempting to retain a unified orthodoxy were caused by its insistence upon an established church; the fact that Plymouth remained comparatively indifferent was one indication of its Separatist mentality toward church and state. The Bay Colony's decision to tax the population made it important that individuals know whether they belonged to the church or not. One result was conversion relations; because voting was tied to membership, regeneracy was needed for membership.[26] Another was the drafting of the *Cambridge Platform* in 1648 by a synod of ministers and laymen, which codified the accepted orthodoxy of the Bay Colony.[27] But complications arose when those paying taxes for the support of religion were barred from membership and the sacraments due to a lack of conversion experience, resulting in further synods, including the controversial Halfway Covenant. Massachusetts, although rejecting Presbyterianism, had no qualms about calling several synods to resolve contentions, including, the synod of 1637 to resolve the Antinomian crisis, the *Cambridge Platform* synod in 1646-48, the Halfway Covenant synod in 1662, and the Reforming Synod of 1679-80.

Meanwhile, Plymouth Colony churches remained relatively apathetic and rarely implemented most of the measures that Massachusetts doled out until the 1691 merger. Only the Plymouth church began the practice of hearing conversion relations, and that was not until 1669.[28] Moreover, Plymouth only met in council one time, in 1675, and then only because of the necessity from King Philip's War. The coming together of

[26] Langdon, "The Franchise," 517.
[27] Despite one delegate from Plymouth (Ralph Partridge of Duxbury) attending the assembly that drafted the *Cambridge Platform*, it was sporadically imported to Plymouth Colony, and had no standing there; Bumsted, "A Well-bounded Toleration," 267.
[28] Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration," 267.

clergymen to discuss theological matters concerning an entire region was uncommon in Plymouth, making the Congregationalism in the region even more sectarian.[29]

This was the context within which the settlement of Middleboro originated, and the sectarian notions of church and state carried into its formation as a town.[30] That the settlers of Middleboro town were connected to Plymouth Colony is clear, for all the inhabitants "belong[ed] to the towne of Plymouth" until Middleboro's incorporation in 1669.[31] They were under the rule of the General Court for the allotment of land, but the colony records make no mention of religious policy in Middleboro, and neither the Plymouth church nor colony records exhibited concern over the meeting of individuals to worship there rather than traveling to Plymouth. Nevertheless, those who worshipped in Middleboro as early as the 1660s were considered part of the Plymouth church, and Plymouth weighed in on all religious decisions, including the choice of Samuel Fuller as their first teacher.

> Dec: 19: our brother Mr Samuel Fuller being called to preach at Midlebury did aske counsel of the chh [church], which motion they took into serious consideration till the next chh-meeting… then the chh did unanimously advise & encourage him to attend preaching to them as oft as he could, but not yet to remove his family, but waite a while to see what further encouragement God might give him for his more settled attendance upon that service there.[32]

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[29] The Halfway Covenant was in effect in Middleboro at its founding, but its introduction never seemed to be an issue with Plymouth or Middleboro. The Plymouth records address it in 1693, describing the response of most members as "indifferent" (*Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:172), and they did not accept it until 1726; Robert Pope, *The Halfway Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 201. Middleboro used the Halfway Covenant since the earliest records with no mention of it causing controversy or alarm; *Book of the First Church*, 79.

[30] Israel Putnam, eighth pastor of Middleboro, later commented, "such was the character of the early settlers of this town, so much were like the generation, who went before them, lovers of religious and civil liberty, that they little heeded the humble circumstance in which they were necessitated to worship that God, whom they loved and served;" in the first of two discourses attached to the *Book of the First Church*, 19.

[31] *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth*, ed. Nathaniel Shurtleff (Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1855), v.4:41; v.5:19: "the Court graunted that Namassakett shalbe a township, and to be called by the name of Middleberry…"; *Book of the First Church*, 4; Thomas Weston provides a list of forty-one "who are known to have lived here." The earliest mention of settlers is in the 1640s; Weston, *History of Middleboro Massachusetts* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1906), 34-35.

[32] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:154.

Even though the worshippers benefited from the isolation afforded by Plymouth settlement patterns, they derived their earliest influences, characteristics, ecclesiology, and even their first teacher from the church with which they had the greatest connection.

The connection many of the worshippers in Middleboro had with the first Pilgrims, and the Plymouth church, provided Middleboro First Church a membership with deeply Separatist roots. Of the twenty-six individuals who eventually purchased the land from the local natives, at least four were passengers on the *Mayflower*, and several were the children of the Separatist-Pilgrims, including their first minister, Fuller.[33] When the First Church was formally established in 1694, Plymouth dismissed "five bretheren & 4 sisters" to join them, constituting almost half of the initial membership of the church. Among the original members were Abiel and Samuel Wood, sons of Henry Wood, a member of the Leyden congregation under Robinson. Three others were the sons of *Mayflower* passengers: Samuel Eaton (Father: Samuel), Isaac Billington (Father: Francis), and Samuel Fuller (Father: Samuel). Jacob Tomson was the son of a first-generation Plymouth settler (Father: John) who arrived on the *Anne* in 1623. Along with members having ties to the first Pilgrims, Plymouth also sent individuals to "helpe them in carrying on that worke," and voted to send two deacons, Thomas Faunce and George Morton, and two respected laymen, Eliezer Churchel and Ephraim Morton, "to accompany the Pastor thither on that occasion."[34] Their purpose was to assist in the drafting of the church's covenant and articles of faith, two instrumental documents in the

[33] On the *Mayflower*: Francis Billington, George Soule (Georg Sowle), John Howlad (Howland), and John Alden.

[34] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:176; George Morton and Thomas Faunce were cousins, and children of first generation Pilgrims. George's father was Ephraim Morton, a passenger on the *Anne* (1623)

church's development. Indeed, at every point in the First Church's foundation, Plymouth was present, and so was the connection to a Separatist past.

The selection of Samuel Fuller, Jr. as teacher—then later, ordained pastor—is one indication of the attitude of the early church to seek ministers with both a Separatist heritage and evangelistic qualities.[35] Fuller was born in 1625, in Plymouth, to Dr. Samuel Fuller, Sr., a passenger on the *Mayflower*, a physician, a deacon, and a renowned individual in the Plymouth community. Fuller, Sr. was well known for his visit to Salem during a scurvy outbreak in 1629, and for his influence among the church there in implementing its Congregationalism.[36] It is difficult to imagine Fuller's father not having a profound effect on his understanding of religious teachings, especially with the emphasis Separatists placed on training up their children, and the frequent references to catechizing them.[37] If the covenant and articles of Middleboro First Church are any indication, Fuller, Jr. did not stray far from the teachings of his father's church.

Fuller, Jr.'s name is found in most of the early accounts of the Middleboro town, including the purchase of land, and it is likely that his influence, knowledge, and labors were most significant in the development and maintenance of the Indian mission churches there. He was not college educated—another glaring distinction from the Bay Colony that required it among its clergy—so presumably his learning came from the teaching of his father and other early Separatists, along with the writings of their

[35] It is my contention that the members of Middleboro were well enough aware of doctrinal distinctions, and of their Separatist principles, that no pastor could act as "pope." But it was possible for a minister to become extremely influential, especially if he appealed to the people's convictions.
[36] Nathaniel Morton, *New England's Memorial* (Boston: 1669), 117; Miller, in *Orthodoxy*, 128-134, debunked the notion that Plymouth helped Massachusetts become Congregationalist, but there is good reason to think that Plymouth's ten years of experiential knowledge would have greatly aided and influenced Salem.
[37] The use of catechisms developed by John Robinson and William Perkins are repeatedly referenced to in the *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:145; 154; 172; 175; 178; Weston, *History of the Town*, 310.

patriarchs William Brewster, John Robinson, and William Perkins.[38] Fuller's knowledge of theology, demonstrated by his successes in both the mission churches in Middleboro and the institution of the First Church, along with its covenant and articles, indicates an understanding of doctrine and church practice that was likely ubiquitous in Plymouth society.

This point—that theology was not for an elite class or trained clergy only, and was thoroughly understood by the general populace—could as easily be made for most of the early members of the Middleboro church, many with ties to early Separatists as close as their minister. It is a point that cautions against assuming Middleboro members were unconcerned or unaware of the finer points of theology or their Congregational rights. A particular evidence of doctrinal knowledge among the general populace is found in the foundation and maintenance of the Indian mission churches of Middleboro during its initial settlement.[39]

One reason for leaving Holland for America included the hope of "laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto for the propagating and advancement of the gospel…in those remote parts of the world." The desire of the Separatist Pilgrims was to establish a church based on the principles of *sola scriptura* and to spread the gospel to the natives. According to Nathaniel Morton, William Bradford's nephew, in 1669 that hope "hath been graciously answered since, by moving the hearts of many of his servants to be very instrumental in this work with some good success." In 1649, Plymouth Governor Josiah Winslow, "perceiving that a door was opening for

[38] Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration," 268; and *Pilgrims' Progress*, 19-20.
[39] Weston also cautioned against the belief that these individuals were not "familiar with the Scriptures," but that they used them with "truth and accuracy;" *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, 59.

successful labor among the Indians," had formed a corporation, with backers in England, for the purpose of furthering the endeavor through new settlements.[40]

Middleboro was one such settlement, located in an area known to the General Court as Namasket. It was located fifteen miles west of Plymouth, isolated from other townships by distance—the closest town was Taunton at eleven miles—and the swampland it was located on, and populated by a sizable native population. Many of the first settlers lived among that natives there, and maintained peace with them for several years. Prior to King Philip's War, there existed three "Indian churches" in the area: Nemasket, Titicut, and Sowampset, totaling ninety members between them.[41] Despite the abandonment of many of these churches during the war, an "account of praying Indians" sent in 1685 to the corporation in England by Plymouth governor Thomas Hinckley, reported seventy Indians still worshipping in the Namasket and Titicut areas, both within the future town limits of Middleboro.[42]

The degree of success among the Indians in the Middleboro area is important to understanding the people that constituted the First Church. Thomas Weston later commented in his history of the town: "the membership in the Indian churches shows how earnest and faithful must have been the labors and the exemplary Christian character of the descendants of the pilgrims living in Middleboro, who without a pastor themselves, did such effective missionary work."[43] This observation touches on two elements of the

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[40] Morton, *New England's Memorial*, 11-12; 380.
[41] *Book of the First Church*, 3; the largest being Sowampset, with 35 members.
[42] John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions…Relating to the History…of Every Town in Massachusetts* (Worcester: Dorr, Howland, & Co., 1841), 512; Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay: From the First Settlement Thereof in 1628, until its Incorporation with the Colony of Plimouth Province…* (Salem: 1795; original, 1764), 313.
[43] Weston, *History of the Town*, 17; the second point is contra Bumsted's belief that they did not have a concern with the finer points of theology. Although no extant sources remain concerning doctrine and

Middleboro church's background that were important to the character established early on: first, that they descended from the Plymouth Pilgrims and, second, that they were well versed in their understanding of the church and theology, evidenced by an ability to establish, convert, and maintain membership among the native population. This emphasis on evangelism, conversion, and establishing churches had far-ranging influences on the formation of Middleboro's mentality of conversion, evangelism, and religious culture. One important influence was the people's willingness to evangelize the natives in the first place.[44]

The religious background of the first members, the first minister, and the context of Middleboro First Church's formation—secularly and religiously—helps to understand the church's initial convictions and how the potential existed to create and maintain a distinct identity. The town in which the church was established belonged to the Plymouth Colony, and while it was far from practicing no oversight, it did give more autonomy to the individual towns than the Bay. Even though those patterns gradually changed, it was not before a mindset of Separatist church-state relations was already well established. Furthermore, the church that the Middleboro worshippers belonged to held to the Congregational belief of local church autonomy, only furthering the ability of a church to create distinctions from other communities; and when the First Church became

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practice, it is difficult to imagine that they were able to evangelize, teach, and build a church of faithful congregants without a "trained" preacher unless they had an adequate knowledge of the Bible and Separatist principles.

[44] It also makes a tenable case for their later support of New Light sentiments. This is further evidenced by the fact that most Separatist-influenced churches were initially New Light during the Awakening, including: Plymouth, Middleboro, Halifax, Taunton, Lakeville, and the separating Baptists; see Bumsted, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 124: "In its early phases, the revival…was openly embraced by nearly every minister in the region..."; see also David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 48-53. Furthermore, Mark Peterson's assertion that the Plymouth church became inwardly oriented and "lacking evangelical impulse," especially among the natives, does not seem consistent with the number of Indian churches in the colony, or with the efforts of Plymouth church members who settled Middleboro; see Peterson, "The Plymouth Church," 578-579.

a distinct church in 1694, it even began to distinguish itself from the Plymouth church. Nevertheless, the church did not abandon its first convictions derived from their Separatist ancestry, even when idiosyncrasies developed later because of political, ecclesiastical, or geographical isolation. Those Separatist convictions were engrained within the First Church, and it would not be long before they were used to defend the doctrine and rights of the particular church against any innovation or encroachment.

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Along with a physical and ecclesiastical connection to Plymouth church and colony, and the Separatist notions of church and state inherent in the system, the First Church derived many of its religious convictions from the Separatists as well—especially in its covenant and articles of faith. In his account of Middleboro's ecclesiastical history, Thomas Weston remarked that the church's covenant and articles were "similar to those of Plymouth," and that they "were in accord with the teachings of the venerable John Robinson, pastor of the Pilgrim Church in Leyden." Given the First Church's connection to the church at Plymouth, and the fact that individuals were sent from Plymouth to assist in the drafting of its covenant and articles, the resemblance is expected. Weston's comment reflects the connection later generations felt they had maintained with the first Separatists—including those in Holland; but how did the covenant and articles of faith "accord" with Separatist teachings?[45]

The First Church's covenant was orthodox, but it was not typical of most New England churches' covenants. There are few examples of a covenant in New England prior to the First Church—even in Plymouth Colony—that went into as much detail as Middleboro's did. One historian remarked that the covenant of the First Church

[45] Weston, *History of the Town*, 442.

contained "an unfashionable load of theology," and that Fuller had the greatest influence in its formulation.[46] Even Plymouth's covenant was only about a fourth the size of Middleboro's—though it also contained appended articles of faith, something Separatist churches were historically known for.[47] Much of Plymouth's was taken up with the explanation of what its covenant was, and with whom it was made, namely, God and each other. It concluded with a vow similar to Middleboro's—but briefer—where the members promised to bind themselves to one another, "& in all sincere conformity to His holy ordinances & mutuall love to & watchfulness over one another."[48] However, no mention is made of transferring its faith to its posterity, church discipline, relationship with other churches, or an explanation of the extent and purpose of the sacraments—all of which were present in the First Church's covenant.[49] Plymouth's covenant was the norm for a majority of churches in New England, especially those before the eighteenth century, and it is evident that the First Church felt a need to make, or remake, clearer distinctions on what qualified as orthodox doctrine by 1694.

Reasons for the differences between the First Church's church covenant and others are manifold. It was due, in part, to the cultural context in which it was drafted, amidst what was considered a waning in communal piety, and the need for greater clarification

[46] John L. Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: 1873-1962), v.5:319.
[47] Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 40-41.
[48] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:148; the initial membership of Halifax was aided by the Middleboro church who dismissed several for its formation (founded, 1734). Their covenant and articles were as detailed as the Middleboro church, following much of the same tenor, and it displays a growing concern for clearly articulated doctrine. Prior to the turn of the century, though, it is difficult to find a covenant and articles of faith with the amount of detailed theology and explicit affirmation as seen in the Middleboro First Church.
[49] *Book of the First Church*, 18-19.

of convictions.[50] It also displayed the increasing need for an educated laity that could defend itself despite failures in the pulpit or surrounding churches. The First Church's elaboration of distinctions points to a church's desire to establish a strong church covenant during a time often considered the start of "decline;" it furthermore points to the church's insistence that it remain central and comprehendible to future church members. But perhaps most importantly, it was a product of a Separatist culture that fostered the desire for a faithful community of believers, free from scandalous sins, assenting to particular doctrinal truths, and providing an historic foundation upon which to remember its first principles, and recommit if necessary.

It is arguable that the First Church resurrected certain Separatist proclivities in its church covenant and articles that had begun to decline by the end of the century. Edmund Morgan demonstrated that the earliest Separatists did not place emphasis on signs of saving faith for the makeup of the church, but instead placed it upon the adherence to a covenant and doctrinal competency.[51] John Robinson explained:

> …this we hold and affirm, that a company, consisting though but of two or three, separated from the world, whether unchristian, or antichristian, and gathered into the name of Christ by a covenant made to walk in all the ways of God known unto them, is a church, and so hath the whole power of Christ.[52]

Later Congregationalists in the Bay Colony began to expect communicants "to detect signs of converting grace," especially evidenced by conversion experiences, in order for admission to the church (explaining many of the difficulties in dealing with subsequent generations who did not seem to undergo the same experiences, i.e., the Halfway

[50] David Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 190.
[51] Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 33-47
[52] John Robinson, "A Justification of Separation from the Church of England" (1610), in *The Works of John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: John Snow, 1851), v.2:132.

Covenant).[53] Separatists, however, looked for assent to a covenant, a competency and understanding of sound doctrine, and a life free from scandalous sin. The covenants of the Separatists often focused on external behavior, a person's agreement to fall under the church's authority, and were accompanied by articles of faith that were subscribed to and understood. Separatists required, what Edmund Morgan called, an "historic faith" for inclusion in the church, as opposed to "saving faith" as in the Bay Colony.[54] The First Church seems to have revived the earliest practices of the Separatists by making its church covenant and articles heavy on externals and deeply theological; however, like most churches in New England, the First Church began to desire relations of a saving experience in their life—the mixture of influences created a church that not only required a relation of God's grace, but also a competent understanding of doctrine and a life free of outward offence.[55]

The First Church's practice of requiring "historic faith" and assent to the truths of the covenant and articles ensured a familiarity with certain doctrines and practices among the members. Both documents required the members to have more than a superficial understanding of their key doctrines, including: original sin, the incarnation, predestination, the sacraments, eschatology, and church discipline.[56] The First Church, like the early Separatists, emphasized the importance of doctrinal knowledge, and looked for an adequate understanding from prospective members. "The Separatists' confession of faith," said Morgan, "involved not only a statement of the candidate's acceptance of Christian doctrines but a demonstration of his understanding of them." This was no less

[53] Peterson, "The Plymouth Church," 581
[54] Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 33-47; especially p. 43.
[55] *Book of the First Church*, 15-17.
[56] Ibid.

the case in the First Church, and it is key in recognizing the role member relations played in the church.

The practice of hearing member relations in the First Church was likely adopted from Plymouth, and was most certainly in use by 1707, when church records began.[57] Relations required that a prospective member understand doctrinal principles as they expressed their hope and desire to join the church. The Plymouth church, described the admission of new members to the church, and it is reasonable to assume the First Church practiced similarly. "The practice was for men orally to make confession of faith & a declaration of their experiences of a worke of grace in the prescence of the whole congregation." Although the relation contained their experience of a work of grace, the evidence of "regenerative grace" was not the only determinative factor for admission, but instead "that their [doctrinal] knowledge was competent."[58] The Plymouth church records described what was "the usuall way of proceeding in the Examination of persons…as to the competency of their knowledge rendring them meet for full communion," by listing out several questions that the applicant was asked.

Q: what doe you beleve concerning God? Unity of Essence & Trinity of Persons & some of his Attributes…
Q: what——concerning man? The state in which He was created, & his Apostacy…
Q: what are the benefits of Christ?
Q: How doe wee come to be made partakers of Christ & his benefits?
Q: what is a church?
Q: what are the ordinances of Gods house?
Q: How ought chh-members to carry it one toward another? …In brotherly love & holy watchfulness.[59]

The Middleboro church, like Plymouth, incorporated the use of a conversion relation and a life free from scandalous sin, along with a competent knowledge of

[57] That said, the first extant relation from the First Church (Noah Alden) is not until 1743, so in-depth analysis of the relations is reserved for the next chapter.
[58] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:145. See Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 30-40; and Aaron F. Christensen, "'Pope' or Persuader? The Influence of Solomon Stoddard in Northampton and Western New England" (PhD Dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 2005), 23; fn. 32.
[59] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:181-182; Weir, *Early New England*, 209-210.

doctrine truth. The covenant stated that all were admitted to the Lord's Supper if they subjected themselves to the lordship of Christ and were found "without offence."[60] In the earliest page of the church record book, the phrases "owned the confession of faith" and "made confession of faith" were typically followed by "and admitted to communion."[61] It would seem, then, that the Halfway Covenant was a means of retaining people who might otherwise leave, and that full membership required a greater understanding of right doctrine and the ability to use it properly in a personal testimony of God's grace, something most probably felt they could not do until they had spent some time in the church, under its preaching and watch.[62] In fact, when the records mention those who were made halfway members it uses the words "owned the Covenant," implying that all that was necessary for halfway membership was agreement to be watched over; when the a person desired to be made a full member they were said to have "assented to the confession [i.e. articles of faith]," meaning doctrinal knowledge was required.[63]

The church covenant and articles of Middleboro First, therefore, functioned as guides for prospective members in formulating a proper relation to the church, because the evaluating members would look for "competent knowledge" in doctrinal matters. The applicant was expected to show a desire to "maintain the word and worship of God," and to be committed "unto the ministerial exercise of the power of Christ in the

[60] *Book of the First Church,* 18-19.
[61] *Middleboro Church Records*, dated between 1709 and October 11, 1713.
[62] "The Halfway Covenant," said Morgan, "enabled the Puritans to keep within the church a number of persons who might otherwise have fallen out into the world." The Plymouth and Middleboro churches were able to retain people in the church, under the church's watch and the pastor's sermons, giving those people a sense of belonging, until they felt they understood the doctrines as relating to their personal experience of grace; see Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 139.
[63] One example can be found in *Middleboro Church Records*, October 31, 1742; Jackson Southard is described as having his child baptized, because Southard had "owned the Covenant", but he is not enrolled in the church catalogue. This is contrasted with those who "owned the confession" and were subsequently enrolled (cf. *Book of the First Church,* 94).

dispensation of the word." They were to be "without offence" if they hoped to partake as a communicant member; this would usually require a full confession of any wrongdoing. They were expected to voice their agreement for the church to "watch" over them and to submit to "discipline" if necessary. Finally, they needed to display a working knowledge of the articles of faith, especially acknowledging their helplessness in salvation, the sufficiency of Christ, the need for sanctification, and the importance of the church.[64] In these ways the church covenant and articles were extremely important to physical and spiritual posterity, and as we will see in the next chapter, contributed to the level of understanding and influence the laity wielded.

It is important, again, to make clear that the First Church did not simply admit anyone who made a cursory profession. They did not believe the visible church could consist of a "mixed people, godly, and openly ungodly."[65] The members of the Middleboro church expected the Separatist requirements for membership: assent to a covenant, knowledge of doctrine with proper application in an individual's experience, a life free from scandalous or habitual sin, and a relation of a work of grace in their life.[66] In these ways, the First Church was unique in its adoption of the Bay Colony relation standards and the Separatist principle of "historic faith."

The church covenant and articles went beyond the application to individual members; they also had an important corporate function. Implicit within the covenant were promises of blessing for obedience, and curse should they fail to uphold their side of

[64] Ibid.
[65] Quoted from Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 108.
[66] Bumsted is correct to say that the distinction in halfway and full membership was in a person's feeling that they did not possess the right experiential knowledge of doctrine. They may have known it on an intellectual level, but not an "experiential" level and this kept them from becoming full members; see Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 62-63.

the agreement. The implied consequence was further illustrated by Middleboro's 1713 covenant renewal, as they became aware of a decline in piety in New England.

> [We] being…awakened by the heavy judgments impending over our nation and country; would search our hearts after what might be in us provoking to God; acknowledging it to be our duty, not only to walk circumspectly, respecting gross sins and miscarriages, but would also guard against prevailing corruptions that often prevail among the people of God; especially, to renew our engagements which are laid on us by the covenant of God, which hath been not only accepted, but renewed, and is hereby renewed and expressed.[67]

The church covenant of Middleboro was seen as a real and binding agreement with God, and it was He alone who could sustain their existence, therefore it was important for them to know the elements and to evaluate their faithfulness to it. The constant need for introspection, confession of failure, and recommitment to their first principles was not unheard of in Massachusetts's churches, but the maintenance of those practices made the First Church unique.

Covenant renewals were one important way for the corporate body to remember its first principles, and to recommit to the communalism it required. Perry Miller, in examining covenant renewals, reduced the practice to outward civil and moral reform, using the Reforming Synod of 1679-1680 as evidence.[68] More recent studies have tended to interpret the covenant renewals in New England as a recruitment or conversion tool in response to a general decline in religion.[69] While both interpretations have their merits, they seem to neglect the most immediate and obvious purpose: to renew the church covenant, solidify corporate identity, and revive the communalism needed for the covenant to have any weight. The church covenant and articles, therefore, not only informed the outline of member relations, it also informed the manner in which covenant

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[67] Ibid., 20.
[68] Miller, *From Colony to Province*, 33-39, 116-118.
[69] Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96-99.

renewals were performed, and the "historic faith" the church needed to adhere to and maintain corporately in order to exist as a true church.

The covenant renewals and member relations, then, served a similar purpose: both reminded the current members of their covenant obligations. Member relations, if given properly, were, in essence, a recurring reminder to the members of the First Church that they must be knowledgeable in their own doctrine and evaluate themselves in the maintenance of their covenant oaths—this point will be more fully appreciated in the next chapter. Renewals were simply a corporate expression of a desire to continue to uphold the principles on which the church was founded, and like the relations required that the church remember those first principles and maintain them by admitting those to the church who knew them well.

The Separatist influence on the First Church's church covenant adherence, admission requirements, and the need for educated laypersons, are helpful in determining what unique qualities contributed to the church's continuity. In the next chapter more will be said about how specifically the renewals and relations modeled the church covenant and articles, and will help to understand how the church could adapt to changing circumstance but still maintain the doctrine of their covenant and articles.

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The influence of Separatism, in both the context in which the Middleboro church formed and in its founding documents, also created a unique Congregationalism among its members. Congregationalism was not only a conviction derived from a Separatist heritage, it was an important means for maintaining covenant faithfulness internally and separation corruption around them, if needed. The turn of the century witnessed a rise in individual concerns among churches in New England, often resulting in serious

contentions between church members, and a lack of covenantal communalism. This trend swept through the churches gradually, and Congregationalism's inability to stem the tide of growing contention has been cited, by some historians, as one factor for New England's "decline."[70] In Middleboro, though, Congregationalism had a different effect.

The principle of Congregational autonomy protected the First Church of Middleboro, firstly, from the whims of neighboring churches and the civil magistrate. As explained earlier in this chapter, the environment and beliefs of the First Church provided the freedom for distinctions—Separatist distinctions, in the case of the Middleboro church—to develop. Historians have sometimes framed the effects of Congregational autonomy in the negative with regards to sustaining the communal society envisioned by the Puritans.[71] For these historians, the breakdown in covenant fidelity, and ultimately the Puritan utopia, was a result of Congregational autonomy. As historian James Cooper has said, "the principle not only allowed for differences in specific practices but it also provided no formal machinery to discipline wayward churches."[72] While it is certainly true that there was no overarching machinery in place, thus making it difficult to sustain the ideal apart from becoming functionally Presbyterian, the system could work equally well the other way, especially if a church did not desire change when the consensus tended toward it. It is tempting to see only the negative effects a congregation's autonomy could have on communalism, because they often create the most interesting

[70] Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 170
[71] Ibid.; see Daniels, *The Fragmentation of New England*, 144.
[72] Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 19, 68-69.

stories of division;[73] but in the case of Middleboro the doctrine proved beneficial to the maintenance of its founding principles and communal mindset.

In Middleboro, Congregational autonomy was a means by which a church—especially an isolated, rural church—could essentially practice whatever it wished, within reason, without threat from outward interference. Due to the principle of Congregational autonomy, there were no binding synodic decrees or government sanctions for those who did not comply with every recommendation; consensual agreement to heed the advice of surrounding churches was all that bound one church to another.[74] The same system that could foster false teaching or differences in church practice (i.e. Halfway Covenant or Stoddardism) was also capable of ensuring the First Church's distinctiveness, idiosyncrasies, and communalism, if desired.[75] The aversion to anything resembling established religion was even more pronounced among churches that owned their Separatist lineage, and so the First Church's autonomy was guarded with a greater resoluteness.[76]

That said, the First Church did not condone churches acting alone, without guidance from others. Its church covenant stated, the members would "engage…to walk orderly in a way of fellowship and communion with all neighbor churches." The First Church understood the role of surrounding churches, and felt the watch and advice of

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[73] See Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 147; Lockridge, *A New England Town*, 24-30; Stout, *New England Soul*, 17.

[74] Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 25-27; According to Morgan, "the doctrine of congregational independence made it possible for a clergyman to develop ideas different from those of his neighbor without either being aware of it;" Edmund S. Morgan, "New England Puritanism: Another Approach," *WMQ*, vol. 18 (April, 1961), 236.

[75] The influences for the First Church may have originated with Plymouth, but its Congregationalism allowed for distinctions to eventually develop.

[76] The end of this chapter explores the potential for dispute between the town and church of Middleboro in the case of Thomas Palmer. But the church's true colors were revealed in later disputes with the town, as discussed in the next chapter.

other congregations was important to its own purity. The church also understood the role of the state to act in the matters it was instituted for, namely, the enforcement of law and order. The church's principles of church autonomy were not created for the purpose of isolation, but it was—and remained—a safeguard against civil encroachment, ecclesiastical innovation, or internal corruption if the need arose. Given the First Church's Separatist proclivities, the slightest provocation may have warranted the use of its belief in Congregational autonomy as a means of separating from any perceived error.[77]

Along with a greater wariness of outward encroachment, the role of Separatism in the church's unique brand of Congregationalism was most pronounced in how it operated internally. From the outset, all Congregational churches in New England took the votes and opinions of the laity into consideration, but in the Bay Colony the clergy tended to have most of the influence because they were typically the most educated and persuasive. Middleboro First, though, inherited the "lay dominance" of the Plymouth church.[78] The first two ministers of Middleboro, Samuel Fuller and Thomas Palmer, were not university trained, and were actually laypersons elevated to the pastoral position by the Separatist practice of ordination by the brethren within the church.[79]

Separatist notions of the equality of all saints, whether pastor, deacon, or new convert, were more prominent in the First Church. The church never had ruling elders because, as it was later put, "there is not much in a name." Instead the church voted for committees, consisting of laypersons or deacons, to be formed whenever a matter needed

[77] Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration," 266-267.
[78] See Peterson, "The Plymouth Church," 574.
[79] Bumsted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration," 268; recall that Fuller was selected by those gathered in Middleboro, not by a council of neighboring ministers, or even by the minister of Plymouth. Also *Book of the First Church*, 32.

resolution. Those committees acted in cases authorized to elders in the *Cambridge Platform*, evidencing a preference for lay guidance above authoritative officers in the church. The only other office aside from the pastor was the diaconate; and those elected deacons were also esteemed, knowledgeable laypersons.[80]

Moreover, because the laity was well versed in their doctrinal knowledge and had a profound command in the churches direction, they were not easily corrupted—or influenced—by the pastor over them. The *Book of the First Church*, a catalogue of the church's history and beliefs, boasted, "We choose our own officers, and depose them when there is just cause…No pastor or elder has ever interposed to control or embarrass the action of this church."[81] In the Middleboro church there was a heightened sense of ensuring that the laity was adequately knowledgeable in the event they should have to deal with matters of discipline, correction, or edification within their own ranks, or among the clergy over them. Later generations took great pride in the laity's role in the direction of the church.[82]

The removal of Thomas Palmer, the First Church's second pastor, due to intemperance and drinking, displayed the church's willingness to seek outside advice (so long as it did not violate their Separatist ideals), while ultimately strengthening the laity's

[80] *Book of the First Church*, 29. The first mention of a committee formed to act on behalf of the church concerned Thomas Palmer, and is mentioned below (p. 35). Most deacons were first esteemed laypersons that rose to that position through the church's unanimous decision to elevate them; Samuel Wood, one of the laypersons selected to represent the church in the case of Palmer, is an example.
[81] Ibid., 28.
[82] The rise of lay liberties and democratization in church government that has been attributed to New Lights during the Great Awakening (often pitted against Old Lights, who are said to have stood for "order" and strict control of the laity) was already commonplace among Separatist churches like Middleboro First. This is why I attribute the church's Separatism to its support of revival and the New Lights in the next chapter. See James Cooper, "Enthusiasts or Democrats? Separatism, Church Government, and the Great Awakening in Massachusetts," *NEQ*, vol. 65 (June, 1992), 265-283; especially 270-271; Cooper also challenged the idea that these principles arose during the Great Awakening.

influence for years to come.[83] Palmer's removal was instigated by opposition from the laity and finalized by a majority vote of the church; and while outside guidance was sought, there was never any real question about the end result, nor was there question about the lay's authority. The removal also showed how the relationship between the church and civil magistrate was tenuous; it worked well if both agreed on a matter, but had potential to awaken the Separatist proclivities of the First Church if its right of autonomy was violated—especially in spiritual matters (i.e. the selection of a pastor).[84]

In August 1695, less than a year after Middleboro's formation, Samuel Fuller had died and the church began looking for his replacement. Between August 1695 and August 1696 three ministers were invited to supply the pulpit, and in 1696 Thomas Palmer was called to preach on probation for a quarter year.[85] In 1698, the town voted to give him a yearly salary, and that "his goods shall be brought from Plymouth at the town's charge."[86]

Palmer's selection to the pulpit was marked by difficulties from the start. There appears to have been some opposition (the reasons are unclear) from surrounding ministers and certain Middleboro church members regarding his settlement by the town. In 1701 a council was convened, "in order to the comfortable peaceable and regular settlement and establishment of the gospel orders & ordinances among them." The church selected a committee to represent them, and the town selected delegates as well.

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[83] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:203. See *Book of the First Church*, 28: the advice of neighboring churches was sought only if "desired by the pastor and brethren." The church never felt obliged; only that it was wise to seek council.

[84] One rationale for including this story about Palmer is to juxtapose the situation with that of Sylvanus Conant forty years later. In both cases the magistrate was involved, but in the former it ended up agreeing with the church's decision, whereas the latter case had a different outcome, as we will see in the next chapter.

[85] *Middleboro Town Records*, August, 1696.

[86] *Book of the First Church*, 6.

The church chose Samuel Wood and Ebenezer Tinkham; the former a layman and the latter a deacon.[87] The council voted that Palmer retain his position as minister, and his ordination took place in 1702.[88] The town's decision to settle him despite some opposition from the church showed early signs of discomfort from civil involvement in the church's affairs; however no further division occurred.

Although opinions between town council and church were divided, it did not take long for all sides to eventually agree that Palmer was unfit for ministry. Following his ordination, dissatisfaction from all parties continued to mount, and in November 1706, he was brought forward on charges of "Intemperance and Excessive drinking." The Plymouth church, and clergy from surrounding churches, heard the case against Palmer *ex parte*, and "upon a full hearing the cases the councell Judged it proved that he was a man addicted to drinking…and thereupon disapproved of his continuance any Longer in the exercise of the Evangelical Ministry there, and advised him to make a peaceable and Ordely [sic] Secession from the Church."[89] The Middleboro church then requested a formal council of twelve churches in 1707, to advise them on what should be done with Palmer. The council's verdict was unanimous: the church should remove him.[90]

The First Church removed its pastor by requesting outside council, but the decision came from the vote of the church, and stood as a testimony of lay influence in the church for years to come. The vote was recorded in one of the first extant church records:

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[87] Wood was later made a deacon in 1734; *Book of the First Church*, 117.
[88] *Middleboro Town Records*, November 15, 1698, and again on August 5, 1701; The *Book of the First Church* (p. 6) and Weston, *History of the Town* (p. 444) agree that Palmer was ordained in 1702; however, the *Book of the First Church* suspects it may have been sooner.
[89] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:203.
[90] Ibid.; the churches were: Boston, Milton, Plymouth, Plympton, Sandwich, Barnstable, Harwich, Taunton, Bridgewater, Bristol, Reheboth, and Rochester.

> Voted…in pursuance of the advice of twelve churches…which have declared that Mr. Thomas Palmer…ought to be removed from the work of the Gospel ministry, and suspended from communion at the Lord's table for his scandalous immoralities…the church doth now declare that they now look on Mr. Thomas Palmer as no longer their pastor, but as deposed from the work of the ministry...[91]

That this entry was one of the first in Middleboro's church records stood as a reminder of the corruption that could creep into a church if the laity was not watchful and it likely reminded any authority over them (future pastors included) that they had a God-given right to self-governance, by an informed and determined laity. The words of the *Book of the First Church*, and all subsequent references to the power of the laity, used the Palmer case as its example for future generations of the lay dominance in the church. While most churches would have removed a pastor for such sins, the laity's prominence already present in the church was further strengthened, and emboldened them, especially as events unfolded in the next century.[92]

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The Middleboro First Church's connection to the early Separatists was physical and philosophical. Both were essential in forming the initial identity of the church, and creating an environment within which the church could develop and maintain that identity. As we have seen in this chapter, the church's Separatist heritage was seen in three broad ways: its connection to Plymouth Colony, its founding documents, and its unique Congregationalism.

The church's connection to Plymouth—and the early Separatist Pilgrims—provided the church a context and identity. Separatism had bred a firmer stance on the

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[91] *Middleboro Church Records*, June 30, 1708.

[92] Palmer went on to have a successful career in medicine, and according to legend, was later admitted back to full membership. One writer, in commenting about Palmer, speculated that perhaps his faith got in the way of his scientific endeavors, and so he abandoned the church; Patricia A. Watson, *The Angelic Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, 1991), 110-111. This, of course, is unlikely. Palmer remained bitter about it, demanded his payment from the town, and even met with a small gathering in his home for some time after.

division between church and state, and churches like Middleboro remained cautious of the state's greater involvement in church matters.[93] Following Governor Bradford's death in 1657, Plymouth Colony slowly became stricter on civil and religious practice due to the pressures from Massachusetts and the threat of religious errors (i.e. Quakerism), but the changes were often resisted and in many cases led to disorders in the Colony.[94] Because of Plymouth Colony's lack of rigid orthodoxy, and the uniform implementation of religious policy, it created an environment of greater religious tolerance and different expressions of Puritanism. In Middleboro it was expressed in evangelism to natives and a culture of lay education and lay dominance in the church.

The education of the laity was expressed in the First Church's insistence on a detailed church covenant and articles of faith that were firmly adhered to by current members and appealed to in the admission of new members. Despite a general decline in covenantal piety throughout New England, the Middleboro church created a covenant and articles that were thorough in their distinctions and adhered to strongly as a litmus for the church's faithfulness—individually and corporately. The documents also provided a firm foundation for future members to become a full member, and required an adequate knowledge of doctrine as it applied to their individual lives, thus continuing a culture of well-informed laypersons in the church. As we will see, this was what defined the First Church throughout its long history, and provided for its continuity: covenant and

[93] Even Ralph Patridge's early draft of the *Cambridge Platform* placed stricter limitations on the power of the magistrate in church matters than most others at the synod, who believed the magistrate was to enforce and keep both tables of the Mosaic Law. Patridge's draft was not used on that particular matter; see Henry M. Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, as Seen in its Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), 446-447.
[94] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 268-271; Langdon, "The Franchise," 526.

doctrinal fidelity while being able to adapt to new situations, experiences, and types of applicants to the church.

Lastly, because of the First Church's insistence on the rights of particular churches, strong sentiments of church-state separation, and the education of all members, there developed a unique Congregationalism that characterized the church as they approached the next century. Externally, the church's right of Congregational autonomy was more pronounced due to Separatist notions of church and state, and is briefly seen in the case of Palmer, but more so in the events of the next century. Internally, the Congregationalism of the First Church was marked by a strong influence of the laity in the development of the church's identity. The Middleboro church derived its "lay dominance"[95] from the Separatist principles of an educated congregation and the equality of all Christians in the eyes of God. The First Church spent its initial years without much guidance from the pulpit, and they would face many more in years to come, causing the lay prominence in the church to continue to grow. It is important to recognize this, lest we are tempted to think its charismatic preachers were the sole reason for the church's continuity. The later histories of the church would give due weight to the importance of their pastors, but underlying it all was a recognition of the laity's rights and influence. In the First Church, laity and clergy worked in concert to perpetuate a Puritan-like church in an age that was leaving Puritanism behind.

[95] Again, the phrase "lay dominance" is taken from Peterson's study on the Plymouth church and the laity's influence in determining that church's development during its early years; Peterson, "The Plymouth Church," 573-574.

CHAPTER II

ADAPTING: 1709-1777

Truly conservative, she has welcomed new ideas and methods, while not wholly losing her hold upon the ancient landmarks and time-honored truths and usages of the Pilgrim church of Britain and New England. With the great author…of Congregationalism, John Robinson, this church…has ever believed that God has yet more light to break forth for us from his most holy Word; so has welcomed to its arms the revivalism of a Thacher and Whitefield…[96]

Prior to the Great Awakening the clergy in New England began to bemoan a shift in New England churchgoers' concerns away from the religious and toward the secular, away from communal loyalties and toward personal gains. Even Peter Thacher, third pastor of the First Church, lamented a "deadness thro' the Town" in 1741, evidenced by "Religion dying, Prayers dropt in many Families, the Ways to Zion unoccupied."[97] Despite the state of deadness, however, there remained latent Separatist predispositions in the First Church with the potential to be reawakened by revival. As demonstrated in the last chapter, the church was founded on Separatist principles of church-state relations, covenant centrality, and a Congregationalism with a strong lay influence. Religious zeal across all of New England may have plateaued at the turn of the century, but when the Awakening revitalized Separatist principles, including lay participation, limitations on clerical authority, and objections to state interference, the founding principles of the First

[96] H.A. Hanaford in *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, 45.
[97] Thacher to Prince, December 21, 1741 in Thomas Prince, *An Account of the Great Revival in Middleborough, Mass. 1741, 1742, during the ministry of Rev. Peter Thacher, with a notice of his character* (Boston: Re-printed by T.R. Marvin, 1842), 9; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 26, 67.

Church reemerged with renewed energy.[98]

Another characteristic of the First Church that to this point has been hinted at but not fully explained was its adaptability. We have seen the underlying principles that influenced the convictions of the First Church, and the political/religious environment that enabled it to develop its identity unhindered; but, it might be argued, if that was all that was necessary to sustain covenant fidelity, doctrinal purity, and communalism then many other churches should have followed similar paths. What, then, enabled the First Church to adapt to a new era without sacrificing the doctrine and communalism outlined in its church covenant and articles?

This chapter seeks to answer that question by appealing, again, to the church's Separatist connection. The belief of its spiritual forefathers—that the revelation of Scriptural truth was progressive and experiential—had a profound effect on the First Church's selection of pastors, tolerance for new practices, evangelism, and thoughts about conversion experiences. This progressive understanding of truth was vital during the era under consideration in this chapter, when two important pastors were selected, church practices were modified, several hundred new members joined the church at one time, and the church underwent a dramatic split. Throughout, the church managed to adapt and survive, while reclaiming its identity as a Separatist-inspired church with sectarian attitudes of church and state, lay influence, and covenant adherence.

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[98] The Separatists of the Great Awakening were New Light supporters who separated from what they believed were corrupt churches in New England. Often they demanded greater lay participation and strict limitations on clerical authority. The First Church did not separate from the standing order in the same manner, but they certainly held similar beliefs about the laity, evangelism, and church-state relations. In fact, the First Church held it long beforehand—as already demonstrated; See Cooper, "Enthusiasts or Democrats?," 266.

The First Church felt it had descended from a prestigious line of Separatist pastors dating back to Robinson, and it was important that its ministers continue in that line—notwithstanding the failure of Palmer.[99] The link to Robinson in its history provides an interesting element in understanding the church's ability to adapt while sustaining historic doctrines. It also explains some of the characteristics the church looked for in its incoming pastors. In Edward Winslow's account of Robinson's farewell sermon to the departing Pilgrims, he records Robinson saying**,** "if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it as ever we were to receive any truth by his ministry; for he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Word." It would be wrong to conclude that Separatists did not believe truth to be fixed—for no truth could go beyond the Bible—but they did believe the full understanding of truth, as revealed in the Bible, was progressive and revealed through experience. Robinson implored his congregation to not stop at the teachings of Luther, Calvin, or himself; and that if Luther and Calvin were now living, "they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received." He beseeched them to allow new surroundings, context, and experiences—including inner experiences—to assist them in unfolding the truth, but being mindful to "examine and compare it and weigh it with other scriptures of truth before we received it."[100]

[99] *Plymouth Church Records*, xviii.

[100] Robinson, *Works*, v.1:xliv-xlv; Christians of both conservative and liberal camps debated the meaning of Robinson's words in later generations. Some took his meaning further than others, but all agreed that the understanding of truth was progressive, and based on new experiences; see William W. Fenn, "John Robinson's Farewell Address," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 13 (July, 1920), 236-251. See also Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm*, 48-53.

This recounting of Robinson's address was well known throughout Plymouth Colony, and it was part of the First Church's understanding of its past.[101] The allowance for "further light," or new light, proved instrumental in the development of Plymouth churches that remained close to their patriarch's teaching, and it often guided the selection of ministers who were in agreement with this understanding of religious truth. In the First Church it helped to accommodate for changes throughout the eighteenth century and to select pastors that were open to change but grounded in doctrinal truth; it also become a foundational principle in the church's willingness to accept the Great Awakening.

This understanding of the progressive nature of truth was displayed, firstly, in the First Church's willingness to accept new measures that were now implemented by its affiliation with the Bay Colony. In 1709, the church settled Peter Thacher, a 1706 graduate of Harvard, to replace the defrocked Palmer. The mention of Thacher's education is not trivial: he was the first pastor of the church to have an education from a Bay Colony university—or any university for that matter. Prior to incorporation, education was not a requirement for a minister to be settled in Plymouth Colony, and before 1691, at least half the colony's standing ministry did not have a seminary degree—including the first two ministers of the First Church.[102] It seems probable that the church placed less importance on where a minister was trained and more importance on what his heritage and convictions were. The records of the First Church reveal no issues with selecting a Harvard-educated minister; in fact, the personality and beliefs of

[101] Mention of Robinson's words is found in the church's *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, in a sermon by H.A. Hanaford, p. 45. It is made in passing, and assumed that the church knew to what he was referencing. It is also used as his reason for why Middleboro welcomed the Great Awakening, and why the church faithfully continued into the nineteenth century.
[102] Bumsted, "A Well-bounded Toleration," 268; *Book of the First Church*, 116.

Thacher confirmed the church's tendency to select ministers sympathetic to its Separatist roots.[103]

In Thacher, the First Church found a pastor who accorded—in both his upbringing and practice—with the progressive understanding of truth revealed through practical experience. He was from a long line of Puritan ministers: his father ministered in Milton; his grandfather in Boston; and his great-grandfather ministered in Salisbury, England. The evangelism of Thacher's father, who preached monthly to nearby Indian tribes starting in 1680**,** was a quality reminiscent of Fuller, and one the First Church surely hoped its new pastor would emulate. Thacher's father (Peter, Sr.) was not unfamiliar with changes in church practice while insisting upon the doctrines of Calvinism. He advocated singing Psalms in the "New Way," like his son,[104] and was known—infamous in some circles—for his relaxation of membership requirements, and tests of saving faith, in order to draw in greater numbers of new congregants. It is furthermore unsurprising to note that Thacher, Sr. was noted by his contemporaries for being a "practical Christian" with more "liberal" views of religious practice.[105] The approach to practical Christianity, tolerance, evangelism, and progressivism found in the father was passed on to the son.

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[103] There were several "innovations" Middleboro adopted (i.e. relations, Halfway Covenant, educated pastors) without noticeable division, signifying an ability to adapt without compromising established beliefs.

[104] In 1723, Thacher, Sr. collaborated with Samuel and John Danforth in writing a defense for the singing of Psalms in the New Way, *An Essay…Concerning the singing of Psalms*. Thacher, Jr., supported the measure as well; see pp. 46-47 of this paper.

[105] Edward P. Hamilton, "The Diary of a Colonial Clergyman Peter Thacher of Milton," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*. Third series. Vol. 71 (October 1953-May 1957), 52-58; Hamilton, in commenting on Thacher, Sr.'s diary, notes: "There are indications which make one believe that Peter Thacher was somewhat liberal in his religion…Sibley felt that Thacher believed 'more in the grace and charities of a Christian life than in the severe teachings of a harsh and ungracious theology'…Thacher kept a little ahead of his time." Hamilton then uses the example of debating a Quaker, and the level of "religious toleration" expressed, a quality often associated with Separatist notions of the division in church and state.

Thacher, Jr. was a good fit for the First Church. He and the church appeared united in their acceptance of the progressive or pragmatic innovations in church practice sweeping through New England in the early eighteenth century, so long as those practices remained true, in spirit, to the church covenant and articles derived from Scripture. In its adoption of new practices and procedures, the church did not seem adamant to cling to the technical point, but instead conformed to Robinson's thoughts on progressive revelation of religious practice through practical experience, resulting in a church intent on making itself relevant to the surrounding culture by adapting old doctrine to a new age.[106]

Several examples during Thacher's pastorate point to the First Church's efforts to accept new practices while maintaining its doctrinal standards. While Thacher may not have introduced all of the practices, he was silent if he had any opposition. One new practice was diligent record keeping. There are no extant church records prior to 1707, a fact partially attributable to Plymouth Colony's willingness to show less concern for mixture of saint and sinner due to the greater separation in church and state mentioned in the first chapter. Along with record keeping came the mention of member relations; again, they were something Plymouth-related churches probably felt no need for before incorporation.[107] With the increasing conflation of town and church in church decisions after 1691, the need to maintain purity in the congregation likely gave rise to both practices. In 1707, Thacher began recording new admissions, marriages, baptisms, and

[106] Lockridge argued that the decline in Dedham was attributable to remaining "too true to their doctrines," and to "cling[ing] to the technical point[s]" at the expense of consensus and evangelism. While the context he spoke of was the rigidity of the visible church and the Halfway Covenant, the point is still valid: if a church was too rigid it could not bend with change, and was unable to survive a new age; See *New England Town*, 87.

[107] It is difficult to determine when the First Church began the practice, but it appears to have been carried over from Plymouth.

"an account of what pricipall votes were Passed in my time att Middlebro." The first account of a relation given to the church was a "negro woman" by the name of Margaret, the servant of church member, John Alden, in January 1709. Her relation was "found good" and she "was invited to Baptism" and "afterwards came to the Lords Table."[108] Thus record keeping and relations were introduced into the church's practice.

Changes in the duties of church officers were also presented. Plymouth's experience, Palmer's failures, and the lay dominance established early in the First Church's formation undoubtedly contributed to the church's decision to give greater duties to officers elected from among the members. With "inconveniences" arising from the changes or vacancies in the pulpit already, and the insistence on lay influence, the church felt it proper to give more duties to the deacons, who—to this point—lasted longer than pastors and were usually long-time, respected members. The changes were no small matter, however. Even the Plymouth church never thought to alter diaconal duties, despite early troubles from the absence of a minister to serve communion or preach to them.[109] Nevertheless, in 1724, the deacons submitted a list of diaconal duties before the church that expanded their duties beyond what most Separatists would have accepted fifty years beforehand.

1. [W]e apprehend ourselves obliged to serve the table of the Lord, & to take care that nothing be wanting thereto, & to be faithful in the distribution of the offerings of the Chh for that End…
2. We do also apprehend ourselves peculiarly obliged to care for the supply of the table of the minister for the time being, & to relieve him as such as in us lyes of all distracting incumbrances & cares for livelihood to be concern'd not only that our people perform all their Ingagements to him, & to Excite & Stir them up to all necessary Acts of Liberality Charity and Kindness to him as his circumstances do require -- & to be concern'd for his prosperity…[110]

[108] *Middleboro Church Records*, dated 1707; January 23, 1709.
[109] Peterson, "The Plymouth Church," 575-576.
[110] Loose Paper, dated March 8, 1724, Middleboro First Church Loose Papers.

As Bumsted noted in his study, this statement was "considerably more elaborate than the *Cambridge Platform*," and included many duties the *Platform* specifically allocated to the ruling elders.[111] It also far surpassed any duties Robinson felt deacons were responsible for, believing deacons were merely the stewards of the church's physical responsibilities, and were not to take upon themselves pastoral duties such as serving communion or supplying the pulpit in the pastor's absence.[112] Whether Robinson would have agreed or not, it was consistent with his charge to allow God to reveal truth through experience, being sure to test all new practices by the light of Scripture; something the First Church felt it had done, evidenced by its vote to accept the new duties.[113]

A final example of the church's changing practice was in the congregational singing, a change that faced more opposition, but which was similarly resolved without division. Singing the Psalms in meter was, according to the First Church, part of the "ordinary religious worship of God."[114] But change to a new way of singing was creating no little opposition in New England. The old way was usually done by a "tuner" or "liner" setting the tune for the congregation from the *New England Book of Psalms*, and was typically unstandardized by notes and unaccompanied by instruments or choirs, often leaving the loudest person to dictate the melody; the new way, starting with the 1715 publication of *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes in a Plain & Easy Method* by John Tufts, introduced the concept of singing by note, sometimes with the accompaniment of choirs and/or instruments as aids.[115]

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[111] Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: 1960), 213.
[112] Robinson, *Works*, v.2:364.
[113] *Middleboro Church Records*, February 11, 1722; it was voted that the deacons supply the pulpit if the pastor was ill.
[114] *Book of the First Church*, 17; article XV.
[115] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 74-76.

Despite some opposition in the First Church due to preference, the majority vote prevailed without division. The church soon adopted the new style of singing with a vote in 1732, eventually introducing the violin and the choir. Other towns were not as fortunate in avoiding contention. In Taunton the issue caused a division in the church, and in Halifax it caused unrest that needed to be settled by a town council. That Middleboro First accepted the new form of singing without division or appealing to outside help speaks to an adaptability uncommon even among Old Colony churches.[116]

The church's efforts to remain relevant in a changing religious atmosphere reflected its continued desire to attract new members; another way this was achieved was through evangelistic efforts. The First Church had a history of evangelism dating back to the Indian mission churches and Reverend Fuller, and it maintained that characteristic in the selection of its ministers. Thacher was not only fit for the church due to his progressive view of practice, but also because he had a strong desire for new converts and church members. His efforts toward revival resulted in the church's greatest increase in membership, and helped it advance from an average, rural church to a beacon of New Light revivalism in southeastern Massachusetts.

Starting in the 1730s the Great Awakening swept across the colonies. Sporadic at first, it began to gain credibility and momentum with the theology of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, and the evangelism of George Whitefield. Itinerant preachers were often credited with awakening members who had long been spiritually "dead" due to pedantic sermons that focused more on the fine points of theology than the application of the teaching to an individual's soul. The Awakening was characterized by a theology

[116] Weston, *History of the Town*, 454; *Book of the First Church*, 27. For more on the disputes in Taunton and Halifax see Laura A. Becker, "Ministers vs. Laymen: The Singing Controversy in Puritan New England, 1720-1740," *NEQ*, vol. 55 (March, 1982), 79-96.

that placed greater emphasis on experiences of regeneration and the individual response to biblical, evangelistic preaching. It was received with such inexplicable enthusiasm and success that even its leaders were surprised by the response.[117]

Not all were pleased with the revival, however. Several clergymen felt itinerant preachers, like Whitefield, sowed division and dissatisfaction for established ministers and orthodoxy, prophesying a breakdown in the whole New England Way. In some cases they prophesied correctly, as dissatisfaction led churchgoers to separate from the standing order into illegal organizations of new churches that placed greater limitations on clerical authority and granted more power to the laity.[118] Those opposed to the Awakening also noted what they felt were wild excesses of enthusiasm, which inevitably discredited the revival for many.[119] The disagreement in support of the revival eventually split parties into what became known as the evangelistic "New Lights" and the standing party, or "Old Lights."[120]

The result of the Awakening, in Middleboro, was revitalization and strengthening of Separatist commitments (i.e. greater lay participation, church-state relations, clerical limitations, and experiential religion) already present in the First Church rather than abandonment of the standing church/minister for newly formed separate churches, wherein they might need to assert—or reassert—those principles.[121] Thacher became a

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[117] C.C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 3-14; Cooper, *Tenacious of their Liberties*, 201.
[118] Cooper, "Enthusiasts or Democrats?," 266; Also Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 197-201; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 2.
[119] Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, 17.
[120] Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 197-201.
[121] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 124, 144, 176; Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, 34-37; Bumsted noted, "Separates withdrew from the standing churches because of the failure or unwillingness of the establishment to make sufficient reforms in church practice and in its relationship with the state. This

New Light, and he—along with several neighboring ministers[122]—was a major contributor to the revival's success in southeastern Massachusetts. Because of the predispositions of the standing ministry in Plymouth churches the revival in the Old Colony was unique. "The Old Colony's revival," Bumsted observed, "was associated less with outside talent [i.e., Whitefield] than with the activities of pro-revival standing ministers in the area." The revival's acceptance among the Old Colony populace was not started by outside itinerants like many other areas; in fact, most had never heard Whitefield or Edwards preach; instead it began with the efforts of ministers selected by churches with ties to a Separatist past.[123] Thacher and the First Church were already prone to the defining marks of New Light evangelism and Separatist inclinations; they had welcomed new understandings of church practice, and prior to the Awakening had seen 247 new members join the church between 1708 and 1741.[124] The revival, for the First Church, reflected the qualities of Robinson's farewell speech, in that it encouraged the "*vital, experimental* and *practical* Parts of Piety," and judged "in scriptural Light" it was found to be "the genuine Work of the Holy Spirit."[125] The revival's acceptance in the church was not surprising.

Though revival was slow to arrive at first, by December 1741 it had reached the First Church, and was received with great enthusiasm. Thacher wrote to his brother-in-

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insistence upon the sect ideal of a visible church of genuinely converted unconnected with the civil power was a reassertion of the principles of separating Puritanism of more than a century previous." The First Church did, however, remain relatively moderate throughout the Awakening, maintaining historic doctrine, not becoming excessive in its emotions, or separating altogether from the establishment. That said, the church certainly rediscovered some of the Separatist commitments of a century earlier.

[122] Especially Josiah Crocker of Taunton, John Porter of Bridgewater, Andrew Croswell, and Nathaniel Leonard of Plymouth.

[123] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 124-125.

[124] During Thacher's thirty-seven year ministry the church had 430 received into full communion. Of those, 183 were received during the years of the Great Awakening, attesting to a strong evangelistic impulse and inclusivism apart from the revival; *Book of the First Church*, attached table.

[125] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 127. Prince, *An Account*, 29; Thacher to Prince, December 21, 1741, in Prince, *An Account*, 12.

law, Thomas Prince: "Our Frolicks are turned into Prayers and Praises! Drinking-Matches at least wholly suspended! Many Families that were Bethavens, are now Bethels!" He related how his church was "not satisfied with one Sermon," and that he preached to them several times a day. Thacher even noted that Indians, already a staple of the First Church's evangelistic efforts, were included in the revival: "One Thing I must not forget; I think almost all the *Indians* that attend our Assemblies, are deeply wounded; and many I hope savingly and wonderfully wrought upon."[126] Thacher subscribed to New Light sentiments with ready approbation, and on several occasions allowed itinerant preachers to preach to his church without fear that they would sow division or discontent for his ministry.

The Great Awakening in Middleboro brought about several changes to the membership of the First Church; the most obvious being size. Between 1741, when the revival began, and 1744, the year of Thacher's death, the church admitted 183 new members to full communion, doubling the membership.[127] This sudden rise in new prospects had an effect on the church's identity. As we saw in the first chapter, a new member was required to own the church covenant and articles, and to relate their conversion experience through a public profession, before they were admitted to full communion; these relations frequently recalled covenant themes and expressed the Calvinist doctrines of the articles.[128] Thacher pointed out in his defense of the revival, "the doctrines of grace [Calvinism] shining into the understanding, are defended and

[126] Thacher to Prince, May 25, 1741; Thacher to Prince, December 11, 1741, in Prince, *An Account*, 7-9.
[127] *Book of the First Church*, 89-94; 27.
[128] The themes will be seen later in this chapter. For the purpose here, it is important to understand the impact a large number of new congregants could have on the church's insistence that the covenant and articles of faith remain lucid and accessible.

earnestly contended for, from inward experience."[129] Each testimony, then, amounted to a sermonette and defense that laid out again, before the entire congregation, the necessity of the gospel, the importance of knowing right doctrine, and the exhortation to remain faithful to the covenant and articles. With so many read, there is little doubt it solidified corporate identity and accepted doctrine.

The surge in new membership also shifted the age demographic of the First Church. Of those who joined the church between 1741 and 1745, 96 were between ages 11 and 31, and the average age of a First Church member dropped from 35 before the revival to 27 during it.[130] The Awakening had the effect of giving the young, restless generation in New England an outlet for their enthusiasm. In the First Church it meant that those who now made up a large portion of the membership owned no property, had few responsibilities, and found more enfranchisement in the church than the state. This is an important element to consider in the coming years, when the church enthusiastically defended its rights against the civil magistrate.

The sudden change in membership also created a church adamant about its beliefs regarding conversion, the progressive nature of truth, and its doctrine—it also provided the church a renewed vitality, with members that could maintain those beliefs well into a new era. Its progressive spirit enabled the church to accommodate new practices and beliefs to the extent that they did not conflict with the founding principles of its church covenant and articles. Passionate sermons imploring members to be born again followed by emotional conversion experiences, sometimes accompanied by outward manifestations, were now the norm. The doctrine applied to the experiences, as

[129] Henry White, *The Early History of New England Illustrated by Numerous Interesting Incidents* (Concord, NH: I.S. Boyd and E.W. Buswell, 1843), 396.
[130] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 131, fn. 82.

expressed in the relations, followed Calvinistic understandings of conversion, strengthening the relevance of the articles of faith. The desire of new prospects to covenant with the church promoted communalism and reestablished the church covenant as an essential document to the church's identity. And the principles of Congregational autonomy and lay participation were given new life by associating with a New Light movement that emphasized those traits over established religion and clerical authority.

When Thacher died in 1744, the church sought a pastor that sympathized with the character of the church born out of both its Separatist identity and, more recently, the Awakening. The majority of church members felt they had found their man in Sylvanus Conant—and they fought to retain him.[131]

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Sylvanus Conant of Bridgewater, another Harvard Graduate (1740), was eventually selected by the church as Thacher's replacement in June 1744, but not without difficulty. Following Thacher's funeral, the surrounding ministers in attendance agreed to supply the pulpit in turns while the church settled a new minister. Thacher's son, Peter, was the favored choice, but he did not express interest. The prolonged search resulted in a division between a pro-revival majority of the church and anti-revival members of the precinct, along with a few influential members of the church. If the themes of the first chapter are recalled, then the tension between church and town should not be understood to have originated with the Awakening but, instead, with the prevailing discomfort of the magistrate being involved in the church's decision. The Awakening inflamed the issue, however, especially because it renewed the church's belief in further

[131] Ibid., 156-157.

separation of church and state—especially on matters of established religion and compulsory taxation.[132]

The first issue to divide Middleboro was the declaration of a public fast, to which ministers were invited to aid in the settlement of a pastor. The officers of the precinct insisted on choosing half of the ministers invited, or they would not participate. The nearby minister of Halifax, John Cotton, commented on the ensuing dispute: "At the Fast when the Ministers were apply'd to for Advice, the Church and [precinct] Committee appear'd greatly divided in their Sentiments about supplying the Pulpit; the One insisted on it as their Right, and the other as their's."[133] It was the practice of the precinct committee to select the pastor that would minister to the community, and they had the taxpayers' money to compensate the minister. The church, however, became increasingly aware of the dangers in having the precinct reject or accept ministers that they felt were not worthy of the First Church's pulpit. Although the church had over one hundred male members, and only sixteen supported the right of the precinct to select a minister, the church's ability to influence the situation politically was hindered by the recent formation of a new precinct in 1743, disqualifying several members from voting in the precinct of the church.[134]

The First Church, therefore, claimed the right to move forward on religious grounds. In 1744 the church voted to hear Solomon Reed and Sylvanus Conant on probation; both were pro-revival. When Reed refused, Conant became the favored

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[132] The words *town* and *precinct* are used interchangeably here. The emphasis here is on the church-state beliefs of the church, not the particular definitions of *civil magistrate, state, town*, or *precinct*.
[133] John Cotton, *Seasonable Warning to these Churches. A Narrative of the Transaction at Middleboro…in Settling a Minister in the Room of the Rev. Peter Thacher Deceased…* (Boston: 1746), v; see Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 156-164.
[134] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 157; Weston, *History of the Town*, 449; Cotton, *Seasonable Warning*, 16. Cotton guessed there were 16 to 17 voting members who opposed the majority of roughly 80 to 90 (there were over 100 male members at the time).

candidate.[135] He agreed to preach to the church on September 9, 1744, but by the time he arrived, the precinct committee had managed to find someone of its choosing. The choice was Thomas Weld, an Old Light and a person with a questionable past.[136] Neither attribute sat well with the church majority; the former because of its revivalist leanings; the latter because many members still recalled the failures of Thomas Palmer. The town's action enraged the Conant party who then forced their way into the meetinghouse where Weld had already started preaching, and disrupted the service. Weld ended up preaching the morning service, and Conant the evening, but the event strengthened the animosity growing on each side. Each party called a council in an effort to settle the matter, with the only result being the reinforcement of their respective positions.[137]

New Light versus Old Light was certainly an issue throughout the proceedings. Those favoring Weld attributed the disruptive and immoral behavior of the church members to "the fatal Extravagancies of the Times" by which the town had been "over-run."[138] One member of the precinct committee was so adamantly opposed to the Awakening, he declared, "that he had rather have a Papist settled among them, than a New Light."[139] Hyperbolic as that may have been, the Old Lights were convinced of a need to restrain Awakening sentiments. But most of the church members were not opposed to the Awakening, and although they did not control the keys to the meetinghouse or the means of parish funds for the minister, they maintained the power of popular opinion: that it was the church's right to elect a minister under whose preaching

[135] *Middleboro Church Records*, July 17, 1744.
[136] He had previously been accused of illicit sexual relations; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 157.
[137] Sibley and Shipton, *Biographical Sketches*, v.10:472; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 157-158.
[138] Ebenezer Morton, *More last Word to these Churches: In Answer To a Pamphlet published by the Rev. Mr. John Cotton of Hallifax…* (Boston: 1746), 5.
[139] Cotton, *Seasonable Warning*, 23.

they would sit. It is unsurprising that those who made up the Old Light faction belonged to the precinct committee, while the majority of those who made up the New Light faction were of the church. With fears that New Light convictions drove people to separation, lawlessness, and extravagance the precinct committee was all the more intent to ward off those sentiments, especially as they grew in the First Church. The "mob" action during Weld's sermon only confirmed their apprehensions.[140]

The dispute in Middleboro was not merely a result of the revival—despite the use of "Old Light" and "New Light" as pejorative terms—but of longstanding tensions surrounding the town's involvement in the church, dating back to the merger of the Bay and Plymouth colonies. The First Church always felt it was the congregation's right to select the minister—as practiced by its Separatist precursors, and protected under the *Cambridge Platform*—and that the would-be minister must first be accepted as a full member before becoming pastor, something Weld's questionable past precluded.[141] In his defense of the church majority, John Cotton reminded the churches of the *Platform*'s words concerning the selection of officers, and charged the precinct of "assuming the Power of providing a Candidate for the Church;" a power the church felt did not belong to the magistrate, especially when many were not members of the visible church.[142] The most the precinct could muster in defense of its position was that it was only fair it have a

[140] One of the voices against Conant (and Reed) was Ebenezer Morton, a member of the church minority, who wrote a polemical response to Cotton, entitled *More Seasonable Warnings*. In his recounting of the events he leans heavily on the divisions, enthusiasm, and disorderliness brought by Conant and Reed. The actions of the church majority during Weld's sermon, under Conant's leadership, only seemed to add legitimacy to his argument; see pp. 11-14 of Morton's response.

[141] Cotton mentions the uncommon manner by which Weld was selected: "without Dismission from any Church" and not "being received particularly as a Member" in the First Church. Given the First Church's insistence on equality, they made it a practice to make a minister a full member first, then elevate him to pastor, in keeping with the tradition of selection by the brethren (p. 35); Cotton, *Seasonable Warning*, 30; *Book of the First Church*, 32.

[142] Cotton, *Seasonable Warnings*, 9, 19; *Halifax Church Records*, January 29, 1745.

say in the decision, because the whole precinct would support the pastor financially through taxation—and therein laid the problem. For several churches in the region, reawakened to the desire for congregational autonomy and the purity of the church, this mixture of precinct and church stood as a warning against encroachment on their ecclesiastical rights.[143] The First Church fought for its ecclesiastical rights not only because it desired a minister with New Light leanings, but because to not would open the door for its identity to be dictated by disinterested parties.

The church majority attempted to reconcile and convince the precinct that it had overstepped its bounds, but to no avail. In February 1745, a council of neighboring ministers, called by the majority, requested that objections against Conant be heard from the opposition. When none of the precinct's objections were found to be of any weight, the council voted that Conant be ordained and that the church majority had sufficient reason to leave the old meetinghouse and form their own. Conant was ordained on March 27, 1745. Afterward, he and his followers began meeting in the house of Mrs. Thacher, the wife of the late Reverend Thacher, and a supporter of Conant. They worshipped there until the erection of a new meetinghouse later that year.[144]

The dispute went on in the courts for some time after the split, while Weld and Conant preached to their respective congregations. During the ensuing years the members under Conant were required to pay taxes for the support of Weld's ministry,

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[143] Isaac Backus, *A History of New England: With particular reference to the denomination of Christians called Baptists*, ed. David Weston (Newton, MA: Backus Historical Society, 1871; 2 volumes), v.2:62; It is little surprise that Isaac Backus's Baptist church in Middleboro (meeting as early as 1748) found a foothold and support following this incident and the Awakening. A second Baptist church was founded in Middleboro in 1758, and a third in 1761. Separatism, in all its forms, was not an unknown persuasion in Middleboro—rejection of infant baptism seemed to be all that was left to make a Middleboro Congregationalist into a Baptist; see Barber, *Historical Collections*, 514 and Backus, *A History of New England*, v.2:134.

[144] *Halifax Church Records*, March 17, 1745; the town also controlled the meetinghouse, which essentially forced the dissenting, majority party out of the church to form a new one; *Book of the First Church*, 37.

causing them to file a petition to the General Court in 1748 for relief. The Court, in response, passed a law changing the town from a territorial parish to a poll parish, by which every member of the society had liberty to choose the Old Lights or New Lights by filing their name with the society of which they desired to become a member.[145]

The Court's decision on the matter irrevocably altered the way churches were composed in Middleboro and, perhaps inadvertently, paved the way for the ultimate separation of church and state, along with the later undoing of compulsory taxation for ministers. The poll parish allowed for voluntary adherence to a church based on common opinion rather than local habitation, and weakened the town's say in matters of the church.[146] Although the practice was new to Massachusetts it was an idea fit for the earliest Separatists, and therefore all the more welcomed by the First Church. The Court's decision helped protect the identity of the First Church, which was now dictated by conscience alone, without threat of civil interference.

The church remained split until 1750, formally until 1756. Weld gradually fell out of favor with those who initially backed him; probably due to his ongoing battle to ward off accusations of sexual immorality. Moreover, with the town now a poll parish, where individuals could choose the minister to support by taxation, Weld also lost most of his financial support. In 1749 the Old Light members dismissed him, and decided to join under Conant who was growing in popularity, even among those who once opposed him, including the town's most influential citizen, Peter Oliver.[147]

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[145] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 162-163; Weston, *History of the Town*, 448

[146] Samuel S. Green, *Gleanings from the Sources of the History of the Second Parish, Worcester, Massachusetts* (Worcester, MA: Charles Hamilton, 1883), 4; not much has been written on poll parishes, but the description that they were "voluntary" societies based on opinion comes from Green's history of Worcester, a later poll parish.

[147] Worthley, *Inventory of Records*, 372; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 160; Oliver was a judge and iron mill owner. He was a well-respected individual in the community, but losing popularity during the

Conant's selection by the church, and the popularity he enjoyed in later years, was understandable given the heritage of the First Church. Conant's selection displayed at least three commonalities in the First Church's choice of pastors. The first was Conant's beliefs regarding conversion experiences that conformed to the manner of conversion which had brought so many members in during the Awakening. The second was his conciliatory and tolerant approach toward religious dissenters and minority groups, all while maintaining the church's longstanding doctrinal convictions. Last was his position on church-state relations, which were displayed in the events already mentioned, but also in the years to follow. These qualities made Conant one of the most influential pastors in the church's history.

Characterized by a spirit of evangelism and "experiential Christianity," Conant was much like Thacher and Fuller. Much of his life is unknown prior to his admission to Harvard; but it is interesting to note that his great-great-grandfather, Roger Conant, was a man who traveled from Plymouth and established Salem, a Bay Colony town influenced heavily by Plymouth Separatism. At Harvard, Sylvanus was known for his intellect and evangelistic attitudes, and attracted the attention of several New Light ministers. He quickly sympathized with the First Church in its quarrel with the precinct committee, and felt it his duty to take the side of the majority in order to bring it to a close.[148] While never claiming the New Light moniker, he never hesitated to make his loyalties known; it was during his pastorate that Whitefield was invited to the church; he also signed the New Light *Testimony* in 1775 and he subscribed to Edwards's *Life of Brainerd*.[149]

Revolution, when he became a Loyalist; see Robert M. Calhoon, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), 234ff, for a character sketch.

[148] Cotton, *Seasonable Warnings*, 25.

[149] Sibley and Shipton, *Biographical Sketches*, v.10:474.

Throughout his tenure, Conant's sermons exhibited the evangelistic qualities sought for by the church majority. Sounding like Edwards in one,[150] Conant warned his followers of neglecting "so great a salvation," and that if they were not within the "Limits of this Salvation" their case was "infinitely dangerous," for they stood "on the brink of hell." He reminded them of their depravity, and that they were as full of guilt and filthiness as a "serpent with poison." He then pleaded that they come to Jesus "& beg for this free gift," to "reverence obey & Love him," and to give him their hearts "in your early days."[151] The language of Conant's sermons was passionate, and it was aimed at stirring the emotions of his hearers: warnings of hellfire were frequent, and persuasive calls to come to Christ were a necessary component.

Conant, furthermore, possessed an ability to reconcile the old with the new, displaying the adaptability argued in this paper to have been so crucial in the First Church's continuity. He showed this by allowing for diversity in opinion so long as Christ was upheld as lord. When the Baptist, Isaac Backus, came to Middleboro in 1747, Conant quickly befriended him, and though the two disagreed doctrinally, they showed a remarkable acceptance of one another and their respective church members. Backus frequently mentioned the great things the First Church had done, and upon Conant's death he commented, "he ministered there to good purpose."[152] Conant likewise had a way of calming Old Light fears that revival sentiments necessarily led to enthusiasm and lawlessness, as he frequently preached on the existence of false outward signs of "sorrow" or "conviction," and that true conversion was found in a sincere need for Christ,

[150] I have in mind here his popular sermon, *Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God*, in which he warned his listeners of the danger in neglecting God's salvation, and the certain damnation that awaited them.
[151] Sylvanus Conant sermon, Hebrews 2:3, undated.
[152] Backus, *A History of New England*, v.2:62.

displayed outwardly by obeying his law and leaving "their former practice of sinning." In speaking to all sides, he implored them to lay aside "party Spirit" and "party Zeal," and to follow the example of Christ in love and charity; both sides, he felt, had legitimate concerns and valid points, but that tolerance for one another, in the name of Christ, was of utmost importance.[153]

Conant was successful in his endeavor to unite opinions. The *Book of the First Church* comments that he had "great success in conciliating and uniting the church and people."[154] His success as a pastor and conciliator was well-known, and was further confirmed by his selection, in 1770, as one of two pastors to assist a divided church in Nova Scotia, "hoping he [Conant] may…be instrumental of uniting & reconciling them one to another, that so a Foundation may be laid for the advancement of their Spiritual Interest."[155] This quality in Conant's character further enabled the First Church to remain relevant, inclusive, successful in bringing in new members, and flexible enough to survive an increasingly pluralistic society without sacrificing its doctrinal convictions.[156]

Conant's inclusive and tolerant nature was displayed by more than just uniting religious parties under the banner of Christ, but also in the equality he ascribed to all human beings in the eyes of God. Judging by the First Church's history of Indian missions and the inclusion of blacks, Conant comported with the church's earliest interests. In 1763, Conant delivered a sermon at Taunton "Upon the Day of the Execution of Bristol" a sixteen year-old "Negro Boy" who was convicted of murder; in it he reminded the teenager:

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[153] Conant sermons, Malachi 3:1, dated December 14, 1744 and Leviticus 26:23-24, dated between 1746 and 1748.
[154] *Book of the First Church*, 10, 38.
[155] Neighboring ministers to Conant, Loose Paper dated March 7, 1770.
[156] Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 160; BFCM, 37-38.

> You are not to imagine, that you are treated with any greater Severity meerly because you are a black Boy…for you are not; If any of us had done such a horrid Thing as you have, we should be treated as you are; Your being of a different Colour from us, makes no Odds in this Matter. You have not only an immortal Soul as we have, but you are of the same Kind of Flesh and Blood that we are; for God hath made of one Blood, all Nations of Men.[157]

Conant even went to great lengths to evangelize his own servant, Cuffy Wright, who made a noteworthy relation of his conversion experiences, written in his own hand, and was "received to full communion" by the church.[158] Conant practiced what he preached, when he said, "kings and subjects, Masters and servants, have equal liberty and freeness to the Throne of Grace."[159] The emphasis of the First Church, under Conant's leadership, on evangelism and inclusion of people no matter their station in life, race, or prior religious beliefs is further evidenced by the reception of most people who made a relation of faith to full communion; as long as Christ was confessed by a relation of conversion, their life was free from open sin, and the covenant and articles were understood, there was no dispute about their inclusion.[160]

The final characteristic Conant possessed which increased his popularity among the majority was his patriotic support of colonial wars. The French and Indian War, beginning in 1754, marked a contest between French and British forces over colonial lands in America. Fears of French and Roman Catholic tyranny were widespread in the colonies, and Conant was seen as one who steadfastly promoted liberty and true doctrine.

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[157] Sylvanus Conant, *The Blood of Abel and the Blood of Jesus considered and improved, in a Sermon delivered at Taunton…Upon the Day of Execution of Bristol…for the Murder of Miss Elizabeth McKinstry* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1764), 20-21; it should be noted that later in the sermon Conant expresses what would today be considered racist opinions (pp. 34-35 of the sermon). However, Conant did believe all people were equal in the eyes of God, even if some were *more* prone to a "barbarous Disposition" due to their place of origin: "a land of darkness."

[158] Relation of Cuffy Wright, dated March, 1773; *Middleboro Church Records*, March 28. 1773; for more on Cuffy's relation see James Cooper, "Cuffee's 'Relation.': A Faithful Slave Speaks Through the Project for the Preservation of Congregational Church Records," *NEQ* (June, 2013), 293-310.

[159] Sylvanus Conant sermon, dated August 1775

[160] It is rare to find a relation that does not correspond with the membership list in the church records during this time. The only relation during this time period that does not correspond to the church's records is that of Priscilla Cushman, who gave a relation in 1763. Why she does not appear is not clear.

"The Design of our Enemies," he warned, "is to deprive us of our Religion, Liberty, and Lives." Any "pious" or "religious" person, he continued, should therefore take part in defending the cause of God, or else lose their "Lives, or Liberty."[161] When the war ended in British victory in 1763, and taxes began to be placed on the colonists in 1765 to pay off war debts, Conant was again a leader in denouncing such arbitrary actions by an overreaching government. "With burning words," remarked Thomas Weston, "he fearlessly advised resistance…to the odious Stamp Act, the unjust tax upon tea, [and] the bloody massacre." Conant even went out with a regiment of the Old Colony, "that he might stay up the hands and support the feeble knees of those of this church and this town who were standing and fighting upon the battlefields of the Revolution."[162] This zeal for colonial causes undoubtedly earned him popularity and support among the First Church and Middleboro town members.

His patriotic support of wars against French or British tyranny was also consistent with the church-state views he supported at the start of his pastorate. The beginning and end of Conant's ministry are interesting in their similarities. His coming to the church was marked by a dispute over representation between the church and town;[163] and by the end of his ministry the Declaration of Independence had been signed, something Conant voiced support for in *An Anniversary Sermon*, with words that could as easily apply to his support of Revolution as to his support of the First Church during its dispute with the precinct committee:

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[161] Sylvanus Conant, *The Art of War, the Gift of God, A Discourse Delivered at Middleborough before three Military Companies, April 6, 1759…for the Canada-Expedition* (Boston: 1759), 7, 9.
[162] Thomas Weston in *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, 72.
[163] Backus, in his description of Middleboro First Church's division placed the narrative within the context of "the limits of civil government;" these arguments were particularly powerful as the colonies approached independence and revolution, a result that could be linked to Separatist ideas of separating church and state mentioned in Chapter I, pp. 23-24; see Backus, *A History of New England*, v.2:60-62.

> …our adversaries began to conceive mischief against us—to impose heavy burdens upon us, and to rob us of our stipulated rights; and because we declined submission to their arbitrary will in all cases, they attempted, and are still attempting to rob us of our natural rights too. We only prayed for…the free enjoyment of the privileges included in our natural and stipulated rights, but could not have them.[164]

Conant's sermons in support of the Revolution, and the participation in the war by the church's members, displayed the ever-increasing approval of religious liberty and limited government, a point shown now—in the First Church at least—to be in some measure attributable to its history of Separatist church-state relations and the progressive understanding of truth.[165]

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At this point an objection could be raised: if the church was marked by greater tolerance of religious belief and progressive adaptability in practice, then how did it maintain doctrinal continuity and communalism? As shown in the first chapter, the autonomy and flexibility of the First Church granted by its political context and religious principles were tempered by the importance placed on the church covenant and articles as faithful summaries of God's word. Despite alterations in the particular application of God's word to church practice, the doctrines of the covenant and articles were unalterable, because to alter those meant abandoning principles "founded on" the infallible "Holy Scriptures."[166] The distinction was certainly tenuous, and for many churches it did not hold up against subtle aberrations in long-held doctrine, but the First Church achieved a balance in changing the method without changing the message.

The importance of the church covenant and articles in upholding communal values and doctrinal purity was maintained, primarily, by two practices: corporate

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[164] Sylvanus Conant, *An Anniversary Sermon Preached at Plymouth, December 23, 1776* (Boston: Thomas & John Fleet, 1777), 27.
[165] According to Weston: "In 1777 there were on hundred and seven men from Middleboro in the continental army for three years or during the war…At one time there were over sixty-four from the First church absent in active service;" Weston, *History of the Town*, 139; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, ch. 8.
[166] *Middleboro Church Records*, June, 1738.

renewals and individual relations. The First Church continued to practice both throughout the eighteenth century, and both were instrumental in re-declaring and reconfirming the principles of the covenant and articles to each successive generation—thereby creating generational bonds and giving weight to the church's convictions. The practices also gave abiding relevance to the documents as people applied them to current circumstances.

Although neither practice was unique to the First Church, both remained popular due to the Separatist principles they confirmed, namely, doctrinal purity based on "historic faith" and an educated laity. Because the church covenant and articles were seen as faithful summaries of Scripture, they were used as the measure of faithfulness both corporately and individually. Historic faith—or owning the covenant and articles—and the absence of open sin were part of what characterized a full member and a true church. The covenant and articles, then, provided the standard to uphold and the doctrines to own in order to prove—and maintain—status as a visible saint or a faithful church. Both documents were used as a guide for the church's assessment of itself in relation to God and for formulating individual members' relations to the church. The result was a laity thoroughly and frequently educated in its doctrines because they first had to express them with clarity in order to join, then revisit them throughout their life with the church in covenant renewals.

During the pastorates of Thacher and Conant, the church performed several renewals. The reasons for initiating them varied; some were called on account of public sins in the church or colony, others for natural disasters, but usually on account of negative events understood as the judgment of God for breaking covenant promises. In

1713, it was due to "heavy judgments impending over our nation and country." In 1724, a renewal was called on account of "much division since we have been A gathered Chh." The 1729 renewal was due to "a sore sickness," possibly smallpox, and was accompanied by several sermons and the admittance of new members.[167] The renewal of 1738 was for the church's "want of love," and to determine whether they were in "suitable frames to communicate at the Lord's table together." Renewals in 1727, 1728 and 1773 were also called for, the first for an earthquake and the other two for droughts.[168] Many other renewals are implied by days of fasting and thanksgiving, even though not explicitly mentioned in the records.

Renewals served two purposes for current members: to recall the founding principles of the church and to encourage corporate recommitment to those principles by examination and abandoning any known sin. Both the renewal of 1713 and 1729 began with the reading of the covenant and articles of faith, to which the members testified their consent by standing up.[169] Once read and affirmed, the church examined where they had not upheld the covenant faithfully. The most oft-repeated failures were in their covenant promises to watch "over the children of the covenant growing up" with them, to walk together "in holy union," and to subject themselves "unto the ministerial exercise of the power of Christ in the dispensation of the word." The renewal of 1729 lamented the "neglect of Family Prayer and Family instruction" and "Contempt of the Gospel." The 1713 renewal expressed the "great evil" it would be "If we should fail of a patient, peaceable, forgiving tempter, towards our neighbors, or if we should not with

[167] *Middleboro Church Records,* April 3, 1713; May 1, 1724; April 8, 1729.
[168] Ibid., July 1, 1728; June 30, 1773; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 126; *Book of the First Church*, 19-20; 24
[169] *Middleboro Church Records,* April 8, 1729

meekness…smother all causes of contention."[170] This was followed by a time of fasting and prayer for forgiveness, which could last hours or days.

Although common practice in New England churches in the 1700s, the First Church carried out the practice of covenant renewal with some distinctiveness. In almost every renewal there was an emphasis on the laity's role in calling for the renewal, challenging the notion of some historians that renewals were merely the actions of the clergy or magistrate in order to maintain morality in the face of failing communalism.[171] While the church called for renewals for those purposes, it was the church members who often saw the need for renewal, not the pastor. Unlike the Plymouth church records, which typically began with the pastor's actions in commencing a renewal,[172] the First Church's records ascribed the initiation of the renewal to "the inhabitants" or the "members of the First Church." The reason for the 1738 renewal concerned the members' belief that they were not in suitable frames to receive the sacrament, and directed the concern to Thacher, who then called for the renewal.

> We, the subscribers, members of the First Church…enquire and resolve to our Rev. Pastor and one another, whether we are in suitable frames to communicate at the Lord's table together, and whether we advise it proper for our Rev. Pastor to administer to us under the general and visible decay of brotherly love among us.

The members noticed the spiritual decay, and they informed the pastor of their desire to renew the "covenant we have expressly obliged ourselves to," calling on him to "lead us thither" in their covenant renewal.[173]

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[170] *Book of the First Church*, 21.
[171] The most notable was Miller, in *From Colony to Province*, pp. 105-118.
[172] See *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:148, 168-169; The 1676 renewal was called for by the General Court, and the meeting in the Plymouth church was called for by the Elders and Pastor; the 1692 renewal was recommended by surrounding ministers and the pastor.
[173] *Book of the First Church*, 24-25.

Another distinction, closely connected to the first, was the frequency with which the First Church performed renewals. The church performed them with a regularity that attests to an internal desire among the members to hear the principles of the church recounted and make reapplication to them with solemn oaths. During the pastorates of Thacher and Conant at least seven renewals were recorded: 1713, 1724, 1727, 1728, 1729, 1738, 1773; again, this is in stark contrast to the recorded renewals of the Plymouth church in 1676, 1692, and not again until 1795.[174] These distinctions in the First Church's desire to maintain covenant adherence must be considered important to the continuance of the church's communalism.

Rituals that strengthened the centrality of the church covenant were not only relegated to formal renewals, however, they were also expressed repeatedly in days laid aside to hear the public relations of prospective members. The church covenant and the individual's covenant with God were inextricably linked, because to desire fellowship with Christ was to desire fellowship with his body, the church. The covenant and articles were, essentially, *corporate relations* of the promises and doctrines that the individual made with God. It is not surprising, then, that they supplied the formula and standard for both corporate renewals and individual relations.

The church covenant and articles informed the prospective member's conversion morphology and provided the ideal by which the current members tested a person's relation. The *Book of the First Church* stated, "The Covenant and Articles adopted when the church was gathered were printed…for the use of the church, and for the information of those who proposed to become members." It further explained that the church's confession (articles) were for "those who propose to join a church, and to the church also,

[174] *Plymouth Church Records*, v.1:148, 168-169.

in order that none may join but as such as are agreed in the fundamental doctrines."[175] It should be remembered from the first chapter that the Separatists emphasized "historic faith" as a requirement for church membership. Though the First Church adopted the practice of hearing conversion relations, and even though the Great Awakening emphasized testimonies of regeneration, a competency in the doctrines of the church was still, in large part, considered a vital component of determining visible sainthood. A relation of a work of grace in a person's life was rarely questioned; but it was imperative that those being admitted to the church upheld the doctrines of the church as expressed in their articles and covenant, and that their life was free from scandalous sin.[176]

There are at least three themes from the church covenant that new members attempted to follow when creating their relation. First, there was an acknowledgement of the inability to fulfill the requirements of God's perfect standard. Next, there was recognition of God's sovereign grace in changing their dependence to Christ alone. Last, there was a pleading for forgiveness of any offenses and a request to join the church and submit to its watch. The doctrines of the articles were ubiquitous throughout the relations, and it is uncommon to find a relation that did not allude to each of the nineteen articles, in an attempt to show doctrinal competency as it related to their individual experience. If the current members hoped to maintain covenant faithfulness for future generation, it was imperative they only allow members in who showed competency in the church's confessional doctrines and covenant convictions.[177]

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[175] The *Book of the First Church*, 47-48.
[176] See pp. 23-27 and 51-52 of this paper.
[177] C.C. Goen, in *Revivalism and Separatism*, pp. 13-14, observed similar themes of relations during and after the Great Awakening.

The first theme of all relations was the admission of their inherent sinfulness, followed by a desire for salvation, but unable to do so in their own strength. Elkanah Shaw, in giving his relation, remarked that he was "a Sinfull Creature," especially with regard to the "sin of fornication (of wch, I confess before God & men that I was guilty)."[178] Others, like Thomas Cole, simply gave the declaration that they were "a great sinner." However it was worded, those hearing the relation expected, as a required element of a relation, the recognition of unworthiness from the prospective member. To not confess sin before the church—especially known sins—was sure to call into question the legitimacy of their visible sainthood.[179]

This realization of sinfulness caused many, like Joanna Redding, to be "brought to despair of helping" themselves, and worthy of "nothing but damnation." "Fear" kept back Ichabod Morton from presenting himself and his children "in an everlasting covenant" with God. Mary Savery recognized that she did not have the power within herself to close with Christ due to a "hard heart." Elkanah Shaw admitted that he had "tried to make myself better but could not," and recognized a need for God's grace.[180] These statements, again, were added purposefully, for they too were derived from the verbiage of the church covenant.

These themes, of sinfulness and the inability to please God apart from his helping grace, run throughout the church's covenant and articles. Article five of the church explained that all men had fallen with Adam, "and so were brought into a state of sin and misery, losing communion with God, and falling under his wrath and curse." The only

[178] Relation of Elkanah Shaw, August 9, 1755. Shaw's parenthetical statement displays a concern to make sure it was open and understood that he had confessed his sin, because it was one of the requirements for full membership in the visible church.
[179] Relation of Thomas Cole, 1747.
[180] Relations of Joanna Redding, August 4, 1750; Ichabod Morton, April, 1760; Mary Savery, 1750.

remedy for their sinful state was the "free grace" of God unto sinners, given to them apart from "any thing wrought in them or done by them." The drafters of the church covenant then took those doctrinal principles and applied them to the *corporate relation* made unto God and each other in the church covenant: "we do personally present ourselves this day in the holy presence of God…humbling ourselves before the Lord for all our sins, and the sins of ours, earnestly praying for pardoning mercy…under a deep sense of our own weakness and unworthiness." Because of their unworthiness, the framers of the covenant repeatedly appealed to "the help of His grace" and "as the Lord shall help us…according to the measure of grace received."[181]

The second broad theme of the relations, derived from the church covenant and articles, was the shift from a hopeless struggle to a trust in Jesus alone as their hope, brought about *solely* by God's electing favor. This was conveyed in a number of ways, depending on personal experience, and with varying degrees of assurance, but the statement—and the understanding of God's predestining grace—needed to be present. Several members, including Deborah Cushman, Lemuel Thomas, and Phebe Leach, related how a God-sent earthquake had awakened them from their spiritual slumber. Cushman went on to relate that the earthquake drove her to a consideration of God's election and her desperate need for Christ.[182] Others, like Mary Savery, related that she was providentially brought to hear a sermon by Peter Thacher, and that she was "maid willing" to "take the Lord jesus Christ to be [her] only mediatore & Redeemer."[183]

[181] *Book of the First Church*, 15-19
[182] Relations of Deborah Cushman, Jun 28, 1760, Lemuel Thomas, 1763, and Phebe Leach, July 20, 1765; Ichabod Billington, March 9, 1762, mentions a thunderclap that awoke him to his need for Christ.
[183] Relation of Mary Savery, 1750.

Perhaps the greatest expression of the second theme is found in the relation of Cuffy Wright, the servant of Sylvanus Conant. Cuffy recognized the sovereign election of God, stating, "he hath please in [h]is great mercy to bring me out of a Land of Dearkness unto the Land of glorious gospel Light...according to [h]is will." He went on to describe his blindness due to sin, but "sance I com to understand the things of god and Christ my Heart all ways desir spirit[ual] things," and despite being "unwor[thy] the lest of all gods marcys" he now had "such thought of Christ in my mind as sumtimes falt very plesant." Cuffy recognized that he did not merit or deserve the mercy of God in salvation, but that he now, by grace, had high thoughts of Christ, and trusted in Him for deliverance. He finished his relation with the words: "I depend not to Any of my owne strength of the service which I do promise, but depend Entirly in Christ."[184]

The church covenant and articles provided the necessary understanding of God's sovereign grace and Christ's sufficiency to save. The point that Christ must be acknowledged may seem obvious, but the language of owning Christ was framed in a way consistent with the Calvinist doctrines of the church's documents—leaving no room for heterodox expressions of Christ's work or person. Article six explained, "that God…chose and ordained the Lord Jesus…to be the one and only mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King." Article nine declared, "that the elect of God are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to their souls by his word and Spirit." Those giving a relation followed the example of the church covenant by "earnestly praying for pardoning mercy and reconciliation with God through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." Then promising to "give up ourselves

[184] Relation of Cuffy Wright, March, 1773

and our offspring unto…Jesus Christ, our only Saviour, our Prophet, Priest, and King; the only mediator of the covenant of grace."[185]

The final element of all relations followed from obedience to Christ, and was a statement of the applicant's desire to fully join the church, submitting themselves to its watch, discipline, sacraments, and the administration of the Word of God. This desire was expressed in the final words of *every* relation. In her statement to the church, Elizabeth Shaw related her "desire" and "duty…to join with the Lords Covenant people that with them I may enjoy his special [ordinances]." The relation of Betty Wood was even more explicit, stating, "it is my Duty to make public confession of Christ, I desire to do it; & to join in full Communion with this Chh…& with them to enjoy the Privelege of Special Ordinances…I ask the prayers of this Chh, that I may not be deceived with a false hope; & that I may…behave at all times as becomes a true Disciple & follower of Jesus Christ." Prospective members needed to convey an understanding, with article fourteen, that "unto [the] church Christ hath given the ministry, grace and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of saints to the end of the world." Without this understanding, the binding character of the church covenant would be compromised, but because it remained an expected element of all relations the previous generation expected the next to proclaim with understanding the need for communal membership.[186]

The philosophy behind the church covenant was to "enter into a holy covenant with God and one with another," and to "give up ourselves, one unto another…promising and engaging to cleave and walk together in holy union." This included "watching one over another," partaking in the sacraments, and submitting to the "due application of the

[185] *Book of the First Church*, 18-19.
[186] Relations of Elizabeth Shaw, Sep 2, 1770; Elizabeth "Betty" Wood, October 1776; *Book of the First Church*, 17.

holy discipline, with love, care and faithfulness." Vital to the continuity of the church was the expression of being in covenant with one another, to submit to the authority of the church, and to submit themselves to censures, excommunications, or corrections for the strengthening of their faith. A true relation of personal faith, and one acceptable to the current members of the church, included an emphasis on the importance of covenanting together.

Before concluding this chapter, a final word is needed about how these rituals, especially relations, helped to maintain the educated laity derived from the church's Separatism. Given the preferences for lay participation and education spoken of in the first chapter, it is little wonder that two practices emphasizing covenant integrity, doctrinal recollection, and self-examination would contribute to the continuance of those preferences. Both practices not only reinforced doctrinal literacy, but also displayed the measure of the members' doctrinal acumen and desire for the covenant communalism of their church's founders.

There are two further aspects of the relations that display the knowledge of the laity, and the extent to which the church ensured competency among all of its members, no matter the race, gender, or age.

The first is that they are, for the most part, written in the hand of those who made them. There is no sign that the pastor dictated these relations; the crudeness of Cuffy's relation demonstrates some measure of individual formulation; and it meant that the applicant was expected to form their relation with doctrinal proficiency. This required sufficient doctrinal literacy, which may seem obvious, except that it included slaves, Indians, and women, meaning all members were taught in great detail and with a view

toward equality — in the eyes of God at least. As historian James Cooper rightly observed, "Cuffee demonstrates a remarkable fluency with the central tenets of conversion theology."[187] To have such an understanding demonstrates the lengths to which the church, and pastor, went in teaching its members according to the covenant principles and articles of faith, even to those who seem unexpected given the times.

Secondly, the relations were laden with religious doctrine and replete with scriptural references. The usage of scripture in the relations was more than randomly interjected, they were woven into the very language of the prospect's relation, and they indicate knowledge of the scriptures as well as how to employ them in theological rhetoric. Theological concepts of election, predestination, atonement, regeneration, covenant, providence, and the role of the church were expressed with detail and competency. Covenant concepts of congregationalism, discipline, sacraments, and communalism were also woven into the relations of prospective members. This not only ensured that incoming members knew what they were agreeing to, but also reinforced the principles of those hearing the relations. If the First Church was anything, it was doctrinally aware in ecclesiology and soteriology, among both the laity and the clergy, through both renewals and relations.

The relation of Priscilla Booth—along with the relations already mentioned, and especially Cuffy Wright's—provides a glimpse of the use of Scripture and religious doctrine.

> …notwithstanding these precious privileges [being born in a land of light] I remained a stranger to the power of Godliness till it please God to send his servant Mr Daniel Rogers who preached in our meeting house upon these words in mathew the 11 and 28 Com unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest under which sermon it pleased God to Convince me of my danger in living a stranger to Jesus Christ…

[187] Relation of Cuffy Wright, March, 1773; Cooper, "Cuffee's 'Relation,'" 306-309.

…then it pleased God to Revel Christ to my soul as a suficent Saviour with application to my own soul and several texts of Scripture set home with power as…Salm 55 and 22 vers with many other places not here to be Enumerated and I have been ever since much perplexed as to my duty in Coming up to the ordinance of the Lords Supper till about a year ago it pleased God to Clear up my doubts in that Case from his word in John the 6 and 55 for my flesh is meat indeed and my Blood is drink indeed and if any man sin we have an advocate with the father Jesus Chrsit the Righteous the first epistle of John 2 and 1 vers and I desire the prayers of all Gods people for me that I may be enabled by his Grace to walk agreeable to his will and the profession I have made…[188]

Booth's relation was typical. It expressed her experience through the use of Scripture proofs, and utilized doctrine in a way agreeable to those evaluating her. This was the standard practice of the First Church well into the nineteenth century.

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The answer to the First Church's continuity, then, rests in a balance between adaptability in practice and commitment to principle. The church's willingness to receive new ideas, and continually seeking ways to add to its membership, prevented the church from becoming obsolete and causing its members to find new ways of relevancy in an age of liberal ideologies. However, the church never lost its determination to keep its church covenant and articles the basis of its identity. As we will see in the next chapter, renewals dropped out of fashion toward the end of the century, but the church continued to preach anniversary sermons and publish works as reminders to remain faithful. Moreover, relations remained in use well into the nineteenth century, and because each was essentially a recitation of covenant themes, there continued to be renewals among the members—even if not as formal days set apart for praying, fasting, and renewal.

[188] Relation of Priscilla Booth, April 12, 1747.

CHAPTER III

SUSTAINING: 1778-1895

> *The departure of a church from the strict terms of their covenant with God, is generally much more gradual than that of individuals. This is seen in their falling away from sound Christian doctrine. It has sometimes taken not only years, but generations, for a church to give up "the faith once delivered to the saints," and to come fully to embrace an unscriptural one in its stead.*[189]

This final chapter examines how the First Church sustained its identity following the Revolution and into the mid-nineteenth century. In the first chapter, it was demonstrated that the church's identity resulted from political context, ecclesiastical structure, and its foundational documents. The second chapter displayed how the church maintained continuity by achieving a balance between flexibility in practice and rigidity in doctrinal conviction. This last chapter seeks to understand how the church sustained its identity well into the nineteenth century. Although continuing to adapt to the changing atmosphere of the newly formed United States, the First Church did not relent on the centrality of its Calvinistic doctrines, covenant communalism, or Separatist identity.

There were at least three ways the church sustained its Separatist heritage and communal identity. The first was by becoming more vigilant and resistant to what they

[189] Israel W. Putnam, *Two Discourses on The Divine Faithfulness as Illustrated in the History of the First Church of Middleborough, Mass. During the Period of One Hundred and Fifty Years* (January 5, 1845), 8, published with the *Book of the First Church*.

perceived were false doctrines leading neighboring churches astray, especially doctrines that rejected the trinity and the inspiration of Scripture. With the selection of Joseph Barker to the pulpit, the church inherited much from his New Divinity theology, including its emphasis on moral reform and staunch defense of Calvinistic doctrine. Secondly, maintaining identity was achieved by an increased desire for church purity, shown by the considerable rise in disciplinary actions, member confessions, and reconsiderations of church practices. Lastly, interest grew in the history of the church, and a desire to maintain the church's heritage greatly increased by the end of the nineteenth century. Much like the covenant renewals, the various historical documents produced by the church reminded members of its past, its principles, and developed a sense of pride in maintaining their "separation" from the world. Even after the church at Plymouth succumbed to Unitarianism, the First Church drew heavily on its Separatist beginnings and committed itself to maintaining the earliest ideals. This collective memory was a powerful perpetuator of the church's existence and self-proclaimed identity as a Pilgrim church, despite the rapid change in American society in the years to come.

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New England had been fraught with theological dangers that Middleboro First wished to avoid long before 1803, when Unitarianism effectively claimed Harvard seminary and became widely accepted in most Congregational churches. Heterodox beliefs had long plagued Massachusetts, but were usually suppressed through civil policies or ecclesiastical councils. The move toward religious pluralism, however, began in the late seventeenth century, gained strength from the individualization of piety in the Great Awakening, and came to fruition during the years of Revolution.

Arminianism was one of the more popular and ardently defended theologies that brought challenges to the Calvinist consensus. The theology of Arminianism was the antithesis to Calvinism's doctrines of man's utter depravity and the particular election of individuals to salvation. Eventually liberal, antitrinitarian, and moral theology (i.e. deism) began to question whether man did not have some good in him, and whether salvation was not available to all individuals, thus borrowing Arminian concepts. Middleboro First found itself in the middle of these challenges to Calvinist orthodoxy, and even witnessed the turning of their mother church in Plymouth to Unitarian doctrine in 1801. It remained vital that the First Church have competent leadership, an informed laity, and measures that maintained its separation from the world if it hoped to remain loyal to its founding principles.[190]

In 1777, Sylvanus Conant died from smallpox, and the church again underwent the process of finding a pastor fit to take the place of an influential leader. With most universities displaying tendencies toward Arminianism as early as the Great Awakening, including Harvard and Yale, ministers that held to the historic dogmas of the First Church were not as easy to come by, and the vetting process became stricter.[191] In 1781, Joseph Barker was recommended to the congregation as a "suitable" pastor for the church. Weston later remarked, "it was undoubtedly through his [Barker's] influence that [Middleboro First] was kept from changing its faith to that of the Unitarian denomination." This may be an overstatement if one considers the gradual pace with which surrounding churches compromised historic beliefs in favor of new ones, along

[190] Daniel W. Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 4-7; Bumsted, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 211-213; Weston, *History of the Town*, 455.
[191] Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 189

with the laity's role in the continuance of Middleboro's identity, but it is still important to understand who Barker was and how his theology led Weston to comment on his influence.[192]

Barker was a 1771 graduate of Yale, a student of Joseph Bellamy, and belonged to the Hopkinson school of theology. The theological school derived its name from its major proponent, Samuel Hopkins, a 1741 graduate of Yale, and a contemporary of Jonathan Edwards. The theology began as a response to more radical elements of New Light enthusiasm, while maintaining the evangelical attack on religious rationalists and Arminians. It maintained a staunch Calvinism that pushed for ethical reform, republican values of limited government, and natural law theories—it was essentially an amalgamation of Enlightenment ideas with Puritan theology. Also known as the New Divinity, the theology became popular in New England during the eighteenth century due to popular preachers like Bellamy. It was a powerful tool in the hands of orthodox clergymen during the American Revolution, and it is little wonder that it appealed to the First Church, a church intent upon maintaining its historic positions while adapting to the new American identity.[193]

The Hopkinson school that Barker ascribed to was not made up of timid clergymen. It was a school commonly associated with resolute defenses of Calvinism against liberal theology and attempts to reconcile doctrines of experimental Calvinism to

[192] Weston, *History of the Town*, 455; *Middleboro Church Records*, November 5, 1781; December 5, 1781; The fact that Barker was of the Hopkinsion school can be taken from Weston's *History* and a sermon preached at his interment by Jacob Norton; Norton, *A Sermon Delivered Thursday, July 27, 1815, at the Interment of the Rev. Joseph Barker* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1815), 17.
[193] Mark Valeri, "The New Divinity and the American Revolution," *WMQ*, vol. 46 (October, 1989), 741-769. New Divinity is known as the Hopkinson school and Edwardean Divinity because of its connection to both. Other influential proponents included Edwards's son, Jonathan, and Joseph Bellamy.

an ethics of moral responsibility.[194] Barker was said to have been an intellectual, who "ably" and resolutely defended the doctrines "of our holy religion" and Hopkinsion theology, because he believed strongly it was the teaching of Scripture.[195] Barker's goal was to defend orthodoxy in an era that increasingly substituted rationalism in its place. In analyzing the attacks upon the Christian religion, he blamed superstition and false religion for the decline in true Christianity's credibility. "The natural consequence of superstition," he argued, "is, to cause men, when they become in a certain degree enlightened, to disbelieve the divine origin of revealed religion." When superstition and Christianity are mixed, he believed, then men see it as folly, and "discard it all together." "Let the christian religion," he continued, "be separated from superstition, and acted out, and taught, in its simplicity and purity, and it will recommend itself to every one, who is governed by reason. Then the age of reason, and the age of christianity, will be synonymous."[196] Barker did not see a conflict in reason and Christianity, only that Christianity must be performed in its Scriptural purity, by sound preaching and moral practice, in order to recommend itself to reasonable people. According to Barker, apart from sound doctrine and holy living reason becomes unreasonable and religion becomes superstitious.

Barker shared with Thacher and Conant a view of the progressive understanding of truth, and adaptability was proper insofar as the orthodox doctrines or covenant

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[194] Ibid., 742; the New Divinity did diverge from traditional Calvinism in several respects and was opposed by many traditional Calvinists. The theological minutia does not seem fitting for this study, but it is important to understand that Middleboro was of a more progressive, experimental spirit, in keeping with their Separatist heritage. See Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1981).

[195] Norton, *Internment Sermon*, 17; Barker received a Masters of Arts from Yale, Harvard, and Brown; see William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit: Unitarian Congregational, 1865* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1865), 8:292.

[196] Joseph Barker, *The Stability of Christ's Church: A Century Sermon* (Preached at Middleboro, 1795), 18.

principles of the church were not compromised. In a sermon given at Barker's death, Jacob Norton recounted, "while [Barker] justly claimed for himself—the free enjoyment of the rights of conscience, and that civil and religious liberty which are secured by our excellent constitution of government, he ever advocated the same claim in relation to others, however widely they might differ from him in their honest opinions."[197] Barker was accepting of different denominations and practices, stating in a sermon *On the unity of Christ's Church*:

> Into what an almost innumerable number of sects, the church has been divided, since the apostolic age; each of which, right in their own opinion, have censured, condemned, excommunicated, and sometimes persecuted unto death, those who differed from the in speculative opinions, and generally about something trivial, or of quite inferior importance!

He explained: "Christians, who have the same hope, ought not to separate from, or refuse communion with each other." And again, "Professing Christians…ought not to be excluded from the communion of Christians, on account of any erroneous sentiments whatever, which they may imbibe, which do not introduce another Lord and another hope."[198] In Barker's understanding there were issues of real importance and issues of "inferior importance," based on "speculative opinions;" the church's duty was to exercise charity on matters unimportant to salvation and holiness—one example, he felt, being baptism.

Barker's ideas likely would not have supported the Separatists' initial separation from the Church of England, but as times changed, and a greater need for Christian unity against doctrinal error presented itself, it became practical to drop some of the perennial battle lines. As context and experience changed so did the understanding of Biblical

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[197] Norton, *A Sermon Delivered…at the Interment of the Rev. Joseph Barker*, 19.
[198] Joseph Barker, *On the Unity of Christ's Church, A Sermon Delivered in the Town-House in Middleborough, April 16, 1807, Before Christians of several Denominations* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1807), 14-16.

truth; this was in keeping with Robinson, Thacher, and Conant, and it was in keeping with the mentality of the First Church's understanding of truth. This was confirmed by a 1793 decision, in which, "The Chh met, & after some discourse upon the propriety of admitting Baptists to occasional communion with us, Voted unanimously, that any person of a good moral character; & in regular standing in a Baptist chh, may hold occasional communion with us, whenever he pleases."[199] The church, under the leadership of Barker, accommodated for certain doctrinal differences by deeming them nonessential; what remained essential, however, was a life free from open sin, a conversion relation, and a competency in the doctrines the church still believed essential to the Christian life, including man's depravity, Christ's work and person, the trinity, holiness, *sola scriptura*, and the role of the local church.

The Hopkinsion theology that Barker espoused, along with its desire for the moral reform of society, had an effect on how the First Church preserved its own purity. Whereas the church records were characterized by revival under Thacher and relative silence under Conant, disciplinary action and a vocal laity characterized the church under Barker. Within the first month of his ordination in January 1782, a church meeting was convened in which three committees were formed "for the purpose of treating with several offending Members, whose offences have been of long standing."[200] The first was for dealing with Samuel Pratt, a member under censure for fornication;[201] the second, for Joseph Lovell, a man accused of intemperance by another member, Zechariah Eddy;[202] and the last, for Alice Anthony, "an Indian woman," guilty of intemperance.

[199] *Middleboro Church Records*, May 3, 1793.
[200] *Middleboro Church Records*, January 3, 1782.
[201] Ibid., February 18, 1783.
[202] Middleboro Loose Papers dated August 12, 1783.

Pratt was promptly excommunicated, Lovell eventually made a confession in 1793, and Anthony made a confession in 1783 and was restored to the church.[203]

These disciplinary measures took place as soon as Barker was instated, and the records under his ministry and beyond continued to be defined by an insistence on church purity. From 1782 until 1784, the records speak of almost nothing other than Lovell's case—with the exception of Pratt's excommunication, and Anthony's sin and confession—and intermittently comes back up until 1793, with his return to full communion. Deliberations about those under church censure often went for several years, even decades, a consequence of keeping to their covenant promise to give "due application of the holy discipline, with love, care and faithfulness."[204] In all, there were more than a dozen disciplinary cases, several censured, a considerable rise in confessions of sin, and three excommunicated during the pastorate of Barker—more than all excommunications in the previous century combined.[205]

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The influence of Barker in keeping Middleboro from heterodox doctrine and moral decay is an oft-repeated assertion in the church's annals, but it does not fully account for the educated laity given so much credit throughout this paper. In the disciplinary cases mentioned above the membership was always involved, and censures or excommunications took place by their vote. However, lay participation and influence

[203] *Middleboro Church Records*, February 18, 1783 (Pratt); May 26, 1793 (Lovell); June 8, 1783 (Anthony). Relation of Alice Anthony, June 8, 1783.
[204] It does not appear that the church was trying to control or pester its stray members. Those who did not want discipline were left alone and excommunicated; those who did were dealt with for as long as that person wished, especially if there was hope of their repentance and return to the church, as the case of Lovell shows. Bumsted made similar observations, *Pilgrims' Progress*, 65.
[205] *Middleboro Church Records* between 1783 and 1805; Those excommunicated were Pratt (1783), John Leach, and Elkenah Elmes (both in 1803) one other disciplinary case, that of Deacon Abner Bourne, was halted by his suicide in 1806, making the end result unknown.

went beyond simply voting on matters of discipline, they heavily influenced any decision, sometimes even correcting the pastor.

The case of Samuel Doggett is a sufficient example to display how lay influence was equally important to the First Church's ability to maintain doctrinal purity. The Doggett case displays not only the laity's voice in the actions of the church, but the fact that an informed voice still existed at the end of the eighteenth century. This, like so many times in the First Church's history, was important when the laity had greater power to decide the future of the church, especially when the state of the pulpit was uncertain in the years following Barker's death in 1815.

Samuel Doggett was born in Middleboro, to a mother who apparently took great pains to indoctrinate her son in the ways of the Church of England. Doggett, who was a studious individual, attended Brown University in 1785, where he eventually came to the conclusion that the Congregational polity was the Scriptural form of church government. He further concluded that the Christian view of nature and grace was that of Arminius, and not Calvin.

Following his graduation from Brown, Doggett made application to the church in Middleboro. Barker, it seems, was willing, "in view of his serious and exemplary deportment," to admit him to communion. However, an unnamed deacon of the church felt that Doggett did not possess the requisite doctrinal qualifications, and his objections stood against the candidate. In this case it seems that the deacon's opposition to Doggett was not wholly unfounded, as Doggett was eventually received at a church in Providence, and became a decided Unitarian. Though not mentioned in any of the previous local

histories, the anecdote provides a glimpse into the balance between laity and clergy, a balance Middleboro members were likely thankful for after the incident.[206]

The laity also had considerable input on church practice. The church's attempts to maintain church purity were not only seen in its increased disciplinary actions, but also in the frequent—and often protracted—debates regarding church practices. Reconsideration and revision of Middleboro's church practices was not unheard of through its history, but never before was it so apparent in the records and the subject of so much debate. It seems the members placed as much emphasis on reevaluating and reestablishing their particular identity corporately as they did identifying those who did not belong in the congregation in the first place. Several committees were formed during Barker's pastorate for consideration of everything from the church covenant to the type of music played during worship.

Some matters of deliberation were important to the maintenance of the First Church's way of life, including revisions to the covenant and reconsideration of the practice of relations. In the early years of Barker's ministry, the church "revised and modernized" the covenant and articles, "preserving the substance." As with all covenant renewals and relations in the church, the intent was to reaffirm and recommit to the church's historic principles. In a time when their neighboring churches were beginning to reject orthodox doctrines of Christ, Calvinism, and the inerrancy of scripture, it was important that the First Church—as a corporate body—revisit their accepted beliefs.[207]

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[206] Sprague, *Annals,* v.8:292; this event is not mentioned in any extant church record either, but took place ca. 1786-1789.

[207] This is clearly seen in the firm Calvinistic statements of their revised articles, and the clear reaffirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity; see specifically articles I, V, and VII in *Book of the First Church*, 49-50: *Article I*: "We believe there is only one living and true God…and that in the Godhead there are three persons…and that these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance…although distinguished by their personal properties."

Moreover, the revised church covenant reestablished the belief in an informed laity, especially among those joining the church. It was now broken down into paragraphs and directed at the prospective member. It included the promise to cleave to God by the "help of Divine grace," making the Scriptures the "rule of…faith and practice," and submitting to the "watch and discipline" of the church. The covenant was addressed to the person making a public profession, with the pronoun "you" beginning all of the paragraphs except for the last two.

> You do now, in the most solemn manner…avouch the Lord Jehovah to be your God. You give up yourself…to the Lord. You resolve, by the help of Divine grace, to cleave to God and the Lord Jesus Christ…You propose to make the Holy Scriptures, at all times, the rule of your faith and practice, so far as, by the grace of God, you shall be enabled to understand them. You do also…give up yourself to this church according to the will of God…

The final paragraphs switched the pronoun to "we," and were the church's promise to watch over and pray for the individual desiring to join.[208]

> We do then, cheerfully receive you into full communion with us, and promise, by the grace of God, to treat you as a member of Christ's body; faithfully and affectionately to watch over you, and always to be ready, by our council and prayers, to promote your spiritual interest. And we depend on your prayers for us…that all of us may be found faithful even unto death…

These differences in form were not meant to supplant the historic church covenant, but to confirm it, and to assist those seeking to join with the construction of their relation, a practice still very much required.

The manner of giving their relation, however, was another subject brought before the church. The requirement to produce a relation was never in question, but the way in which it was heard came under review. In June, 1791, a meeting was called to consider "the laying aside the custom of reading before the Congregation the relation of a person's experience." After long discourse, the church voted that Barker and two deacons form a

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Article V: "We believe the Son of God has…made an adequate atonement for sin, and that all who are saved will be wholly indebted to the sovereign grace of God through his atonement."
Article VII: "We believe that for those who are ordained to eternal life…there is no condemnation…"
[208] *Book of the First Church*, 47-49.

committee to consider the adoption of such a proposal. In September of the same year, the church heard the report of their appointed committee, and "after much conversation, rejected it, & Voted that when any Person is desirous of being admitted…the Chh be notified to meet to hear his or her relation, & to examine him or her, so far as the Chh think proper & expedient."[209] Although it appears there was some serious consideration of dropping the practice, it does not seem it was ever in jeopardy of being discontinued. The church had long practiced the hearing of relations in order to determine the legitimacy of someone's desire to join in full communion; it was the church's mechanism for maintaining doctrinal purity, and was not easily laid aside.

For many of these considerations of practice and doctrine it was not a matter of doing away with established rituals, but of reconfirming the reasons for performing them. The practice of relations and reading them aloud was further strengthened in the First Church by the due consideration of its legitimacy, and it continued to be firmly required until the end of the century. The revision of the church covenant was not meant to alter the identity of the First Church, but to make the prospective member subscribe to explicit points of doctrine that were being denied at the turn of the century, evidenced by a revision to the articles of faith that were added to the revised covenant. The first point of the new articles was obviously a defense against the rejection of the Trinity: "We believe there is only one living and true God…and that in the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory, although distinguished by their personal properties."[210] This was an expansion on the earlier article (article II), and guarded

[209] *Middleboro Church Records*, June 23, 1791.
[210] Book of the First Church, 49-50.

against heterodoxy. Both subjects—relations and the church covenant—were confirmed in their usefulness for sustaining an informed laity, doctrinal purity, and communal identity.

Not all matters of dispute were quite as important in sustaining the church's communal identity or doctrinal faithfulness, however. But it appears that the issues that did not strike as deeply to the foundations of the church were the ones that caused the most unrest between members. Despite the willingness of Barker to adapt to new contexts and ideas, the First Church became characterized by greater conflict than seen in previous decades—it started with music, but spread to other matters, and became the defining attitude of the church in the first quarter of the next century.

Issues surrounding the congregation's singing and its musical accompaniment appeared early in Barker's tenure. The first appearance of the issue in the records was during a meeting in January of 1786, at Barker's house, when several members "discoursed…upon the importance of having this part of Divine worship, viz. singing, conducted in a devout & edifying manner."[211] The exact concern was not specified, but it was decided that several individuals would sit in the front to lead the singing. Initially the subject seemed a small matter, seemingly resolved and barely noticeable in the records. But the next month the issue was brought back up, and voted "that the Chh is not satisfied with the present mode of carrying on that part of worship", and that "the vote of this Chh respecting singing, & singers [in January], be reconsidered." A committee was then formed to select the tunes that the church would sing in public worship. This seemed to placate the concerned party, but in September 1787 another meeting was called because "a number of the brethren [were] dissatisfied…with certain

[211] Ibid., January 11, 1786.

tunes." The party bringing their grievances wanted to sing the "old tunes."[212] It was decided that the choristers sing the songs approved for in worship by the church, and that at the end of worship they could sing one tune of their choosing. Again a committee was appointed to deal with any disapproving parties. The conflict around singing went on for several years, and was only further exacerbated by the debate over introducing a bass viol into the worship.[213] The subject remained in consideration as late as 1793, and essentially fades from the records without mention of resolution.

The dispute over music was an indication of the implacable spirit beginning to grow at the end of the eighteenth century. When Barker took a seat in the United States House of Representatives in 1805, the church was left to itself as contentions mounted. The church now spent much of its time trying to resolve cases in which it seemed impossible for the sides to come to terms. The change in the church's disposition was likely the combined result of several factors. Firstly, it was likely due to anxiety caused by a changing religious landscape. Congregational churches were not only changing, but also frequently presenting arguments against the *archaic* beliefs of historic orthodoxy. This likely created an insular membership, wary of any new practices, doctrines, and even people. Secondly, there appeared to be a resistance to change in anything that had sustained the church for so long. The certainty of the "tried and true" undoubtedly had a profound effect on the congregation of Middleboro First Church. The church was more than a century old, and already had weathered an eventful history. Even a church distinguished and preserved by its adaptive nature was bound to have its lulls. That the

[212] Ibid., September 26, 1787.
[213] Ibid., May 3, 1793.

church survived this era of growing inward contention and outward pressures only adds to the uniqueness of the Middleboro First Church.

By most accounts, the growing divisions had the potential to alter the future of the church. In 1822 Barker's successor, Emerson Paine, commented, "for a long time there have been divisions and contentions in this place."[214] The problem, he felt, was so bad that he requested a resignation of his pastoral duties in light of the church's persistent quarreling. Opposition to Paine had existed since his first coming to the church, and the reasons are difficult to discern. Even the council called to consider his resignation declared that the opposition to him had nothing to do with his doctrine, talent, or piety, and was "wholly in considerations foreign to religion;"[215] it is probable that the church had spent so much time without a consistent presence in the pulpit because of Barker's frequent absences, that they had become too lay dominant—it appears the membership had become unappeasable in the matter.

In Paine's final address to the church he preached two sermons. The first reminded the church of their responsibility to select a pastor who preached the doctrines of Christ's divinity, and the second was from 2 Corinthians 13:11: "Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." The order and structures of his sermons warned the congregation that their divisiveness and selfishness could easily lead to the same end as so many other churches: if they continued in their way, then God would break covenant with them. Paine then warned, "these division and contentions should cease," and that the people must be

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[214] Emerson Paine, *Sermons, Delivered at Middleborough, First Precinct, Lord's Day, June 9, 1822…Occasioned by His Dismission From his Pastoral Relation to that Church* (Plymouth: Allen Danforth, 1822), 21.
[215] "Result of Council, Middleborough June 4, 1822," attached to Paine, *Sermons…Occasioned by His Dismission*.

"*united in the truth*," for, "should you become united in the belief of some one of the erroneous systems of religion, prevalent at the present day, your union could not, in the nature of things, last very long."[216] If not for a return to a strong leader in the pulpit and the appeal to remember their heritage—including the events and mindset that led them to this point—it may very well have caused an unrecoverable decline into obscurity or dissolution of the First Church, at least as it was known at its founding.

When William Eaton took the pastoral position in 1824, the church was still marked by a spirit of increased discipline and contention. George Stearns later remarked, "the records made during our seventh pastor's [Eaton] service show the church trying to keep herself pure. She disciplined members for drunkenness, 'hauling wood on Sunday,' damming a brook to a neighbor's inconvenience, prolonged neglect of worship, etc." He then opined that "some dead branches were wisely pruned away."[217] Eaton—like Paine—was dismissed by his own request only ten years later, in 1834. Whether or not Stearns' opinion was correct, it is likely that if a strong presence did not return to First Church's pulpit, the church was in jeopardy of losing its communalism, and inevitably its doctrinal orthodoxy.

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Emerson Paine's final sermons were full of laments and warnings, but his prophecies of the church's demise did not come to pass. Following his dismissal, and during a two-year vacancy in the pulpit, the church added seventy-two new members, far exceeding the fourteen brought in during Paine's six-year stint; and during Eaton's term

[216] Paine, *Sermons…Occasioned by His Dismission*, 22-23
[217] *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, 14.

fifty-three new congregants joined.[218] With the selection of Israel Putnam in 1835, moreover, the church underwent a noticeable change in its demeanor, away from the discipline and contentiousness of the last four decades, and toward a renewed interest in its heritage and historic, communal identity.

Retelling the past had been a common practice for the First Church throughout its history. Covenant renewals had always been one way for the church to remember its original foundations, and were frequently employed during the pastorates of Thacher and Conant for the purpose of reminding their congregations of its doctrines and principles. Barker's covenant revision took into consideration the original covenant and articles, only modifying it for ease of use by those framing their relations, but maintaining its historic foundation. Anniversary sermons were also a recurring tradition for solidifying the church's corporate identity. Conant preached an *Anniversary Sermon* in December of 1776, in Plymouth, "In grateful Memory of the first Landing of our worthy Ancestors in that Place." Conant's intent was to connect the memory of the churches in Plymouth and Middleboro to their "ancestors," who came not through Massachusetts Puritans, but the Separatist Pilgrims. The implication of his sermon was that their current existence was owing to that small band of travelers, along with their principles of freedom, "civil and religious."[219] Barker, likewise, preached a century sermon in January of 1795, chronicling the last one hundred years of the church, and imploring his congregation to remember how God had preserved them for so long, so that they would not take it for granted.[220]

[218] Weston, *History of the Town*, 456; *Book of the First Church*, 106-111.
[219] Conant, *An Anniversary Sermon*, 6.
[220] Barker, *The Stability of Christ's Church*, 25-31.

While accounts of the church's history had long been retold in sermons and renewals, the emphasis on remembrance had waned, especially after Barker's death in 1815. Under Putnam, however, there emerged a renewed interest in preserving their heritage and principles in published works that could stand as memorials for posterity. Shortly after Putnam's arrival, the First Church "took some action…on the subject of a reprint of the catalogue of its members from the beginning, in connection with such historical matter as might be deemed useful and of general interest." In 1838 a committee of three was formed, and in 1841 three more were added, but "little was done…for several years." It was Putnam's *Two Discourses on the Divine Faithfulness as Illustrated in the History of the First Church in Middleborough* that was credited for the "revived…interest on this subject."[221] Putnam's language was persuasive: if the First Church was still in existence, and still clung to the same foundational principles, then it followed that God was still with them, and that they had honored their covenant commitment.

> When we reflect on the length of [the church's existence]…on the number of ministers who have here preached…on the many hundreds of members…when we reflect that this beloved church still survives the period of a century and half, and that it is looking forward with the prospect of living for centuries yet to come:—and when…we consider that all the blessings it has experienced…are to be attributed to the grace of its covenant-keeping God, we may well…say unto Him, "Thy faithfulness is unto all generations."[222]

Like the renewals, this had the effect of renewing his listeners' interest in preserving the God-honoring principles of the church; to stray from them was to doom the church.

With Putnam's call to remember God's faithfulness to the church, and the church's need to remain faithful for future blessings, the committee again took up the task of publishing a church history. In 1852 they published the final product, the *Book of*

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[221] *Book of the First Church*, 1.
[222] Putnam, *Two Discourses on The Divine Faithfulness*, 3.

the First Church in Middleborough.[223] The *Book* highlighted all of the major points that this paper has addressed: the church's Separatist background; its church-state beliefs; the laity's participation, education, and influence; and the evangelistic spirit of the church. The committee that compiled the *Book* hoped that it might "lead the living members of the church to ponder well on the various relations they sustain to those who have died in the Lord, to one another, and to all who…may yet be brought into spiritual communion with themselves on earth and in heaven."[224] It was a memorial to remember and sustain its identity for future generations.

The *Book of the First Church* contained, on almost every page, several references to its Separatist pedigree. The history makes clear that the early residents, and first worshippers, were citizens of Plymouth, and members of the Plymouth church. The *Book* describes Samuel Fuller as "the son of the Pilgrim, Samuel Fuller;" it even gives a brief history of Fuller, Sr.'s contributions to all of Massachusetts. Esteemed members, Madam Thacher and Madam Morton, were said to have "the pilgrim spirit…in their hearts, and the pilgrim blood…in their veins." In the *Book*'s justifications for every practice of the church throughout its history, it was careful to note how the church followed the teachings of John Robinson and the earliest Separatists. The church was Congregational because it was "in accordance with the platform of John Robinson, and the practice and discipline of the churches of the Pilgrims." The church did not have ruling elders because "it was a decided principle of Robinson that the Elders should *advise,* but not *rule* without the consent of the church." Perhaps the most telling reference to Robinson was on the voting rights of women.

[223] It was voted that Putnam's sermons should be attached to the *Book*.
[224] *Book of the First Church*, 1.

> Every member of a church, in full communion…male or female, has the right of voting in the church. But John Robinson, our ecclesiastical father, says the churches do not admit the sisters to take a part in the *business* matters of the church, as it is against the spirit of the directions of St. Paul in respect to them.

It was not enough to state that St. Paul stated the rule; Robinson did as well.[225]

The *Book* reminded the readers of the church's rights both civilly and ecclesiastically. In a section entitled "The Church is a Legal Body," the rights of the church were listed, and having now seen the events from its past we see the reason for their inclusion. Among the rights of the people of God was the "free election of all their officers." Another stated, "every church has free liberty of administration, recommendation, dismission, expulsion, and disposal of their officers and members." Perhaps the most interesting practice of the church, and one the church held to decisively throughout its history, was the requirement that pastors, "on becoming such respectively, are to be subject to the discipline and watch of the church, and before ordination are to be admitted into full communion." This practice leads to the next major theme discussed repeatedly in the *Book*: the role of the laity.[226]

The *Book of the First Church* recalled often the laity's knowledge and influence in the church's history. All officers of the church were selected from among the laity, including pastors—even if a formality of sorts—as mentioned above. The *Book* made clear the rights of the laity to choose, depose, censure, or excommunicate any member or officer by a vote of the church; perhaps these rights were not unique to the First Church, but it is worth noting the strong declarations of lay rights and pastoral limits. "No pastor or elder has ever interposed to control or embarrass the action of this church." Again, as

[225] *Book of the First Church*, 4, 12, 29, 33, 57.
[226] Ibid., 11-13, 32

noted in the first chapter, the church never had ruling elders, and a committee of elected laypersons acted on all matters usually given to ruling elders.

The *Book* also took considerable space to give notice of some of its members, and the descriptions outlined their influence and knowledge. Jacob Thomson "took lead in the deposition of Mr. Palmer." Samuel Prince was "much improved in Scriptural knowledge." Mercy and Alice Prince, along with Mrs. Thacher and Mrs. Morton, were women esteemed as "important helpers in the church," and as having influence on some decisions of the church in the mid-eighteenth century. Samuel Eddy, Jr. was listed among "every important committee, and especially in the troublous times which followed Mr. Thacher's death, he was relied on as well qualified to meet the crisis." Benjamin Thomas, it was said, "was well versed in the Scriptures, of inflexible virtue, sound and clear orthodoxy, and conscientious in the performance of known duty, holding on upon the old landmarks and not letting them go." With as much description placed upon prominent members as was placed upon the ministers, the implication was clear: the laity had just as much of a role in the maintenance of the church's principles.

Last among the *Book*'s main themes was the church's evangelistic impulse. The church took great pride in defining itself as evangelistic, always gathering in new members. One indication of God's faithfulness to the church, according to Putnam, was the "evangelical ministry which…He has bestowed upon it." The *Book*'s account of the church's history begins with the work among the Indians under Samuel Fuller; it speaks of the revivalism of Peter Thacher in the Awakening; of Sylvanus Conant's evangelistic sermons throughout his ministry; and of Joseph Barker's resolute defenses of orthodoxy paired with a desire to unify the church. The *Book* also noted its revivals: 1740-42, 1807,

1808, 1818, 1823, 1830, and 1840. And it listed the churches that it helped to establish: Titicut, Halifax, and the Central Congregational Church.

Along with all of the major points listed above, the *Book of the First Church* included several other pieces of information useful to its intended readers and historians. It contained the first extant copies of the church's covenant and articles of faith, along with the renewal of 1713, and Joseph Barker's revised covenant, signifying the church's continued adherence to the "gospel principles on which [the church] was originally established."[227] Other topics included were the statistics of admitted members under each pastor and decisions surrounding singing, the order of the church, and pastoral power. The *Book* surveyed the lives of its pastors, prominent members, and deacons. Finally, it included a catalogue of every member admitted to the church since its establishment.

Under the leadership of Putnam and the creation of the *Book of the First Church* the church had changed its focus from discipline and division to remembrance and pride. Half a century after the publication of the *Book of the First Church*, the church took further steps to remember its history and publicly display its longstanding faithfulness to the "Pilgrim faith." In 1894, the church "voted to provide for a suitable observance of the two hundredth anniversary of the organization of the church."[228] The two hundredth anniversary took place in August of that year; and the speeches given were collected into a publication. It was a form of covenant renewal, resurrected from a page of the church's history, as a means to solidify identity and separate itself from those who had failed to uphold the banner of orthodoxy. The event began with a sermon by the present pastor of the church, G.W. Stearns, entitled "Two Centuries in God's Work." In it, he boasted,

[227] Putnam, *Two Discourses on The Divine Faithfulness*, 14.
[228] *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, 5.

"not many churches in our republic have raised and kept the banner of the cross upheld longer than it has been done in this ancient town."[229]

The First Church's beliefs about their connection to the Pilgrims had a greater significance than simply having a noble history of religious liberty or renowned preachers; in their eyes it meant that they drew their lineage back to the early church itself. R.G. Woodbridge, pastor of the Central Congregational Church in Middleboro, mentioned the First Church's "pedigree," proclaiming, "Behold! the church at the Green [Middleboro], Plymouth Rock, Leyden, Scrooby, Pentecost, Jesus Christ…Behold the line in unbroken continuity!"[230] Woodbridge's point was not to say other churches were not "true" churches, but the view of the First Church's spiritual and physical lineage was clear among the members: they believed that the Congregationalism, communalism, covenants, educated laity, revivalism, evangelism, tolerance, and Separatism that defined them were all inherited through the Pilgrims in Plymouth, the Separatists in England, the apostles at Pentecost, and ultimately Christ himself. For a two hundred year old church—that maintained a strong belief in a covenantal God—this undoubtedly had a powerful effect.

The importance of the *Two Hundredth Anniversary* was the understanding that the church had of itself as a Pilgrim church, and the theme was frequently revisited throughout the event. The fact that many of the speakers were outsiders who attributed the church's "success" to a Pilgrim connection only helped to support the belief of the First Church about their historic identity. In his oration, Thomas Weston described the founders of the First Church as "elderly men and children of the Pilgrims of Plymouth,"

[229] Ibid., 11.
[230] Ibid., 103.

and when they organized the church, it was "in accordance with the simple forms of the church of the Pilgrims—first gathered in Elder Brewster's manor house in Scrooby, and afterwards removed to Leyden, and from there to Plymouth—and which have continued in our denomination to the present time."[231] In his publication on the history of Middleboro town, Weston echoed the Pilgrim foundation with regard to the church's covenant and articles, stating, "They were in accord with the teachings of the venerable John Robinson."[232] According to Weston, the church's covenant, articles, and foundation were thanks to the Separatist Pilgrims. Moreover, said Weston, the First Church was sustained by an adherence to "the Pilgrim faith" over against "that of the Arminians, now known as Unitarians."[233] Why did he not call it simply "the faith," or "the Puritan faith," or "orthodoxy"? The intention was clear: it grounded the First Church's identity in a particular history, implying that it was the principles of the Pilgrims that had given it so much success. All of the speakers contributed to that understanding.[234]

Former First Church pastor, Howard Hanaford, praised Middleboro for remaining one of the few churches left in the Old Colony who had not forfeited orthodoxy for Unitarianism. The reason, said Hanaford, was because its "ancestors" had followed in the "shining footprints" of the Puritan age. Their lineage was drawn directly from the earliest Separatists, "Robinson and Brewster were followed by the Mathers, the Fullers,

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[231] Ibid., 58-59.
[232] Weston, *History of the Town*, 442. Weston's *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts* was published in 1906. It was voted at a town meeting (in March of 1894) that a committee prepare a volume of the town's history. The committee appointed Weston to prepare and write the volume. The *History of the Town* covered more than the ecclesiastical history of the town, and included its involvement in the several conflicts, land agreements, as well as treatment of the town's culture and society.
[233] *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, 61.
[234] The "Pilgrim faith" theme was mentioned repeatedly throughout the event. Almost every speaker mentioned something about the "Pilgrim faith." A poem was even written entitled, "The Pilgrim Mothers," as a remembrance of the Pilgrim women who assisted in the continuity of the "Pilgrim faith." See *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, pp. 53 ("The Pilgrim Mothers"), 89-90 ("Mr. Eddy's Address"), 93 ("Judge Fuller's Address").

the Thachers, the Putnams of our later day; a noble army of confessors. You of the generation now before me are…worthy successors of most worthy and admirable sires." He concluded, "Let us never forsake the Pilgrim faith…clinging fast to the glorious doctrines of the reformed churches."[235] Again, it was not a general understanding of faith, but a specific brand of faith.

The two hundredth anniversary marked the end of yet another century for the First Church, and like all renewals of the past it reminded, convicted, and implored the members to consider how the church might sustain its heritage into a new century. "The result," said the authors of its published form, "is now submitted to the public, in the hope that the host of friends of the First Church…may find in these pages not only much interest, but a quickening of Christian longing for the triumph of Christ and his Church."[236] Whatever form Christ's church might take in the next century, it remained vitally important that the Separatist-Pilgrim foundations be sustained and protected for all generations. The *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, the *Book of the First Church*, the renewals, the relations, the covenant, and the articles all stood as witnesses against them if the church should fail in upholding its long-maintained principles.

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The two publications discussed above shared commonalities in the themes the First Church desired to express. Those themes followed many of the same ones expressed throughout this paper. Most importantly was the church's Separatist connection; both its "physical" descent from the first Separatists in Scrooby, Leyden, or Plymouth under the leadership of Robinson, Bradford, or Brewster, and its "spiritual" or

[235] Ibid., 45, 51.
[236] Ibid., 5-6.

"philosophical" descent in the principles it adhered to: Congregational autonomy, covenanting, lay participation, the progressive nature of truth, and sectarian notions of church and state. It is vital to understand how important these connections were to the congregants of the nineteenth century, how often they were addressed throughout the church's publications, and to what end.

The First Church identified with the past as a means for confirming its present, and preserving its future. Often its narratives of the past were pietistic; that is not to say they were false, but blemishes of its past were typically omitted or minimized to not distract from the fact that the church remained established in the "Pilgrim faith." The effects of remembering and memorializing its past should not be underestimated in the continuity of the First Church. Grounding the church's identity in the past, and making a convincing argument that its identity and convictions flowed directly from the "founding fathers" of its heritage, gave confidence to its members, and helped to sustain its—real or perceived—identity, against any change, decline, shift, or perversion that presented itself against its founding principles. The First Church of Middleboro, Massachusetts proved the power of identifying with its Separatist past. Even if one argued that the First Church was different from a Separatist church by the end of the nineteenth century, it mattered not, so long as the members believed they had sustained the same spirit of the Separatist Pilgrims.

CONCLUSION

Covenanting in Christ to disciple our families and the world[237]

In his address to the First Church during its two hundredth anniversary, Howard Hanaford listed four reasons he believed the church had continued for so long: *stability, progress, ideal,* and *ritual*. Hanaford's exposition of these defining characteristics helps to summarize the main themes this paper has attempted to show as the reasons for the First Church's continuity throughout its long and eventful history. The order, however, that best represents how they were shown in this study is *ideal, progress, ritual,* and *stability*. It would be worth looking at each element again to see how the First Church remained Puritan in an un-Puritan age.[238]

Hanaford considered the First Church's maintenance of *ideal*, "based upon the ideas of the Fathers of the New England faith and polity," to be instrumental in their continuity. In chapter one, we looked at how the political and religious principles of the "fathers" provided a context within which the church sustained the beliefs it felt were in keeping with its "founding fathers," the Separatists. This context included the church's connection to the Plymouth Colony, which allowed for greater autonomy in religious policy, as well as their connection to the Plymouth church, and the shared belief in Congregational autonomy. The First Church went to great length throughout its history

[237] From the webpage of the First Congregational Church of Middleboro [http://www.fccmiddleboro.org/]
[238] All of the references to Hanaford's sermon are taken from the *Two Hundredth Anniversary*, pp. 45-46.

to protect its Congregational autonomy from both civil and religious encroachments, because to sacrifice those was to sacrifice the Separatist-Pilgrim *ideal*.

The Separatist *ideal* was also maintained in the purity of the church. The Separatist principles were codified in the church's covenant and articles, two documents that were stringently guarded throughout the church's history, and renewed often for the purpose of maintaining the *ideal*, namely, a church composed of doctrinally competent and outwardly holy individuals. Israel Putnam understood that the *ideal* of the "Pilgrim Fathers" was maintained by the practices the church inherited from them:

> It is very obvious, that our fathers of the first generation of this church regarded a life of practical piety as an indispensable part of christian character, and as a uniform condition of church membership. Their confession of faith, their covenant engagements, their solemn protestations against sin in all its forms, show in a most convincing manner, what stress they laid upon true Holy Living.

The First Church maintained its emphasis on outward godliness as a measure of full membership, for to "regard anything, short of a life of vital godliness, as evidence of real christian character," or to "dispense with it as a necessary qualification for admission to [the church's] communion" would, according to Putnam, be a day of ill omen. The church covenant, articles, renewals, relations, and histories were all means of maintaining the *ideal*.[239]

The next important attribute was that of *progress*. The ways in which this mentality displayed itself throughout the church's history varied: it informed the selection of pastors, it was evident in the church's support of revivalism, it allowed for flexibility in church practice, and it supported greater toleration for those who held different beliefs, but who were united in their cause for *true* religion and "essential" doctrine. The idea of flexibility has in mind the church's ability to bend, but not break, and to return to its

[239] Putnam's first discourse in *Book of the First Church*, 22-23.

original form after undergoing stress—either from without or within. The First Church was a great example of this quality, and it must be attributed largely to the words of one of its Separatist forefathers. As mentioned early in this paper, the effects of Robinson's statement about the nature of truth deeply impacted his hearers; so much so, that even a pastor in 1894 reminded his listeners of Robinson's words as if they already well knew them, and understood their implication for the continuity of the First Church.[240] Hanaford rightly summarized the character of the First Church on this point:

> Truly conservative, she [the church] has welcome new ideas and methods, while not wholly losing her hold upon the ancient landmarks and time-honored truths and usages of the Pilgrim churches of Britain or New England. With the great author…of Congregationalism, John Robinson, this church…has ever believed that God has yet more light to break forth for us from his most holy Word: so has welcomed to its arms the revivalism of a Thacher and Whitefield…as well as the tender, persuasive, tranquil, earnest, paternal ministry of a Putnam and a Conant. This church has been *progressive*, never retrogressive…[241]

The First Church was also a church of *ritual*. The First Church adopted various rituals for the purpose of examination and recommitment in its constant attempts to evaluate its covenant commitments and its doctrinal faithfulness. Corporate renewals, the reading of relations, examination of prospects, ordination by the brethren, and the recounting of history were a few examples of Middleboro's church *rituals* that helped to sustain its identity as communal, lay dominate, and doctrinally committed. The balance between *ritual* and flexibility (*progress*) was a precarious matter at times, but the benefits of an educated laity and the selection of charismatic, influential ministers provided balance and *stability* to the church.

Several factors contributed to the *stability* of the church, including the three characteristics mentioned thus far. One major contributor to its *stability* was its pastors. The selection of ministers throughout Middleboro's history played no small part in their

[240] See Chapter II, pp. 48-49.
[241] *Book of the First Church*, 45.

stability. Fuller set the foundation, Thacher provided an evangelistic spirit, Conant was a champion of church-and-state causes, Barker reinvigorated the moral and Calvinistic backbone of the church, and Putnam enlivened the desire to remember the church's history. Hanaford—and anyone who has studied the history of the church—recognized the role of the pastors.

> The stability of the church has been due…to the faithful ministries of the learned and devoted men who have never failed in declaring the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ, having so gently and wisely…preached the Word that all harmful schisms and heresies were avoided, and the church was enabled to pursue the tenor of its way unmolested by Socinian schismatics or hypercalvinistic zealots.

Even the unpopular pastors served their purposes for the collective memory of the church; both Palmer and Weld stood as warnings against the subtle attacks on church purity and a reminder of lay power; and the short terms of Paine and Eaton, along with the recurring vacancy in the pulpit, stood as reminders that the church must remain capable of sustaining itself in the absence of strong leadership.

This brings us to the other factor that we would be remiss to leave out in speaking of the church's stability: the knowledge and influence of the laity. There were several times in the First Church's history when it was without a pastor, and it was the congregation that maintained the *ideal*, *progress*, and *ritual* of the church. The *stability* of the First Church of Middleboro was rooted in the Separatist *ideal* for a voluntary, educated laity that was given a voice in church matters—and in the case of the First Church, it was a strong voice. It is a reminder in any history about the religious climate of the Old Colony to take due consideration of the laity as much as the clergy; and in the Middleboro First Church, specifically, there was no single entity to thank for the continuity it experienced.

ABBREVIATIONS

NEQ	*The New England Quarterly*
WMQ	*The William and Mary Quarterly*

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Sylvanus Conant Sermons. Sermon Collection. Received through email from the Congregational Library & Archives. Used with permission.

Notes

I have endeavored to edit the primary document citations for easier reading while attempting to maintain the original meaning and appearance. The use of punctuation (i.e. periods, commas, colons, etc.) has been modified, while spaces, capitalization, and original spellings have not (unless difficult to understand). Also the use of u, i, j, v, and s have been standardized to modern usage.

Dates prior to 1752 are according to the old style of date keeping, anything after is considered the new style. I.e. the Middleboro First Church was formed on December 26, 1694, but most mentions of their anniversary after 1752 are mentioned on January 5 according to the conversion between O.S. and N.S.

The name "Middleboro" has undergone several changes. The town has been known as Middleberry, Middleboro, and Middleborough. For the sake of ease I have kept it as Middleboro throughout, unless otherwise noted, or used differently in a citation. The First Church of Middleboro has frequently been shorthanded as the "First Church;" if another church is considered containing "First Church" in the name, the distinction is made.

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