Infant Baptism & The Half-Way Covenant

Christopher J. Black[1]

Introduction

Believer's baptism may be the most prominent of Baptist distinctives, however, during the founding of America, when the Puritans held sway, infant baptism was the norm. The sacramental attitude toward baptism by the Puritans produced a dangerous schism in the American colonies. In 1662 the Christian leaders in New England created a document that would come to be known pejoratively[2] as the Half-way Covenant. This document would effectively change the course of the development of the burgeoning nation. Most leaders realized that some sort of compromise was necessary or the whole noble experiment might be lost. The desire to build an actual theocracy, free from "episcopal, legislative and monarchical approval" was failing.[3] The situation was crying out for someone to do something. The solution eventually agreed upon was seen as a measure that would allow the theocracy to continue.

The new covenant was not decided upon easily or quickly. The road to compromise was a long and difficult path. Eventually, however, the vast majority came to realize that the New England Way was no longer viable. Effectively, the result was a new covenant that was a compromise half way between full- and non-membership in the Church. Kenneth Scott Latourette reports that even during the founding generations' lifetime few people held church membership: "In spite of the part which Christianity had in initiating and shaping the Thirteen Colonies, in 1750 the large majority of the white population were without a formal church connexion. It has been estimated, although this may be excessively low, that in 1750 only about five out of a hundred were members of churches."[4] By the midway point of the

---

[1]Christopher J. Black is a Ph.D. candidate (A.B.D.) at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He also serves as the Assistant Editor for the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*.

[2]Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Reformation to the Present, Volume II,* revised ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1953, 1975; reprint, Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2005), 955.

[3]David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 19, 23.

[4]Latourette, 954.

eighteenth century Colonial leaders were realizing that changes were needed if they were to save their society. The discussion in this article will offer a brief glimpse into the struggles early colonials had over the issue of baptism.

THE NEW ENGLAND CHURCH

The Puritans, believing in the autonomy of individual churches, instituted a church polity that would provide the freedom they sought. John Cotton dubbed this form of polity 'Congregational.' This system was integral to the New England Way.[5] However, this new polity did not mean that each church was completely freestanding. The faithful needed a venue for covenanting with God, fellow believers, and society. The idea of the church, for the Puritans, grew from their traditional, Old England views of a national institution. "The notion of a particular church covenant emerged only slowly from the practice of England's comprehensive national church, and New England Puritans instinctively maintained that national element, even as they established particular churches."[6] For the Puritans, the church, local and national, was instrumental for the proper functioning of society.

As exemplified in the Bay Colony, Ahlstrom defines the New England Way as resting "on the conviction that the entire commonwealth was intended to be as faithfully 'under God' as it could possibly be."[7] This understanding manifested itself in three ways important to this discussion. First, the church was to function as the central conduit through which the civil authorities would affect society. Second, full church membership was reserved only for the regenerate. Third, only those who clearly demonstrated regeneration were accepted as full members of the church.

The church functioned as a means through which the civil authorities exercised their offices. Only full members were permitted the vote on church matters;[8] and since the society was functioning as a theocracy, church membership included certain civic privileges. Not only was citizenship tied to church membership, but also, as Donna Campbell explains, members of the church would play an important role in the running of the town: "In each town, male church members could vote to elect 'selectmen' to run the town's day-to-day affairs, although town meetings were held to vote on legislation."[9] To be outside the full membership of the church was to be outside of society.[10]

---

[5]Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17.

[6]Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

[7]Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 149.

[8]E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 54.

The church only permitted the elect to enter into full membership of the church. One of the most recognizable features of the New England Way was its emphasis on participation. The understanding was that true believers would show clearly demonstrable signs of their conversion. Harry Stout holds up John Cotton's 1636 sermon in Salem as an outline of the Puritan system. Since the Church was for the regenerate alone, the Church required that the existing membership demonstrate their personal experiential piety in order to enter into the membership of the church.[11] These visible saints were the only ones permitted full participation in the church.

Only those who were able to pass the scrutiny of the membership committee were permitted full membership. Robert Pope explains the seriousness of the membership process: "The 'morphology of conversion,' initially developed by English Puritan divines as a guide for individual souls, was transformed into a yardstick for measuring the faithful. Saving faith, as distinguished from historical faith—an intellectual assent to the doctrines of Christianity—and from a simple belief in Christ, was the achievement of man. No matter how well intentioned or how respectable, those who desired entry into the churches of New England had to wait for the Lord's quickening of the spirit." The interviewers rejected many who, despite good character and professions of faith, failed to clearly demonstrate a regenerate nature. Pope continues, "The Puritans readily admitted that testified regenerate membership was not an infallible test: dissemblers and hypocrites could and did breach the portals of the church, despite the probing questions of elders and members; and perhaps even some of the elect were left outside. But within human limits Congregationalists had done their best to separate the wheat from the chaff."[12]

Membership was important for one other reason, access to the two main sacraments of the church—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both remained important parts of church life. Prior to the Reformation the sacraments were seen as conveying grace, but afterward Protestants held them as less salvific. Despite loosing the patina of salvation, however, the two sacraments retained much of their prior status.

The Lord's Supper remained much the same as before the Reformation. Even though they opposed any Anglican innovations when it came to the application or understanding of Communion, the doctrine of transubstantiation remained ever-present with the New England Puritans. For this reason, participation in the Lord's Supper was restricted to the church membership only.[13]

---

[9]Donna M. Campbell, "Puritanism in New England" *Literary Movements* [internet journal article]; http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/purdef.htm; accessed 20 April 2006.

[11]Stout, 19; John M. Mulder, "Half-Way Covenant," *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, Donald K. McKim, ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 99.

[12]Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 5-6.

The other sacrament, baptism, became a much more hotly debated issue. Like the Lord's Supper, the institution of baptism retained much of its former importance throughout the Reformation. The sacrament, though no longer thought to be salvific, remained the embodiment of regeneration.[14] The Puritans believed that their baptisms in infancy brought them into a relationship with the church and were somehow helpful in ushering them into the Kingdom later in life. For them, paedobaptism remained integral to church life. Within the restrictions of the New England Way, only church members were allowed to baptize their infants, which would be the source of trouble in generations to come.[15]

The New England Dissenters

Not everyone agreed with the way colonial life was evolving. Some stepped well outside the societal boundaries, while others made only minor moves. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were both banished for straying too far from the center of the covenant.[16] In 1631, Williams arrived in the Bay Colony as the Boston Church minister. When he arrived he found that the church had not separated from the Church of England and had not repented of its past affiliation to the mother Church. By 1635, he had so continuously disrupted the peace of the colony that the General Court of Massachusetts moved to have him deported. In order to avoid a return trip to England, Williams fled, founding Providence, Rhode Island in 1636.[17] Hutchinson was seen as an antinomian and a threat to the stability of the colonies. Her assertion that keeping the law was secondary for those under grace undermined the security of the embryonic colonies. She eventually was forced out of the colony into the wilderness. Noll places the threat presented by these dissidents into perspective:

As the history of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening would show, Hutchinson's kind of grace-inspired conventicalism, rather than Williams's moral scrupulosity, was always the most volatile threat to the Puritan scheme. Yet Williams and Hutchinson found out what later American dissidents would also discover: to strike at the reigning sacred synthesis anywhere was to call it into question everywhere. Their banishments showed both friends and foes of the New England Way that firm discipline was required to protect the covenant people.[18]

---

[13]Ahlstrom, 153-54; Weir, 160.

[14]Weir, 160.

[15]Pope, 13.

[16]Noll, 40.

[17]Ahlstrom, 154.

[18]Noll, 40.

The rigorous restrictions imposed by the community were seen as necessary for the protection of society. For those unwilling or unable to conform to the strict regulations, removal from the group was seen as critical to survival.[19]

Some separatists, however, remained loyal to the idea of the New England Way. In 1634 Thomas Hooker moved his congregation west, planting Hartford and many other towns in the lower Connecticut valley. His goal was to find land and a place where he was free to pursue his own brand of Puritanism. "The need for greater freedom, a wider franchise, and more restricted exercise of the magistrate's authority seems also to have figured in the decision."[20] In the Hartford church, freemen were not required to be members, and the test of internal conversion was not as stringently applied. Despite the softening application, Hooker remained a staunch proponent of the New England Way, opposing those who would challenge its basic principles.[21]

Other, non-Puritan, Christians also had some difficulties with the New England Way. The issue was over the strict membership requirement insisted upon by the Puritans. If the church had not required a certain level of personal piety, demonstrable in the life of the elect, then the issue of paedobaptism would not have been an issue.[22] The non-Puritan Christians watched with anticipation. The Presbyterians appreciated how the Puritans did not require believer's baptism as a membership requirement, but saw their emphasis on personal religious experience as negating the role of baptism in the life of the believer. The Baptists, on the other side of the spectrum, appreciated the Puritan's steadfastness toward restricting church membership to regenerate believers only, but their insistence on paedobaptism was unacceptable. According to Ahlstrom, as a result of pressure from the other Christian sects within New England, the Puritans "compromised by limiting infant baptism to the children of parents who had owned the covenant."[23] In other words, only the parents who were church members were allowed to baptize their children.

This compromise created an unstable and confusing situation within the Puritan Church. The result was that some churches defected to the Baptists, while a great number of churches remained Puritan but made excuses and did as they pleased.[24] The situation was growing dire, but the attention of the church was on paedobaptism, not the strictness of their membership requirements.

---

[19]Stout, 23.

[20]Ahlstrom, 152.

[21]Ibid., 152-53.

[22]Pope, 13.

[23]Ahlstrom, 158.

[24]Ibid., 158-59.

The New England Baptism

The New England Way and its policy of visible faith as a witness to conversion were placing the colonies in an untenable position. All was well with the first generation of Puritans. Fleeing from England because of religious persecution was a good indicator of an inner conversion. The problem became evident with the third generation: the founders' grandchildren.

With the Reformation, the sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper—had their functions redefined. For the Puritans, the Eucharist remained the center of the mass and baptism still promoted salvation. They both maintained much of their magical properties. Although the salvific qualities formerly associated with the sacraments were diminished, they lurked in the background of many believers' personal theology.[25]

The role of the Lord's Supper in the church remained at the core of the worship service, but the role of baptism was somewhat less secure. Most reformers understood that baptism sealed the covenant of grace, but were reluctant to imply that grace was received through baptism or that baptism guaranteed future salvation. They needed to clarify their position. The question was: In what way did baptism seal the covenant of grace in the person being baptized?[26]

The Puritan minister John Hooker, in his book, *Covenant of Grace Opened*, separates the covenant into the inner and the outer covenants. The inner covenant was reserved for the elect, who, during baptism, were sealed into the covenant of *salvation*. The outer covenant was for the non-elect, who, during baptism, were sealed into the covenant of the *church*. In this way he was able to avoid overstating the power of baptism while retaining its ability to seal the covenant.[27]

Holifield explains the confusion felt by New England ministers: "It sometimes appeared that the ministers could say only that baptism was a pledge and engagement to obedience, but they never intended to deny that baptism was a means of grace."[28] The concept that baptized infants were provided with a greater opportunity for salvation because of their baptism was presented in the 1648 *Cambridge Platform*. For this reason—the hope that through baptism their children would have the best chance for salvation—paedobaptism remained a critical sacrament within the Puritan Church.[29]

---

[25]Weir, 160.

[26]Holifield, 53.

[27]John Hooker, *Covenant of Grace Opened*, 20; quoted in Holifield, 53.

[28]Holifield, 53.

[29]Ibid., 53-54.

THE HALF-WAY COMPROMISE

Two factors conspire at this point to plant the seeds of controversy. The first factor is that only church members can present their children for baptism. The second factor is that baptism is understood by most New England Puritans to be critical in the process of salvation for their children. Although not all Christians are able to become church members—having failed to demonstrate to the satisfaction of their church elders a visible Christianity—they still desperately desired baptism for their children. A growing number of grandchildren of the founding fathers were prevented from the benefit of baptism, and the problem was not restricted to the established New England families. During this time immigrants continued to flood into the colonies, and because of the high standard of personal piety demanded by the church, many were not able to attain the membership needed to have their children baptized. An ever-increasing anxiety within families, affected by the strictness of the New England Way, was beginning to spread.[30]

The worry over the eternal security of their children began to take its toll. The issue began to come to a head 1634 when a church member brought his grandchild to Pastor John Cotton for baptism. The child's parents were not church members so stood outside the covenant. When Cotton allowed the baptism on the condition that the grandfather raise the child, he created an exception to the rule that the infant's right to baptism came from one or both of the immediate parents. This exception allowed other such baptisms to take place. Holifield points out how "the problems intensified when many of the baptized grew to adulthood without attesting that God had converted their hearts."[31] Cotton's exception opened Pandora's Box, and like the myth, once opened, the box could not be closed.

The situation continued to worsen. The clergy demanded the answers to certain questions: Who could bring children for baptism? Who was responsible for the children brought by people other than the parents? Was membership necessary for parents to bring their children for baptism?[32] Initially several ministers, realizing where the brewing crisis was heading, "advocated, not the elimination of regenerate membership, but new ways to extend church discipline."[33]

Holifield lists three issues that divided the churches. First was whether paedobaptism conveyed permanent membership to the infant. Those ministers who advocated infant baptism held that baptism was a permanent seal of personal membership. The opponents claimed that the baptized infants were only mediate members who needed to demonstrate a visible faith in order to become members. Second was whether baptism conveyed a promise or covenant to the infant. The proponents claimed that the promise held to at least the second generation, while the critics emphasized not the promise but the obligation signified

[30]Ahlstrom, 158.

[31]Holifield, 54.

[32]Noll, 40.

[33]Pope, 14.

by baptism to various baptismal duties, which the unregenerate failed to fulfill. Third was whether baptism was typologically equivalent to circumcision. Proponents held that since baptism is the same as circumcision the privileges that circumcision seals are also sealed at the time of baptism. The critics failed to see the typological connection, so found the proponents' point moot.[34]

One of the most successful solutions came from Richard Mather, who, in 1645, suggested that the children and even the grandchildren of church members should be permitted baptism. Pope adds, "Peter Bulkeley of Concord and George Phillips of Watertown shared his view. Both conceived of the covenant as continuing unto a thousand generations; cutting it off at the third was unthinkable."[35] Whether to the third generation or the thousandth, many conservative Puritans found the mere thought of opening the church up to include the unregenerate to be anathema.

For Puritans, membership was only for the regenerate. To open up baptism to everyone threatened the sanctity of the church. Eventually, two parties formed. The Congregationalist party disagreed with the idea that opening baptism would pollute the church, but the Conservative party refused to believe that change was necessary so put pressure on those calling for change. In September of 1646, John Davenport, the main leader of the conservative movement pressured the Commissioners of the United Colonies into warning each colony's General Court to permit only those into membership who demonstrated an effectual calling and to allow baptism of only those children who were the immediate offspring of a member.[36] The New England Way was reinforced.

The Half-Way Covenant

The ruling of the General Courts did not deter the Congregationalists. Eventually, the matter came to the attention of the Massachusetts General Court, who called for an official synod. The Cambridge Synod spent little time debating the issue of baptism, but did appoint Ralph Partridge of Duxbury and Richard Mather of Dorchester to prepare a response to the question.[37] Both strongly recommended the extension of baptism. The response, which was primarily the work of Mather, was named the *Cambridge Platform* when presented to the Synod at the session held in 1648.[38] The reforms in the platform failed.

---

[34]Holifield, 54-55.

[35]Pope, 14.

[36]Ibid., 15.

[37]Ibid., 18; Alstrom, 158; Although Pope lists only Partridge and Mather as the men selected by the Synod, Walker includes John Cotton in the list. Williston Walker, "The Services of the Mathers in New England Religious Development." *Papers of the American Society of Church History* 5 (1893): 61-85. [internet edition]; http://www.dinsdoc.com/walker-1.htm; accessed on 20 April 2006, 66-67.

[38]Pope, 18; Walker, 66-67.

The Congregationalists did salvage some success from the Cambridge Synod. Many of the small churches that previously were reluctant to extend baptism found that they were not alone in the struggle. In fact they found that they were actually in the majority. Richard Mather became a figurehead for those wanting change. He took the reins of the movement and guided it with skill and wisdom. His hard work was not in vein. Slowly, more churches began seeing the wisdom of expanding baptism. In 1650 the two largest churches in Connecticut entered into discussions with Mather about the consequences of accepting the proposed polity changes. The dialogue lasted over six years, but the churches eventually came to accept the inevitable tide of change. By 1656 the tide had indeed turned. In that year the Connecticut General Court sought help from the Massachusetts Court in order to resolve issues regarding baptism. In response to Connecticut's request, Massachusetts called for a Ministerial Assembly to be held in Boston, June 4, 1657.[39]

With much of the conservative party occupied with business in their home colonies, the Ministerial Assembly took only two weeks to complete its business and forward its findings to the General Courts. Richard Mather submitted the main proposal, which he published under the title *A Disputation Concerning Church Members and Their Children in Answer to XXI Questions*. Mather most certainly wrote this document, basing it on his work used in the *Cambridge Platform* of 1648, for it retains much of the earlier document's language.[40]

The Congregationalists were vindicated. Their policies were recognized and endorsed. The General Court of Massachusetts gave baptized parents who did not have church membership the right to have their children baptized. In this way, all non-members, who themselves were baptized as infants, retained the right, through their baptism, to have their children baptized.[41]

Even with all the progress that was made, little was done to resolve the actual issue. Dissention remained, unity continued to be threatened, and "to compound the difficulty, the restoration of Charles II in 1660 jeopardized the Puritan cause everywhere. Now more than ever New England had to close ranks. That marvelous intellectual construct, the New England Way, was foundering on the rocks of baptism."[42] Something more substantial was needed to draw the matter to a close. Mere legislation would not suffice.

Realizing that the issue over baptism remained critical, the Massachusetts General Court took action in December of 1661. Hoping that a full-scale synod would finally settle

---

[39]Pope, 22-29.

[40]Ibid., 29-30.

[41]Holifield, 54.

[42]Pope, 42.

the matter, they called one for the following March to be held in Boston. The question for debate was "Who are the subjects of baptism?"[43]

THE HALF-WAY SYNOD

In March 1662 eighty ministers and laymen from most of the thirty-four Massachusetts churches arrived at Boston's First Church to debate the pressing issue of baptism. Representatives from the other colonies failed to arrive. One notable loss was the absence of the lead conservative voice in the colonies, John Davenport, who was dealing with important matter in the colony he founded and sustained. According to royal charter, New Haven was being absorbed into Connecticut. This political turmoil may have played some role in why the ministers of Connecticut also did not attend. The Massachusetts Congregationalists regretted the absence of their support. Massachusetts was left on its own to find a solution that affected all of New England. With each messenger, no matter his status, having one vote, the matter was far from certain.[44]

The synod elected a moderator "and introduced for the synod's consideration seven propositions based on the conclusions reached by the Ministerial Assembly." After eleven days of debate, the first session concluded with a split vote, "but the lines of debate, had they ever been in doubt, were now clearly drawn."[45] The synod was adjourned until the tenth of June. The three-month break allowed the conservatives time to lobby support and to prepare a response.[46]

When the synod returned in June, the debate was renewed. At the next vote, the conservatives were surprised to find that they had lost significant ground. Pope describes the situation, "What appeared to be a formidable number of opponents in March was reduced to one man in eight by June."[47] The tide had turned.

By late September the seven proposals, which were formalized and presented to the synod, passed the final vote. Pope summarizes the proceedings: "The question, 'Who are the subjects of baptism,' had been answered and Massachusetts had a new orthodoxy. The Cambridge Synod had evaded the issue; the Ministerial Assembly had outlined the principles; the Half-Way Synod placed the full weight of a synodical decision behind the extension of

[43]*Massachusetts Records, 4,* Part 2, 38; quoted in Pope, 42.

[44]Pope, 43-44.

[45]Ibid., 44.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid., 45.

baptism and gave new meaning to the church covenant."[48] After a fifteen-year campaign, Richard Mather was finally vindicated.[49]

The Half-Way Synod upheld the ruling of the Ministerial Assembly, in a sense ratifying that decision. While the children of church members were to be considered under the constant supervision of the church, non-members were permitted to have their infants baptized. In order to maintain the exclusivity within the church role, non-members, although now permitted the privilege of baptism, were still not permitted the other rights of membership, especially access to the Lord's Supper. Communion was preserved as a right for only the regenerate because it symbolized the new birth in Christ. Therefore, non-members, even if confessing Christians, remained outside of the church unless they were able to successfully demonstrate a visible faith. In this way, church life functioned after the Half-Way Synod much as it did before.[50]

CONCLUSION

The Puritans' desire to 'purify' the Church of England led them to the New World, which they saw as the New Promised Land. Access to the sacraments remained vital to them, but with successive generations, an increasing number of New England Puritans were being excluded from them. Their form of polity was known as the New England Way.

Anxiety began to grip the colonies as many of the second generation Puritans who had been baptized but had not demonstrated a visible faith were not able to baptize their children. Non-members did not have the privilege of paedobaptism, so members began bringing their grandchildren for baptism. When John Cotton allowed this exception, the problem seemed to be solved. However, when many of these third-generation infants grew into an unregenerate adulthood, the Church began questioning the wisdom of such a course.

Three options were available to the New Englanders. The first was to open the Church to the unsaved. The second was to continue to exclude all but the membership to the rights and privileges of the church. Both of these options were unacceptable. The third solution was to reach some sort of compromise. In 1647, the Cambridge Synod asked Richard Mather and others to draft a solution to this matter. The blueprint of his 'Model of Church Government' became the basis for the response, and was entitled, the *Cambridge Platform*. When the problem persisted, a Ministerial Assembly was held in 1657, but the situation remained. Finally, in 1662, the Congregationalist, those pushing for the expansion of the right to baptism, won a lasting victory at the Half-Way Synod. The resulting half-way principles allowed those baptized as infants the right to baptize their children—half-way membership—but they were not allowed access to any other rights or privileges of the

---

[48]Ibid., 49.

[49]Ibid.

[50]James Thomas Meigs, "The Half-Way Covenant: A Study in Religious Transition," *Foundations* 13 (April-June 1970): 148; Noll, 40-41; Mulder, 99.

Church. This solution provided the necessary avenue for non-members wanting to provide their children with the means to salvation, while continuing to preserve the exclusiveness of full Church membership.

Noll summarizes the situation: "The need to improvise a Half-Way Covenant after only one generation in the new world revealed faults within the New England Way, but also the capacity of Puritan leaders to maintain the tension between, as Robert Pope once wrote, 'a moral, covenanted society' (including every citizen) and 'truly reformed churches' (made up only of the elect)."[51]

By holding onto a sacramental view of baptism, the Puritans placed themselves into a difficult situation. They wished to keep the Church holy by restricting membership to the converted. For them, one's faith must be demonstrable; thus the subjectivity of the system took its toll, reducing the church membership over time. If nothing changed, the church would disappear. People began panicking when members of their family were prevented from baptism. Without baptism, surely they would never be saved. In this way, the struggle over baptism forced the development of a half-way compromise. But this new approach was only a temporary fix to the bigger issue of sacramentalism.

[51]Noll, 40; Pope, 261.