

JOHN COTTON: THE ANTINOMIAN CALVINIST

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To my supportive and loving family:
this dissertation is a testimony
to God's grace
and your support

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CHAPTER I

THE ANTINOMIAN CALVINIST

It could be easily argued that John Cotton was the most famous of all the first generation American Puritans. His reputation as a Puritan pastor and scholar was already well established by his successful pastorate in Boston, England. This ministry made him the envy of his fellow Puritan pastors and a household name in the Puritan community. Upon his arrival in New England, he was quickly called as the teacher of First Church Boston. There, his ministry experienced the first significant revival in American history. Cotton also quickly became the primary teacher for the colony when he continued his practice of holding a Thursday lecture that was attended by most of the clergy and prominent laity. The recent publication of Cotton's voluminous correspondence also illustrated that he was the advisor to many within the Puritan community.¹ His advice, opinions, and perspective on the Christian life were sought by both commoners and the nobility. In the past three hundred and fifty years, there has been no shortage of books that provide information concerning the basic details of his life and ministry, and many important scholarly works have affirmed that he was a significant leader within both English and American Puritanism. Yet, even with all of this acclaim, the reasons for Cotton's ministerial success as well as the source of his personal magnetism have remained obscure. In other words, Cotton remained an enigma: important but extremely confusing. This dissertation seeks to assess Cotton's importance for his day and today.

¹ Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Building upon the work of others but providing a new interpretation of Cotton's primary theological and pastoral particularities, this dissertation seeks to illuminate the reasons for Cotton's popularity as well as his importance for Puritanism.

This dissertation will argue that best way to understand Cotton's significance is a renewed investigation into both Cotton's life as well as his theology. In particular, this dissertation will present Cotton's theology within the context of his life and ministry. The goal of this exploration will be a renewed investigation of Cotton's thought during his early years in New England. These years of ministry have proved troublesome for those seeking to understand Cotton's true place and importance within Puritanism. During this time, Cotton became embroiled in the Antinomianism controversy. This thought came under fire from his New England colleagues and this trend continues to today. In recent years, several influential scholars have described Cotton as a theological compromiser whose opinions and theology changed often throughout his life.² This interpretation has guided several generations of scholars resulting in a distortion of Cotton's thought. This dissertation will take a two-part approach to correcting the standard interpretation. First, each chapter will take the known basic facts concerning

² As we will see, Larzer Ziff's biography of Cotton began this direction within the scholarship. His research emphasized Cotton's tendency toward compromise as central to understanding his place within Puritanism. Perhaps more influential in his critique of Cotton's theology was William Stoever. Stoever argued that Cotton's theology moved from the Puritan mainstream toward a rejection of the proper means in promoting assurance. He argued that this change directly led to the Antinomian controversy. Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) and William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978). Several recent works have basically agreed with and augmented Stoever's observations. These include, Brooks Hollifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) and Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Cotton's life and weave a fresh interpretation of Cotton's place within Puritanism.³ These short biographical sections will present Cotton as a defender of Reformed thought: a man concerned with promoting God's sovereign glory in election and other traditional Reformed doctrines. Cotton began his ministerial career by winning the day for classic Reformed thought in Lincolnshire against a rising Arminian movement.⁴ This victory shaped his self-understanding, and it prompted his responses to theological questions he faced throughout his life. Each chapter will begin with these short biographical sections to prepare the way for a new interpretation of Cotton's thought before, during, and after the Antinomian controversy. In the process, these biographical sections comprise one means of explaining the ultimate issues behind the Antinomian controversy. In particular, they illustrate why Cotton's theological trajectory emphasized divine grace in every aspect of salvation and sanctification. This theological trajectory was formed from his education and the early conflicts that he faced as a young pastor and theologian. They also build one element of the argument for understanding Cotton's importance as a Reformed theologian in early America.

³ This will not be a complete new biography of Cotton's life. Many of the basic events within Cotton's life and ministry are not in debate. As a prominent first generation American Puritan leader, the basic scope of his life and ministry has been well researched and explained. The purpose of these biographical sections will be to take known instances in Cotton's life to offer a new interpretation of his character and thought. To date, the best presentation of Cotton's life is found in Larzer Ziff's *The Career of John Cotton*. This dissertation's biographical sections are indebted to Ziff's research. Yet, they will go beyond his research by augmenting his presentation of Cotton's life with recent scholarship concerning Cotton's educational situation at Cambridge as well as several recently discovered elements of Cotton's life that have been unearthed with the recent publication of Cotton's correspondence. The result will be a new perspective on Cotton's life and thought. Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁴ See pages 56 *ff.* Years later, Cotton explained that a Mr. Doctor Baron had "leavened many of the chief men of the town with Arminianism." John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 215.

The second element of this dissertation will explain Cotton's theological trajectory. While Cotton's life explains the reasons for his theological particularities, the second half of each chapter provides insight into the substance of Cotton's thought. This dissertation is the first sustained scholarly work to explore how his theological system impacted the debates surrounding the Antinomian controversy. Taking the perspective that Cotton's early education and ministry shaped his thought, each chapter will build a case for understanding Cotton's theology as an attempt to defend Reformed thought against any hint of Arminianism. In the process, this dissertation will present Cotton's affinities to the Reformed tradition in regard to the work of each person of the Trinity in bringing redemption. Chapter two will present Cotton's understanding of the work of God the creator in his understanding of the doctrine of God, creation, and covenant theology. In each of these areas, Cotton was unwaveringly within the Puritan and Reformed mainstream.⁵ While his understanding of the character of God, creation, and covenant theology were not novel, they provided the basis for his reflections upon the importance of person and work of Christ and the work of the Spirit to the life of the believer. Chapter three will then explore Cotton's understanding of the importance of Jesus for every dimension of the Christian life. Within his theological system, Cotton sought to give all the glory and credit in salvation to the person and work of God the Son. We will see that such a desire led him to overemphasize the doctrine of justification. Both the reasons and the consequences of this inflation of justification will be explored and

⁵ In his recent work concerning Antinomianism in England and America, Theodore Bozeman focused much of his time on Cotton's thought. In these sections, he confessed that Cotton never abandoned the Puritan mainstream on these core issues even as he took a different path concerning God's work in salvation, assurance, and the Christian life. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 257-262. This is a reoccurring theme in Bozeman's research.

explained. Finally, this dissertation will explore Cotton's understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of the Antinomian debate was the charge that Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit approached the teaching of the Familist sect. Chapter four will explain Cotton's theology concerning the Spirit. It will also explore Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit's work in bringing assurance. In the process, it will illustrate Cotton's place within the Reformed tradition as well as explain the particularities of Cotton's thought regarding the Spirit.

In the midst of this two-part investigation into Cotton's life, this dissertation will clarify Cotton's place within transcontinental Puritanism. It will argue that Cotton's central significance for Puritanism was his ability to articulate a vision for the Christian life that emphasized the centrality of objective assurance through the witness of the Spirit without abandoning the need to grow in one's subjective godliness.⁶ While the terms objective and subjective are imposed upon the Puritan literature, this dissertation will illustrate that the concepts were clearly derived from many Puritan sources. In this dissertation and within Puritan thought, objective assurance referred to the work of the Holy Spirit in confirming the promises of the gospel to the life of a believer through an inward witness of faith and adoption. For example, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* Article XVIII.2 On Assurance of Salvation stated,

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption

⁶ This dissertation is indebted to Mark Dever for the objective and subjective terminology. The concept is clearly within Puritanism, but the terminology assists in understanding the issues surrounding the Antinomian controversy. Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 163.

witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

As we will see in chapter four, this concept was borrowed from William Perkins, and it is what this dissertation will present as objective assurance.⁷ This section of *The Westminster Confession* and the concept of objective assurance illustrated two of the three foundations for authentic assurance: first, the inward evidence of grace from the promises; and second, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption. This dissertation will illustrate that Cotton's thought emphasized these foundations. Yet, they were not the only means of finding assurance. Puritans also held to the notion that one could, through ordinary means, find assurance of faith. These ordinary means included prayer, listening to sermons, self-examination, humiliation, and a host of practical Christian disciplines. Such pursuit of assurance through ordinary means is what this dissertation describes as subjective assurance and what many scholars have labeled the proper use of the syllogism. As we will see in chapter four, subjective assurance is the third foundation for authentic assurance of faith. Perhaps the clearest means of explaining this idea is to look at Article XVIII.3 of *The Westminster Confession*. It stated,

This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

⁷ See chapter IV, pages 170-171.

This dissertation will illustrate that Cotton did not deny this Puritan principle of subjective assurance even as he emphasized objective assurance as essential for proper subjective assurance. It will also illustrate that Thomas Shepard, Cotton's greatest detractor during the Antinomian controversy, maintained both objective and subjective assurance even as he emphasized that subjective assurance must be primary in determining authentic assurance of faith.⁸

The concepts of objective and subjective assurance were well known to the Puritans though the significance of the distinctions between the concepts has often been blurred in any discussion surrounding the Antinomian controversy.⁹ Cotton's vision of the Christian life emphasized the objective work of God: in particular the work of the Spirit in promoting authentic assurance. While this vision is supposedly ubiquitous within Puritanism, it clashed with the emphasis of Thomas Shepard and Thomas Hooker in the 1630s who emphasized the role of subjective assurance in promoting authentic assurance.¹⁰ This dissertation will explain not only Cotton's thought from the context of his life and Puritanism, but also the significance of his ideas for his context and today. In the process, this dissertation will clarify Cotton's place in the many debates he faced throughout his ministry including offering a fresh theological approach to the Antinomian

⁸ See chapter IV, pages 151 *ff.* and 162-163.

⁹ For example, William Stoever and even the recent work by Brooks Holifield insist on the centrality of subjective assurance. Both of these scholars insist that Cotton's thought neglected subjective assurance in his overemphasis on the Spirit's witness. This dissertation will address this topic in depth in chapters three and four. William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven* and Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America*. A similar argument was recently made by Theodore Bozeman's *The Precisionist Strain*. In this work, Bozeman argued that strict disciplinary religion (subjective assurance) was central to Puritanism. Thus, Cotton's thought was problematic within Puritanism. Yet, Bozeman often noted that Puritanism also contained the objective assurance pole. As he stated in explaining Cotton's theological perspective in America. "In America, Cotton retrenched the holy walk, but he did so by accenting the vintage Puritan urge to make religion less human and more divine." *The Precisionist Strain*, 257. This dissertation will seek to clarify the supposed conflicting Puritan teaching concerning both objective and subjective assurance.

¹⁰ See chapter IV for details.

controversy. It will explain the issues found within the controversy as pastoral and theological disagreements concerning how one best applies traditional Reformed thought to the Christian life. It will illustrate how the debate concerning the relationship between objective and subjective assurance pushed both sides to positions that needed correction. In particular, this dissertation will present Cotton's contributions to the debate as well as his shortcomings in causing the controversy. In the end, this dissertation will also illustrate the many tensions within Puritanism, and in particular American Puritanism, from the mid-seventeenth century through the Great Awakening in the 1740s.

Foundational for understanding Cotton's life and thought is the acknowledgment that Cotton's work was consistently more pastoral than purely academic.¹¹ The vast majority of Cotton's published works were sermon notes, often notes taken by others. While many Puritan works of divinity were composed in this fashion, with Cotton this tendency was particularly marked. In addition, the vast majority of his works were collections of sermons, and not academic works. Interestingly, many scholars have not focused upon Cotton's academic explanations for his positions because of the claim these works were mere apologies for his theological deviancy. This dissertation will illustrate how these scholarly explanations matched the theology contained in his preached sermons. Cotton did write a short catechism for children and several scholarly works concerning issues of church government and practice, but his most influential works were primarily "helpful" books on practical Christian living. As such, his theology's most important characteristic was its emphasis on application. These applications were vital for understanding the many threads of his thought, his life, and his ministry. Throughout

¹¹ As scholars have often noted, this tendency marked many Puritans. See Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America* 25-26.

this dissertation, Cotton's theological applications will be described as Cotton's theology of the Christian life. In other places, this application of traditional doctrines has been called experiential theology or practical theology. While all Puritans were concerned with the practical implications of their biblical theology, Cotton's importance rested in his ability to explain Reformed theology in a manner that helped his hearers and readers apply traditional doctrines to their lives. In other words, following the lead of William Ames and William Perkins, Cotton presented a vision of theology as the art of living blessedly.¹² His theology was focused upon the practical living of the Christian, and he used classical Reformed doctrine to encourage even the weakest of believers to rest in Christ alone for salvation. This encouragement focused his hearers to rest in the objective work of Christ as foundational for living the Christian life. As Cotton's correspondence illustrated, this approach to Puritan spirituality gained Cotton a wide audience within Puritanism. In addition, Cotton's indisputable popularity as a preacher, writer, and advisor for the Puritan community illustrated the attractive nature of this teaching. Important for American Puritan studies, his approach to practical spirituality also differed from his fellow Elders in New England. Fortunately for those who enjoy controversy, Cotton's teaching proved to be a lightning rod for dispute throughout the last half of his life. This dissertation will also present the sources of Cotton's supposed Antinomian teaching. In the process, it will respond to the theological questions raised by his fellow Elders that led to the Antinomian controversy as well as those questions concerning Cotton's thought raised by more recent scholarship. It will illustrate how his

¹² A theme that marked the goal of all Puritans from the mid-1580s. See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 90 ff.

emphasis on application over theological precision explains his inconsistency and weakness as a systematic theologian.

While this dissertation will build upon the important scholarship of many others, it will go in slightly different directions from any previous work. As we shall see, the reasons for these departures from the scholarly norm are in the end justified, but in the beginning they were personal. In my readings of the Puritans, I found many parallels to my own life in a conservative Reformed denomination. In particular, I found that all of the major thinkers within the Puritan camp agreed upon many basic theological concepts. The clearest articulation of these points of agreement was the Westminster Standards. While those Puritans who embraced Congregationalism differed from the Presbyterian affirmations concerning Church government, they still agreed with all of the major theological affirmations of the Confession. While there was debate concerning how best to articulate many of these theological concepts, there was nevertheless a basic agreement concerning the veracity of the Confession's central claims. In other words, at the level of affirming a statement of faith, there was agreement. The problem was this agreement in a statement of faith did not bring peace to the Church. Instead, Puritanism was often marked by a deeply divisive debate over the particulars of how individuals and churches should apply the agreed upon theology.

I experienced a similar dichotomy. Within my denomination, there is an affirmation in the theology expressed within the Westminster Standards. For ordination, a pastor or teacher must affirm these standards and promise not to teach against the theology expressed in the Standards. Yet, even with this agreement, I found that virtually every Presbytery meeting was marked by disagreement and even distrust. In my

experience within the denomination, I did not find many, if any, who truly disagreed with the basic statements of faith expressed within the Westminster Standards. Instead, the debate and often heated discussions centered upon the many different applications of a shared theology. In other words, even with basic theological agreement, intense debate over application of these shared beliefs can cause division. In today's world, the issues for debate closely resemble the areas debated within Cotton's lifetime. For example, of vital importance to some is the question of how a Christian or a church should relate to the world in worship? Today and four hundred years ago, people who agree upon the Westminster Standards debated the extent of the scripture regulatory principle. In Cotton's writings, he affirmed a rather ardent belief in this principle. More important for understanding Cotton's life and thought, a second question dominated many years of his life. This question asked how salvation by grace impacted the living of the Christian life. A secondary related question asked how the law should be preached and applied to the Christian life. Today these questions are still being asked and answered in different ways by people who affirm the same basic patterns of belief as the early American Puritans. My initial and continued interest in these questions also has driven my interest in Cotton's life as well as the debates that consumed the last half of his active ministry.

In providing a detailed explanation of Cotton's applications of Reformed thought, this dissertation will provide insight into Cotton's significance for Puritanism as well as for today's theological debates within conservative Reformed denominations. Each chapter will illustrate the many ways that Cotton agreed doctrinally with the Puritan mainstream. It will also explain how application of traditional Reformed teaching concerning salvation by Christ alone and reliance upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the

life of a believer illustrated the inconsistencies within his life and ministry. It will illustrate how Cotton drew from these doctrines owned by all within the Puritan mainstream to compose a vision of the Christian life that rested in the objective work of God in salvation for growth in personal godliness. As we will see, within Cotton's system the aim of all theology was godly Christian living. He argued that the central mark of true godliness was personal and corporate humility in thought and action. He affirmed that an authentic work of God resulted in true humility: this was the mark of authentic conversion as well as true spiritual maturity. Such humility could only be brought about by the work of the Spirit, and it marked authentic justification with the life of a believer. While it could be argued that this emphasis on humility marked many Puritan thinkers, Cotton took this emphasis to an extreme. Throughout his life, Cotton used humility as a litmus test to determine appropriate Christian responses to the many social and theological issues facing the Puritan community. He used humility as a sword to cut to the heart of the many theological debates in which he played an active role. This sword left no room for theological pride, and it placed the emphasis within his teaching on humble Christian living and experience over theological precision. Consequently, Cotton's true importance for Puritanism lies in his particular expressions of how to apply accepted Reformed thought to the Christian life. This dissertation will illustrate how his theology used accepted Reformed articulations of theology to address the thoughts and concerns of his day. It will also identify the places where his theology overemphasized some areas of accepted Reformed theology, which led to theological confusion and debate. Interestingly, Cotton's teaching did not cause a stir in England; but in New England, his approach to the Christian life differed greatly from the teaching of Thomas

Shepard and Thomas Hooker.¹³ Both of these men emphasized personal holiness, preparationism, and intense introspection as the surest method of finding assurance of faith and living an authentic Christian life.¹⁴ While on the surface Cotton agreed with the use of these tools within the Christian life, his emphasis was consistently different. Cotton emphasized humility and a continual recognition of unbelief in the life of a believer. He argued that unbelief and sin provide opportunity to come afresh to Christ by faith.¹⁵ This dissertation will explain these differences; and in the process, it will provide a clear presentation of Cotton's importance for both Puritanism and today.

Of importance to the scholarly community, this dissertation will also explain why Cotton became embroiled in the Antinomian controversy. As we shall see, the Antinomian controversy remains the primary lens through which Cotton's theology has been explored. This is to be expected, and this dissertation will continue that trend by addressing Cotton's theology to the questions raised during the Antinomianism controversy. Where this dissertation will differ from previous scholarship is in its attempt to explain Cotton's theology during the controversy by offering a new perspective on Cotton's life and thought before and after the controversy. In the process of explaining the development and form of Cotton's theology, this dissertation will

¹³ For example, Thomas Hooker, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ* (Morgan, PA: Sola Deo Gloria Books), 1-2. This trait of Hooker was also emphasized in Sargent Bush, Jr. *The Writings of Thomas Hooker: Spiritual Adventure in Two Worlds* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 147 ff., 252.

¹⁴ A consistent example of this tendency was Thomas Shepard's *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* (Morgan, PA: Sola Deo Gloria Books). Shepard's applications of doctrine often stressed the need to love God more, to hate sin more, and to strive for true faith. The entire first section of *The Ten Virgins* explained how most Christians were not prepared for Christ's return so they must prepare themselves so they can close with Christ. For comment concerning this tendencies, see Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 78 ff.

¹⁵ As we will see in chapter IV, Cotton's understanding of such repentance and faith followed from his understanding of the teaching of William Perkins. Shepard and Hooker used this same teaching by Perkins to promote preparationism. See below pages 174-175.

attempt to explain the reasons why Cotton argued and behaved as he did throughout the controversy.¹⁶ It will present Cotton's theological emphasis upon the objective assurance found by the work of the Spirit as central for his understanding of authentic Christian living. It will illustrate how Cotton's thought matched with many within the Puritan mainstream, but differed from the emphasis upon subjective assurance found within the thought of Thomas Shepard and Thomas Hooker.

Within recent years, several important works have illuminated the primary theological questions involved in the Antinomian controversy. For example Brooks Holifield's recent *Theology in America* argued that the primary theological issue that precipitated the controversy revolved around the issue of union with Christ.¹⁷ He argued that Cotton over emphasized the importance of union with Christ and justification so as to undermine accepted beliefs concerning sanctification. As he stated, "Instead of telling his people to look to their sanctification as evidence of true faith and union with Christ, he told them that they had to discern their justifying faith and union with Christ before they could know whether their sanctification was genuine."¹⁸ Importantly, such a distinction placed the emphasis in assurance on "'the revelation of the Holy Ghost,' the immediate Seal of the Spirit, a power 'above' even the biblical word."¹⁹ This dissertation will illustrate the reasons Cotton emphasized justification and the witness of the Spirit as primary in the Christian life. When Cotton's thought is viewed only through the

¹⁶ This emphasis is different from recent studies concerning Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy. As we will see, many of these studies attempt to explain Cotton's thought only through the works immediately surrounding the controversy. While these studies have made many brilliant discoveries concerning the Antinomian controversy, they have missed several key ideas within Cotton's thought that explain his position in the mid-1630s.

¹⁷ Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45. A similar argument was made by Theodore Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 257-280.

Antinomian controversy, Holifield's assessment of Cotton's thought, particularly his *The Covenant of God's Free Grace* that was preached in 1636, hits the mark. Yet, this dissertation will go beyond Holifield's articulation of the theological issues immediately surrounding the Antinomian controversy. It will do so by presenting Cotton's thought before, during, and after the Antinomian controversy. In the process, it will illustrate how Cotton's thought did not neglect subjective assurance, as well as how his thought had many antecedents and followers within the Reformed and Puritan tradition who emphasized objective assurance as foundational for authentic subjective assurance.²⁰ This dissertation will assist in the scholarly understanding of the controversy by illuminating Cotton's theological and personal reasons for maintaining the particularities of his theology. In the process, it will clarify Cotton's position and offer a fresh interpretation of Cotton's role in the controversy.

Why another work concerning Cotton?

This dissertation will illuminate Cotton's significance for Puritanism and today through an exploration of both his life and his theology. This work is needed for several reasons. First, the scholarly community is still awaiting a definitive biography of Cotton. In fact, the most significant scholarly work concerning Cotton's life is now over forty years old. Since the publication of Larzer Ziff's *The Career of John Cotton* in 1962, Cotton's theology has been investigated in many works concerning the Antinomian controversy, but there have been no renewed attempts to understand the significance of

²⁰ See below pages, 170-175.

his life for his thought.²¹ This dissertation will offer a different understanding of Cotton's life and significance within Puritanism. It will weave a new interpretation of Cotton's early life and how his early ministry experience shaped his self-understanding as a Puritan pastor and theologian. In addition, the recent publication of Cotton's correspondence makes a renewed investigation into his life particularly apropos.²² This correspondence illustrates not only the areas of debate surrounding Cotton's theology, but also the genuine ways that his thought ministered to the questions and concerns of his audience. Second, this dissertation is needed to help add perspective to the many different attempts in recent years to understand the issues surrounding the Antinomian controversy. As we will see, Cotton has been rightfully identified by many scholars as central to the issues surrounding the Antinomian controversy. Unfortunately for Cotton studies, such notice has made the Antinomian controversy the lens through which all of his thought is measured and understood. This dissertation will answer the questions raised by scholarship concerning Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy, but it will do so by explaining the whole of Cotton's thought as it unfolded throughout his life. This dissertation is needed to help explain the significance of the theological issues often mentioned in the scholarly literature.

To provide context for the remainder of this dissertation and to answer the question of why another study of Cotton is necessary, the following few pages will give a brief account of the arguments made by my primary scholarly conversation partners. The

²¹ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

²² For a complete historiographical essay concerning Cotton scholarship, see Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1-67. In this essay, Bush illustrated the lack of detailed analysis of Cotton's thought throughout his life.

first part of this account will include the argument and perspective of Larzer Ziff's *Career of John Cotton*. The second part will include the primary scholarly perspectives concerning Cotton's theology during the Antinomian controversy. While this dissertation will build upon this scholarship and in many ways agree with some perspectives, it will also seek to augment and explain the reasons behind some of the observations made by previous scholars.

Perhaps no monograph has had a greater impact on Cotton studies than Larzer Ziff's *The Career of John Cotton*. It has remained the scholarly standard concerning the life and ministry of Cotton even though Ziff confessed that it was not intended to be a complete and authoritative biography. Ziff's work, written in 1962, was the first published biography concerning the life of John Cotton in over one hundred years. As a work of history, Ziff's research was extremely solid. This work borrowed appropriately from all the earlier works concerning Cotton's life, and he also used more of Cotton's correspondence to provide new information concerning the details of his life.²³ Ziff began with his explanation of why Cotton was so difficult to understand. He argued that he has remained an enigma to modern scholarship because previous scholarship has not sought to understand him in his context. Ziff believed that Cotton was a perfect man of his time: he understood the issues of his time and his work reflected his attempt to

²³ Ziff drew upon the previous biographies of Cotton including A.W. M'Clure, *The Life of John Cotton* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1846) and Cotton Mather, *Johannes in eremo: Memoirs, relating to the lives, of the ever memorable, Mr. John Cotton; Mr. John Norton, Mr. John Wilson, Mr. John Davenport: reverend and renowned ministers of the gospel, all in the more immediate service of one church in Boston, and Mr. Thomas Hooker, pastor of the church in Hartford, New England* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms International, 1979), 945:16. He also included the valuable research contained in two important biographies concerning Cotton. These include Judith B Welles, "John Cotton, 1584-1652, Churchman and Theologian" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1948) for the background of Cotton's life in England; as well as Donald Robert Come, "John Cotton, Guide to the Chosen People" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1949) for details concerning Cotton's life in America.

address the thoughts and concerns of seventeenth century Puritanism on both sides of the Atlantic. He concluded that Cotton's significance must lie with the questions of his day, and that his writing has lost its significance as his era passed away. Like many writers in the 1960's, Ziff had to rehabilitate Puritanism and its major figures from those who dismissed Puritanism and Puritans as passé. In particular, Ziff argued against Moses Coit Tyler and others who argued that John Cotton was boring and unoriginal. Ironically, in his attempted answer to Tyler, he continued to affirm that Cotton's writing was boring and unoriginal by presenting Cotton as one who met the needs of his day, but it did not convey important information for today.

At the heart of Ziff's argument was his attempt to understand how Cotton could compromise theologically and pastorally so much throughout his career. Even from the start, Ziff presented Cotton as a consistent compromiser.²⁴ He began his work by offering his primary theory for understanding Cotton's tendency toward compromise: it lies within his intellectual and cultural milieu. *The Career of John Cotton* began with an explanation of the delicate relationship between Puritanism and the English monarchy from the time of Elizabeth. As he explained, Elizabeth viewed Puritanism as a political threat to Royal authority. Thus, Puritans had to be careful in all their actions, and they needed to remain in good graces with their Bishop. Ziff argued that John Cotton learned well the art of compromise from his early years as a student at Cambridge. He presented Cotton as a man who enjoyed his ten years of graduate study at Emmanuel College because the university environment allowed him the freedom to practice and to teach

²⁴ For example of the compromising thesis see Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962)15, 40, 49, 79.

nonconformity without the risk of punishment.²⁵ Ziff explained that only reluctantly did Cotton leave the academy in 1612 to become the nonconforming pastor/teacher at St. Bolttophs in Boston. While in Boston, Cotton developed into a great scholar and preacher who used shrewd compromise and erudition to avoid controversy over his nonconformity.²⁶ These traits were learned while at Cambridge, and they marked his ministry in England: Cotton was a brilliant scholar, but a cautious and compromising churchman.

Ziff argued that Cotton did not change his method of operation once he arrived in New England.²⁷ Instead, Cotton consistently expressed willingness to compromise and a strong tendency toward otherworldly scholarship. In other words, Ziff presented Cotton as a dearly beloved intellectual who was greatly out of touch with real life. His portrait of Cotton was that of a scholar more than a pastor; an abstract thinker more than a personable teacher of the Christian life. Unfortunately, this portrayal of Cotton has not only remained popular, but it also has skewed many of the subsequent attempts at understanding Cotton's thought. Many scholars have followed Ziff's lead in assuming that Cotton's theology must have changed to precipitate the Antinomian controversy. They also have assumed that compromise and change mark Cotton's life and thought. As we shall see, with this presupposition many scholars have come to various and often competing claims concerning Cotton's changing thought in the 1630s. Unfortunately, the

²⁵ Ibid., 25-26.

²⁶ Ibid., 57.

²⁷ As Ziff wrote, "The answer was predictable to any who knew the preacher. John Cotton upon landing on the shores of the wilderness at the age of forty-eight would do what John Cotton upon arriving at Trinity at the age of thirteen or what John Cotton upon settling in Boston at the age of twenty-eight had done. He would keep his silence and observe, neither approvingly nor disapprovingly to any outward appearance. He would bide his time, pondering the relation of his convictions to the practices asked of him, attempting to square his beliefs with the procedures, for he was a meek and cautious man despite his celebrity." Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 79-80.

attempt to find a unified understanding of Cotton's theological compromises has not been successful.²⁸ Ziff's compromise thesis did provide an answer to how Cotton could be celebrated and famous, but still at the center of numerous theological debates including the Antinomian controversy. The difficulty with the thesis is that it has no power to explain his appeal as a Puritan teacher immediately following the controversy with several who were his adversaries in the midst of the struggle.²⁹ Furthermore, while Ziff described Cotton's teaching, his thesis of compromise unwittingly provided a basis for future scholars to ignore the actual teachings of Cotton before and after the Antinomian controversy. This dissertation will attempt to correct this gloss.

Even with his compromise thesis as central to his presentation of Cotton's life, Ziff's work provided some extremely important contributions to our knowledge of John Cotton's theology. Ziff's perspective on Cotton's theology comes through his explanation of the Antinomian controversy. He argued that Cotton was not deliberately the cause of the Antinomian affair.³⁰ Instead, he argued that Cotton became entangled in the affair because of his naive trust in his ability to compromise and to debate his way out of trouble. Ziff maintained that Cotton was unaware of the potential problems with his teaching concerning human inability and the need for absolute trust in the Holy Spirit's work for regeneration. Cotton instead believed that he could adequately explain any differences between his teaching and the teaching of the other pastors in the colony.³¹

²⁸ See pages 25 *ff.* There have been three major positions taken by scholars since Ziff's writing. Some completely exonerated Cotton's thought. Others claimed it has tendencies that led to the controversy, but that it was not the primary cause. Others, led by Stoeber, argued that his thought was theologically deviant.

²⁹ See pages 198-201 for examples from Cotton's correspondence that illustrate the respect his opponents illustrated for Cotton's thought immediately following the controversy.

³⁰ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 106-148.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

Ziff argued that the real issue in the debate was John Cotton.³² The universal respect within the colony for his preaching and teaching formed a cult following within his congregation. These followers did not share Cotton's desire for compromise, and they threatened the peace and well-being of the entire colony. Ziff argued that Cotton was not aware that he was the issue until it was too late for him to mediate between Anne Hutchinson and the rest of the clergy. Thus, he reluctantly compromised by giving up Hutchinson, though he continued to support her even after her banishment. In Ziff's opinion, Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy was consistent with his tendency toward compromise and his trust in scholarly argument. Once again, Ziff argued that these traits are the keys that unlock the mystery of Cotton's actions in England and America.

Though Ziff's understanding of Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy remains influential, it has several problems. First, it was based upon the same idea that was critiqued above: Cotton was a compromising, otherworldly thinker who consistently changed his thought. As we shall see, following the lead of Ziff, there have been several scholars who have attempted to illustrate the important ways that Cotton shifted theologically. Unfortunately, all of these arguments fail to explain the significance or the attraction of his teaching in both England and New England even in the years immediately following the Antinomian controversy. Furthermore, Ziff's work was not concerned with understanding the totality of his thought. It did not take into account the development of Cotton's thought concerning predestination and its related doctrines of total depravity, justification, and the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing spiritual change.

³² Ibid., 122-123.

These issues were vital for understanding Cotton's thought within the context of his life. This dissertation will present this development as central for understanding Cotton's thought during the Antinomian controversy. It will present Cotton not as a compromiser, but as a theologically consistent defender of Reformed thought. Throughout this dissertation, an alternative to Ziff's compromise thesis will be presented: a perspective that argues the key to understanding Cotton was his desire as a pastor to explain the Christian life in a manner that exalted Christ and provided authentic assurance of faith in his hearers. In theological terms, Cotton's thought emphasized the objective work of Christ as applied by the Holy Spirit for authentic assurance over the subjective assurance found through the normal means or syllogism. Contrary to Ziff, Cotton was not so otherworldly that he had little concern for earthy and practical concerns. Instead, Cotton's life and ministry must be understood within the light of the early controversies in his life. Chapter two will explore these early controversies and Cotton's responses within these controversies to illustrate how these events provided the key to understanding Cotton's thought as well as his importance within Puritanism. Chapters three through five will conclude a new portrait of Cotton's life by illustrating how his ministry focus consistently guided him in his discussions and debates throughout his time in New England. In the process, this alternate telling of Cotton's life will provide background for understanding the substance of Cotton's thought.

By far the most important arena for Cotton studies has been the scholarly comment concerning Cotton's theology. In the past fifty years, scholarship has often focused on the theological distinctives held by the earliest American settlers in New England. In particular for the study of Cotton's thought, many commentators have tied

Cotton's ministry to the social upheaval caused by Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian controversy. Following the lead of Perry Miller and other scholars of that generation, many early American scholars have attempted to understand the theological dimensions of the controversy. As we shall see, the result has often been conflicting accounts as to Cotton's role in the controversy, as well as differing accounts of the keys to understanding Cotton's thought. This section will investigate these various attempts to understand Cotton's thought. It will illustrate the ways that several important scholars have understood Cotton's theology. The remainder of the dissertation will build upon these observations to propose a new perspective on Cotton's thought.

Perhaps the most important interpreter of early American religious history was Perry Miller. His interpretations of New England theology and society renewed interest in Puritanism, and his work has influenced several generations of scholars. Miller's importance for Cotton scholarship was his emphasis on Cotton's thought and theology as it pertains to the development of the New England Way.³³ One of Miller's most thought-provoking ideas claimed that early New England was united by a monolithic Puritan "Mind" that held together the foundations of society. He argued that Cotton was a major architect of the New England Way. He presented Cotton as in agreement with many of his fellow Puritans concerning church government and the formation of a city on a hill. Yet, Miller's multifaceted understanding of the Puritan "Mind" also can be seen in his observations concerning the ways that Cotton differed from his fellow Puritans. In particular, he pointed to Cotton's theology and his Biblical method as ways that he

³³ Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts: 1630-1650* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 261-62. Miller stresses John Cotton's role as the apologist for the state throughout this work. Also Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York: Atheneum, 1965).

differed from other New England elders. Miller argued that John Cotton was a creative interpreter of scripture who was given to typological interpretations more than any other New England minister except Roger Williams.³⁴ This observation has proven fertile ground for recent scholarship concerning the widespread use of typology among Puritans.³⁵ Unfortunately, most scholarship concerning Cotton's use of scripture only focused upon his use of typology; and as a result, it missed many fruitful areas of scholarship concerning the theology he expressed in his use of typology. Miller also observed that Cotton had a less legalistic interpretation of the gospel than the remainder of New England ministers who leaned more heavily toward "preparationism."³⁶ Miller argued that Cotton favored a more pure understanding of election than his fellow New England elders. He even went so far as to argue that the elders favoring preparationism unwittingly promoted a semi-Arminian understanding of the gospel that overemphasized the role of the individual in salvation.³⁷ Like his observations concerning typology, these observations concerning Cotton's rejection of preparationism have proved extremely fertile ground for later scholarship. In the past thirty years, many scholars have addressed Miller's observations with scholarship that has illustrated both the roots

³⁴ Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 37. Miller claimed that Cotton pushed to the extreme of accepted typological use. Recent revisionist scholarship has illustrated that Miller was wrong in this understanding of Cotton. Sacvan Bercovitch persuasively argued that all the ministers in New England, including Cotton and Williams, used typological interpretations. The problem with Williams's typological usage was that he used typological interpretations to attack the entire foundation of the New England Way. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Typology in Puritan New England: The Williams-Cotton Controversy Reassessed," *American Quarterly* 19 (Sum 1967): 167-169.

³⁵ See particularly the work of Jesper Rosenmeier; Jesper Rosenmeier, "The Teacher and the Witness: John Cotton and Roger Williams," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., XXV (1968), 408-431; Also, Mason I. Lawance, Jr., "Typology and the New England Way: Cotton Mather and the Exegesis of Biblical Types," *Early American Literature*, IV (1969), 15-37.

³⁶ Perry Miller, "'Preparation for Salvation' in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IV (1943): 259-286.

³⁷ This dissertation will agree with this interpretation of both Cotton's and the New England Elder's application of accepted Reformed doctrine. This line of thought will be investigated in the conclusion.

of preparationism as well as its application in New England. The result has been several different opinions concerning Cotton's theology during the Antinomian controversy. These opinions can be broken into three categories: those that deny Cotton's doctrinal deviance, those that affirm that he was doctrinally leaning toward Antinomianism, and those that claim his teaching was a root of Hutchinson's Antinomianism, but not the only root. All of the following scholars have followed Miller's lead in understanding Cotton's theology through the lens of the Antinomian controversy.

A limited number of scholars argued that Cotton was in theological agreement with the other New England elders. The general method of argument employed by these scholars was to argue that Cotton was nothing more than an innocent bystander who did not know the extent of Anne Hutchinson's heresy. Following the direction set by Cotton Mather and other early biographers, these scholars attempted to lay the whole blame for the controversy on the charismatic teachings of Anne Hutchinson.³⁸ Perhaps the most articulate of these modern scholars was James Cooper. Cooper argued that Cotton actually quelled the Antinomian controversy when he turned from his support of Hutchinson. Cooper claimed that Cotton did not know the full extent of Hutchinson's teaching; and as soon as he became aware of her heresy, he pressed for her dismissal from First Church. In the process, Cooper argued that Cotton stopped the Antinomian controversy when he seriously questioned Hutchinson's thought by causing her supposed followers to see the error of the Antinomian position. Thus, Cotton's turn against Hutchinson, based upon his growing understanding of her teaching, helped turn the tide

³⁸ An example was Edmund S. Morgan, "The Case Against Anne Hutchinson," *The New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 635-649. Also, James F. Cooper, Jr., "Anne Hutchinson and the 'Lay Rebellion' against the Clergy," *New England Quarterly* 61 (S 1988): 381-397.

against Antinomianism. The main point of Cooper's argument was that the overall lack of Antinomian support after Hutchinson's conviction of sedition illustrated that there was no active lay rebellion against the clergy.³⁹ While Cooper's argument against a lay rebellion has much merit, his position regarding Cotton as a suppressor of the controversy has not gained widespread favor within the academic community. Importantly for this dissertation, Cooper did affirm that Cotton's basic articulation of accepted Reformed orthodoxy matched the articulations of his fellow New England elders.⁴⁰ His final conclusion was that Cotton's theology remained true to Reformed orthodoxy. While this dissertation will agree in many ways with Cooper's final conclusion, it will provide much more detail into Cotton's theology and his ties to Reformed orthodoxy. It will also illustrate the ways Cotton's theology matched and disagreed with his fellow elders.

A second group of scholars argued to the other extreme that John Cotton's teachings were the cause of the Antinomian controversy.⁴¹ This group of scholars was also small, but it was very significant for understanding the theological dimensions of the Antinomian controversy. Perhaps the most persuasive of these scholars was William Stoever. Stoever's work concerning the theological roots of the Antinomian controversy has been the scholarly standard for almost thirty years. He argued in an early work that the real root of the Antinomian controversy was the question of "the proper relationship

³⁹ James F. Cooper, Jr., "Anne Hutchinson and the 'Lay Rebellion' against the Clergy," *New England Quarterly* 61 (S 1988): 387-389.

⁴⁰ Also see James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalist in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: 1999). In this work, Cooper argued that the Antinomian controversy illustrated a growing desire for liberty within the Massachusetts.

⁴¹ In particular, William K.B. Stoever, "Nature, Grace and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy," *Church History* 44 (Mar 1975): 22-33. William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978). Also to a lesser extent, Michael Jenkins, "John Cotton and the Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Profile of Experiential Individualism in American Puritanism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 No. 3 (1990): 321-349.

between created nature and divine activity in the process of regeneration itself.”⁴² According to Stoever, Cotton taught the Antinomian doctrine that the work of the Holy Spirit completely overruled and made void the natural created nature of humanity. In other words, Cotton’s affirmation of election to the exclusion of the human role in salvation went against the accepted Puritan understanding of salvation. He argued that this idea was antithetical to the accepted Puritan understanding of salvation because mainstream Puritanism always affirmed the human element within salvation. As a result, Cotton’s teaching was the ultimate cause of the Antinomian controversy.⁴³ This explanation of Cotton’s thought also matches the recent work of Holifield.⁴⁴ In many ways borrowing from Stoever, Holifield has argued that Cotton’s thought neglected subjective assurance through one’s works. As a consequence both of these sources explaining the systematic issues surrounding the Antinomian controversy blame Cotton’s theological distinctives for the debate.

In Stoever’s account, Cotton was the absolute villain in the Antinomian controversy. While Stoever’s work has remained important for understanding the theological issues within the Antinomian controversy, his conclusions regarding Cotton’s theology need further reflection. Even though it has become a widely accepted interpretation of the theological elements within the Antinomian controversy, Stoever’s interpretation of Cotton’s theology did little to shed light on the roots and nuances of Cotton’s thought. Stoever’s work built upon the foundation of the questions posed by

⁴² William K.B. Stoever, “Nature, Grace and John Cotton”: 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28-32. Furthermore, Stoever also portrayed Cotton as a dubiously shifty man who lacked the courage to save Hutchinson in her hour of greatest need, 38 *ff.*

⁴⁴ Also to a lesser extent this argument is in agreement with Theodore Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 257-280. Bozeman disagreed with Stoever in regard to Cotton as the one who ontologically denied the role of the created individual. He argued that Cotton deemphasized human effort, but Hutchinson and her followers took this fateful step out of the Puritan mainstream. See page 301-303 for details.

Miller; but in so doing, it limited the investigation into Cotton's thought by using the Antinomian controversy and the questions posed during that controversy as the best means of understanding Cotton's theology. In the process, Stoever's work has led scholarship down a path that misidentified the real differences between Cotton and his fellow Elders. These differences involved the application of accepted Reformed doctrine: varying perspectives on how to apply orthodoxy into the lived experience of the Christian life. It also neglected the perspective within Puritanism that emphasized objective assurance as foundational for subjective assurance. This dissertation will seek to add to our understanding of Cotton's thought and the Antinomian controversy by illustrating these strains within Puritanism and the reasons for Cotton's theological particularities.

By far the largest group of scholars argued for a middle position in regard to Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy. Through several different appraisals of the controversy, different scholars have argued that Cotton's teaching was one of the sources for Anne Hutchinson's Antinomianism, but Hutchinson took Cotton's views to extremes Cotton would not endorse. The first method of arguing this point was to focus upon Cotton's preaching method as the root of the controversy. Lead by Eugenia Delamotte and Teresa Toulouse, several scholars argued that Cotton's use of figurative language in his sermons ultimately lead to Anne Hutchinson's theological Antinomianism.⁴⁵ These commentators claimed that Hutchinson and her followers misunderstood Cotton's genius in language, and they took his figurative meanings as literal. Thus, Cotton was one cause of their Antinomianism, but he was not an Antinomian himself. While this argument has

⁴⁵ Teresa Toulouse, *The Art of Prophesying: New England Sermons and the Shaping of Belief* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987). Eugenia Delamotte, "John Cotton and the Rhetoric of Grace," *Early American Literature* 21 No 1 (Spr. 1986): 49-74.

proved fertile ground for further scholarship concerning Cotton's preaching, it begs the question regarding how his theology drove his preaching method.⁴⁶

More important for the remainder of this dissertation, other scholars argued that Cotton's teaching was one of the sources for Anne Hutchinson's Antinomianism because of Cotton's theological commitments.⁴⁷ This argument has taken several forms, and it has developed through the process of scholarly revision. The fundamental argument for these scholars involved a revision of Perry Miller's consensus model of American Puritanism. Their most basic argument was that Cotton differed from his fellow New England ministers because he rejected preparationism. As R.T. Kendall argued, Cotton's position was an attempt to recover the traditional Reformational understanding of complete human inability in salvation.⁴⁸ Thus, Cotton followed Calvin in arguing that the Holy Spirit must change a person's heart before they can prepare for salvation in any way. Kendall suggested that this understanding did not match with the accepted understanding of preparationism.⁴⁹ Thus, Cotton's views, taken to their logical end, were at the root of Anne Hutchinson's heresy even though Cotton himself did not endorse her conclusions. Kendall made the important observation that the Antinomian controversy focused upon a theological discussion regarding the nature of saving faith and the

⁴⁶ Alfred Habegger, "Preparing the Soul for Christ: The Contrasting Sermon Forms of John Cotton and Thomas Hooker," *American Literature* 41 (1969): 342-45 and the most in-depth look at Cotton's preaching was a dissertation written by David A. Simmons, "John Cotton's Sermonic Style: the Use of Figures of Repetition" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University School of Theology 1995).

⁴⁷ Stephen Foster, "New England and the Challenge of Heresy, 1630 to 1660: The Puritan Crisis in Transatlantic Perspective," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3ds 38 No. 4 (O 1981): 561-623. Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 139ff.. R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford University Press, 1981; repr., Paternoster Press, 1997), 167-183.

⁴⁸ R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford University Press, 1981; reprint, Paternoster Press, 1997), 182.

⁴⁹ This was also the argument of Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, 139.

assurance of salvation. These theological questions were at the heart of Puritanism, and thus the various answers to these questions were complicated and hotly debated. This dissertation will agree with many of Kendall's basic thoughts regarding Cotton's ties to the Reformed tradition as well as his ideas concerning the primary issues in the Antinomian controversy. It will illustrate that some of Kendall's central claims were incorrect, such as his claim that the primary difference between Cotton and his fellow Elders is his rejection of preparationism. As we shall see, Cotton retained preparationism as a tool within his pastoral toolbox.⁵⁰ He did not use it as often as Hooker and Shepard, but he did not reject preparationism. Instead, he used it to point people to resting in Christ alone for salvation. In addition, Kendall's work did not offer an explanation of the roots or nuances of Cotton's theology. As a result, he did not escape the quagmire of viewing Cotton's work only through the lens of the Antinomian controversy. While this dissertation will agree with many of Kendall's observations concerning Cotton's thought, it will augment his argument by providing both the foundations and the nuances of Cotton's theology.

Perhaps no scholar has gone as far in their critique of Miller than Janice Knight in her book, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts*.⁵¹ Knight maintained that there were two major systems of theology within Massachusetts Puritanism. The first system was held by those

⁵⁰ A point affirmed by many recent scholars including Theodore Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 213 ff. and Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 34-35. Bozeman argued that Cotton's use of preparationism was especially marked during his years in England. This dissertation will argue that Cotton developed the notion of humility as central to his preparationist scheme. This tendency marked all of his later thought.

⁵¹ Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

she called the "Intellectual" fathers.⁵² These men were the focus of Perry Miller's work; and they included Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, Peter Bulkaley, John Winthrop, and the majority of New England clergy. For this group of theologians, God's power was central; and they stressed the need for preparation for the human heart in salvation as well as the absolute need for Christian works to evidence salvation.⁵³ The second system of theology was held by a group of theologians she called the "Spiritual" brethren. This group attempted to reaffirm Augustinian piety, and its members in New England included John Cotton, John Davenport, and Henry Vane. The Spiritual brethren stressed God's love over his power, and they affirmed that there were no steps to salvation because God's grace must do all the work. Knight's work detailed how the Intellectual and Spiritual brethren differed in their understanding of ecclesiology, sin, the character of God, and, most important, covenant theology. According to Knight, the Intellectual fathers, following William Ames, magnified God's power and the covenant of works, while the Spiritual brethren focused more on the covenant of grace. Because of these differences, the Intellectual fathers stressed the conditional nature of the covenant (dependent on human works) while the Spiritual brethren stressed a personal Christ who was secured by the "testament" of God's loving choice of us.

At this point, Knight went past where the documents allow for several reasons. First, though it is a minor point of terminology, Knight's definitions of covenant versus

⁵² Knight borrowed these terms from William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 79. Haller did not support Knight's position of partisan dispute, but he did recognize these differences within Puritanism.

⁵³ Knight, 2-3.

testament were not present within the Puritan writings as being in opposition.⁵⁴ Second and more importantly, Knight's work also presented a deep division between the Intellectual and Spiritual fathers based upon basic theological affirmations. It is clear that both groups of Puritans did not see themselves or their thought in opposition. Instead, there was much borrowing and interaction between the theological systems of both parties.⁵⁵ As we shall see, Cotton did not disagree with the basic theological affirmations of mainstream Puritanism nor did he disagree with the thought of those in the Intellectual fathers' camp. While this dissertation will agree with many of Knight's central ideas concerning two major Puritan parties, it will argue that these differences were not at the level of theological commitments. Instead, the major issues between the parties were over the proper application of a shared theology.⁵⁶ This dissertation will present Cotton's appreciation and often wholesale borrowing from Ames, Perkins, and other Intellectual fathers.

A final and fourth means of arguing that Cotton was a cause but not the main cause of the Antinomian controversy has been presented by two recent books concerning the American Antinomian controversy. Both of these works argued that Cotton's thought was an important cause of the Antinomian controversy, but also that Hutchinson, Wheelwright, and their Antinomian followers developed a theological system that Cotton refused to endorse. The first of these books was Michael Winship's *Making Heretics:*

⁵⁴ A good critique of Knight's work was found in a book review by Norman Pettit. Norman Pettit, review of *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts* by Janice Knight, in *New England Quarterly* 68.1 (1995): 147-150.

⁵⁵ For example, Richard Sibbes illustrated great ties to Perkins, Ames, and other earlier Puritans. See Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*.

⁵⁶ To be fair, Knight calls these differences one of emphasis. In many ways, this dissertation's discussion of differences in application supports her thesis and provides an example from Cotton's thought how these differences were spelled out.

*Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641.*⁵⁷ Winship's work offered the first book length reassessment of the New England Antinomian controversy since Battis's work in 1962. Winship argued that the Antinomian controversy (what he called the Free Grace Controversy) was really a culmination of many small theological, personal, and group agendas that led to the expulsion of the "Hutchinsonians" from Massachusetts Bay. Winship understood Cotton as one of the major players within the entire affair due to his eminence as a Puritan Divine and his development of a theology of free grace that was innovative and troublesome to several of his fellow pastors. The problem was that these pastors could not easily discipline Cotton without bringing disgrace and problems to the colony. Of utmost importance for this dissertation, Winship presented Cotton as adapting and changing two Reformed Doctrines involving Covenant Theology to fit the needs of his ministry. The first adaptation was Cotton's understanding of the order of salvation. To deal with the threat of Arminianism within his English parish, Cotton advanced the argument that God decreed the covenant of works before God decreed that there would be reprobates. This change appeared to be minor, but it allowed Cotton to preach a call to salvation freely without discounting the continued importance of the covenant of works. Ironically, this formulation raised the ire of William Twisse and others who thought Cotton was falling into the very error he was trying to combat- Arminianism. Cotton never addressed these concerns; and as we shall see, he thought them absurd. Yet, Winship argued Cotton did grow increasingly enamored with the role of the covenant of works throughout his ministry in England. Winship suggested that Cotton began to see the covenant of works as mirroring the

⁵⁷ Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

covenant of grace in that it offered a means of atonement, salvation, and the law. The problem was that the covenant of works was not only a dead end that merely mimicked the covenant of grace, but it also left the reprobate deceived as to their true state. This realization caused Cotton much grief and fear, and he began to search for a scriptural means of assurance. Finding none that could escape the covenant of works within traditional Puritan thought, he searched in the writings of the sixteenth century continental theologian Zanchius. Here he found the assertion that assurance was found only in believing that the biblical promises of salvation were absolute and not dependent on any condition in the elect. This meant that sanctification and even faith were not signs of assurance, but only God's work in a person's life as promised in scripture. Winship argued that this understanding of salvation was extremely close to the Antinomian teaching.⁵⁸ This dissertation will explain Cotton's understanding of objective assurance and its relationship to subjective assurance. It will also address the reasons why Cotton emphasized objective assurance against subjective assurance in the mid-1630s.

Winship argued that Cotton's second adaptation of traditional doctrine was Cotton's insistence that the Holy Spirit witnessed through the believer and scripture to bring about assurance. This pneumatology closely resembled the teaching of the Familists- a sect that Thomas Shepard warned Cotton about in his first pastoral letter. Winship also suggested that this charge of Familism was one of the factors that drove Shepard on his heresy hunt. Helpfully, Winship argued that Cotton developed an elaborate system of how the Trinity worked to bring about assurance of faith. Cotton argued that the Father prepared Christians for salvation through bringing to the individual

⁵⁸ Ibid., 32-34.

the full terrors of the law. This terror illustrated that Christ alone could bring salvation; and with this realization, the Father justified the believer. This justification was then witnessed to the Christian by the Son, through absolute promises as revealed by the Holy Spirit. This revelation informed the Christian that the terrors of the law were all part of the process of salvation, and the individual received from the Son genuine assurance. The problem was that this was not complete assurance but only an assurance still mixed with heavy fears and doubts. At this point, Cotton was still within the parameters of orthodox Puritan divinity. His invention was that he proposed that the Son also gave hope that the Holy Spirit would reveal itself directly to the believer. Much like the disciples at Pentecost, believers would then know the Spirit, and they would know their acceptance by God through the righteousness of Christ. At this time, believers experienced a clearer assurance of their faith.⁵⁹ As Shepard noticed, this doctrine was close to the idea of the Familists that God dwelt bodily in the believer. As Winship argued, Cotton's ideas left much room for interpretation, and they allowed him to work with more tolerant ministers because he never denied the need for sanctification or the pastoral need to encourage those who were in travails after first assurance because of the terrors of the law. This dissertation will explain Cotton's theology of the Holy Spirit, and it will compare his thought with that of the Antinomians.

Another recent book that in many ways agreed with Winship's conclusions was Theodore Bozeman's *The Precisionist Strain*.⁶⁰ In this book, Bozeman continued an argument he began in his work *To Live Ancient Lives*, concerning the central ideas that

⁵⁹ Ibid., 34-36.

⁶⁰ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

marked Puritanism.⁶¹ The first book dealt with the idea of Primitivism, while the second concerns Puritanism's tendency toward emphasizing purity. As with his work *To Live Ancient Lives*, *The Precisionist Strain* was well researched and persuasive. His central thesis was that "Christianity, whatever it may be, is a sternly regulatory system." Thus, Puritanism, while seeking to be Biblical, developed an "often obsessive trait of the quest for further reformation: a hunger for purity."⁶² *The Precisionist Strain* began with an overview of the Puritan disciplinary system as it developed from the 1570s through the 1620s. He concluded that, "Unquestionably, Puritan practical theology stood on a bedrock of grace and faith alone, but it overlapped extensively with Catholic teaching, and its ruling emphasis was on behavior."⁶³ Bozeman argued that this emphasis reached a climax in the 1610s and 1620s. In response to this emphasis on purity for illustrating true faith, what this dissertation has called subjective assurance, a movement of more moderate Puritans chafed under the pressure from this call to absolute purity. Many within the movement remained within the parameters of Puritanism. Yet, this movement also gave rise to various groups that often moved outside the orthodox Puritan party in their emphasis on free grace without the need for subjective assurance.

The second half of the book illustrated the growing movement within Puritanism against the emphasis on personal purity. Of those who eventually defected from the orthodox Puritans, a major group became identified as Antinomians. As he stated, "By the century's second decade the level of disciplinary demand had risen so high as to generate a virtual counter-Puritanism, not merely a set of gripes against strictness, but a

⁶¹ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988).

⁶² *The Precisionist Strain*, 3.

⁶³ *The Precisionist Strain*, 90.

distinctive redraft of the Christian redemption.”⁶⁴ As Bozeman argued, these critiques upon Puritanism were leveled against the emphasis on conditions and duties while only giving lip service to free grace in salvation.⁶⁵ In the terms used in this dissertation, Bozeman argued that the Antinomians rejected mainstream Puritanism as abandoning objective assurance for subjective assurance. As a result, Antinomianism declared that orthodox Puritanism was a “legal” religion that overemphasized law and duty to the exclusion of grace. In the 1620s, Antinomianism became a major movement of dissent within Puritanism. Bozeman argued that most of the future Puritan spiritual leaders in New England, including Cotton, “jousted” with antinomian doctrine.⁶⁶ In terms of Cotton, Bozeman argued that during this time, Cotton’s doctrine was consistently anti-Antinomian.⁶⁷ Yet, things began to change for Cotton in the early to mid-1630s. Bozeman argued that Cotton’s thought shifted toward the Antinomian position even as he retained some traditional Puritan beliefs concerning assurance and the role of a Christian in growing in godliness. In particular, Bozeman argued that Cotton’s thought provided three points of connection with Hutchinson’s thought that may have fostered her eventual apostasy. As he stated,

Three basics of his doctrine offer likely points of connection: a portrayal of the saints’ direct dependence upon Christ both for ethical purification and assurance, an emphasis upon the Holy Spirit as the agent of assurance, and an unusually strong formulation of the Protestant principle of private judgment. These were stock items of Protestant belief, and Cotton’s treatment of them does not appear to have been controversial. Yet there is reason to suppose that this trio of elements, amplified and creatively misunderstood, contributed to Hutchinson’s, and perhaps others’, move toward free grace.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *The Precisionist Strain*, 7.

⁶⁵ *The Precisionist Strain*, 184.

⁶⁶ *The Precisionist Strain*, 183.

⁶⁷ *The Precisionist Strain*, 211-221.

⁶⁸ *The Precisionist Strain*, 223.

As Cotton's situation changed in the 1630s with his arrival in America, his theological particularities became more pronounced against the backdrop of a new colony seeking to establish a model Puritan community. Bozeman argued that in response to these changes, Cotton's thought shifted to more of an emphasis on free grace. As he stated,

...By 1636 he valued less its (The Reformed teaching) moral pole, including the special interest in purification and likeness to God that had flavored his teaching at least until the later 1620s. His counsel to New Englanders striving to enter and walk comfortably in the Christian way now tended toward a single focus. With limited but clear harmony of purpose with English theorists of free grace, he pointed beyond human agency to the power and solace found in deity alone.⁶⁹

Still, Bozeman observed that Cotton did not personally or pastorally abandon the traditional Puritan emphasis on piety: he continued to keep family and private devotions, devoted himself to fasting, and was fastidious concerning the Sabbath. Such practices also remained in emphasis in his teaching in *The Covenant of Grace*.⁷⁰ As Bozeman remarked, the primary change in Cotton's mind was his critique of New England's hypocrisy.⁷¹

To this point, this dissertation remains in complete agreement with Bozeman's observations. Yet, at this point, Bozeman's work, though fascinating and thought provoking, needs some clarification in regard to Cotton's thought. Throughout, Bozeman placed Cotton's teaching as a potential source of Antinomian discontent. He questioned his emphasis on total depravity and the passive nature of the soul in conversion,⁷² even as

⁶⁹ *The Precisionist Strain*, 242.

⁷⁰ *The Precisionist Strain*, 243. *The Covenant of Grace*, 64, 76.

⁷¹ *The Precisionist Strain*, 247-252.

⁷² *The Precisionist Strain*, 265, 317-318.

he confessed that such teaching marked the Puritan mainstream.⁷³ He accused Cotton of too strong an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life,⁷⁴ even as he confessed that such thought marked the Puritan mainstream.⁷⁵ He argued that Cotton's thought suggested free grace radicalism,⁷⁶ even as he confessed that Cotton consistently emphasized the need for caution so as not to take his emphasis on the Spirit and grace to Antinomian conclusions.⁷⁷ Central to his argument was the claim that Cotton's thought rejected the practical syllogism as believed by orthodox Puritans.⁷⁸ Yet, in his explanation of the accepted Puritan version of the practical syllogism, Bozeman neglected the work of the Spirit as central in providing objective assurance.⁷⁹ This dissertation will seek to build upon Bozeman's conclusions to illustrate why Cotton preached against resting in "duties" for assurance in the mid-1630s. It will also seek to explain the Puritan teaching concerning objective and subjective assurance. It will illustrate Cotton's affinities and his tensions to this accepted teaching.

In the end, Bozeman placed Cotton at the center of the Antinomian controversy. He argued that Cotton's thought directly influenced the Antinomian thought of Anne

⁷³ *The Precisionist Strain*, 91-94.

⁷⁴ *The Precisionist Strain*, 265-280.

⁷⁵ *The Precisionist Strain*, 223-224.

⁷⁶ *The Precisionist Strain*, 225, 242.

⁷⁷ *The Precisionist Strain*, 278-280. As Bozeman confessed, "Not even in his least cautious moments had the Boston teacher knowingly intimated such views. On the questions of the body and soul, immortality and resurrection, he remained unquestioningly orthodox. He affirmed biblical law as the rule of the Christian life and tied his allowance of personal revelation to the sacred text." p. 299. He also rightly accused Wheelwright and Hutchinson of taking Cotton's suggested view to extremes he would not endorse.

⁷⁸ *The Precisionist Strain*, 272-275. Again, the practical syllogism is another way to state the entire process of discerning assurance of faith through the normal means promoted in the subjective assurance pole within Puritanism.

⁷⁹ See pages 170 *ff.* of this dissertation for the importance of this emphasis in Puritanism.

Hutchinson and her followers even as he struggled to explain Cotton's many ties to Puritan orthodoxy.⁸⁰ As he explained,

Cotton's teaching, too, had more subversive implications for a disciplinary and text-centered tradition than he allowed. By about 1636 he was gesturing well beyond familiar pietist terrain, and it is easy to imagine that under more favorable circumstances he might, like Eaton, have moved on to a boldly new synthesis; but he did not. He remained double-minded, standing undecided but resolutely between opposing tendencies. To lower the status of sanctification but preserve commitment to a Puritan moral and ecclesiological reformation, to magnify the Deity's operation upon and within the individual saint yet stop firmly short of a spiritist extreme, to strike at cherished ideals of the pietist turn while clinging to membership in the clerical network- these were deep equivocations, and his advanced intellectual training (he and Charles Chauncy were the only two Bay leaders of the first generation to hold the bachelor of divinity degree) proved indispensable as he strove to articulate and defend them.⁸¹

This dissertation seeks to augment Bozeman's fine research by clarifying both the roots and consequences of Cotton's thought as well as the tensions within Puritanism concerning the role of objective and subjective assurance.

To date, both Winship's and Bozeman's works have been the first efforts since the 1960s to attempt to understand Cotton's theology within the context of his entire life. Cotton's theology expressed during the Antinomian controversy did not occur in a vacuum, so this methodology was admirable. This dissertation will agree with Winship that the early controversies Cotton faced in his ministry radically shaped his articulations of theology. It will also agree with Bozeman's observations concerning Cotton's critique of New England's hypocrisy in trusting in their purity of worship as a trust in works for salvation. Unfortunately, both of these works' conclusions regarding Cotton's theology still have not escaped the well worn path of using the Antinomian controversy as the final

⁸⁰ *The Precisionist Strain*, 303-305.

⁸¹ *The Precisionist Strain*, 286.

determiner of his theology. As I have read Cotton's works repeatedly and reflected upon his life, I have not seen the same development of Cotton's theology: his work did not illustrate his "growing concern" with the covenant of works as mimicking the covenant of grace as per Winship. He also did not radically change his thought to overemphasize grace as Bozeman argued. Instead, his writings in the mid-1630s illustrated a growing concern for helping hypocrites come to Christ for salvation. Yet, nowhere in his writing or correspondence did he reject accepted Puritan orthodoxy. Instead, Cotton's life and thought reflected a consistency in his attempt to explain and apply accepted Reformed orthodoxy to the life of the believer.

As we have seen in the brief descriptions concerning my primary conversation partners, Cotton's life and thought remains a topic of debate within the scholarly literature. Within the past five years, in fact within the time that this dissertation has been undertaken, two new works concerning the Antinomian controversy have been completed. While in many ways this dissertation agrees with the conclusions of these works, it also seeks to augment their finding by providing an alternative presentation of Cotton's thought within the context of his life. The work of Ziff remains the scholarly standard as an interpretation of Cotton's life. He portrayed Cotton as a shifty compromiser throughout his entire ministry. While this interpretation remains influential, this dissertation will illustrate that it did not capture Cotton's theological significance for the Puritan community. This dissertation will present an alternative view of Cotton's life and thought. It will conclude that the early controversies in Cotton's life shaped him into a theologian who defended traditional Reformed thought against any hint of Arminianism. It will argue that his early ministry success propelled him into the Puritan

spotlight, and they provided him with an ardent Reformed perspective that he retained throughout his life. It will argue, in agreement with Winship, that Cotton's early ministry successes shaped his later theological articulations. It will provide a much needed new perspective on Cotton's life.

This dissertation will also draw upon the entirety of Cotton's thought to provide a needed answer to the question of why Cotton behaved as he did during the Antinomian controversy. As we have seen, virtually all investigations into Cotton's thought use the Antinomian controversy as central for understanding Cotton's theology. This dissertation will address the controversy in great detail, but it will attempt to add perspective to previous scholarship by focusing the discussion on Cotton's early years of ministry as determinative for his theological affirmations during the 1630s and beyond. This work will provide insight into the development of Cotton's thought; and in the process, it will give needed clarity into Cotton's theological role in the Antinomian controversy. While this work will agree with the basic conclusions of many scholars, it will provide a fresh perspective on both Cotton's thought and how his pastoral life shaped his thought.

Form and Structure

Contrary to much Puritan scholarship, this dissertation will argue that the key to understanding Cotton's importance for Puritanism can be gleaned from both his life and his copious published works. As an important pastor and theologian, Cotton addressed many different debates and issues that faced Puritanism. It is clear from his correspondence that his opinions were vitally important for many within the Puritan community, and he understood that his advice carried much weight. Central to the

argument of his dissertation is the belief that these debates and controversies shaped his theological commitments. Thus, each chapter will provide glimpses into the central events Cotton faced throughout his ministry as well as a detailed exploration of how these events shaped his theology and understanding of the Christian life. In the process, this dissertation will present the outlines of a new biography of Cotton's life as well as a systematic presentation of Cotton's theology of redemption.

Chapter II will begin with a fresh perspective on Cotton's early life. It will argue that Cotton's time at Cambridge and his early years in the pastorate shaped his basic theological foundations. As Cotton struggled to deal with the rising Arminianism within the university system and then his parish, he came to some basic conclusions regarding pastoral ministry and how to present the doctrines of grace to his congregation. As a result, he also developed his thoughts concerning the nature of God, creation, the fall, and the covenantal relationship between God and humanity. This chapter will illustrate that Cotton's basic theological system was in agreement with mainstream Puritanism. This chapter will argue that the conflicts he faced during his early years as a pastor shaped his theological and pastoral vision. During this time, he adopted the accepted theology of Puritanism but sought to apply this theology to his particular pastoral situation. As we will see, he was extremely successful in his applications, and his popularity as a Puritan pastor became secure. This dissertation will argue that these early debates and Cotton's particular applications of accepted doctrine provide the clues for understanding both his importance for fellow Puritans and his responses to later theological debates that he faced in his ministry in New England. The second half of this chapter will explore Cotton's acceptance of traditional Puritan doctrine. It will present his theological affirmations

concerning the nature of God, creation, the effects of the fall, and the covenantal relationship between God and humanity. This chapter will draw upon Cotton's first work, *A Treatise of Mr. Cottons, Clearing certaine Doubts concerning Predestination* to illustrate his core doctrinal beliefs. This early work was an attempt by Cotton to apply the doctrines of grace pastorally against a rising Arminian undercurrent within Lincolnshire. This chapter will also draw upon Cotton's other early works to illustrate the foundations of his theology. There will be some mention of Cotton's later works to illustrate the continuity of his thought, but the primary focus of this chapter will be the early years of Cotton's ministry in England.

Chapter III begins with a fresh perspective on Cotton's life from 1625 through the beginning of the Antinomian controversy in New England. It will begin with an argument that Cotton did not retain his post because of his compromise, but because of the protection of his Bishop John Williams. It will also explore the reasons for Cotton's immigration as well as give a description of Cotton's first years in New England. In the first years of his ministry in New England, Cotton experienced a revival in his church and the accolades of many. Yet, just three years after arriving in New England, he also experienced several years of controversy with his fellow New England Puritans. These controversies included debates over religious liberty that led to the eventual banishment of Roger Williams and the debates concerning the assurance of salvation during the Antinomian controversy. The debates surrounding the Antinomian controversy were important for understanding Cotton's theology of the Christian life during this time; and this chapter will attempt to explain the theological and pastoral issues that Cotton perceived as driving these debates. Yet, this chapter will also go beyond time constraints

of the Antinomian controversy to illustrate from all of Cotton's works his theology of redemption. As we will see, the person and work of Jesus were central for Cotton's understanding of redemption and justification. The second half of this chapter will include a systematic presentation of his understanding of the gospel, justification, the order of salvation, and the role of the human will in preparing for Christ. This chapter will describe the hallmark of Cotton's theology- his emphasis on humility and changed affections as the best mark of true conversion. It will illustrate Cotton's greatest errors as a theologian during this time period: his overemphasis upon justification to the expense of a clear explanation of sanctification. This chapter will present both the substance of Cotton's thought as well as an explanation of the reasons for his emphasis on justification. In the process, it will also illustrate the theological reasons for the Antinomian controversy as well as Cotton's reasons for maintaining his position.

Chapter IV begins with a detailed analysis of the disagreement between Thomas Shepard and Cotton that directly led to the Antinomian controversy. This section will draw upon the recent dissertation by David Como concerning the growing Antinomian underground in England to illustrate how Shepard's ministry situation shaped his accusations against Cotton's pneumatology. From this historical perspective, the remainder of the chapter will present understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit and sanctification. It will argue that within the Puritan community the ties between sanctification and the assurance of salvation were often debated. This chapter will provide a context for these debates by exploring various positions regarding work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. In the midst of the debates, Cotton maintained the position that sanctification was a work of the Holy Spirit that transforms a person's affections. In

particular, Cotton argued that humility must be experienced by a believer- a humility that rests in Christ alone for both salvation and a changed life. Chapter Four will continue the discussion concerning Cotton's theology of redemption by focusing upon how Cotton's teaching concerning the work of the Holy Spirit illustrated a clear thread within the Reformed tradition and Puritanism. In particular, the end of this chapter will illustrate Cotton's ties to William Perkins and others within the Puritan mainstream. It will offer an explanation of Cotton's position regarding sanctification and how it related to justification.

This dissertation will then conclude with an explanation of Cotton's life and ministry after the Antinomian controversy. It will illustrate that Cotton's ministry and thought continued in many ways as it was before the controversy. After this biographical section, all of the conclusions found within this dissertation will be summarized and explained in light of Cotton's scholarship to this date. In particular, this chapter will address the question raised by Stoeber, Holifield, and Bozeman concerning Cotton's ties to Antinomianism. This analysis will be made through a careful examination of a recent dissertation by David Como concerning the marks of Antinomianism in England. Comparing these observations with Cotton's many ties to the Puritan mainstream, this conclusion will illustrate both Cotton's Antinomian tendencies as well as his place within Puritanism. Finally, this dissertation will end with a comparison of Cotton's thought with the theological directions taken in the next one hundred years in New England. In many ways, this conclusion will affirm a version of the well-worn declension thesis, but it will do so on the basis of change in spirituality instead of religious observance. In particular, it will present how the Antinomian controversy pulled New England toward an emphasis

upon subjective assurance as foundation for discerning true faith over the objective witness of the Spirit. Admittedly, this tendency did not mark all of American Puritanism as evidenced by the revival tradition of Solomon Stoddard and eventually the Great Awakening. Yet, the official New England theology was shaped by the decisions made during the 1630s. Cotton's position became the minority position within the colony. In the midst of this discussion, this dissertation will also explain why Cotton is so significant for understanding the tensions within New England Puritanism. Cotton's theological system contained many ideas and doctrines held by other American Puritans who disagreed with his understanding of the Christian life. Yet, his approach to spirituality- his applied theology- held many similarities to Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and the New Lights within the Great Awakening.

CHAPTER II

THE FOUNDATIONS

The foundations of Cotton's thought were forged during the early years of Puritan development in England. These foundations were shaped by Cotton's years of study at Cambridge and his constant contact with the developing theological tensions within the Church of England. These early education and ministry experiences shaped Cotton's vision of theology and the Christian life. Through these experiences, Cotton made his name and reputation within Puritanism. This chapter will begin with a brief portrait concerning the context of Cotton's early life and ministry.¹ This portrait will differ from previous understandings of Cotton's early life. In particular, it will argue against the theory that Cotton's early ministry was marked by his tendency toward compromise. This position has become the dominant scholarly understanding of Cotton's life since the writing of Larzer Ziff's *The Career of John Cotton*. Instead, this section will argue that Cotton's early educational and ministry experiences shaped Cotton into an ardent defender of predestination. They also shaped both his self understanding and his position within Puritanism. This section will begin to build the argument that Cotton's continual defense of Reformed thought and predestination also set his path for his later debates concerning salvation during his early years in New England.

¹ This dissertation is the beginning of a full biography of Cotton; but due to the nature of the dissertation, the biographical sections are focused on how his cultural milieu shaped his theological perspectives. For more details of Cotton's life, see Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, and Judith B. Wells, "John Cotton: 1584-1652: Churchman and Theologian" (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Edinburgh, 1948).

After this biographical section, the remainder of this chapter will present the theological foundations that marked Cotton's thought as within the parameters of Puritan orthodoxy. In particular, this chapter will present Cotton's understanding of God, creation, and humanity. These doctrines formed the foundation of Cotton's theology. Fortunately, Cotton's early works illustrate well his understanding of these particular doctrines. While Cotton's teaching concerning these traditional Puritan doctrines did not differ from the Puritan mainstream, he did use these foundations to build his entire theological system. This chapter is significant for understanding how Cotton's work remained within the Puritan mainstream throughout his life. It also serves as a building block for explaining Cotton's more controversial understandings concerning salvation and the work of the Spirit in the Christian life.

John Cotton's education and early ministry commenced during a confusing and troubled age for English religious leaders. Cotton was born in December of 1584 to poor parents without prestige. His father was a struggling lawyer, and his upbringing had no special marks save that he was educated and prepared for study in the university.² Cotton's life began just before the defeat of the Spanish Armada propelled England into the position of a major world power. With this victory, England became the greatest naval power in the world as well as a Protestant nation with a strong sense of national honor and importance. Yet, even in victory there remained domestic questions that would plague the next sixty years of English life. Perhaps the greatest question naturally arose from England's Protestant faith and her newfound prominence: how can England be the best representation of a Protestant nation? The answers to this question were both

² Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 4-5.

varied and hotly debated. From this question arose many different ideas and theories concerning the relationship between the Monarch and the Church. One popular way of describing how the events unfolded from the 1590s through the 1640s proposes that Thomas Cartwright's Presbyterian proposals in the 1570s illustrate an emerging party of religious leaders who sought to purify the Church of England by making it more biblically congruent.³ These proposals gave rise to a nascent Puritan movement then ran afoul of Elizabeth, because she interpreted Presbyterianism as a political attempt to curb the power of the Queen. Yet, even though Cartwright was exiled, the movement continued to multiply and to bide its time until the coronation of James allowed it to express itself clearly. According to this telling concerning the roots of English Puritanism, the theological and practical issues of the debate involved the use of the Book of Common Prayer in all its forms.⁴ To be Puritan involved a rejection of the Book of Common Prayer as prescribed and an affirmation for the Bible alone to be the guide for all worship.

Over the course of his education and early pastorate, Cotton did come to the affirmation that the Bible alone must guide all worship. He came to reject the Book of Common Prayer and any "invention of man" concerning worship. Yet, because of his education, conversion, and first pastorate, Cotton developed a theological vision of Puritanism based not only on worship practice, but also on the affirmation that Christianity must be a religion of the heart. This change in heart, or as he described it

³ For example see the classic outlook of William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, 9. Also see Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 29-39.

⁴ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 6.

change in affections, was marked by true humility and worship of the sovereign God.⁵ Consequently, Cotton came to the conclusion that his theological and pastoral task was to help people experience the life-changing touch of God's grace in Christ. At the heart of his pastoral theology was his affirmation of traditional Reformed theology that salvation was brought about by the sovereign God's work in Christ. This work was applied to the individual by the Holy Spirit according to God's predestinating decree. This multifaceted affirmation was the centerpiece of Cotton's Puritanism: it drove all of his theological and pastoral work. While such thought was almost universally believed within Puritanism, we will see that Cotton's applications of these ideas provide the background for understanding his role in the Antinomian controversy. Cotton's primary importance for his time and for today was in his unwavering commitment to the defense of predestination, and his attempts to apply his doctrine pastorally to his congregation and in his writings.

Cotton developed his theological understanding of Puritanism during his twelve years at Cambridge and through the experiences of his early years in the pastorate at Boston. When Cotton matriculated at Trinity College in 1598 as a sizar, Cambridge was in a state of debate and tension concerning the doctrine of predestination.⁶ Trinity was a moderate College theologically; and as such, it was not the center of the growing debate at Cambridge concerning predestination. Still, as a young pupil interested in theology, Cotton could not help but be drawn into the discussion. In 1596, Peter Baro had been

⁵ Admittedly these characteristics were held by the vast majority of Puritans. As we will see, where Cotton differed from some New England Puritans was in his application of these doctrines for the promotion of authentic assurance of faith.

⁶ Also Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: the Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 29-57 also see Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 15-16.

effectively driven out of Cambridge, where he had served as the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, because of his teaching and preaching against the Lambeth Articles of 1595.⁷ Baro criticized the idea that Christ's death was only for the elect. This assertion drew the ire of the more conservative Reformed theologians at Cambridge, and he was not reelected as the Lady Margaret Professor. He was replaced by a more conservative Reformed theologian in Thomas Playfere, but this move still did not quell the debate.⁸ In 1599, during Cotton's first full year as a student, John Overall, the Regius Professor of Divinity asserted "the perseverance of a truly justified man was conditional upon repentance for sin."⁹ Overall's teaching concerning grace, salvation, and sin emphasized the human role in bringing salvation and reprobation, and he attacked the strict Reformed position as 'utterly nonsensical'.¹⁰ This teaching again drew the ire of the conservative Reformed establishment at Cambridge. Even with this opposition, Overall retained his position as Regius Professor of Divinity until 1607, and he remained at Cambridge as the Master of St. Catharine's College until 1614.¹¹

In 1607, John Richardson, a fellow at Emmanuel College, succeeded Overall as the Regius Professor of Divinity. Richardson did not have any major conflicts with the more conservative theologians at Cambridge during his ten year tenure as the Regius Professor. Yet, from his manuscript, "Lectiones D.D. Richardsoni de Praedestinatione" it is clear that he did not affirm all the traditional Reformed doctrines.¹² Richardson affirmed that salvation was "available to all men in general." He 'who restricts the grace

⁷ Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: the Rise of English Arminianism*, 35.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tyacke, 37. Assertion is found in BL Harleian MS 7038, p. 82; CUL, Sel. 1.11.2.

¹⁰ Tyacke, 37. From CUL MS Gg/1/29, fo. 98.

¹¹ Tyacke, 37.

¹² Ibid., 38-39.

of God to the elect removes any way for sinners to repent', whereas in truth grace is offered to others beside the elect and can be accepted or rejected."¹³ That this teaching was not only present at Cambridge in general, but from a fellow at Emmanuel during the time of Cotton's studies, illustrates that Cotton could not have escaped the debate. Furthermore, with the arrival of Arminius's books after 1610, the debate over these teachings continued to advance. In general during Cotton's life at Cambridge, the conservative Calvinists won the day, and they sought to quell the growing anti-Calvinist teaching. Still, a growing movement of significant anti-Calvinist voices forced the Cambridge community to debate the biblical teaching concerning predestination. As an advanced student of divinity, Cotton participated in this debate, and it shaped his understanding of the Christian life.

It is also clear from the records of Cotton's life that he wrestled personally with the doctrine of predestination while at Cambridge. Early in his career at Cambridge, Cotton was both attracted and greatly repelled by the teaching of William Perkins.¹⁴ Perkins' preaching emphasized that salvation was found in faith given by predestinating grace apart from any human effort. Perkins' preaching was so compelling and his reputation so internationally famous that Cotton continued to sit under Perkins' ministry. Yet, as the implications of Perkins' preaching continued to hammer at Cotton's conscience, he became fearful for his eternal estate, and he sought to avoid Perkins' preaching if at all possible. As Cotton later related, his aversion became so intense that he felt joy when he heard the bells sound for William Perkins' funeral in 1602.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 39.

¹⁴ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 28-30.

¹⁵ John Norton, *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh*, 12.

Unfortunately for Cotton, Perkins's death did not alleviate his struggles with predestination. As Ziff described,

The familiar doctrine of Calvinism as interpreted and urged home by Perkins profoundly stirred the adolescent Cotton. The tremendous emphasis Perkins placed on grace as a free gift and on man's helplessness in the face of it meant that all the assumptions the young man had made about his salvation, assumptions based on his growing knowledge of the Bible, his belief in the Trinity, and his zeal for a reformed church, were foundations laid on shifting sands. He was not saved, according to the preacher, until he had *felt* God moving in him, and that feeling would not come, if it came at all, until he had undergone an intense period of soul searching.¹⁶

As we have seen, Cotton's attempts to forget the question of predestination were impossible at Cambridge in the early 1600s. Even the Puritan hotbed of Emmanuel was engaged in questioning the implications of predestination. During Cotton's years at Emmanuel, he continued to gain a reputation as a great polished preacher who had excellent scholarly gifts. Ironically, as his reputation increased, he also became attracted to the preaching and ministry of a then less famous Puritan, Richard Sibbes. From Sibbes, Cotton heard that predestination and the reality of total depravity had a positive side. Sibbes taught that total depravity meant that if one has the slightest desire to please God and to know God, this desire must be God-given. Thus, even the slight desire toward God should be fanned into flame. From Perkins, Cotton had felt the negative proclamation that he might not be saved. From Sibbes, he heard the affirmation that God was surely calling him, and he needed to reflect upon the grace of God in Christ. After sitting under the preaching of Sibbes and enjoying several discussions with him, Cotton came to apprehend his salvation by grace in Christ. The result was that he became a plain preacher in the Puritan style (at least somewhat since his sermons were rich with

¹⁶ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 21-22.

rhetorical devices),¹⁷ and his career as a Puritan preacher began. Sibbes' influence on Cotton's theology and approach to ministry cannot be overemphasized. Cotton's career path and his preaching ministry followed in the theological path laid by Sibbes. Cotton went so far to affirm his indebtedness to Sibbes that he kept "the picture of that great man (Sibbes) in that part of his house where he might oftenest look upon it."¹⁸

Importantly, Cotton's conversion occurred just as he was leaving Cambridge for the pastorate in early 1612. In July of that year, he became the new vicar at St. Botolph's Church in Boston, Lincolnshire. It was reported that the Bishop of Lincoln, William Barlow, thought Cotton too young and inexperienced for such an important post. Yet, Cotton's supporters in Boston skillfully (and perhaps financially) secured the Bishop's approval for Cotton to become their next pastor.¹⁹ Boston is a port city located on a river at the entrance to the Wash. It was once a great city famous for its medieval fairs and culture as well as an international port of significance. By the time Cotton arrived, those glory days were behind Boston, and it was better known as a hotbed of Puritanism than as an economic or cultural center. Lincolnshire in general and Boston in particular had a long history of practicing nonconformity. As far back as 1585, the vicar of St. Botolph's had maintained and argued for Puritan causes. In that year, Reverend Mr. Worship was among a group of twenty Lincolnshire clergy who had petitioned Archbishop Whitgift against the insistence of wearing proper clergy garb and the use of the wedding ring in

¹⁷ See especially, David A. Simmons, "John Cotton's Sermonic Style: the Use of Figures of Repetition." Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University School of Theology 1995. Also, Eugenia Delamotte, "John Cotton and the Rhetoric of Grace." *Early American Literature* 21 (1986): 49-74.

¹⁸ Norton, *Able Being Dead*, 18. Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America* (Hartford, 1853), 1:255. Quoted in Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 41, 57.

¹⁹ It appears that the practical Alderman of the town bribed Bishop Barlow so that Cotton could retain his post. Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 39-40.

marriage. It also appeared that the town supported Worship because in 1590, they consented to his destroying the rood screen in the church.²⁰ Reverend Worship was followed as vicar by Thomas Wooll who was brought before the Bishop of Lincoln in 1604 “for not wearinge the surplice nor signinge with the signe of the crosse in baptisme.” The case continued until it was discharged by the bishop’s court upon his confession of conformity.²¹ Interestingly, William Chaderton, the Bishop of Lincoln, found 137 nonconformists by his visitors in 1604. Not only was Boston alive with the spirit of Puritanism, but all of Lincolnshire was marked by Puritan impulses. When Thomas Wooll retired, the church went in search of a pastor with non-conformist tendencies. In John Cotton, they found their man, as well as a pastor true to the theologically Reformed convictions he had developed while at Cambridge.

When Cotton arrived in 1612 in Boston, he found a church and a city torn asunder by debates concerning Arminianism. Immediately, Cotton’s conversion and his internal debates concerning God’s predestinating grace were put to the test by those who sought to discredit the doctrine of predestination. As Cotton told the story years later, he found that a Mr. Doctor Baron had “leavened many of the chief men of the town with Arminianism.”²² Coming directly from the University environment and being recently converted to a firm belief in predestination, Cotton knew he had to deal with the issue decisively. The question was how to best do so pastorally. Prudently, he decided to handle the issue in a scholarly manner, and he took much time and energy to learn the

²⁰ Ibid., 36. From A.M. Cook, *Boston (Botolph’s Town)*, (Boston, 1934), 59 ff.

²¹ Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 37. From C.W. Foster (ed.), *The State of the Church in the Reigns of Elizabeth and James I as Illustrated by Documents Relating to the Diocese of Lincoln*, “Lincoln Record Society,” XXXII (Horncastle, 1926), cxvi, 369.

²² John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 215.

exact issues brought by Dr. Baron against the doctrine of predestination. Contrary to Ziff, his desire was not compromise, but wisdom in how to deal with the actual issues raised by Dr. Baron. After interviewing many people within the church and taking the time to discuss the issue thoroughly, he addressed these issues. This complete understanding of the debate allowed him to shape his argument against the Arminian doctrine so as to avoid offensive language. He then began “publicly to preach, and in private meetings to defend the doctrine of God’s eternal election before all foresight of good and evil in the creature: and the redemption (*ex gratia*) only of the elect: the effectual vocation of a sinner *per irresistibilem gratiae vim*, without all respect of the preparations of free will: and finally, the impossibility of the fall of a sincere believer either totally or finally from the estate of grace.”²³ It appears as if Cotton’s scholarly and pastoral answer to the objections of the Arminians won the day. The Arminian controversy began to die out, and Cotton recorded that his church experienced a lasting peace over the issue. In the Puritan community, Cotton’s answers to these Arminian objections enhanced his reputation as both a scholar and a pastor.

Fortunately, Cotton’s earliest work against these Arminian objections to Reformed thought have been captured in a book by William Twisse called, *A Treatise of Mr. Cotton’s Clearing Certain Doubts Concerning Predestination Together with an Examination Thereof*.²⁴ As Twisse described, he came across Cotton’s teaching in a letter, and he was alarmed at the Arminian tendencies within the work. *A Treatise* was Twisse’s answer to these Arminian tendencies, and throughout the book he used Cotton

²³ Ibid., 216.

²⁴ William Twisse, *A Treatise of Mr. Cotton’s Clearing Certain Doubts Concerning Predestination Together with an Examination Thereof* (London, 1646).

as the foil to expose the Arminian errors. As a result, the context of Cotton's words was often lost; and in the second section of the book, it becomes difficult to discern Cotton's actual writing from Twisse's opinions about Cotton's thought. Fortunately, the first half of the book clearly contained sections of Cotton's writings with pages of Twisse's thought following these sections. If Cotton's writing is taken from the first section of the book, it contains about 20 pages of prose (out of 148 pages of text in Twisse's book). This material flows well chronologically, and it appears that Twisse was dealing with Cotton's thought as it was presented in the original letter. Admittedly, Twisse often argued against Cotton by pulling only certain ideas out of context and exploiting them, but a large section of Cotton's earliest thought on the nature of God and God's covenantal relationship to humanity is still intact.

Somewhat misleadingly, Twisse called Cotton's work a Treatise even though it only runs to twenty pages of text. Cotton did not choose to respond to Twisse's accusation except to say that this letter was meant to be a pastoral response to the rampant Arminianism within Lincolnshire. As I read this material, I have no reason to doubt that Cotton's account of this letter is true. This is not a treatise, but a pastoral letter to a friend struggling in his parish with the same Arminian issues that Cotton faced early in his tenure in Lincolnshire. Since Cotton has decisively dealt with this issue in Boston, his advice was significant. Thus Cotton's only response to Twisse's accusations of Arminianism was the following from *The Way Cleared*.

As for my too precipitant rashness in former times, which he is pleased to remember me of, let him be pleased to forbear his censure a while, till I may give account thereof to Reverend Doctor Twisse. In the meantime let him know, that those tenents which he saith I send abroad to the world, whereof I had cause to repent, I neither sent them abroad to the world, (but wrote them

privately for the satisfaction of a neighbor minister) nor do I yet know, whether I have cause to repent of them or no, it being near thirty years ago since I wrote them, and many years ago since I read them.²⁵

If Cotton's claims were true, then this was a pastoral letter written in the 1610s and not a treatise. The purpose was pastoral and not purely academic. In this work, Cotton was not a theological compromiser, but a skillful apologist against the very arguments of Lincolnshire Arminianism.

This letter remains extremely significant for Cotton studies for several reasons. First, it illustrates clearly Cotton's earliest attempt to explain covenant theology and predestinarian thought to a hostile audience. While Cotton's theology grew from this point, it did illustrate ways that Cotton used traditional Reformed ideas to argue for predestination. Second, this letter was not Cotton's definitive work concerning predestination, but an early draft addressed to the actual questions and concerns of the Arminians. This letter was written before the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. Thus, Cotton's theological explorations were completed before the official teachings against Arminianism were codified. These two details explain several perplexities that have baffled scholars concerning Cotton's supposed *Treatise on Predestination*. Cotton's thought did not match with the orthodoxy expressed in the 1640s because it was an early attempt to address Arminianism from a Reformed perspective. He did not view Twisse's complaints as worthy of a response because this letter was nothing more than an early Reformed Puritan attempt to explain the gospel and covenant theology to the specific needs and questions of the 1610s. Furthermore, Cotton's work illustrated his concern for

²⁵ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 211.

pastoral and biblical faithfulness to the topic. Even though he quoted extensively from Zanchi in other areas of thought, he did not illustrate any tendencies toward metaphysical speculation into the character of God in his thought concerning predestination. Instead, Cotton illustrated decided affinities with Calvin and the early Reformers in this thought regarding the character of God and predestination.²⁶ Thus, Cotton's early thoughts regarding predestination did not illustrate his heterodoxy; but instead, they revealed the variety of thought within Puritanism before Dort.

Furthermore, Cotton did not choose to address Twisse's concerns because he dealt with predestination and Arminianism in much more detail in a later treatise on the subject. In his recently published collection of Cotton's letters, Sargent Bush, Jr. presented a letter of Cotton's dated May 31, 1626, to Archbishop James Ussher that indicated Cotton's continued interest in the predestination question. In this letter, Cotton wrote to introduce a manuscript he had written (probably in 1624-25)²⁷ on predestination that he desired the Archbishop to review.²⁸ This work was apparently in a popular style that might violate the King's 1622 injunction against divines writing "in any popular auditory the deep points of predestination, election, reprobation, or of the universality, efficacy, resistability, or irresistibility of God's grace."²⁹ Cotton's reputation was that of a

²⁶ For an excellent discussion of these issues see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformational Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003) 95-101. Cotton suffered in this early letter with the same problems Calvin had with the subject. As Muller stated, "Thus, while it is clear that Calvin intended to deny that God is the author of sin and to affirm the existence of secondary causes, contingency, and human freedom or responsibility, his difficulty with the language of divine permission and his lack of recourse to establish language of divine *concursum* left places in which his theology is unclear on such issues." p. 101.

²⁷ This date is in agreement with Sargent Bush, Jr. Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

²⁹ Edward Cardwell, ed., *Documentary Annals of the Reformed Church in England*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1844), II, 202. Quoted in Bush, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 110.

fine scholar and teacher, so he attempted to address the issues and still obey the King's injunction. Thus, he wrote to Archbishop Ussher for his advice and opinion concerning the book because he knew that Ussher was clearly in favor of the Calvinist position against Arminianism. Unfortunately for students of Cotton's thought, timing was everything: Cotton's manuscript could not have arrived at a worse time for Ussher to promote its publication. In June of 1626, acting on the instruction of King Charles, Bishop Neile wrote against the Cambridge divines who intended to support Calvinism against Arminianism in the 1626 Commencement. In an official letter, Neile forbade either "by writing, preaching, printing, conferences or otherwise" to "raise any doubts, or publish or maintain any new inventions, or opinions, concerning religion than such as are clearly grounded and warranted by the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England, heretofore published and happily established by authority."³⁰ Cotton's continued relationship with Cambridge and the material within his manuscript made it impossible for the Archbishop to approve the work without fear of trouble from King Charles. His rejection also meant the death of Cotton's manuscript. This work would have been helpful to understand Cotton's published thought concerning predestination after the Synod of Dort. The existence of this manuscript may also explain why Cotton did not respond to Twisse. Yes, he had written a *Treatise on Predestination*, but Twisse was only dealing with an early draft in the form of a letter. This letter was not meant for public view but as pastoral advice.

While Cotton's work on predestination is important for understanding his early thought, it was not his only important work. *The Way of Life, Christ the Fountaine of*

³⁰ *The Stuart Constitution*, ed. J.P. Kenyon (Cambridge, 1966), 154-5. Quoted in Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 48-49.

Life, God's Mercie Mixed with his Justice, Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish, A Brief Exposition of Canticles, and the exhaustive *A Practical Commentary upon the First Epistle General of John* all illustrated the foundations of Cotton's theology. These works contained many of Cotton's best known pastoral works, and they were the books that made Cotton's reputation as a Puritan and as a writer. From these works and drawing from the context of Cotton's education, conversion, and pastoral experiences the remainder of this chapter will explain the foundations of Cotton's theology. These foundations include Cotton's understanding of God, his high Christology, his firm belief in total depravity, and his understanding of the covenantal relationship between God and humanity as expressed in both the Old and New Testament. These basic articulations of accepted Reformed doctrine were well within the Puritan mainstream. Because Cotton's understanding of God and Christ were not controversial, the next section will only briefly describe these foundations of his thought. The focus of these descriptions will be to provide a basis for describing his understanding of Covenant theology, and how these foundational doctrines informed his more controversial articulations concerning the work of the Spirit in assurance.

The Shared Foundations: Christ, The Holy Spirit, and Human Depravity

Doctrinally, Cotton's place within the Puritan mainstream was well established during formative years of Puritanism in England. As we have seen, his early education included years of training at the Puritan stronghold of Emmanuel College. During this time, Cotton accepted the basic Puritan articulations of orthodoxy. As with all clergy in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Cotton began his theological

reflections with the immutable character of God. Cotton believed in the Trinity, and he condemned as heretical anyone who denied this doctrine. Overall, his reflections upon the character and person of God did not display depth of thought and exploration. Instead, Cotton's real concern with the doctrine of God was his focus on Christ as the divine mediator between God and humanity. In addition, all of Cotton's thought concerning God was shaped by direct scriptural descriptions of God's character and work. He did not wish to go beyond the scriptural affirmations of God's person and character.³¹ In keeping with these parameters, Cotton assumed the Trinity as the orthodox understanding of God, and his thoughts concerning God the Father did not go beyond the dual affirmation that God was both sovereign over creation as well as marked by absolute holiness.³² His works were rife with allusions to God's sovereignty and its significance for the life of the believer. Throughout his ministry, he used divine sovereignty as a pastoral tool to encourage the believer to trust in God's work instead of their own actions. While he did maintain that God was the only free determining agent within creation who predestined from all eternity some for eventual salvation and others for eventual damnation, he used double predestination to encourage his hearers to trust in God's work for salvation if they felt the slightest desire for Christ.³³ As we will see in

³¹ Here Cotton's thought resembles Calvin's *Institutes* more than his contemporaries concerned with writing doctrinal theology. See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformational Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 4, 90-91.

³² Again, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformational Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 3, 95-107. Cotton's thought concerning the doctrine of God matches well with Calvin and the early Reformers. His speculations were not as insightful or exhaustive as Zanchi nor the Ramist influenced Puritans such as Perkins and Ames. Again, this does not illustrate heterodoxy, but the variety within accepted Puritan articulations of these doctrines.

³³ An example of the two sides of this teaching was found in Cotton's controversial *The Covenant of God's Free Grace* (preached in 1636). Here Cotton argued that even in the best families, there were examples of unbelief and rejection of Christ. This fact illustrated God's double predestinating decrees, but also the need for all who feel led to repentance to come to repentance and faith. John Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace, Most sweetly unfolded, and comfortably applied to a disquieted Soul, from that Text of 2 Samuel 23., Ver. 5.* (London, 1645), 6.

detail in the next two chapters, such encouragement focused his hearers on the gracious nature of Christ in saving sinners. Such teaching and emphasis matched many within the Puritan and Reformed mainstream.³⁴

If there is any area where Cotton excelled as a theologian following in the footprints of Calvin, it was in his emphasis that Christ is the primary agent in creation for bringing glory and praise to God. Cotton's consistently high emphasis on Christology and the importance of the Spirit's application of that work to the individual were his greatest contributions to Puritanism and Puritan spirituality. The roots of this teaching can be seen from Cotton's first work concerning predestination. In this letter, Cotton built his argument against Arminianism by emphasizing the importance of Christ in both creation and salvation.³⁵ This writing consistently attempted to undercut any human pride that would seek to rob glory from Christ by emphasizing the human role in creation. According to Cotton, the glory of Christ was the primary purpose of God's supralapsarian plan. This argument placed Christ at the center of both salvation and all creation.³⁶

Twisse took this emphasis on Christ and he twisted the argument to illustrate how his teaching promoted Arminianism. Twisse's refutation of Cotton was most unfair because it did not understand what Cotton was attempting to do in the beginning of his refutation of Arminian doctrine. Cotton emphasized the person and work of Christ as a means of undercutting human pride.³⁷ He appealed to his hearers' consciences by promoting Christ as more significant than any of their actions. If he was guilty of

³⁴ See Muller, *Post-Reformational Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 3, 542-543.

³⁵ William Twisse, *A Treatise of Mr. Cotton's Clearing Certain Doubts Concerning Predestination Together with An Examination Thereof* (London, 1646), 1.

³⁶ John Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 6.

³⁷ See chapter III pages 125-129. Humility is a reoccurring theme in Cotton's thought.

anything, it was of exalting Christ.³⁸ Cotton's emphasis on the importance of Christ for both salvation and the Christian life was his most consistent theological trait. His thought was driven by his desire to give all the glory or "preeminence" to Christ and Christ alone. Even from Cotton's first pastoral letter, his theology of the Christian life focused on promoting humility in the face of Christ's completed and perfect work. Cotton's emphasis on the person and work of Christ was so significant for our understanding of his theology that it will be covered extensively in the next chapter.

At the heart of the debate concerning predestination that raged in England throughout Cotton's education and early pastoral career was a discussion on the extent of sin within creation after the fall. Cotton's early works reflected his concern for providing a biblical answer to this question. These early works illustrated Cotton's conclusions concerning the extent of human sinfulness: conclusions that lay a second foundational building block for all his thought concerning the Christian life. Matching the Reformed and Puritan mainstream, Cotton believed that the doctrine of total depravity was a complement to his understanding of the supremacy of Christ. To our modern ears, the doctrine of total depravity sounds negative, but Cotton used this doctrine positively to illustrate how assurance of salvation is found only in Christ. While this pastoral emphasis of the doctrine of total depravity runs counter to our intuition, it is essential for our understanding of Cotton's importance as a Puritan theologian. As we have seen, Cotton's theology emphasized the plan of redemption and the work of Christ as from

³⁸ As Cotton stated, "Christ is said in all things to have a preeminence, and God is said to dispose and carry his counsels and waies toward the Church, that it might appear, Christ in all things to have the preeminence. ... If God should have no thought of the advancement of Christ man to the fellowship of the second person to become man, till upon the presupposall of the fall of Adam; then were we not created for Christ, but Christ for us, contrary to that of the Apostle; And so Christ shall be brought into the world, as it were, *ens per accidens*, a thing by accident, upon occasion of the fall." John Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 11-12.

before time.³⁹ Thus, he believed that humans were created righteous and holy,⁴⁰ but they quickly fell into sin so that God's excellent plan of salvation could begin to unfold.⁴¹ All of Cotton's reflections upon creation and the fall returned to explore this theme in different ways. First, he argued that God created humanity to reflect God's glory through perfect fellowship with the divine.⁴² The key to this relationship with God was complete and perfect obedience. While humanity was created in original righteousness to walk with God; providentially, this perfect obedience did not last long, and the result was the loss of fellowship with God. Cotton maintained that this change in status with God was the real nature of the fall.⁴³ Furthermore, within Cotton's thought true goodness was always derived from God. With the separation from God brought about by sin, humanity became lost, blind, and dead to truth and goodness.⁴⁴ Since humanity was created to participate in God's goodness, at the core of all people remains a longing for restoration back toward God. Yet, due to sin within us, we constantly strive against this desire by inventing means of restoration apart from submission to God and submission to the Word

³⁹ William Twisse, *A Treatise of Mr. Cotton's*, 6.

⁴⁰ John Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practical Observation upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1654), 161.

⁴¹ "Secondly, He is truly said to be slaughtered from the foundation of the world, in regard of the promise of God made to *Adam* since the world began; the same day that *Adam* was created he fell, or certainly soon after, but most probably the same day: the same day that he fell, it is clear the Lord gave him a promise of the death of Christ in *Gen. 3:15*." John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 189.

⁴² John Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practical Observation upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1654), 162.

⁴³ As he stated, "Since the fall, the good which God put into the creature, (*Gen. 1.31*) is accursed to us for our sin, so that now labor and sorrow, is all our portion from the Creature, *Gen. 17.19*. Goodness residing chiefly in God, is to be found in the creature only by participation, and that as his pleasure, *Matth. 19.17*. By Adams fall goodness is devoted to the second Adam; to wit, the goodness of the creature, *Heb. 2.6,7,8*. Hence from his it is derived." *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁴ As he stated, "And whereas Man is carnall, blind, and impotent, and yet a lover of his own devices (no lesse than *Pigmalion* of his own Picture); if he should be suffered to invent new Signs, they would be carnal and not spiritual, dead, having no Power; dark, veiling the brightness of the Sacraments themselves." John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 9.

of God as our authority.⁴⁵ For Cotton, this idolatry was the root of our actual sin against God. It was idolatry; and at its heart, it was active unbelief that rejected God and Christ as the means of salvation.⁴⁶ This is the condition of all humanity; and apart from a direct work of God's grace, it is impossible to overcome such radical, deep-seated rebellion against God.

Cotton's articulations concerning God, the centrality of the person and work of Christ, and the utter depravity of humanity were not controversial during his lifetime. These foundations were shared by the Puritan and Reformed mainstream. Thus, this chapter has not gone into great depth discussing the particulars of Cotton's thought concerning these topics. Yet, from these foundations, Cotton developed a theological trajectory through his understanding of covenant theology that did leave room for debate and questions. The next section will describe Cotton's perspective concerning covenant theology. This understanding provided the final foundation for his more controversial thought.

⁴⁵ Here Cotton joined the Puritan and Reformed mainstream in its critique of human invention in worship. As he stated, "For the Scripture testifieth that every man is brutish by his own knowledge, nor more able to discern what is this case is fit and acceptable, than a blind man is able to judge the colours; that there is no light in them that speak not according to the Scripture, no wisdom in them that reject the Word of the Lord: There is a certain light engraven in the hearts of men by Nature, whereby they know somewhat concerning God; as, that there is a God, that he is wise, just, good, and bountiful, the Governour of all things; and they discern some things pertaining to justice, equity, temperance, honest commerce and dealing with men: but they are utterly ignorant how, or by what means God will be served, what he will bless for the Instruction of his People." John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 28.

⁴⁶ Here Cotton agreed with Thomas Shepard and Thomas Hooker. Both of these men would place humiliation within the process of preparationism. See Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 80-82.

Covenants of Work and Grace

The idea that God worked in covenant with God's church was central to the theology of both the Puritans and their foes. It was also central to Cotton's theology because it provided a way to reconcile a Holy God with fallen humanity through Christ. The idea of covenant is found throughout the Bible; and in the period of Protestant Scholasticism, it became the primary means of explaining God's relationship with the church and with all of creation.⁴⁷ Covenant theology began with the premise that God chose to relate to humanity in the form of covenants. These covenants were basic contracts of allegiance that stipulated the requirements to remain in covenant or relationship for both humanity and God. Generally, these covenants were not made between equals. Instead, they were modeled after the treaties between two kings or kingdoms where a greater king dominated a lesser king. In such a treaty, the lesser king made vows to the greater king to maintain obedience and faithfulness to the covenant. These vows or stipulations included the paying of tribute, the agreement to maintain the covenant, and the promise to support the greater king. The great King meanwhile also made covenantal promises to the lesser king. These included protection, the maintenance of the covenant, and the promise not to annihilate the lesser king. The covenantal relationship hinged upon the fulfillment of the requirements of the covenant. If the requirements were broken, then the greater king would punish the lesser king for all violations.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For an excellent study of the development of Covenant theology, see David Weir. *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁴⁸ For more details, see Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997).

According to the Puritans, God and humanity were in a covenantal relationship. As in the above examples, God represented the great King while humanity represented the lesser king. The result was that humanity has taken vows or made stipulations to God. These stipulations included certain beliefs and the outward working of these beliefs in behavior. If these stipulations were broken, then God had the right and responsibility to punish the disobedience. For the Puritans, the basic explanation of this covenantal relationship between God and humanity was expressed in two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.⁴⁹ The covenant of works was made with Adam, and the entire human race with Adam as a federal head, before the fall. This covenant demanded “perfect and personal” obedience. As a result of the fall, this covenant no longer can be fulfilled, but it was still binding upon all humanity. The result was that all humans are guilty before God of breaking the first covenant of works. The Puritans then postulated that due to God’s mercy, a second covenant, the covenant of grace, was put into place by God to offer salvation through Christ to those who place their faith in him for salvation. Cotton did not differ from his contemporaries in arguing that the best way to understand the relationship between God and humanity was through the idea of covenant. This idea became the third foundational block in his theology of the Christian life, and it was vitally important within his system for understanding how God can be reconciled with humanity.

In agreement with the Puritan mainstream, Cotton maintained that there were two distinct covenants within scripture: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. He argued that these covenants were similar in that both have an individual and a corporate

⁴⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith 1647, Chapter VII, I.

component: both provided a way for an individual as well as the church to be in a right relationship with God. He maintained that they are different in that each is addressed to different heads: the covenant of works to Adam, who federally represents all humanity, and the covenant of grace to Christ, who federally represents the true church. Cotton argued that both covenants remained binding, yet their applications to humanity could not be more different. The covenant of works was made to Adam at the beginning of creation. It stipulated that Adam would have perfect fellowship with God if Adam obeyed God perfectly. As Cotton understood this covenant, it stipulated that Adam was to walk in his own created righteousness. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Adam quickly disobeyed God because he lacked the strength to keep perfect obedience. The result was a loss of created righteousness and death.⁵⁰ As the representative for all people, Adam was not able to maintain perfect righteousness. The result was that all of humanity fell into sin and out of right relationship with God when their representative, Adam, fell into sin. For Cotton and the mainstream Puritans, this explanation was the proper explanation for original sin.

In the 1640s, Cotton was accused by Dr. Twisse of changing this accepted understanding of the covenant of works and thus original sin in Twisse's *A Treatise of Mr. Cotton's*.⁵¹ Twisse accused Cotton of teaching a form of Arminianism since Cotton argued in his letter from the 1610s that humanity is guilty of sin because of their own acts of willful disobedience. In Twisse's mind, Cotton has denied both the covenant of works

⁵⁰ As Cotton stated: "Now I say, that a man is not written to destruction, but to life, and to life in Christ; not as *Adam*, that was to stand by his own strength, and so long as he useth grace well, he shall live; but if not, he shall dye: and he roused it, that if God give him not life in Christ, he dyed forever: This is in *Adams* covenant, not in Christ's, that was for a man to live by his own righteousness." John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 149.

⁵¹ William Twisse, *A Treatise of Mr. Cotton's*, 57.

and original sin. Cotton's own letter illustrated that Twisse missed an essential part of his argument. It was true that in his attempt to address the actual objections of the Arminians, Cotton argued that all humanity was implicated in the fall due to their own willful sin. This concession was more of an apologetic tool than the end of his argument. Cotton continued by stating that because of these willful sins, all humanity illustrated their solidarity with Adam.⁵² Such an affirmation was not a denial of original sin, but a careful apologetic move to address the questions of his Arminian foes. In other words, he affirmed his belief in original sin and the covenant of works through the back door of appealing to the conscience of the Arminians. In fact, he concluded this section with the affirmation that the universal disobedience of humanity illustrated the binding nature of the covenant of works. Thus, Twisse's argument did not have merit. In addition, Cotton's reply to the Arminians cannot be used as evidence for his supposed compromising spirit. Instead, the passage and the remainder of Cotton's other works throughout his lifetime illustrated his adherence to the binding nature of the covenant of works as expressed by the mainstream Puritans.

Cotton's theology also maintained agreement with the Puritan mainstream in his teaching concerning the covenant of grace. Cotton argued that in one important respect the covenant of grace was very similar to the covenant of works: both covenants demanded perfect obedience and righteousness to maintain a right relationship with God. Yet, the covenant of grace radically differed from the covenant of works because the covenantal mediator was so radically different. In the covenant of grace, the representative for the church was Christ: the God-man whose strength, character, work,

⁵² Ibid., 42-43 and 54.

and perseverance maintained perfect righteousness. In the covenant of works, the representative was Adam, a human whose disobedience lost righteousness. In describing the difference between Christ and Adam, Cotton stated:

First, the *Covenant of Works* was made to Adam and all his posterity, Cain was within this Covenant, *Gen 4.7 Rom 2.6 to 10. Do well and you shall be accepted.* The everlasting Covenant is not made to Adam and his seed, but to Abraham and his seed, *Gal 3.16 He saith not to the seed of many, but as to one of they seed, which is Christ,* being spoken collectively; so likewise, *Gen 17.7. Moreover, I will establish my Covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting Covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.*⁵³

In this passage, Cotton maintained his belief that all humanity was implicated and found guilty by the covenant of works. Yet, the promise of the everlasting covenant was made to Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ. In Cotton's thought, this illustrated that only Christ could truly keep the covenant because only Christ could live a life of perfect obedience. Thus, Christ was the absolute key to entering the covenant of grace. He was the perfect covenant mediator.

Cotton also agreed with the Puritan mainstream in his applications of this covenantal theology. Cotton argued that the blessings of Christ's active righteousness were granted to those who trust in Christ alone for salvation. He maintained that through his death on the cross, Christ paid the penalty for those who deserved death because of their personal unrighteousness. Those called by God's grace to trust in Christ by faith have a complete and perfect payment for their sin in the person of Jesus. In this way, the blessing of the covenant of grace extended to them. Here Cotton's other basic understandings of God and humanity overlapped with his articulations of covenant

⁵³ J. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace, Most sweetly unfolded, and comfortably applied to a disquieted Soul, from that Text of 2 Samuel 23., Ver. 5.* (London, 1645), 12.

theology. In Cotton's theology, even one's faith in Christ must be a gift of God's grace because of human deadness in sin. God changed a person's heart from dull and lifeless to alive and active.⁵⁴ This change was described using biblical language: those under the covenant of works maintained a heart of stone while those under the covenant of grace were given a heart of flesh. The result was that those under each covenant experienced relationship with God through different conditions. Those under the covenant of works affirmed that they would perform the perfect works demanded, but they are not able to so. The reason for this was their stony hearts. Meanwhile, the covenant of grace was given to those whose hearts were changed to flesh. Such change must be completed by God alone since the individual is incapable self change.⁵⁵ Christ made way for the covenant of grace by his perfect life, but it was applied to others by God's work to change their hearts from stone to flesh. In the process, God's grace gave duties to perform and the strength to carry out these duties.⁵⁶

In another overlap with Cotton's other foundational elements of theology, Cotton maintained that covenant theology rightly understood must give all the glory in salvation and the Christian life to Christ. As we have seen, Cotton understood himself as a defender of Reformed and predestinarian thought. He fought against any attempt to take glory for Christ by giving it to humanity. Consequently, covenant theology became a

⁵⁴ As Cotton stated, "Secondly, they (the covenants) differed in the frame of their tables wherein they were written: the first was in stone after the fall, implying the Law was given to stony hearts, that could not be done away, and that our hearts were very dull to receive it; But this Covenant of Grace is written in the fleshy tables of the hearts; the one gives duties to perform, but no strength wherewithall, the other affords both". Ibid.

⁵⁵ While Cotton's articulations of how one experienced this change differed from those of Thomas Shepard, here he agreed completely with Shepard's understanding of preparationism. Both men would agree that only God changed a person. For a discussion of these tendencies within Puritanism, see Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 80.

⁵⁶ Interestingly, this point is taken from Cotton's most "Antinomian" set of sermons. It still maintained Cotton's affinities to the Puritan mainstream and covenant theology.

means of promoting and illustrating God's sovereignty and human depravity. The result of this emphasis was the belief that personal sin served to verify humanity's guilt in breaking the covenant of works. Furthermore, the breaking of the covenant of works resulted in the absolute lostness of humanity: humans were "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world."⁵⁷ Because of the deadness of humanity in sin, Christ alone must get all the credit for anyone's salvation. Covenant theology held together both of these theological positions, and it provided Cotton with a means of articulating his theology to his hearers. In the process, covenant theology provided Cotton with a tool to refute Arminianism and its claims that God somehow responds to an individual's expressions of faith. For Cotton, such a claim goes against scripture, reason, and experience.

Cotton's application of covenant theology carried over to his interpretation of the Old Testament. He argued that the covenant of grace must not be seen as a secondary covenant that came in response to Adam's sin. Instead, the covenant of grace was enacted before the foundation of the world so as to give all the greater glory to Christ.⁵⁸ In Cotton's view, God's supralapsarian plan included the magnification of Christ as the only means of salvation since the first of creation. As we have seen, this supralapsarian payment for sin was appropriated to the life of the believer by faith granted by God. Given that God's plan for salvation was at work since the foundation of the world, Cotton

⁵⁷ Ephesians 2:12 NIV.

⁵⁸ As he stated, "(Christ) is truly said to be slaughtered from the foundation of the world, in regard of the promise of God made to *Adam* since the world began; the same day that *Adam* was created he fell, or certainly soon after, but most probably the same day: the same day that he fell, it is clear the Lord gave him a promise of the death of Christ in *Gen. 3:15*." John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 189.

postulated that the Old Testament saints also must be brought to right relationship with God by the work of Christ in the covenant of grace. Abraham was an example Cotton often used to explain this point. He argued from the book of Galatians that Abraham was brought into right relationship with God not because of his own righteousness, but only because of his faith in the work of Christ.⁵⁹ Thus for Cotton, only the covenant of grace brought true salvation. Because of this fact, Cotton consistently pleaded with his hearers to trust in Christ alone for salvation.

The foundations of Cotton's theology were held by all within the Puritan mainstream. In his basic theological articulations, there was little to cause controversy. Yet, the reason these foundations of Cotton's thought were so important was that from these foundations, he branched out into theological positions that were controversial.⁶⁰ These more controversial subjects, including his thought concerning salvation and the work of the Spirit in assurance will be explored in the next two chapters. This chapter's significance is found in illustrating the accepted foundations of Cotton's thought. From these foundations, Cotton developed a tendency to exalt Christ in all areas of salvation. As we have seen, this tendency was born from his early struggles against Arminianism. Due to this background and from his basic theological foundations, Cotton exhibited a great distrust for those who possibly confused the covenant of grace with the covenant of works. This included Roman Catholics, prideful Puritans, and general unbelievers. Pastorally, Cotton warned that pride in one's action to merit favor with God was the surest proof that one trusted in the covenant of works instead of Christ. In response to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁰ This chapter confirmed the argument of Bozeman and Winship that Cotton's basic theological system remained at all times within the parameters of Puritan orthodoxy. Where he differed from other Puritans was in his application of this shared theology.

this tendency, Cotton developed an emphasis within his teaching upon deep-rooted humility as the best proof of authentic Christian experience. This emphasis developed during his early years in the pastorate; and as he grew in emphasizing humility, he began to distrust works as a means of identifying authentic union in the covenant of grace. Early in his ministry, Cotton taught that both the covenant of grace and the covenant of works required obedience to the Word. He did not make a distinction between the obedience of works that fulfills the law and the obedience of faith that rests in Christ.⁶¹ During these early years, Cotton emphasized obedience to the Word as the surest mark of authentic spirituality.⁶² Such teaching would make even the most scrupulous of the Puritans understand that Cotton did not disregard the law in the Christian life.⁶³

Throughout the 1620s, Cotton's perspective changed concerning the best manner of determining authentic Christian experience.⁶⁴ During this time, his sermons became increasingly focused on promoting faith, and he began to argue that one's obedience to the law can mislead someone into thinking they believe in Christ when they really are trusting in their ability to maintain the law.⁶⁵ The roots of this change were laid within Cotton's foundational theological presuppositions. Cotton reflected that because of total

⁶¹ John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 43.

⁶² In these early works, Cotton's thought did not fall prey to the overemphasis on the Spirit over the Word that Holifield and Stoeber mention as the theological cause of the Antinomian controversy. In chapter three, we will take a look at Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit and the Word in the 1630s. See pages 126-128.

⁶³ Such statements also would agree with the teaching of Thomas Shepard and Thomas Hooker. For examples, see Shepard, *Sound Believer*, 99; and Hooker, *Soules Humiliation*, 9. For a discussion of these teaching in context see Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 81 ff. This also matches the Puritan emphasis on "Christian works" after conversion emphasized in Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

⁶⁴ In some ways this argument is similar to that made by Michael Winship *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 34-36. This difference is in our understanding of the roots and extent of Cotton's changes.

⁶⁵ This argument disagrees with Bozeman who argued that in the 1620s Cotton emphasized Christian duties. In his reading of Cotton, Bozeman ignores the increasing tendency to emphasize grace and faith. In Cotton's thought, divine grace and faith will promote Christian duties. See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 211-230.

depravity, the covenant of works interacted with human pride to convince us that our efforts somehow mollify God's righteousness. Due to this sin tendency, humans developed a relationship with the covenant of works where they suppressed outward sinful behavior so that they could gain favor with God and others. As Cotton developed into a famous Puritan preacher, he increasingly came in contact with fellow Puritans who proved their right relationship with God by their upright lifestyle. While Cotton would not argue against an upright life, he did begin to warn such Puritans to trust in Christ instead of their lifestyle for salvation. These warnings against hypocrisy hinged upon Cotton's emphasis on Christ and his distrust of human effort because of total depravity. Some of Cotton's most famous works, such as *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, were marked by these dual emphases. In these sermons, he did not nullify the law, but he warned his hearers that salvation and grace were found in Christ alone.⁶⁶

Again, such an emphasis was not controversial. Yet, Cotton's application of this idea became more controversial. During Cotton's first couple of years in New England, his warnings against trusting in the covenant of works became increasingly focused. While these years will be covered in detail in the next chapter, it is helpful to think of his warnings against trusting in the covenant of works as a pastoral response to a church convinced of their own righteousness. In particular, Cotton was called upon to deal with the judgmental spirit of the church at Salem. His response to this church was one of the clearest examples of his tendency to emphasize the covenant of grace instead of works as

⁶⁶ Emerson dated *Christ the Fountaine of Life* to the period of 1624-1632- the last few years of Cotton's ministry in England. It is clear from the references to England that it was preached before immigration. Given its mature expressions of Cotton's thought, Emerson's dating was most likely correct.

proof of authentic Christian experience.⁶⁷ The purpose of this sermon was to apologize to the church for his earlier attack on their congregational practices (though this confession might be just to gain their trust), and to illustrate why Roger Williams and the church following Williams' advice was wrong in their insistence that the New England church renounce any association with the Church of England. Cotton argued that the Reformation had gone far enough and that it was foolishness to denounce as non-Christian both the Church of England and those in communion with the Church of England. In a skillful use of rhetoric and logic, Cotton turned the argument of those desiring a pure church back upon itself. By the end, he argued that those who trust in their actions, their purity, or even their covenant, were under a covenant of works. In the process, he illustrated clearly his understanding of both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace and how these covenants were applied to the individual.

Cotton began his sermon with his clearest published explanation of the similarities and differences between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. In a theological move that was accepted by all mainstream Puritans, he explained that the covenant of works was marked by the law. He continued by arguing that the covenant of works also was marked by several other key characteristics. These included the fact that the Mosaic covenant began with the Lord calling to the Israelites out of thunder and lightning. He argued that this calling caused fear, but did not address their hearts. Next, the Mosaic covenant demanded exact obedience to all the commandments of the law. As the Israelites professed their trust in this covenant of God, they affirmed the rightness of these laws, and they agreed to the stipulation that they must continue to live by this

⁶⁷ Cotton, *A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636* (1713).

covenant. Finally, the covenant of works contained the warning that those who break the commands of the law will be cursed.⁶⁸ Cotton stated that the people responded to this covenant by professing their universal obedience unto all the commandments.⁶⁹ In context, Cotton argued that the people had no real idea that they could not keep the commandments. Instead, they were deceived as to their true spiritual state: they really believed they could and would keep the requirements of the covenant. Cotton concluded that because of this lack of understanding of their own sinfulness, the people also professed that they were justly accursed by God, if they did not keep the covenant.⁷⁰ The result was that according to their own words, they were accursed.

Cotton's application of this Old Testament covenant to the situation at Salem illustrated his concern for trusting in the covenant of works. Skillfully, Cotton turned his argument against Salem's desire for a pure church and pure ordinances. While he did not condemn a pure church model (this was the basis of his apology in the beginning of the sermon), he did affirm that trust in purity of church and ordinances was exactly like the Israelite trust in their covenant with God. As a result, he warned them against slipping into the covenant of works- a covenant where they trusted in their own actions instead of Christ's work. He then made an interesting argument concerning the nature of both covenants. He stated that it was easy to mistake the covenant of works with the covenant of grace in outward performance because the Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices all suggest the work of Christ. The problem was not with the ceremonies, but with the

⁶⁸ John Cotton, *A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636* (1713), 47-48.

⁶⁹ As he stated, "They do profess universal obedience unto all the commandments, Deut v. 27; Exod. Xix, 8. Twice they repeat it, *All that the Lord shall say unto us, we will hear it, and do it*. Only consider this, they promise it in some kind of opinion of their own insufficiency; like men under pangs of conscience, they do believe that they shall be able to keep and do all that the Lord shall say unto them." *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

people in that they trusted in themselves instead of in the grace found in Christ. In comparison, Cotton claimed that the Salem church might also be trusting in themselves and in their ability to maintain the covenant (or law). As he stated,

The elders of the church propound it, will you renounce all your sinful pollutions? Will you keep covenant? And enter into a covenant with the church, and take Christ, and promise to walk after all God's ordinances? You answer, all this we will do; all this is no more than the old covenant: for you are much deceived if you think there was no speech of Christ in the covenant of works. What were the ceremonies but shadows of Christ? What was the laying the hand on the head of the sacrifice, but the laying hold upon Christ Jesus? What was the blood of the sacrifice? Was it not the blood of Christ? And what was the atonement by that blood? Was it not the atonement which is by Christ? All the understanding Israelites did see that these things did point at Christ. Now, if we do enter into a covenant to keep the ordinances of the law, of the gospel, and of the civil state, (for that was the tripartite covenant) all this may be but a covenant of works.⁷¹

After this stern warning against trusting in the covenant of works, Cotton continued with several more applications that encouraged his hearers to believe in Christ instead of themselves. At the very least, such preaching explains why Cotton has been rightly accused of being an anti-legal preacher. Yet, Cotton's point followed from his belief in both total depravity and the absolute supremacy of Christ as the only means of salvation. His anti-legal preaching was really gospel-centered preaching, and it flowed from his pastoral concern that the Salem church must embrace Christ by faith.⁷²

Cotton maintained that one of the primary marks of the covenant of grace was humility. He argued that God prepares a person for salvation by granting them a spirit of poverty and impressing upon them that Christ alone was the only hope for salvation.⁷³ With the Salem church, Cotton sensed a spirit of pride instead of proper humility. The

⁷¹ Ibid., 56-57.

⁷² Ibid., 59.

⁷³ Again, this affirmation agreed with the teaching of Shepard and Hooker. Both of these men argued that such humility was a step of God's preparation for conversion. See Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 80 ff.

evidence of this pride was their insistence that they should judge others who were known believers in Christ. As we shall see, according to Cotton's understanding of salvation, such a spirit of judgment was antithetical to salvation in Christ. To those in pride, Cotton warned, "When men have received ease from God, and then are strait laced toward their brethren, then doth the Lord revoke his pardon. So that reformation is no assurance that God hath made an everlasting covenant with us. And mind you further, all the graces that you have laid hold upon, have sprung from your own righteousness."⁷⁴ Cotton called the Salem church to trust in Christ alone for their salvation. He warned against trust in reformation; and instead, he called them to a true revival of trust in grace instead of their own righteousness.

The significance of Cotton's sermon to the Salem church is highly debatable. Michael Winship argued that this sermon, and a letter from 1638 to Samuel Stone, illustrated Cotton's lack of resting in the covenant of grace.⁷⁵ He argued that Cotton's preaching against the covenant of works was a reflection of his personal wrestling against his trust in works. According to Winship, the result was that Cotton preached an Antinomian theology upon his arrival in New England. While I respect this opinion, I do not believe the evidence of Cotton's thought warrants this conclusion. Cotton's

⁷⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁵ Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 32-33. The letter to Samuel Stone is found in Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 272-275. In this letter, Cotton affirmed that "God hath so often exercised me with renewed Feares and Agonyes abut mine owne spirituall Estate, and the Estate of some others Depending on me, that I could not Rest mine owne Spirit upon every singe thereof (though othereise good in itselfe:) but have bene forced, not to seeke out new wayes of Peace, but those which as I have sometimes here and elsewhere delivered, so I have thought them to be the Path beaten out by others of our best Professours." (275) As Cotton continued, he did not discount these paths, but stated that "only the want of cleare discerning of the Difference betweene the imputation of Christs righteousness, and our justification, did (in *the Conference*) putt me upon some incongruous Apprehensions." From this letter, Winship based his entire argument that Cotton was overwhelmed with the covenant of works. Within the whole of his theology, this conclusion is vastly overstated.

preaching against trusting in the covenant of works was based upon the foundations of his Reformed thought. From God's sovereignty, the exaltation of Christ, and total depravity he came to understand covenant theology as a tool to promote trust in Christ alone for salvation.⁷⁶ Cotton's preaching at Salem and his work throughout the late 1620s and 1630s illustrated a consistent desire to uphold the glory of God in salvation. This emphasis within Cotton's theology of the Christian life not only shaped all of his theological reflections, but its roots were to be found in his early ministry experiences combating Arminianism. Cotton understood himself as a defender of predestination against those who seek to take glory from Christ by affirming their own works. Against such thought, Cotton mustered all of his energy and defenses. In the letter to Stone, Cotton maintained that the elders rightly encouraged him to think through, "Only the want of cleare discerning of the Difference betweene the Imputation of Christs Righteousness, and our Justification, did (in the Conference) putt me upon some incongruous Apprehension, and Disorderly Expression of the Order and Place of Fayth unto them both."⁷⁷ In other words, Cotton affirmed that he might have been theologically imprecise in his expressions of the order of salvation and he admitted that he was willing to change his public expressions of the order of salvation. Yet, Cotton was not willing to change his basic theological schema; a schema worked out quite successfully during his years of ministry in England; a schema based upon his understanding of salvation that must exalt Christ because of human depravity; a schema that affirmed the rightness of

⁷⁶ Contra Winship, Cotton argued from the 1920s that the Law cannot give life. As he began in a mid-1620s sermon series, "If there had been a Law that could have given us life, then wee might have lived by it, but there is no such Law as can give us Spiritual life."⁷⁶ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 2.

⁷⁷ Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 273.

covenant theology, and the need for all to embrace the covenant of grace found in Christ alone. These cornerstones shaped the foundation of his thought, and he did not back away from his trust in these theological concepts.

Conclusions

The foundations of Cotton's theology of the Christian life were laid during his extremely productive ministry in England. During Cotton's pastorate at St. Boltoph's from 1612 through 1633, he became perhaps the most famous and envied of all Puritan pastors. Not only was he able to maintain his post at an important parish without censure, but he also had earned the reputation of being a pastor marked by his scholarship and understanding of scripture. As we have seen, part of Cotton's success in England came from the protection offered by the officials of Boston. These men were known as nonconformists, but they also knew how to bribe and use their influence to keep a nonconformist pastor from censure. During Cotton's years in England, he developed into a leader of both theological and non-conforming Puritanism. Throughout this period of ministry, Cotton became the advisor for many,⁷⁸ and his ministry became a source of mentoring and encouragement for many young Puritan pastors.⁷⁹ Through his continued association with Cambridge, he also remained in the center of theological discussion within the Anglican Church. As we have seen, during his first couple of years at Boston, Cotton decisively dealt with the objections of a troublesome group of Arminian

⁷⁸ On this point, the importance of Sargent Bush's work on recovering Cotton's correspondence cannot be understated. Cotton understood himself as an advisor to the Puritan community. See pages 93-94 for the importance of this self understanding as evidence against the argument that Cotton's life was marked by compromise.

⁷⁹ Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 43-44.

sympathizers. His victory over Arminianism gained Cotton much credibility as a Puritan scholar. Now, not only did he have the proper education for Puritanism at Emmanuel, but he also had won the day for Reformed theology. Contrary to the ill informed opinions of Dr. Twisse, Cotton's victory over Arminianism did not illustrate a tendency to compromise traditional Reformed doctrine.⁸⁰ Instead, his victory gained him both favor within mainstream Puritanism and, due to his connections, a place in the vanguard of a developing theological Puritanism. This movement within the Puritan community sought to defend the doctrines of grace and Predestination against their critics. In the 1620s with the rise of Arminian doctrine within the church hierarchy, Cotton's importance for the Puritan community as a defender of free grace should not be underestimated.⁸¹ By this time, Cotton's theological foundations were clearly laid; and as a defender of Reformed orthodoxy, he was always willing to emphasize the grace of Christ over any human works. This theological emphasis was not troublesome in England because it identified Cotton as part of a conservative response against Arminianism. As we shall see in the next chapter, his theological emphasis was extremely troubling for some in New England who did not share Cotton's desire to refute Arminianism. Consequently, Cotton's theological foundations came into conflict with the theology of Thomas Shepard and others within New England.

⁸⁰ This understanding of Cotton's "Treatise on Predestination" became popular with the writing of Larzer Ziff in the 1960s. See Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 41-43. It has seen a recent revival with the publication of Michael Winship's book on the Antinomian Controversy. Winship presented Cotton as a "lively stone" who was marked by his tendency to change accepted Puritan doctrines. This incidence was his primary example of Cotton's supposed compromise. Michael P Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 31.

⁸¹ See Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: the Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640*. He approached the subject from the perspective of a rising Arminian party after 1620. Cotton's work in Boston before 1620 enabled him to speak out against this rising theological party from the perspective of one who has already effectively dealt with their ideas.

Chapter III

Salvation

The foundations of Cotton's theology were shared by mainstream Puritan and Reformed divines. His thoughts concerning the character of God, the work of Christ, and the centrality of covenant theology were fairly typical. This is to be expected given his education for the ministry was established in the Puritan stronghold of Emmanuel College. Furthermore, Cotton's early exposure to the debates concerning Arminianism at Cambridge and his early victories as a pastor over Arminianism in Lincolnshire shaped him to be an ardent defender of traditional Reformed orthodoxy concerning predestination. In his early ministry, Cotton emphasized the work of God in bringing salvation over any hint of human works. He argued for this emphasis from the Bible, but also from other Puritan and Reformed sources. In this chapter, we will begin to explore the details of Cotton's theological vision concerning salvation. This will include both his systematic thoughts emphasizing God's work in bringing justification as well as the basis for the controversial conclusions that Cotton draws for the individual Christian from his emphasis on God's work in bringing salvation- including his emphasis on passivity in salvation, his emphasis on preparation throughout his ministry, and his emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work in the life of a believer.¹ These controversial conclusions derived

¹ These controversial conclusions have been well documented in recent scholarly literature. These next two chapters will provide context and depth to Cotton's controversial thought. See William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978); Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton University Press, 2002); and Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary*

from his tendency to magnify God's work in salvation and the Christian life over human effort: what this dissertation has called the basis for objective assurance over an emphasis on subjective assurance.²

This chapter will begin with a brief biographical section that describes Cotton's last few years in England and his arrival in New England. This biographical section will continue the argument against the "compromising Cotton" thesis proposed by Ziff and accepted by many others. This section will argue that Cotton's later years in England were marked by the same theological particularities that marked his early ministry and his later ministry in New England. This section will not add many new historical details to the scholarly understanding of Cotton's life since Ziff and others have used the available historical sources to trace well the general events of Cotton's life during this period. Instead, this section will take these known events and some discoveries made from Cotton's recently published correspondence to weave a slightly different narrative concerning Cotton's life and ministry in the late 1620s and early 1630s. Central to the argument is the idea that Cotton was not a compromising churchman, but an ardent defender of predestination and God's grace in the face any hint of an emphasis on human works. This section will provide a platform for understanding the systematic explanations of Cotton's thought. The second half of this chapter will begin an investigation into Cotton's thoughts concerning salvation. This investigation will describe the particulars of Cotton's thought as well as the places where his reflections lacked precision. While the whole of Cotton's theology was based upon the premise that

Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

² Again for clarity, subjective assurance was found through the proper use of the syllogism to illustrate sincere faith.

God must get all the credit in salvation and the Christian life, the particulars of Cotton's thought and the consequences for this thought require a detailed explanation. As a result, the material in this chapter will overlap and be augmented by the material in the next chapter concerning the work of the Spirit. The primary focus of this chapter will be concerning Cotton's thought regarding justification, while the next chapter's focus will address the question of the Spirit's work in bringing authentic assurance.

As Cotton finished his book concerning predestination in 1625, the age of Puritan freedom in England was drawing to a close.³ Throughout the early 1620s, William Laud was gaining in power in the Church and with the King. He had the complete support of Charles I, and he used his influence to begin a systematic persecution of the Puritans in the hope of ridding the Anglican church of their influence.⁴ Even with this persecution, Cotton retained his post and continued his work without interruption. His Bishop, John Williams, was at odds with Laud and his supporters.⁵ As Laud called for complete conformity, Williams moved toward leniency of non-conformists out of spite for Laud's orders. Williams chose to treat Cotton as a scholar and gentleman, and he allowed him to continue in his ministry unhindered.⁶ The result was that Cotton's reputation gained even more favor among Puritans. While many Puritan pastors were harassed and forced to

³ Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 110-112.

⁴ Ziff recorded the following ominous note from Laud's personal diary in 1625. "I exhibited a schedule, in which were wrote the names of many Churchmen, marked with the letters O [Orthodox] and P [Puritan]. The Duke of Buckingham had commanded to digest their names in that method; that (as himself said) he might deliver them to King Charles." Ziff, 54. From *The Autobiography of Dr. William Laud* (Oxford, 1839), 34.

⁵ Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 93.

⁶ It is clear that Cotton and Williams had a continuing relationship through their correspondence. See Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 93-102; 178-181.

leave their parishes and even the country, Cotton remained at his post. As Samuel Ward, a Puritan pastor in Ipswich stated, “Of all the men in the world I envy Mr. Cotton, of Boston, most; for he doth nothing in way of conformity, and yet hath his liberty, and I do everything that way, and cannot enjoy mine.”⁷

Even with this success, Cotton knew that his position was becoming more precarious. As the 1620s came to a close, the Puritans were faced with several possibilities. The first method was to conform as much as necessary, but retain their trust in a religion of the heart. This means of dealing with Laud’s persecution was adopted by Richard Sibbes and many other English Puritans.⁸ For a time, Cotton also adopted this view, though he was aided in his conformity by Bishop Williams’s leniency. A second method was to reject both conformity and the Anglican Church’s authority. Such Puritans retained their nonconformist ways by practicing their religion underground. For a Puritan pastor, this method was extremely perilous, and it offered no way of making a solid living. Both the mainstream Puritans and the conformist Anglican hierarchy had deep suspicions of those who chose this method of dealing with persecution.⁹ Many of these radical Puritans later formed the independent wing of Puritanism in the 1640s. A third option arose as more and more Puritans were exiled for their beliefs. Many of these Puritans moved to Holland, and there they attempted to retain their English Puritan identity. The primary advantage of this option included the fact that Holland’s proximity

⁷ See Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 58-59. From Whiting’s account, 427.

⁸ For examples of the wrestling many Puritans had with accepting conformity or accepting the consequences of non-conformity, see William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, 54-63.

⁹ Cotton illustrated this distrust in his condemnation of separatism in his preface to Arthur Hildersam’s *Lectures upon the Fourth of John*. Hildersam was known as a Puritan who worked to root out separatism. Arthur Hildersam, *Lectures Upon the Fourth of John* (London, 1629), vii. Andrew Delbanco also has written an excellent account of Cotton’s distrust for separatism in Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 125-131.

to England allowed them to remain close to the affairs of the English church. Unfortunately, the culture of Holland made it difficult for these Puritans to make a living, and it became obvious that Holland's social culture made it difficult for the immigrants to retain their English Puritan identity.

Finally, in the late 1620s another option presented itself to these persecuted Puritans. Led by the Earl of Lincoln and the Puritans of Lincoln, a significant group of Puritans came to view colonization to the New World as the best way of dealing with persecution. Yet, immigration came with a price: it meant leaving behind the direct involvement with the affairs in England. The debate over how best to influence England and practice their religion continued for some time. Finally, as the persecution continued to escalate, a sizable group of Puritans began to make plans for immigration. Cotton undoubtedly knew of these plans, as many of the leaders of the movement were from Lincoln. Yet, while he supported their immigration, he was not yet free to go himself. He understood his position as a leader of the Puritan movement; and while he preached unhindered, he could not leave.¹⁰ In 1630, Cotton made the trip to Southampton to preach the farewell sermon to the group that would form the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His sermon, *God's Promise to his Plantations*, encouraged his fellow Puritans to remain faithful to England even as they left to start a new colony where they could have liberty in the ordinances.¹¹ Cotton was careful not to promote separatism in this sermon, and it appeared that the official ears of the Anglican Church did not take offense at this

¹⁰ A point well made in Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 122-123.

¹¹ John Cotton, *God's Promise to his Plantations* (London, 1630), 7, 14.

statement.¹² After preaching and bidding farewell to his friends, Cotton returned to Boston to lead the Puritan cause from his pulpit.

Unfortunately for Puritans in England, within a year of the departure of the *Arbella*, Boston was the last public home of nonconformity in England.¹³ Cotton retained his post, and his ministry remained much the same. Yet, that year also marked the final ascension of William Laud. Laud had managed in 1630 to become the Chancellor of Oxford over the loud protests of Bishop Williams. Laud was already the Bishop of London; and with this appointment, he assured himself of being the next successor to the Archbishopric of Canterbury.¹⁴ He already assumed much of the power of this position, and he was determined to stop the nonconformity allowed by Bishop Williams. Cotton's nonconformity was well known; and by early 1631, the threat of summons to the High Court had become a distinct reality. Cotton did not have to deal with this threat immediately because in the spring of 1631 both he and his wife became ill with malaria. The fourth Earl of Lincoln allowed both Cotton and his wife the use of his manor so that they could attempt to recover from the disease. Cotton slowly recovered, but his wife, Elizabeth, died from the disease.¹⁵ After almost a year, Cotton was strong enough to return to his pastorate, but his return was short-lived. Soon thereafter, he was summoned to appear before the High Court to answer William Laud and the charges of nonconformity. Fortunately for Cotton, Puritan sympathizers informed Cotton of the summons before the official High Court messenger arrived to take him before the court. The result was that Cotton fled hastily for his life. At first he sought the protection of his

¹² Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ A position which he assumed in 1633. *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64 ff. From Norton's *Able Being Dead*, 25.

friends in the nobility, but that avenue did not prove fruitful as Laud's power made it impossible for anyone to protect him from the summons. Even as he went into hiding in London, it is clear that during this time Cotton sought the advice of several important Puritan divines. In an interesting account that must have passed down through his family, Cotton claimed that he sought the advice of John Dod.¹⁶ In his discussions with Dod, he was advised, "I am old Peter, and therefore must stand still and bear the brunt; but you being young Peter, may go whither you will, and ought, being persecuted in one city, to flee to another."¹⁷ While in hiding, he contemplated immigration to Holland; but after a meeting with Thomas Hooker he abandoned this idea. Instead, with the invitation of Winthrop and the Lincoln contingency in New England, Cotton resigned his pastorate in June of 1633, and he boarded the *Griffin* for the New England.¹⁸

Soon after Cotton's arrival, he was named the teacher at First Church Boston. His arrival provided the colony with its first truly famous Puritan scholar and pastor.¹⁹ He was welcomed with open arms, and his church soon experienced a revival marked by an upward swell of new members.²⁰ In fact, the church grew in membership by over fifty percent in Cotton's first four months as the teacher at First Church: from roughly eighty to over a hundred and twenty members.²¹ Cotton's fame and his preaching were an immediate success in New England. Soon after his arrival, he continued the practice he had started in England of presenting a Thursday lecture in addition to his Sunday preaching. This additional Thursday preaching time was doubly important for Cotton

¹⁶ This meeting was recorded in Norton's *Able Being Dead*, 26-27.

¹⁷ Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, I, 241. Quoted in William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, 61-62.

¹⁸ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 69-70.

¹⁹ Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 119.

²⁰ John Winthrop, *Journal*, I, 116.

²¹ Michael Winship, *Making Heretics*, 40.

because it provided a time for him to instruct his fellow pastors concerning issues of practical divinity. In fact, Cotton's lectures became the pattern for other pastors who began to offer lectures in divinity throughout the week. The popularity of these lectures grew until in 1634, the ministers agreed to limit the number of weekday lectures so that people could go to work.²² Through it all, Cotton's lectures were well attended, and they helped solidify Cotton's importance as a pastor and scholar.

Larzer Ziff and others presented the early years of Cotton's ministry in the New World as a time when Cotton came to understand both his surroundings and how he should fit into these surroundings. The central thrust of Ziff's portrayal of Cotton was as a weak man of compromise who sought to understand all the issues before making any stand. As he stated,

The answer was predictable to any who knew the preacher. John Cotton upon landing on the shores of the wilderness at the age of forty-eight would do what John Cotton upon arriving at Trinity at the age of thirteen or what John Cotton upon settling in Boston at the age of twenty-eight had done. He would keep his silence and observe, neither approvingly nor disapprovingly to all outward appearances. He would bide his time, pondering the relation of his convictions to the practices asked of him, attempting to square his beliefs with the procedures, for he was a meek and cautious man despite his celebrity.²³

Ziff was correct that upon his arrival, Cotton did not immediately become the political advisor for the colony. Where Ziff misrepresented Cotton's life was in his insistence that Cotton should fulfill the role of political advisor to the colony. Cotton understood himself as a pastor: a man more concerned with the care of souls than with being a political advisor. In other words, upon arrival in New England, Cotton did not bide his time looking for opportunities to compromise his beliefs with the state of affairs in the

²²Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

colony. Instead, he began to practice his calling: he preached the doctrines of grace and his theology of the Christian life. As we have seen, the result of this preaching was a revival.

Ziff portrayed Cotton as cautious and compromising, but he misrepresented Cotton's self-understanding. He thought of himself as a teacher of practical divinity, and this task occupied his time and energy. Cotton's nature was not meek, but bold in his applications of what he took to be scriptural truth. Cotton was not a politician, but a pastor. Cotton's immense correspondence revealed his concern not with politics, but with practical applications of scripture to the lives of his hearers.²⁴ Cotton understood himself as a pastoral advisor to all Puritans. As Sargent Bush has argued,

He seldom shied away from answering a difficult question and usually delivered his opinion with striking confidence in his authority. Cotton was a dedicated scholar whose study of the Church Fathers and of more recent exegetical literature, together with his intimate knowledge of the Bible itself, gave him the foundation on which his authority was based. He was prepared to share the findings of his lifelong search for truth with his correspondents. He responded to those he disagreed with by saying, "Your argument will not hold," and explained the basis for saying so- usually resorting to scriptural exegesis. Nowhere in this correspondence does he deflect a question by suggesting the inquirer ask someone else. The writer had often already done that; Cotton's was the decisive voice. In offering his reactions, and typically basing those reactions firmly on Scripture- on the authority, that is, of God- his letter evince the manner, the speaker-audience relationship, of Pauline epistles. As Goodwin believed, Cotton functioned in Puritan circles as "Apostle of the Age."²⁵

Cotton's correspondence revealed a man who understood his place within Puritanism: he was an authoritative advisor to the souls of his hearers. As Cotton settled into his

²⁴ Even when he did address political leaders, he did so with practical and personal concern. For example in his famed correspondence with Oliver Cromwell in 1651, Cotton addressed Cromwell as a man seeking God's word on his work. Cotton sought to encourage him in performing God's task. See Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 458-464.

²⁵ Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John*, 67.

ministry in New England, he practiced his pastoral calling in much the same way as he practiced in England. He was a spiritual leader, not a political advisor. Admittedly in New England, given his position, it was difficult to distinguish between being a spiritual leader and a political advisor. As we will see, this is a major weakness in Cotton's life. He continued to proclaim his theology without concern for political consequences. The reason for this oversight was his understanding of his primary calling as that of spiritual leader and director for the people. To this end, Cotton found no lack of need among the people of New England. In his role of teacher, Cotton did not compromise his beliefs, but he preached his understanding of accepted theology. The result was a revival with many new members added to the congregation at Boston. Such an increase in membership and the addition of his Thursday lecture were undoubtedly enough to keep Cotton busy. Yet, within a year of arriving Cotton was called upon to help address the issues raised by Roger Williams and the Salem church.

Ziff began his presentation concerning Cotton's life and ministry during his first years in New England by addressing the movement within New England toward separatism. He argued that Cotton was not comfortable with Salem's and Plymouth's position regarding separatism, so he sought to offer a compromising position for the colony. In the process, Ziff made it appear that Cotton was at first indecisive concerning how to address the issue of separatism as well as how to confront Williams. Again, much of Ziff's interpretation of the Williams-Cotton controversies was correct. For example, Cotton clearly did not want to punish or excommunicate Williams- his writings to and

interactions with Williams illustrate a sincere desire for repentance and restoration.²⁶ Yet, Ziff's interpretation of Cotton as a life-long compromiser again misrepresented Cotton's role in the debates with Williams. Cotton was not confused as to how to deal with Williams. He approached Williams and the tendency toward separatism with the love and concern of a spiritual mentor. His desire was for Williams to respond to the Word and the testimony of his fellow Elders with humility instead of pride.²⁷ He did appeal to Williams in attempt to inform his conscience rightly, but he had already determined that a rightly informed conscience would result in Williams coming to a position of humility instead of judgment. As we have seen, such an emphasis on humility instead of pride matched well with Cotton's understanding of the authentic work of God in a person's life.²⁸ In the process of dealing with Williams, Cotton did represent the Colony's cause against separatism, but this cause was also Cotton's. He did not compromise his beliefs, but he acted in accordance with his beliefs and his practices in England.

²⁶ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 91. Cotton wrote, "Let not any prejudice against my person (I beseech you) forestall either your affection or judgement, as if I had hastened forward the sentence of your civill banishment; for what was done by the Magistrates, in that kinde, was neither done by my counsel nor consent." Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 213.

²⁷ As Cotton stated, "I speake not these things (the God of Truth is my witness) to adde affliction to your affliction, but (if it were the holy will of God) to move you to a more serious sight of your sin, and of the justice of Gods hand against it. Against your corrupt Doctrines, it pleased the Lord Jesus to fight against you with the sword of his mouth (as himself speaketh, Rev. 2.16) in the mouthes and testimonies of the Churches and Brethren. Against whom, when you overheated you selfe in reasoning and disputing against the light of his truth, it pleased him to stop your mouth by a suddaine disease, and to threaten to take your breathe from you. But you in stead of recoiling (as even *Balaam* offered to doe in the like case) you chose rather to persist in your way, and to protest against all the Churches and Brethren that stood in your way: and thus the good hand of Christ that should have humbled you, to see and turne from the error of your way, hath rather hardned you therein, and quickned you onely to see failings (yea intolerable errorrs) in all the Churches and brethren, rather then in your selfe." Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 213-214.

²⁸ See above, pages 80 *ff.* Bozeman argued that Cotton emphasized Christian duty in his later years in England. He argued that such an emphasis illustrated his acceptance of preparationism in its strongest form. Cotton retained throughout his life an emphasis on Christian duty and performance in response to God's work. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 211-213. From the 1620s onward, Cotton emphasized humility as the greatest subjective witness to authentic faith.

Perhaps the greatest evidence for Cotton's lack of confusion with New England congregationalism as well as against Ziff's claims of Cotton's meek compromising spirit in regard to the practice of New England congregationalism came from his practices in England. Cotton's greatest invention in his practice of non-conformity in England was his insistence that the truly redeemed should be drawn into a fellowship that avoided the most scandalous of the ceremonies prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer.²⁹ This group of redeemed parishioners would then covenant together "to follow together after the Lord in the purity of his Worship."³⁰ He first proposed this fellowship of the saints in 1615; and predictably, he met with great resistance from those not chosen to be a part of the covenanter group. These folks protested to the Bishop, and Cotton was suspended. He appealed, and once again the political supporters of Cotton helped him retain his post.³¹ The final result of Cotton's proposal was that he formed a congregation of the redeemed within his parish church. In 1617, Edward Wright was named the major's chaplain, and he presided in the elements of the service containing ceremonies to which Cotton objected. In a wonderful description of what must have occurred in the church each Sunday, Ziff wrote:

An interesting shuffle took place of a Sunday on the steps of St. Botolph's as the Puritan members waited until the Apostle's Creed, at which their orthodox fellow members would stand, was completed under the direction of Chaplain Wright and then filed in to hear Cotton's sermon while the Anglicans passed on their way out.³²

²⁹ Ziff, 48-49.

³⁰ John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish* (London, 1660), 3.

³¹ This assistance most likely included a well placed bribe. Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 49.

³² Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 50-51. Other speculations on how this church within a church operated are found in Nicholas Hoppin, "The Rev. John Cotton A.M.," *The Church Monthly*, IV, V (1862,1863) 40-54, 161-167.

Somehow, this practice became the accepted practice at St. Boltoph's. This invention allowed for a Congregational system of church government to begin to flourish within the parish setting of England. In other words, traces of Cotton's later Congregational impulse can be seen even from 1615 in England. From his core beliefs concerning God's sovereignty and human total depravity, he arrived at the conclusion that the Sacraments and church membership should be limited only to the redeemed. In his reasoning, only the redeemed should share in the blessings of full covenantal membership. The seeds of Cotton's Congregational impulses were planted in England. The soil of the New World allowed them room to grow and flourish, but the theological foundations behind Congregationalism were laid years before his arrival in New England. Yet Cotton consistently maintained that he did not promote Separatism.³³ He understood his position as bringing attempted biblical reform to the Anglican Church. Cotton's practice of Congregationalism within the English parish system proved a marvel for many Puritans. It allowed him to influence the most theologically influential of English Independents, Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye.³⁴ When he arrived in New England, Cotton had the freedom to think through the implications for Congregationalism. The thoughts he expressed in the late 1630s and the 1640s were the mature reflections of a man who had promoted Congregational practices since the mid-1610s.

³³ Because of his distrust for separatism, he raised objections to Samuel Skelton and the separatist tendencies in Salem. Interestingly, Skelton had been a pastor in Lincolnshire who could not avoid the punishment of the authorities for his Puritan tendencies. Cotton probably understood himself as a senior minister to Skelton; and thus, he offered his advice to him.

³⁴ The Presbyterian apologist Robert Baillie said Cotton was "if not the Author, yet the greatest promoter and Patron of Independency." He also argued for Cotton's importance for Independency by stating, "Master Robinson did derive his way to his separate Congregation at Leyden; a part of them did carry it over to Plymouth in New-England; her Master Cotton did take it up, and transmit it from thence to Master Thomas Goodwin, who did help to propagate it to sundry others." In Robert Baillie, *A Dissuasive*, 58, 54. Quoted in Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 197-198.

Ziff's presentation concerning Cotton's compromising spirit in regard to separatism is again lacking. As we have seen in the last chapter, Cotton's issues with Williams and the Salem church were on the surface concerning their separatist leanings. At their heart was Cotton's concern as a pastor and spiritual leader for Williams's prideful judgment of other believers. According to Cotton's theology, such a lack of authentic humility illustrated a lack of godliness and the need for repentance. When Williams was not willing to repent, Cotton allowed the local government to deal with Williams. Through it all, Cotton retained his pastoral integrity as well as his theological distinctives. The problem with Ziff's interpretation is that it forced the idea of Cotton as a compromiser on every area of Cotton's life. This interpretation has influenced several generations of scholarship, but it cannot explain Cotton's leadership and outward authority within Puritanism's Independency party.

The process of the debates with Williams illustrated to Cotton the tensions within New England concerning separatism. They also illustrated to him the judgmental spirit of many. With the persecution of Puritans in England, the 1630s saw a rapid increase in the population of Massachusetts Bay Colony. While this rapid growth caused other difficulties, it also assisted in establishing the method and importance of church membership within New England. The purity of ordinances and the differences in church membership with the Anglican Church became marks of debate and even pride to some within the New England context. Into this mix, Cotton the pastor walked as he always had. He began to preach concerning the need to trust Christ alone for salvation. He began to address the thoughts and concerns of his hearers by striking at their greatest pride- the purity of their churches and covenants. During this time, Cotton came to agree

that a covenanted church is the proper expression of the New Testament church, but he also came to see that blind trust in this covenant was no different than the Israelite's blind trust in the covenant of works.³⁵ As we have seen in the previous chapter, Cotton addressed this blind trust in his published sermon to the church at Salem. Cotton believed that the best antidote to pride was a careful preaching of the doctrines of grace: a preaching marked by the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humanity, and the need for Christ alone for salvation. To that end, Cotton the pastor and teacher remained faithful to the message of salvation in Christ alone as he had in England. The issues changed somewhat because of the social conditions in New England, but Cotton's message remained consistent with his preaching in England. He warned against idolatry and the deceitfulness of sin in the hopes of moving his hearers to trust in Christ alone for salvation.

Unfortunately, it appears as if Cotton did not foresee any potential political problems in New England with his theological trajectory. In England, he had no difficulty maintaining his theological particularities while remaining well within the Puritan mainstream. In New England, the changing political climate made his thought problematic. For example, the issue of Arminianism was not as pressing in the 1630s in New England. There was no evidence of any debate concerning predestination until much later in New England history.³⁶ Indeed, the most relevant issue within Puritanism- particularly for those Puritans from London- was the question of free grace as opposed to

³⁵ Cotton, *A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636* (1713).

³⁶ See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America*, 37-39. Holifield dated the rise of Arminianism in New England to the late 1720s and 1730s, p. 83-84.

legal preaching.³⁷ While Cotton had preached against this rising tide of Antinomianism in England,³⁸ his emphasis on justification and humility as central for the Christian life caused his theology to be brought into question. This theological background coupled with the natural New England concern with how to organize and run a godly community brought Cotton's grace-centered preaching into question. Many of the pastors and leaders feared an emphasis on grace and humility. Not only did it sound like Antinomianism, but it also deemphasized the law's place in the Christian life. Such a neglect of the law could lead to disorder and chaos. Interestingly, Cotton completely agreed with this assessment. He did not abandon the uses of the law or the necessity of Christian practice at anytime in his ministry.³⁹ Yet, Cotton continued to address the hypocrisy he witnessed in New England by emphasizing the need to trust in Christ, not one's works for right standing before God. It was just a matter of time before another leader challenged Cotton to consider the consequences of his teaching for the civil affairs of New England. What was most shocking was that this challenge was issued by Thomas Shepard, a young pastor without a great reputation. What had to be equally shocking for Cotton was that Shepard called into question the core of Cotton's theology of the Christian life.

It cannot be emphasized enough that Cotton must have been absolutely shocked to have been accused of Antinomianism and Familism by Thomas Shepard.⁴⁰ As we have

³⁷ See Theodore Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 186 ff.

³⁸ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183, 210-213.

³⁹ *The Precisionist Strain*, 243. He retained this emphasis even at the height of the Antinomian controversy. See *The Covenant of Grace*, 64, 76.

⁴⁰ The Familist sect followed the teaching of Hendrick Niclaes or HN, a Dutch mystic, who taught that Christ actually dwelt within each believer. The followers of HN believed the indwelling of Christ meant that heaven was now on earth. In addition, they rejected the authority of scripture for the authority of the Spirit. Shepard accused Cotton of this heresy because he thought Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy

seen, Cotton thought of himself as a solid defender of God's sovereign grace in Christ. All of his previous writing and labor in the pastorate had illustrated his success at defending and explaining clearly these doctrines of grace. He had an international reputation as a pastor and scholar. Yet, Shepard had the audacity to accuse Cotton of heresy. The reasons for this accusation were undoubtedly many. While we will never know the private reasons why he challenged the famous theologian, it was clear from his past that Shepard saw himself as a defender of the truth from the heresy of Familism. As he told the story, as a young man in England, he had almost been drawn into the heresy of Familism and Antinomianism, save by the grace of God. When he arrived in New England, he was listening for even the faintest suggestion of Antinomianism and Familism. In the teaching of Cotton, he thought he heard suggestions of this pernicious heresy. The result was that the theological presuppositions of each man naturally led to debate over the best way to present the doctrines of grace. In his response to Shepard's original letter, Cotton was gracious, but dismissive of Shepard's concerns. He claimed that the only difference between himself and Shepard was one of language. If they could talk it through, they would be in agreement.⁴¹ Unfortunately, they never had the opportunity to work through these issues in private because Shepard's questioning of Cotton became public. The resulting debate has shaped the way both Cotton and Shepard have been viewed by history.

Spirit placed too much emphasis on the seal of the Spirit in salvation. Familism will be explained in greater detail in chapter four. Also see Appendix A of David Como's dissertation "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999), 414-425.

⁴¹ David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy: 1636-1638. A Documentary History*, 33.

From Cotton's perspective, the Antinomian controversy was really a theological debate concerning how a believer comes to know and experience the free grace of God. He framed the debate within the context of covenant theology and predestination. As Cotton explained ten years after the debate, the central issues were the nature of the covenant of grace versus the covenant of works and how these covenants were worked out in the life of the believer. As we have seen in the second chapter, Cotton's ideas concerning covenant theology and predestination were well within the Puritan mainstream. He had learned this theological system while at Cambridge under William Perkins, and he used this framework to hold together the tensions of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. His thought was not radical, but foundationally in agreement with many famous Puritans. Furthermore, Cotton had gained his reputation as a pastor by applying the doctrines of grace to the life of a believer. For over twenty years, Cotton had success applying the doctrines of grace to his hearers through the lens of explaining predestination. With all of this background, Cotton thought of himself as singularly able to answer these questions. In addition, there is no evidence that anyone questioned his theological orthodoxy during his ministry in England. He ran afoul of the authorities for his non-conformity, but there is no evidence that his adherence to the Reformed tradition was ever questioned.

From the view of scholarship, it has been popular to argue, and to a large extent it has been accepted, that the best explanation for these charges is that Cotton's doctrine changed in the early 1630s. Given the widespread influence of Ziff's treatment of Cotton, it is not surprising that scholars following in his footsteps would seek to find Cotton's compromising spirit. As we have seen in chapter one, this approach has yielded

many fine works of scholarship concerning the Antinomian controversy. Many have argued that Cotton somehow inventively changed his doctrine. Ironically, most of these scholars cannot agree on how Cotton changed. Equally ironic is the fact that Cotton's changing doctrine cannot be supported from his writings. Cotton's thoughts concerning salvation, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the process of sanctification remained consistent throughout his ministry. The remainder of this chapter and the next chapter will illustrate this consistency. These chapters will argue that the real issue was not Cotton's changing theology, but the changing theological and political climate of New England. In this climate, Cotton's theology of free grace conflicted with the thought of Thomas Shepard.

As we have seen, the traditional interpretation that Cotton consistently compromised throughout his career is in need of revision. Instead of this perspective, it is more helpful to realize that Cotton thought of himself as a pastoral advisor to all. In this role, he sought to encourage his hearers to rest in the gospel alone for salvation. His mode of operation in New England did not change from his pastoral mode of operation in England. Instead, Cotton attempted to fight the battle against trusting in the covenant of works, or as he understood it Arminianism, for salvation. The remainder of this chapter will explore Cotton's theology as it pertained to salvation. It will illustrate the gospel-centered spirituality that Cotton preached throughout his ministry in both Old and New England. This presentation will be the first in-depth look at Cotton's thoughts concerning salvation and the work of the Holy Spirit. It will also illustrate Cotton's greatest weaknesses as a systematic theologian: his confusion of terms concerning justification

and sanctification within the Christian life. In the process, the remainder of this chapter will illuminate some of the primary theological issues in the Antinomian controversy.

The Foundations of Salvation- Repentance and Faith

Cotton's theology of the Christian life began with solid Reformed foundations of God's sovereign election in Christ by the Spirit, the total depravity of humanity, and the covenant of grace applying God's promises to the life of the believer. All of these foundations were discussed and explained in chapter two. From these foundations, Cotton constructed a theology of the Christian life that explained every dimension of a person's experience from reprobation, through conversion, to glorification. Cotton did not deal with these topics in a systematic method, but each of these principles must be discovered within Cotton's sermons and treatises. Consequently, Cotton's theology of the Christian life was presented as an experiential journey into the life of a sincere Puritan believer. As a result of Cotton's non-systematic presentation, this chapter as well as the next should be seen as a whole. Each of these chapters describes different elements of Cotton's theology, but these explanations all interrelate and merge to form the whole of his theology. There will be some overlap in the material as it is presented because of these interrelations of Cotton's understanding of salvation, sanctification, and assurance of faith. There will also be some overlap with the material presented in chapter two, but the purpose of these chapters is to explain Cotton's particular presentation of theology through his early years in New England. This chapter will focus on the person and work of Christ as primary for the Christian life. In this section, Cotton's thoughts concerning the person and work of Christ will be explored through his foundational

theological understandings of God's sovereignty, human depravity, and covenant theology. In the process, this chapter will provide a framework for understanding Cotton's soteriology.

Perhaps the best starting point for explaining the particulars of Cotton's understanding of salvation is his presupposition that because of total depravity, God must be the one to work in a person's life. As we have seen, Cotton believed in a sovereign God who works by the Spirit to bring people to faith. Cotton's reputation in England had been won largely by his ability to present the doctrines of grace so as to defeat the Arminian threat against God's sovereignty in salvation. When he arrived in New England, he had no reason to believe that his theological perspective could cause trouble among fellow Puritans. After all, God's sovereignty in election was supposedly held by all Puritans since they were part of the Reformed tradition. Yet, what set Cotton apart from some of his fellow New England Puritans was how he explained the doctrine of election in such a way to give assurance and peace to his hearers.

Cotton began his explanation of election with an emphasis on Christ. Cotton believed that in Christ all the promises of God were perfectly fulfilled. He also maintained that Christ's person and work were the keys to understanding the beauty of election.⁴² It cannot be emphasized enough that in every aspect Cotton sought to emphasize the supremacy of Christ in salvation.⁴³ Anything that could be seen as diminishing that glory was rejected as chaff and idolatry composed by humanity. In

⁴² Here is an interesting parallel to the patriarch of Antinomianism, John Eaton. The difference was that Eaton changed the nature of God and Christ to completely diminish any punitive dimensions of God's character. Cotton held to the orthodox tension of Christ as just and merciful. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 192.

⁴³ This is the central theme of Cotton's popular sermon series, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*. See John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 3, 5, 7.

other words, Cotton despised any theology that stressed human works as producing salvation. He understood such thoughts as the natural idols of individuals in rebellion against God. Cotton's works were replete with examples that illustrated how Christ must be made central in all respects concerning salvation. True faith rested only in Christ, and it placed no trust in self. As he stated in the sermon series, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, preached in the mid-1620s, "But if a man grow, though but in amiableness, and self-denial, and more firmly in Christ, and more assured of Gods grace and mercy, and more depends upon Christ for what he hath doth, and can do nothing without Christ, and he knows it by experience, that unlesse a man so grow, there is no life in him."⁴⁴ For Cotton, the main issue in the Christian life was whether a person has Jesus Christ by faith: it was all about Jesus since salvation, growth, and change were found only in Jesus.

There were two positive results of Cotton's focus on Christ as the primary agent within election. The first positive result was that such teaching took the focus off the individual and one's behavior and placed it fully upon Christ. Cotton taught that because of election, Christ and the worship of Christ alone were the ultimate goals and delights for all Christians. Jesus alone rescued the soul of an individual, and the Christian life was marked by a growth in the knowledge of and the actual participation in the life found in Jesus.⁴⁵ Cotton's teaching emphasized that a true Christian responded with love to the

⁴⁴ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 140. Bozeman argued that this sermon series illustrated Cotton's preparationism and agreement with Puritan orthodoxy. This passage and many others illustrated Cotton's emphasis on grace even as he maintained the need for precision in a Christian's life. Both of these tensions marked his thought throughout his life.

⁴⁵ As Cotton stated "Though the other be a lawfull desire, but chiefly his desire is, that he might see Christ, whom from his first conversion he hath most loved, and in whom he hath lived all his life, and now to be wholly possessed of him, and wholly acted and swayed by him, not that he might have his heart filled with joy, but that he might be with Christ, not only as chiefest of ten thousand persons, but as the chiefest of ten thousands benefits of God, that should God give us pardon of sinne, his Word and Sacraments, and victory over all our lusts, strength of every grace of God, and everlasting life, and therewith fellowship with all the

awesome love of Christ. Thus, the best test of faith was not works, but whether a person desired and loved Christ, who first loved them.⁴⁶ This teaching freed his hearers from focusing upon their sin as hindering them from knowing God, and instead focused their attention on Christ, the one who elected them to salvation.

A second positive result of Cotton's teaching concerning election was that it presented God as loving toward both struggling non-believers and believers. Cotton believed that the fact that people heard his sermon or read his book was evidence that God was lovingly pursuing them. In a famous sermon that anticipated both the Great Awakening New Light preaching and later American revival preaching, Cotton presented God as one who gently knocks on the hearts of people. Such gentle knocking bids all who hear it to open their hearts to Christ.⁴⁷ Cotton did not attempt to scare people into belief and trust in Christ. Nowhere did he teach that God entered an individual's heart in a forceful or brutal manner. Instead, he constantly affirmed the dignity of those who listen to him, and he presented the sovereign God as beckoning the individual to respond. One of the most fascinating elements of Cotton's thought was that he refrained from intellectual explanations of God's sovereign work in salvation. In place of an intellectual explanation of God's sovereign work, he offered an experiential picture of how God works to enter the heart. As he stated,

blessed Saints and Angels, yet to us Christ is the chiefest of them all." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 50.

⁴⁶ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 237. This teaching was similar to the teaching of John Eaton except that Eaton stopped here and insisted that the Christian life must not strive for holiness. Cotton insisted that his teaching drove a true believer toward holiness. Such holiness included all of the traditional Puritan means of finding subjective assurance. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 194.

⁴⁷ "The heart is the way of entrance of God into the soule, or into the whole of man." John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 3.

Thirdly, there is another voice of God that knocks, and God in that shows much bounty; and that is when God is pleased to knock at the doors of our hearts by the work of his Spirit; by opening our conscience, which is as a fortress before the doors of our hearts; as in many great cities there are some out-works to defend the gates; God so convinces the conscience, and enlightens the mind, and informs the judgment, and the memory and affections.⁴⁸

Notice that Cotton did not reject God's sovereignty over salvation, but he explained it so that an individual can understand how God was working in one's life. Cotton presented God as the one that opened the conscience, enlightened the mind, and informed the judgment, memory, and affections. The result was freedom for the individual to rest in God's work instead of their response to God's work.⁴⁹ In other words, he told his hearers not to focus upon the question of God's sovereignty and whether you were elect. Instead, he told them to know that God must be calling and changing the individual if they were convicted in conscience, touched in the mind, informed in judgment, or changed in affections. In this way, Cotton's preaching and teaching style encouraged his hearers that the sovereign God was for them. God did not demand that people get their lives together to become believers, but that they responded to God's gracious knocking. As they responded, their soul was changed through their interaction with the Spirit in the preaching. These changes within the person were marked and significant because they reoriented a person's conscience, mind, and affections.

⁴⁸ John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 11-12.

⁴⁹ All of these references were found in those sermon series Bozeman labeled as within the Puritan mainstream. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 211. Cotton's teaching contained both a grace emphasis as well as a retained emphasis on Christian experience, or what Bozeman labeled precisionist thought. After the Antinomian controversy, Cotton maintained that his teaching had not changed from his teaching in England. A more accurate statement would be that his teaching did not change, but his focus was more toward the grace pole of accepted Puritan thought in the mid-1630s.

The complete reorientation of an individual was what Cotton understood as repentance. The purpose of Cotton's preaching was always to bring people to repentance and faith. These twin actions of repentance and faith were the first and primary response for both believer and non-believers to Jesus. They also illustrated how Cotton's foundational theological presuppositions worked out in the life of an individual. In the conclusion to the above sermon concerning God knocking at the heart, Cotton pleaded with the non-believer to not despair for their lack of faith even if they have stood long against God.⁵⁰ By Cotton's logic, the fact that they were hearing this sermon and being affected by the preaching illustrates the patience and love of God for them. He naturally assumed that if they felt this love and heard the knocking, they will open their hearts to Christ. He then illustrated and led his hearers to experience what it meant to open one's heart to the Holy Spirit. As he stated,

First, we open to Christ, when wee believe all that God hath spoken. ... Wee believe the truth of the Word, and give credence and have assurance of the certainty and goodness of it to our souls, when we are able to say; good is the Word of the Lord, this is the key of faith.

Secondly, wee open the doors of our hearts when wee doe to God and openly confesse from our hearts all the despite and contempt we have put Gods grace too, when wee in confession open the mouth and heart together, and confesse that all God hath spoken to us of our dangerous course, hath beene the Word of his truth and goodnesse, when wee confesse former and latter sins, and judge ourselves as unworthy of any mercy, he that thus confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy.⁵¹

⁵⁰ John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 16.

⁵¹ John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 21.

This passage not only illustrated Cotton's insistence that the Word was the primary agent of God's truth,⁵² but also that true repentance meant forsaking sin as well as seeking mercy in Christ. He called people to experience the joy of finding the sovereign mercy of Christ.

At this point, Cotton's teaching concerning the centrality of Christ began to overlap with his understanding of total depravity. It could be argued from the above examples that Cotton attempted to diminish the doctrines of total depravity and divine sovereignty. From the whole of Cotton's works, this was clearly not the case. While Cotton constantly maintained the dignity of the individual, he also took much time to illustrate the desperately sinful condition of all his hearers. Cotton taught that the human heart was "drowsie and dead in sin."⁵³ The expression of our deadness in sin was active rebellion and rejection of God. Thus, true repentance and faith consisted not merely of confessing one's individual sins, but also confessing the general attitude of rebellion against God's grace and love. Interestingly, this call to repentance for rebellion was not just to the non-believers. Throughout his writings, Cotton argued that all people remained in rebellion against God's grace. This rebellion consisted of our lack of

⁵² Interestingly, in a sermon series often used to illustrate Cotton's overemphasis on the Spirit, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, Cotton retained the traditional Puritan emphasis on the Word as the mediator of the Spirit's work. As he wrote, "The first cause of our spiritual life, is the holy and gracious will of God." "The second cause of my spiritual life is, The Word of God; the Word of Promise." "Then doe by consider, if thou been borne of God, what cause was there of thy birth? Wast thou born of the Word of God, or of thine own conceite, or of the good opinion of Christians? Or is there some Word of God, which thou hast placed thy confidence in, and upon which thou hast been reformed; and since that day to this, God hath turned thy heart and way to another course, and given thee to live in his sight? It is true, it may be many a good soule cannot readily tell you, what promise did first bring them on to God; but though thou canst not always tell, yet a word of promise it was; and ordinarily, a word of Promise which the word preached did apply to thy soule, and caused thy heart to reach forth and to lay hold upon it."⁵²

⁵³ John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 13.

complete and perfect love for and obedience to God.⁵⁴ The conclusion to his sermon on God knocking was a good example of how Cotton called people to respond to that rebellion: repent and confess the “despite and contempt we have put Gods grace too,” and believed that there was mercy found in Christ. Thus for Cotton, the first action of the spiritual life was the confession that one’s life did not give glory to God in every respect. As he stated in a later sermon series preached after the Antinomian controversy,

To teach you what the nature and practice of repentance is: What is the nature and practice of it? It is lively set forth in the text (I might be large herein) they repented not to give God glory: So there is the proper act of repentance, when it runnes right in a right channel, it gives God glory: What glory doth it give God? First, it gives him the glory of his Sovereignty, the Text is plain, as *They gave not glory to God that hath power over these plagues*; they are Gods plagues, and he hath power to send them and we see his hand in them, his plagues they are, and that is the first thing in repentance, to see it the hand of God in his kind, and that King, in and kind that may befall us, Give God the glory of his sovereignty, who hath sent these plagues, and this will help us to repentance.⁵⁵

Again, the overlap of repentance, original sin, and God’s sovereignty was illustrated. For Cotton, the rejection of God’s sovereignty in any aspect of life was the sin of rebellion and idolatry. Cotton began his applications of Reformed theology with the precept that because of sin, no one perfectly affirmed the sovereignty of God in every aspect of one’s life. For Cotton, the heart of this sin of rebellion and idolatry was unbelief. Furthermore, unbelief was the primary problem for both believers and non-believers.⁵⁶ He did not believe that regeneration and faith eliminated the effects of original sin. Thus, the remains of original sin within all people indicated that faith was never perfect until death

⁵⁴ At this point Cotton was in direct opposition to the teaching of the Antinomians in general and John Eaton in particular. See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 194-195. The Antinomians taught that a believer was free from the need to increase one’s obedience to God.

⁵⁵ John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Vial 4, 22.

⁵⁶ John Cotton, *The Ground and Ends of the Baptisme of the Children of the Faithful* (London: 1646), 125.

removed the original sin from believers. The resultant unbelief provided a daily opportunity for repentance, and it provided a believer with the opportunity to embrace Christ by faith.⁵⁷ The final result was that Cotton's preaching promoted humility with both nonbelievers and believers. He believed that salvation was found in Christ alone and that the greatest need for all who heard him was more faith in Christ.

Cotton's primary method of reaching the consciences of his hearers was to illustrate their idolatry and rebellion against God's sovereignty. Cotton repeatedly struck at the root of his hearer's consciences by illustrating their radical tendency toward unbelief and trusting in themselves for salvation and life. For Cotton, the greatest danger of life was to mistake trust in self for sincere faith in Christ. He constantly warned against this danger, and instead he encouraged all who heard him to trust only in Christ. Reliance on Christ alone for salvation and life brought glory to God because it affirmed God's sovereignty.⁵⁸ It also turned a person "from their evill wayes," and it would "quicken them in every spiritual duty." Cotton did not teach that believers were free from following God's law and commands. He actually believed that only Christ can free someone to truly obey the law and the commands of God. Cotton offered that the related

⁵⁷ As he stated, "And therefore, doubtlesse this is that which every true believer hath respect unto, every faithfull Christian prayes for himselfe, *Lord increase my faith*, Lord helpe my unbeliefe, this is the prayer of every soul that comes to Christ, that though we have some measure of faith already, yet mixed with so much unfruitfulnesse, and unsettlednesse, and so many defects, that every Christian hath cause to pray, Lord helpe my unbeliefe." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 203.

⁵⁸ "What doth repentance give God the glory of? As of his sovereignty, and justice, and truth, in making humble confession of it where we are called, if we have just occasion; so the Lord requires that we should give him the glory of his mercy and grace, that we looke for all our pardon and mercy in the blood of the Lord Jesus, and in unfeigned seeking after fellowship with him, beleeving on his grace, confessing what is sinful, turning from our evill wayes, laying hold of eternall life and of every gift of the Spirit, that might quicken us in every spirituall duty, that we might depend upon his grace for pardon, and healing of our bottomlesse depth of unbeliefe for the changing of our hearts, and the quickening of our spirits; this gives God the glory of his grace, thus repentance doth." John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Vial 4, 23.

concepts of repentance and faith were the balm that heals the deadly wound of unbelief, and they were the means of strengthening a person so they can truly deal with “the bottomless depth of unbelief for the changing of hearts.” Yet, Cotton’s emphasis on doubting self effort and trusting only in Christ also became the grounds for the accusation that Cotton promoted Antinomianism.

Cotton’s emphasis upon Christ as central for salvation shaped his entire understanding of how God related to humanity. As has often been stated in scholarship, the Puritans used the concept of covenant to explain how a sovereign God could relate to sinful humanity. Through the work of Perry Miller and many others, the nature of covenant theology has been explored and used as the way to explain Puritan thought. As we have seen in chapter two, Cotton also believed that covenant theology was essential for understanding God’s relationship with humanity. Because of his emphasis on the work of Christ, Cotton constantly stressed the need for individuals to rest in the covenant of grace instead of the covenant of works. At this point, Cotton’s teaching and emphasis on the covenant of grace have come under the scrutiny of both his contemporaries as well as modern scholarship. Such scrutiny has been justified since Cotton’s imprecision with terms was the direct cause of the confusion regarding his teaching. Cotton’s lack of clarity regarding the difference between the covenant of grace and the covenant of works was the root of his differences with his fellow New England elders. The biggest issue in the debate was Cotton’s use of language and illustrations that often expressed the need for the covenant of grace in ways that pushed the envelope of accepted Puritan thought.

The first difficulty in understanding Cotton’s teaching regarding the process of salvation was his use of intemperate language in describing the covenant of grace. One

clear example of this intemperate language was found in the following passage from *An Exposition of the Thirteenth Chapter of Revelation*.⁵⁹ This book was written in the years immediately following the Antinomian controversy. In this passage, Cotton began with an emphasis on election, but he concluded with a discussion of salvation that downplays faith as the instrumental cause of salvation. As he stated,

And again, it is called the Lambs booke of life, because he is the head of all Gods elect; they are all elect in him, not besides or out of him, not as actually believing in him, for it long before any work of ours, *Rom. 9.11 Not of workes, but of him that calleth, the children being not yet born, neither having done good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand.* Election is before any worke of ours, God gives us in his eternal councill to Christ, but we are not then in him by faith; faith is an effect of our election, not the cause of it: *As many as were ordained to eternal life believed,* Acts 13.46,48. But this is the thing; It is a true distinction that some give in this case; we are in Christ, not by actuall existence in believing; nor as so considered, but by virtuall comprehension: the Lord looks at us as in him, we are not in him by faith; but the Lord comprehending us in his everlasting decree, we are in him by Gods charter, even children not born, the Lord hath wrapped us in his everlasting armes, in his electing love, promising in time to give us faith to believe on him, and therefore to come to him, and to give him to us that wee may live in his sight; therefore it is the Lambs booke of life, as is the sonne of man, the sonne of the Virgin Mary, to be united to the second person of the Trinity, long before his humane form was in being.⁶⁰

In this lengthy passage, Cotton magnified the work of Christ and election. He did so by using some difficult theological language to explain God's perspective on salvation. Cotton argued that believers are seen as in Christ not by their actual faith, but by God's virtual comprehension. His use of the term virtual comprehension confused the notion of God above time with the concept of God seeing in time. He argued that because the decrees of God were from before time, God loved believers, and viewed them as

⁵⁹ This sermon series was preached in the late 1630s. In this series, Cotton maintained his theological particularities while using Roman Catholicism as the foil to explain how some rest in the covenant of works instead of the covenant of grace. John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656).

⁶⁰ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656),136-137.

righteous by virtual comprehension, before they actually have faith in time. The result for Cotton was that salvation was entirely from grace. Yet, this concept of virtual comprehension before faith downplayed the covenantal response of faith from the individual.⁶¹ In this description of salvation, Christ's work alone secured and brought salvation. As Cotton explained, "Election is before any worke of ours, God gives us in his eternal councell to Christ, but we are not then in him by faith; faith is an effect of our election, not the cause of it." After mentioning his idea, Cotton did not come back to the topic nor did he explain his reasoning. Instead, he pushed to his conclusion that Christ alone must be the assurance of God's electing love. Cotton's emphasis on Christ gained a following with some of his Puritan hearers because it placed assurance of faith on Christ's righteousness instead of their own. We will return to this subject in the next chapter. Nevertheless, it is clear that Cotton's constant desire was to undercut human pride in bring about one's salvation while exalting Christ as the redeemer.⁶² The problem was his means of demonstrating these two points sometimes led to confusion on other theological issues.⁶³

⁶¹ According to Stoever, Cotton's rejection of faith as the instrumental cause of salvation was the issue in the Antinomian controversy. As he stated, "Cotton would admit a habitual receiving of Christ by the regenerate but not an active going to Christ or taking of Christ prior to union. The latter, however, was precisely the point in dispute. It was, moreover, a point that went beyond the issue of the Protestant *sola gratia* to the question of the integrity of the human creature, as by nature a rational agent, vis a vis the creative power of the Trinity." William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 43.

⁶² In this goal, Cotton was not alone. His teaching anticipated the later Puritan emphasis in England on justification as a means of escaping human pride and theological error. For example, see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677) found in John Owens, *Works*, V:4. Also see Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I: 313 ff.

⁶³ As we will see in the next few pages, the difficulty is that Cotton's preaching would push the envelope of accepted ideas in one section and then he would develop that material to illustrate accepted Reformed and Puritan teaching in the next section or sermon. This practice has caused many interpretative issues with Cotton's work.

Another example of strong and intemperate language for describing the covenant of grace came from his discussion of human passivity in salvation. As we have seen, Cotton's thought consistently attempted to both undercut human pride and to exalt Christ in all elements of salvation. Thus, due to remaining original sin and unbelief, Cotton affirmed that only God can change a person's heart through the work of the Spirit. The work of God rendered the individual passive in the reception of Christ by faith. In one of his latter works, Cotton compared the reception of Christ for all individuals to that of the reception of Christ for an infant. He did not explain exactly how an infant could receive Christ, but he used this idea as an example to prove that Christ must be received passively in salvation.⁶⁴ Such teaching regarding human passivity in salvation was one of the primary differences between the theology of Cotton and others in the New England clergy.⁶⁵ Thomas Hooker and Thomas Shepard both taught that a person could prepare the way for Christ to enter through godly practice.⁶⁶ As a result, they argued that the human soul was not passive in salvation, but active in cooperating with the work of the Spirit. They went so far as to argue that such preparation for salvation illustrated true faith, and it was the most solid ground for assurance of faith. This was the major difference between Cotton's thought and that of his fellow New England Elders'

⁶⁴ As he stated, "Even in infants, for when faith is wrought in infants, the heart is quickened with spirituall life, and made a sanctified vessel fit to receive Christ; which reception of Christ, though it be passive, (as Dr Ames calleth it, in Chap. 26 *de Vocatione, lib 1 Medulla Theologia*) yet it is all one with regeneration, wherein not infants only, but all men are passive: which gave the Lord Jesus occasion to say, That whosoever receiveth not the kingdom of God as a little child, hee can in no wise enter into it, *Luk 18.17.*" John Cotton, *The Ground and Ends of the Baptisme of the Children of the Faithful* (London: 1646), 16.

⁶⁵ Yet, one of the Fathers of Puritanism also believed in the passive nature of the soul in salvation. In the above quote, Cotton quoted from Ames, *Medulla Theologia (The Marrow of Theology)*, 26:1.

⁶⁶ Preparationism was clearly discussed in Thomas Hooker, *The Soul's Preparation for Christ* (1632) and Thomas Shepard, *The Sound Believer* (1645). In both books, Hooker and Shepard went to great lengths to describe the preparatory work of God in salvation. Bozeman argued that Cotton also taught preparationist doctrine in England. *The Precisionist Strain*, 211-221. Throughout Cotton's thought, he used humility and the promotion of humility as the proper ground and end of preparationism.

representatives of Shepard and Hooker. The full implications of this difference will be explained in the next chapter when the issue of assurance of faith will be discussed.⁶⁷ While Cotton did not deny that one could prepare to receive Christ through attending the preaching of the Word and other spiritual practice, he completely disagreed that such practice alone could be a solid ground for assurance. As we have seen, Cotton feared that many might be deceived as to their faith in Christ by trusting in their own actions and in the graces of the Word and Sacraments. To combat this potential error that sought to magnify human efforts, Cotton always emphasized positive belief in Christ. To some, this insistence that the Christian life must be focused on Christ alone sounded too much like Antinomianism. For Cotton, the emphasis on Christ alone for justification combated the error of Arminianism and humanity's natural idolatry.⁶⁸

Ten years after the end of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton defended his belief concerning the passive reception of Christ by appealing to fellow Puritans. In particular, he appealed to Dr. Twisse as a fellow Puritan who taught extensively concerning the passive righteousness of one in Christ. He argued that Twisse also affirmed human passivity in salvation because of his concern for affirming the sovereignty of God.⁶⁹ Cotton concluded that since Dr. Twisse was never accused of Antinomianism, he should

⁶⁷ See below pages 165 ff.

⁶⁸ Again, this argument sounded similar to argument advanced by Robert Traill in the 1690s. See Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I: 321-329.

⁶⁹ Twisse was actually called to account for his teaching concerning justification in the late 1640s. He taught that one was justified from before the foundation of the world. In so doing, he relegated faith to merely discovering what God has already declared instead of promoting active trust in Christ. The Westminster Confession dealt with Twisse's error in its statement, "God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect ... nevertheless they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them." (XI: iv) For a discussion concerning Twisse and this affair, see J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 155.

not have to endure such accusations.⁷⁰ Cotton's point was to illustrate that a proper understanding of predestination resulted in the belief that all of salvation must come from God. Again, his concern was that if this was not the case, then it was easy to fall into the trap of Arminianism. Perhaps the primary issue between Cotton and his fellow elders in New England was one of emphasis. They did not understand his constant desire to fight against Arminianism and human pride in salvation. Cotton consistently valued the objective work of Christ over human works. Yet, Cotton did not object to human works as a proper response to God's grace or as a proper means of determining authentic faith. He taught that works without a personal claim to the objective work of Christ applied by the Holy Spirit was a dead end. In the mid 1630s, Cotton's teaching, while not leaving Puritan orthodoxy because he retained both objective and subjective elements to his systems, led many into Antinomian paths he did not endorse, and it threatened to undermine the political structure of the colony.⁷¹

That being said, it is also fair to say that at times Cotton used rhetoric in his preaching concerning salvation that some could have construed as Antinomian. This tendency within Cotton's preaching has led many scholars into accusing Cotton of teaching radical ideas that at least leaned toward Antinomianism. The problem with this idea is that the overall flow of Cotton's thought does not allow such a conclusion. In every case where Cotton leaned toward Antinomianism, he made this point to illustrate the importance of justification within the Christian life. His means of making this point

⁷⁰ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 236.

⁷¹ In this point, this dissertation is in agreement with the conclusions of Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 282-290. Yet, Bozeman went further and argued that Cotton's thought, in many areas, went beyond Puritan orthodoxy. As we will see, this dissertation disagrees with that conclusion.

was to argue that a person should not trust in any way in their own works to gain God's favor. The following passage from *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, preached in the 1620s, illustrated this tendency well.⁷² In this passage, Cotton was warning those who are deceived into thinking they have Christ when they really were trusting in their own works. In the process, he appeared to uncouple sanctification from justification. Cotton argued,

Fifthly, if we would have Christ, and life in him, we may have him in Justification, but not in growth of Sanctification, if you part not with confidence in the saving graces of Gods spirit, you must not looke to be justified by them, for if you doe you will discover them not to be sanctified grace, nor the fruits of them, the fruits of saving graces. ... If therefore we thinke that for these graces sake God accepts us, truly we lose the things that we have wrought, and for all that we have received, we have no part nor portion in the Lord Jesus Christ. ... Therein stands our blessednesse, when the Lord imputes not sinne to us, but if we looke to be justified either by the gifts of grace we have received, or by the workes and acts of grace that we have performed, we shall certainly fall short.⁷³

For some elders in New England, such teaching was heresy since Cotton appeared to deny the importance of sanctification. Yet, Cotton's point was not to deny the need for sanctification- he has many sermons emphasizing the need to grow in grace, love, and holiness; but rather to emphasize that justification by faith was primary for the Christian life.⁷⁴ Cotton's conclusion to this sermon was extremely powerful. It revealed the central doctrine that drove his theology of the Christian life. He concluded, "Therefore

⁷² Again, Bozeman argued that this sermon series contained Cotton's teaching that remained within the parameters of accepted Puritan orthodoxy. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 211-212.

⁷³ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 27-28.

⁷⁴ Even in *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, Cotton illustrated his trust in examining one's works in finding assurance. John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 95, 208. Cotton's preaching and teaching method was to exalt Christ's completed work in justification, but he did not ignore the need for sanctification even as he emphasized the need for sanctification to follow from authentic justification.

the life of Christ is not a life of grace, but a life of faith.”⁷⁵ By this Cotton meant that the Christian life was not about our actions and deeds of righteousness, but positive trust in Christ for salvation and righteousness. This trust or faith was the starting point for the entire Christian life. It was the outward expression that proved God has justified an individual, and it resulted in an authentic spiritual life. As he stated,

The costliness of it, the matter of our justification is the price of our redemption, and without justification, no spiritual life at all. Now the price of our redemption is our justification, the form of that justification is Gods accepting of it, and imputing it to us; but the matter of it is the price of our redemption, and that is the root of all our spiritual life, the price of our redemption, given to God is accepted of him, and by him given to us.⁷⁶

As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, such teaching matched the teaching of a host of Reformed and Puritan divines.⁷⁷ We will also see that he did not deny preparationism as a means of determining authentic assurance of faith even as he did affirm that it must not be the only means of determining authentic assurance of faith.⁷⁸

Justification: Reorientation of the Soul by the Spirit

In Cotton’s thought concerning the Christian life, justification was by far the most significant doctrine. It was also his most controversial as his articulation of the range and scope of justification slipped toward the edges of Puritan and Reformed orthodoxy. As we just witnessed, Cotton’s thought concerning salvation emphasized justification so as

⁷⁵ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 29.

⁷⁶ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 3.

⁷⁷ Again, Cotton agreed with many within the Reformed community. His statements regarding justification were similar to the teaching of Calvin (*Institutes*, III:xi:23) and *The Westminster Confession*, VII:iii. For later Puritans see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677) found in John Owens, *Works*, V:4. Also see Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I.

⁷⁸ See below pages 191-193.

to exalt Christ in all areas of salvation as well as to undercut human pride and effort as any cause of justification. This idea matched the thought of earlier and later Puritans including Perkins, Sibbes, Owens, and Traill.⁷⁹ He arrived at this position through his early ministry experiences that shaped him into an ardent defender of predestination. Yet, in the 1630s, the rising Antinomian thought in England made such teaching suspicious.⁸⁰ The Antinomians had borrowed several key ideas from orthodox Puritanism including an emphasis on justification as primary in the Christian life.⁸¹ The whole of Cotton's thought was not Antinomian, but individual sermons and illustrations definitely hinted at "free grace" teaching. While many modern scholars have illustrated that elements of Cotton's thought were problematic, none have systematically explained the essence of Cotton's thought.⁸² This section will explain not only Cotton's thoughts concerning justification, but also those elements that were problematic within his system.

Within Cotton's system, justification had a wide range of meanings and applications. The basic definition involved one being made right with God by having Christ's righteousness imputed to them. This action of God brought redemption, transformation, and the foundations of the Christian life. It also must all flow from the work of Christ, and it must be passively received because only God can change the

⁷⁹ Again, Cotton agreed with many within the Reformed community. His statements regarding justification were similar to the teaching of Calvin (*Institutes*, III:xi:23) and *The Westminster Confession*, VII:iii. For later Puritans see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677) found in John Owens, *Works*, V:4. Also see Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I.

⁸⁰ See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183-210; David Como, "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999).

⁸¹ See pages 222 *ff.* for a discussion of Antinomianism in England and a comparison of Antinomianism with Cotton's thought.

⁸² William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven* was the first to advance this argument. Several recent works have basically agreed with and augmented Stoever's observations. These include, Brooks Hollifield, *Theology in America* and Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

heart.⁸³ Thus, while Cotton always presented justification as the result of faith from the human perspective, he still theologically maintained that even faith is a gift given by God. Through these doctrines, Cotton taught that salvation was entirely from God even as the individual experienced faith and repentance. His teaching did not promote licentiousness, but rather the promotion of Christ's glory in bringing a person to authentic faith.

Cotton's thoughts on conversion and the importance of justification agreed with the thoughts of Calvin and others within the Reformed tradition. His ideas were not radical, and they were well received by many of his Puritan hearers. His teaching allowed his hearers the freedom to rest in Christ instead of laboring to prove their own actions as illustrating divine favor. It also provided the basis for an alternate American Puritan spirituality that emphasized Christ as central in all aspects of salvation and the Christian life. Cotton's teaching emphasized justification as primary for the Christian life because original sin made all dead in sin apart from God resurrecting an individual. Still the question remained, how could one know if they have experienced salvation? Were there outward consequences in the life of a believer if they had truly trusted in Christ? Cotton answered these questions by teaching that justification resulted in several immediate changes within the life of a person. These changes illustrated that one has been made alive in Christ, and they began a complete divine reorientation of an individual. Interestingly, for Cotton, these changes were marks of true justification, and

⁸³ An example of this thought from the mid-1620s can be seen as he stated, "The costliness of it, the matter of our justification is the price of our redemption, and without justification, no spiritual life at all. Now the price of our redemption is our justification, the forme of that justification is Gods accepting of it, and imputing it to us; but the matter of it is the price of our redemption, and that is the root of all our spiritual life, the price of our redemption, given to God is accepted of him, and by him given to us." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 3, 18. The price of our redemption was Christ's completed work applied by the Spirit.

he did not teach that these should be labeled as part of the process of sanctification.⁸⁴ Justification was proof that a person has been filled with the Holy Spirit, and it resulted in a life marked by humility, submission to the Word, and changed affections. For the remainder of this dissertation, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit of God will be explained. Cotton taught that the Spirit was the one who worked within the life of a believer to bring faith and a change in character by applying the work of Christ to the individual.⁸⁵ As we will see in the next chapter, the Spirit also was the one who brought about growth in love, or sanctification, by applying the work of Christ to the individual. Cotton's understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit should not have been controversial, but his misunderstanding or misapplication of the terms justification and sanctification proved extremely controversial.

As we have seen, in Cotton's understanding of salvation, justification was primary for the spiritual life of a Christian. Cotton argued that this must be true since total depravity rendered a person powerless to change themselves. As a result, God must change a person to bring about faith and a changed character. This work of God was performed by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁶ Cotton insisted that the Spirit was the vehicle through which God worked to apply the righteousness of Christ to the individual. The Spirit

⁸⁴ Again, such teaching was one the major causes of his difficulties during the Antinomian controversy.

⁸⁵ As Cotton stated in the 1620s, "And as this is ground why there is no sufficiency in the creature to give us the life of our justification; so it is also taken from the root of our sanctification and consolation, for they spring both from one fountaine, and that is the Spirit of Gods grace, *John 16.7* he is the comforter, that is, our *sanctifier*, and this *springs in us to everlasting life*, *Joh. 4.14* Now he that can give a spirit of sanctification, and consolation, is onely the Lord Jesus Christ, unless he goe away, and send the Comforter to us, he never comes." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 3-4

⁸⁶ Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit will be dealt with in great detail in the next chapter. The following discussion is all related to the Spirit's work in changing a person's affections at the time of justification. A short quote to illustrate this point is found in a later work written in the 1640s. He stated, "That God hath given the Ministration of this gospel to bee the ministration of the Spirit of grace to worke faith, whereby we receive Christ, and reconciliation with God through him, and all the gifts of the Spirit from him, *2 Cor. 3.8 Gal. 3.2.*" John Cotton, *The Ground and Ends of the Baptisme of the Children of the Faithful* (London: 1646), 22.

opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, and raised the dead to life. As we have seen, the Spirit also opened the conscience of an individual so that one could come to repentance for sin and place their trust in Christ. The result for the individual was:

This being applied by the spirit, it falls on him with power, and he sees the goodnesse of God in Christ, and the vanity of all things else: and seeing so much glory in Christ, and in particular to him also, this lets him see the vanity of all other courses; for this manifestation of Gods spirit doth effectually and manifestly open our eyes to see, and hearts to believe what the Lord offers, for faith is laid to receive what the Lord gives of grace; here is then that which makes calling sure, for otherwise how can we know it, but by the manifestation, and declaration, and revelation of the Spirit. The things that eye never saw, nor ear heard, nor ever entered into the heart of man, but he hath revealed them by his spirit, *1 Cor. 2.9,10.*⁸⁷

Thus, the Spirit of God was the means by which God changed the heart of an individual. The Holy Spirit came to dwell within the hearts of believers, and it was the deposit guaranteeing God's sovereign mercy to the individual.⁸⁸ The result was a Trinitarian formulation of salvation flowing from the work of Christ.⁸⁹ For Cotton, this work and inhabitation of the Spirit were the surest mark of true faith, and they were the best evidence that one was justified. When the Holy Spirit came to dwell within the heart of an individual, it brought about several changes in a person's character. The first and primary change for Cotton was in a person's understanding of themselves and Christ.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 151.

⁸⁸ 2 Cor. 1:22. Cotton's teaching concerning the work of the Spirit was not doubted or questioned. It was agreed that the Spirit worked to bring repentance, faith, and a changed heart. What did become an issue of debate was how the Holy Spirit dwelt within an individual. In the next chapter, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit will be more fully explored; and in that chapter, the more controversial elements of his teaching concerning the Spirit will be examined.

⁸⁹ As Cotton stated in the late 1630s, "So that this is the purchase which the Lord by his blood hath purchased, reconciliation with the Father, and union with the Sonne, and also the inhabitation of the Holy Ghost." John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 172.

⁹⁰ Ironically, this teaching matched the preparationist teaching of both Hooker and Shepard. See Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 80 ff.

As we have seen, the condition of a person before the work of the Spirit was one of active and passive rebellion against God. This rebellion took the form of pride that sought to find comfort and security apart from God's grace and mercy. An unregenerate person may appreciate the teaching of Christ, and even attempt to live out the morality of the gospel. The problem was that such a person refused to acknowledge their sin against God and their pride in refusing the mercy of Christ. Such a person may have sorrow for the consequences of their sin, but they did not recognize that sin was against Christ. A true believer, marked by the Holy Spirit, recognized that their sins were placed upon Christ. They also have intense sorrow, what Cotton called godly sorrow, that their rebellion was the cause of Christ's death.⁹¹ This personal application of sin against Christ was antithetical to the character of the unregenerate. Only by the power of the Spirit could someone realize the depth of their sin against Christ.

Importantly, the recognition of sin against Christ promoted within a true believer both the exaltation of Christ as well as true humility. Cotton argued that both of these traits cannot be manifest within the life of an unbeliever. Instead, an unbeliever will seek to keep some of the glory in salvation for themselves, and they will walk in pride. Thus, the surest mark that an individual has been touched by the Spirit of God for justification was their humility and their exaltation of Christ alone for their salvation and life.⁹² The humility of true worship was only possible if the Holy Spirit changed a person's heart. Throughout Cotton's writing, such humility was also the best evidence that God was truly working in the heart of an individual. This fact helps explain Cotton's dislike for the

⁹¹ John Cotton, *The Way of Life or Gods Way and Course in Bringing the Soule into, keeping it in, and carrying it on, in the ways of life and peace* (London, 1641), 31.

⁹² John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 7.

Salem church's spirit of judgment on their fellow Puritans. His response to their judgmental position was to encourage them to repent since their judgment and pride is antithetical to the work of the Holy Spirit.⁹³ He also believed that anyone who trusted in their actions- even their great faith- was in great error. In the Antinomian debate, Cotton was often pressed to explain if a person can affirm their justification by their sanctification. Cotton always argued that this is at best a dubious means of determining one's spiritual state.⁹⁴ He argued that if one is not justified, then they cannot be sanctified by the Spirit. Instead, he consistently affirmed that one must trust only in Christ for salvation so they can be found in the covenant of grace. Anything that affirmed Christ plus works of any sort is a teaching that promoted human pride: a sure sign that it was not the work of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁵ As we have seen and will see, Cotton still believed that works would follow true justification. His primary point was that the witness of the Spirit in justification must be primary as proof of assurance over the witness of a godly life without the witness of the Spirit in justification.⁹⁶

The humility given by an authentic work of the Spirit also promoted a faith that was rooted and grounded in the Word of God. During the Antinomian controversy, Cotton was accused of making the Christian life only dependent upon the Spirit, and thus

⁹³ John Cotton, *A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636* (1713), 62.

⁹⁴ In this insistence, Cotton disagreed with the Puritan mainstream, at least the mainstream in America. As Hambrick-Stowe stated, "Sanctification was seen as proof for justification in Colonial New England." Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 169. Also see, Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-48. The issue within this dissertation is explaining why Cotton made his affirmation that justification was central to the Christian life. He did not disagree completely with sanctification as proof of justification as long as one expressed repentance and faith illustrating justification. This dissertation also illustrates how others within both the Reformed and Puritan tradition agreed with Cotton.

⁹⁵ Again a similar argument made by the later Puritan Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I. Traill was writing to combat the error of Amyraldism or Neonomianism in the 1680s and 1690s.

⁹⁶ This is the argument made in much more detail in chapter IV. See pages, 165 *ff.*

uncoupling the work of the Spirit from the Word of God. In recent scholarship, Cotton has also been accused of teaching that the witness of the Spirit was primary over the witness of the Word. As Brooks Holifield recently stated, “Instead of telling his people to look to their sanctification as evidence of true faith and union with Christ, he told them that they had to discern their justifying faith and union with Christ before they could know whether their sanctification was genuine.”⁹⁷ Importantly, such a distinction placed the emphasis in assurance on “‘the revelation of the Holy Ghost,’ the immediate Seal of the Spirit, a power ‘above’ even the biblical word.”⁹⁸ As we have seen, Hollifield’s first claim is undoubtedly true: Cotton did teach the primacy of the Spirit’s work in justification as proof of assurance over sanctification as proof of assurance. Yet, he did not place the immediate seal of the Spirit as somehow above the biblical word.⁹⁹ Instead, Cotton joined a host within the Reformed tradition and Puritanism in maintaining that the Spirit and the Word operated in tandem: true faith or justification brought by the Spirit must be grounded in the Word.¹⁰⁰ He believed that any faith based upon something other than a clear witness of the Word was futile. He also argued that due to human pride, only the Spirit could bring one to submission to the Word. Thus, matching the teaching of

⁹⁷ Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 45.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45

⁹⁹ As Cotton stated in his earliest published work, “Faith saith *Zanchius*, is to be promoted; but by what means, such as God hath ordained, *viz.* The Word and the Sacraments: God would have us to be taught divine things, and all men as well vulgar as others to know things belonging to their Salvation; But whence or of what Instructors? Of those that he hath given to be Teachers unto us, not of those that do please ourselves: He hath given unto us the Book of the Creature, whence we may know many things of God: He hath given us the Book of the Scripture, which he would have continually to read, and to be explained in the Church; What canst though desire more? He hath given Sacraments, Glasses of divine mysterie: He hath instituted us a Ministry, and charged us to exercise ourselves daily in the Law of God; Ought not these Books and Teachers to be sufficient for us?” John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Other examples of the tie between the Spirit and the Word can be found throughout Cotton’s works. These include works in the 1620s like *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 95, 193, 194, 196, 205 and 208. They also include clear teaching from the 1640s like *Milk for Babes- Drawn out of the Breasts of both Testaments: Chiefly for the spiritual nourishment of Boston Babes in either England, but may be of like use for any Children* (London: 1646), 6-9;

John Calvin and William Ames, Cotton taught that scripture was the vehicle through which the Spirit works in the life of a believer.¹⁰¹ Within the Reformed and Puritan tradition, such a tie between the Word and the Spirit were not seen as antithetical. Within Cotton's thought, the key to holding both the Word and the Spirit together was the individual's humility before the Word and obedience to the Word could only be brought by the Spirit. In other words, within the realm of Christian experience, the witness of the Word would be synonymous with the witness of the Spirit.¹⁰² Such teaching did not uncouple the Spirit's work from the Word, but it illustrated the Word as the means of the Spirit's work.

Of great importance for our understanding both Cotton's teaching and the ultimate cause of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton argued that justification meant a person had changed affections toward God. Such changed affections resulted in a new direction of life marked by love and humility. This teaching was the basis for many of the above arguments concerning a person's new attitude of humility and submission to Christ and the Word. As we will see in greater detail in the next chapter, such a change

¹⁰¹ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, IX, 3. See William Ames, *Theological Discussion on the Perfection of the Holy Scriptures* (Ames, *Disputatio de perfectione*). Also see the argument of John Dykstra Eusden in his introduction to William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 63.

¹⁰² As Cotton wrote in the early to mid-1620s, "We open to Christ, when wee believe all that God hath spoken. ... Wee believe the truth of the Word, and give credence and have assurance of the certainty and goodness of it to our souls, when we are able to say; good is the Word of the Lord, this is the key of faith. Secondly, wee open the doors of our hearts when wee doe to God and openly confesse from our hearts all the despite and contempt we have put Gods grace too, when wee in confession open the mouth and heart together, and confesse that all God hath spoken to us of our dangerous course, hath beene the Word of his truth and goodnesse, when wee confesse former and latter sins, and judge ourselves as unworthy of any mercy, he that thus confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy." John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 23.

As he stated in a treatise written several years after the Antinomian controversy describing conversion, "Those predictions in the Prophets do only shew, first with what kind of weapons he will subdue the Nations, to the obedience of the faith of the Gospel, not by fire and sword, and weapons of war, but by the power of the Word and Spirit, which no man doubteth of." John Cotton, *The Controversie concerning Liberty of Conscience in Matter of Religion* (London, 1646), 9.

occurred by the work of the Spirit at the time of justification. Such a work of the Spirit changed a person so that they now desired the things of God. This change included the desire to magnify Christ in all of life, the desire to worship in submission to the Word, and the ability to walk in humility before others. Cotton's emphasis on changed affections has drawn surprisingly little comment by scholars. Cotton's emphasis on changed affections harkened back to the writings of Richard Sibbes,¹⁰³ and it harkened forward to the revivalist teaching of Jonathan Edwards in *Religious Affections*.¹⁰⁴ It also joined a host of orthodox Christians including the thought of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.

Cotton's understanding of changed affections was not as clear as the teaching of Edwards, but his thinking followed along the same lines.¹⁰⁵ Cotton used the idea of changed affections to illustrate how a person changed when they experience redemption and justification. Within Cotton's thought, at the moment of justification, God changed a person's basic dispositions and desires. This radical change within a person meant a change in affections. In explaining this idea, Cotton stated,

By gifts of grace, I mean holy qualities, the same which philosophers call *virtuous habites*, or good dispositions, whereby the faculties and affections of the soul, which by corrupt nature are set upon a man's self, and earthly things, and cannot favour the things of God (and so are said to be dead) are hereby sanctified, and lifted up to God, and set upon him and heavenly things, and so are said to be quickened and made alive to God. ... These gifts we say are wrought, or created by the Holy Ghost, because they are the Fruits or effects of the Spirit of God in us, *Gal. 5.22,23*. wrought by his almighty

¹⁰³ There were many examples in Sibbes' writing. He argued that the primary changed affection was love for God. "The Soul's Conflict with Itself," in *Works* 1:130. Also see Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, 135-160.

¹⁰⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* Edited by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

¹⁰⁵ Where Cotton and Edwards differed the most was in Edwards' emphasis on the works in the twelfth sign as proof of an authentic work of God. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* Edited by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

creating power out of nothing, *Col.* 2.12. and thereby making us spiritual men, 1 *Cor.* 2.15. And fit instruments for Gods spiritual service, 1 *Pet.* 2.5 and therefore every one of these gifts of grace whereby any faculty or affection of the soul is sanctified, it is called the spirit of such a faculty or affection.¹⁰⁶

As we have seen, Cotton taught that a person apart from justification was dead in sin. The result was that such a person cannot understand nor submit to God. This corruption of the person was the real consequence of both original and indwelling sin. Yet, when a person experienced justification, the Holy Spirit made them alive to God, and they were made spiritual men or women. This new condition made the individual desire the things of God; and in particular, they earnestly desired Christ. As with many Puritans, Cotton used extremely sensuous language to describe such a desire.¹⁰⁷ His intention in using such language was to affirm that after justification, every element of a true believer desired to worship and glorify Christ. In other words, the surest sign of true faith was a heart religion marked by changed affections that now desire Christ.¹⁰⁸ Such a humility and desire for Christ was the mark of changed affections: a heart religion that desires Christ above all else. These changed affections followed from justification because they were brought about by the work of the Spirit to transform a heart from self-centered idolatry to God-centered worship and living.

¹⁰⁶ J. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace, Most sweetly unfolded, and comfortably applied to a disquieted Soul, from that Text of 2 Samuel 23., Ver. 5.* (London, 1645), 27-28.

¹⁰⁷ As he stated, "The gospel of Christ "ought to stirre us up to more ardent and longing affections after Christ, so that as wee be ready to faint and swoone through earnest affections, after more full and familiar fellowship with him." John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles or Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), 63-64.

¹⁰⁸ As he stated, "A man worships Christ, not only by an act of his mind, but a man hath Christ likewise when he hath him in the deep affection of his heart, when he deeply affects him in his heart, as his chiefest good. The former was an act of Judgment and understanding; this belongs to the heart, will, and affections." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 9.

As we will see in the next section, Cotton's teaching concerning justification and the marks of an authentic work of the Spirit have been a source of contention since the time of the Antinomian controversy. Yet, the heart of Cotton's teachings concerning changed affections was a direct foreshadowing of both the teaching found by Jonathan Edwards a century later as well as the teaching found in much American Evangelicalism. His teaching continued the message of Richard Sibbes, William Ames, and other English Puritans. It also matched well with the teaching of the first generation of Reformers such as Calvin. For Cotton, justification was primary for authentic Christian living. From justification flowed a true spirituality marked by humble trust in Christ alone for all of life. Such a work of the Spirit within a person's life drove them to seek God in the Word and Sacraments. As we have seen, the heart of Cotton's teaching concerning justification was not outside of the Puritan mainstream. Yet, with the rise of Antinomianism in England in the 1620s, such teaching became problematic for mainstream Puritans in the 1630s. Further, as we will see in the next chapter, Cotton's teaching concerning justification became extremely controversial in the theological milieu of the 1630s when his ideas were applied to the questions of assurance.

Objections to Cotton's Understanding of Salvation

Cotton's understanding of salvation has caused difficulties and questions since the time of the Antinomian controversy. In the spring of 1636, Thomas Shepard attended Cotton's Thursday lecture, and he came away from the lecture troubled by Cotton's teaching. In a letter to Cotton, he presented his questions concerning Cotton's doctrines,

and he accused Cotton of teaching Familism.¹⁰⁹ Shepard had been drawn toward the teaching of this heretical sect as a younger man, and he wrote to warn Cotton of the dangers of this teaching. Cotton's return letter to Shepard was fairly dismissive of his charges.¹¹⁰ He thanked him for bringing the matter to his attention, but he also quickly dismissed the charge of Familism as false. Cotton maintained that none of his teaching has tended toward this heresy, so please do not worry. Unfortunately for Cotton and for the entire Massachusetts Bay Colony, the debate between Shepard and Cotton did not end here. Anne Hutchinson's teaching continued to gain adherents, and they claimed that their teaching came directly from Cotton. Within a year, the entire colony was debating Antinomianism and its critique of the covenant of works.¹¹¹ Of importance for this dissertation, Cotton's theology did play a role in the controversy- just not the role often assigned it by scholarship. This section will explore the questions that the New England Elders asked Cotton about his understanding of salvation in the debates throughout the Antinomian controversy. The Elders' objections to Cotton's teaching can be found in several different lists of questions they gave Cotton for his consideration. These questions and Cotton's answer to these questions remain significant for understanding both Cotton's thought concerning justification as well as the central issue involved in the Antinomian controversy.

It is clear from the way these questions were asked that the primary concern of the Elders was to reclaim Cotton within their fold. It is also quite clear from reading these questions and Cotton's answers, that Cotton was perturbed by their questioning of his

¹⁰⁹ See above page 100, footnote 40, for a brief explanation of Familism.

¹¹⁰ Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 230-234.

¹¹¹ A similar debate occurred in and around London in the early 1630s, and continued through the 1640s. See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183-209.

thoughts. The vehemence of the early debates illustrated that both Cotton and the Elders sincerely believed that the issues at stake were of vital importance for the Christian life. These were not just academic questions separate from reality, but rather they were issues that would determine the course of New England theology for the next five generations. After much debate and discussion concerning these issues, Cotton and the Elders found agreement in their theological terminology. Yet, there still remained several substantial issues of debate. These issues ran along two separate tracks. The first dealt with the nature of salvation while the second dealt with the role of the Holy Spirit in providing assurance of faith in justification and sanctification.¹¹² This chapter will be primarily concerned with understanding the differences in the nature of salvation. To get to the heart of these differences, this section will investigate the five questions the Elders addressed to Cotton early in the Antinomian controversy.¹¹³

The first question raised by his fellow New England Elders struck directly at Cotton's understanding of salvation and the role of God in bringing a person to faith. As we have seen, Cotton's understanding was that because of total depravity, God must work to change a person's basic disposition so that individual can come to faith. Because of this presupposition, Cotton emphasized God's work in justification as primary within

¹¹² Unfortunately, some overlap with the material presented in the next chapter will be unavoidable. If there is confusion, the reader is encouraged to read pages 165 *ff.* to help clarify the different Puritan understandings of assurance.

¹¹³ These five basic questions were further clarified into three questions in the published *A Conference Mr. John Cotton Held at Boston With the Elders of New-England* (London, 1646). This *Conference* was republished in David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy: A Documentary History*, 173-198. I believe the five questions Cotton addresses in *The Way Cleared* gave a clearer explanation of the theological differences concerning salvation between Cotton and the other New England Elders than the three questions found in the *The Conference*. Also, the five questions included Cotton's explanation of his earlier thought from the perspective of ten years after the controversy. This explanation is helpful for understanding Cotton's theology of the Christian life both at the time of the controversy and after ten years of further reflection.

salvation. In response to this teaching the Elders asked, “Whether our union with Christ be complete before and without faith?” Cotton responded to this question by stating,

Not without, nor before the habit (or gift) of faith, but before the act of faith; that is, not before Christ hath wrought faith in us (for uniting himself to us, He worketh faith in us) yet in order of nature, before our faith doth put forth itself to lay hold on Him.¹¹⁴

Again we see Cotton maintaining that God must first work within a person before they can come to faith. He argued that a person was dead in sin through Adam until Christ came through the Holy Spirit to change their heart and bring them to true faith. As he explained in the *The Way Cleared*,

For indeed I looked at union with Christ, as equipollent to regeneration. And look as in generation we are in a passive way united to Adam: so in regeneration we are united to Christ. And as the soul *habet se mere passive* [Is in a completely passive state] (in the judgment of our best divines) in regeneration, so also in union, and by the judgment of Christ himself, who saith, without Christ abiding in us (and so united to us) we can do nothing, not bring forth any spiritual fruit at all: much less can we before union with Christ, unite ourselves to Christ, which is the greatest and most solemn spiritual fruit of all.¹¹⁵

Cotton based his argument upon Christ’s word in the gospel of John that apart from Christ, one can bear no spiritual fruit. Thus, one must be in union with Christ by faith before they can bear spiritual fruit. For Cotton, the first moment of union with Christ must take place by God’s initiative because nothing within the reprobate person can move toward God. In light of these theological presuppositions, Cotton’s affirmation of the passivity of faith flows naturally from his theology. Cotton did not affirm that we were justified from all eternity like Twisse, but he did affirm the centrality of God’s work

¹¹⁴ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 227.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

in Christ by the Spirit.¹¹⁶ As we have seen, Cotton sought to exalt Christ in all matters concerning salvation, and the passive nature of faith exalted Christ and humbled the individual. Pastorally, Cotton was attempting to promote humility and to undercut the pride of those who believed that their faithful church attendance or other religious duties merit God's favor. While he did not deny the place of preparation for salvation, Cotton maintained that preparation cannot bring regeneration because the depth of depravity made one spiritually dead, not merely spiritually sick.¹¹⁷ Thus, only the divine touch of justification could revive one spiritually dead. This teaching flowed from his belief that justification must be primary within salvation because it was the only means of effecting spiritual change.¹¹⁸ Cotton's teaching concerning the passive nature of faith was consistent with his teaching both before and after the controversy. As Cotton argued, it also was a teaching advocated by William Ames and other theologians within the Reformed tradition.¹¹⁹ While the passivity of faith has been identified as problematic within Puritanism- in many ways because of the Antinomian uprising in the 1620s and 1630s- it was a view held by several prominent Puritan divines within the Puritan

¹¹⁶ See above pages 117 ff. For a discussion concerning Twisse his teaching, see J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 155.

¹¹⁷ In many ways, Hooker and Shepard completely agreed with Cotton with many of these statements. The real difference was their disagreement between the clearest means of discerning assurance of authentic faith. Shepard and Hooker emphasized the subjective assurance through the syllogism as the clearest means of finding assurance. Cotton emphasized discerning one's justification, or objective assurance in Christ's promises, as primary. The differences between Cotton and his fellow ministers will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. See pages 165 ff.

¹¹⁸ Again, Cotton agreed with many within the Reformed community. His statements regarding justification were similar to the teaching of Calvin (*Institutes*, III:xi:23) and *The Westminster Confession*, VII:iii. For later Puritans see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677) found in John Owens, *Works*, V:4. Also see Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I.

¹¹⁹ See above pages 116-117.

mainstream.¹²⁰ It appears that human passivity in salvation was not problematic within Puritanism until after the Antinomian debates. Thus, Cotton's attempt to remain within the orthodox party while arguing for human passivity was not a double-minded tactic, but the move of a theologian dealing with and endorsing older accepted Puritan beliefs that were derived from Puritanism debates against Arminianism.

A similar objection to Cotton's teaching concerning the origin of faith was found in the Elders' second question. They ask, "Whether faith be an instrumental cause in applying Christ's righteousness to our justification?" Cotton answered, "Faith is an instrument to receive the righteousness of Christ applied to us of God, for our justification: but not properly an instrumental cause."¹²¹ Following the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9, Cotton argued that while faith was the visible means by which a person comes to union with Christ, even this faith was a gift of God. Thus, the true instrumental cause was God's grace in election, even though from the human perspective, faith was the doorway one enters for salvation. Once again, Cotton's primary concern was to magnify the importance of Christ while diminishing the importance of the individual. True to form, he desired to maintain a position that both rejected any hint of Arminian doctrine as well as promoted humility within the life of an individual. As he explained in *The Way of the Congregational Church Cleared*, "for faith emptying the soul of all confidence in its own righteousness, is a fit vessel or instrument to receive the

¹²⁰ For an argument concerning passivity as problematic see Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 265-266.

¹²¹ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 228.

righteousness of Christ offered and imputed.”¹²² Again, humility and trust in Christ’s work alone were the best marks of authentic faith. In his answer, Cotton also illustrated that he retained a preparationist mindset, but he transformed preparationism into a pursuit of humility that makes one open to the Spirit.¹²³

The third and fourth questions from the Elders suggested another dimension of the Antinomian controversy: whether justification was based upon our condition of obedience or upon God’s grace alone. At stake in both of these questions was also the issue of how one can be assured of authentic faith.¹²⁴ As the Elders asked, “Whether the Spirit of God in evidencing our justification doth bear witness in an absolute promise of free grace, without qualification, or condition?”¹²⁵ At the time of the controversy, Cotton answered,

The spirit in evidencing our justification doth bear witness either in an absolute promise, or in a conditional: in case the condition be understood, or applied absolutely, not attending the condition as the ground or cause of the assurance, but as the effect and consequence of it: or (as I might have added, as before) as a fit disposition of the subject to receive it.¹²⁶

At this point, many have concluded that Cotton rejected works as a proper end of justification. This conclusion was not well founded. In his answer to this question, Cotton again maintained that justification is the first and surest sign of faith: it was what

¹²² Ibid., 228.

¹²³ Bozeman has argued that Cotton was “Strong Reformed” in his emphasis on preparationism in England. He retained his emphasis on preparationism throughout his life with the goal of humility becoming the primary emphasis of his preparatory system. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 211-218.

¹²⁴ This question will be specifically addressed in pages 165 ff.

¹²⁵ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 228.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 228-229.

brought a person from spiritual death to life. If one has spiritual life within them, then they were justified by grace. The result was that they can also be assured of their salvation. This teaching did not eliminate the need for subjective assurance of faith, but it did emphasize the importance of objective assurance through Christ's finished work.¹²⁷ As we have seen, one of the keys to Cotton's success as a preacher was his ability to encourage his hearers that if one felt touched by his preaching, the Spirit was working within them. He then encouraged his hearers to fan into flames this smoldering fire by affirming their trust in Christ alone for salvation.¹²⁸ For Cotton such a work was an affirmation of their justification and not a looking at one's sanctification as proof of justification. As we will see in the next chapter, it was also an emphasis on objective assurance in the Word by the Spirit over subjective assurance found in the syllogism.¹²⁹ Yet, even in the above quotation, Cotton did not deny the validity of subjective experience in providing authentic assurance. What he did affirm was that subjective assurance apart from the objective assurance of the promises witnessed by the Spirit was dubious at best. He came to this conclusion because of his fear of Arminianism. It resulted in his emphasis on justification as primary in the Christ life.

At this point, one of the primary differences between the New England Elders and Cotton was exposed. Cotton's work was often marked by a distinct confusion in his definitions of justification and sanctification. While his works always attempted to exalt God's grace in salvation, his confusion of justification and sanctification naturally led to

¹²⁷ Again, see below pages 165 *ff.* One of the greatest difficulties in the entire discussion of Cotton's thought is the use of terms. Again and in this passage, objective assurance is found in the Word by the promises of Christ applied to the individual by the Spirit. Subjective assurance is found by preparationism and living the conditional elements of gospel (the syllogism). It is measured by a godly life.

¹²⁸ In his manner of encouragement, he is similar to Richard Sibbes in his work, *The Bruised Reed* (London, 1630).

¹²⁹ See below pages 170 *ff.*

misunderstanding. As we have seen in several examples, he consistently affirmed that changed affections must be derived from justification, but he did not affirm that they result in a life of growing sanctification. This lack of precision was the root of the difficulties both his contemporaries and scholarship has had in understanding his teaching. On the positive side, with his talk of changed affections, Cotton attempted to illustrate God's mercy and grace in working within an individual. He argued that only grace can change a person's disposition so radically since a person's natural disposition was a state of rebellion against God. Thus, the clearest assurance of salvation was a person's new found love for Christ marked by humility.¹³⁰ This marked the work of the Spirit, and it evidenced true justification not sanctification.¹³¹ This teaching was not radical, and it affirmed the traditional doctrines of original sin and total depravity as well as contains a robust understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. The problem was that Cotton used the term justification to explain virtually every area of the Christian life—from the moment of salvation through a life changed by grace. This inflation of the importance of justification at the expense of sanctification was one of the primary problems his fellow Elders had with his teaching.¹³²

¹³⁰ This humility would be the surest sign of one's subjective assurance. As we will see, Cotton's understanding of preparationism focused upon humility as best mark the Spirit's work. Such teaching matched the teaching of William Perkins. See below pages 174-175.

¹³¹ As he stated, "The third reason is taken from the state of the person united to Christ, which being united, is not a natural, but a spiritual man. The Reason standeth thus: If there be no spiritual gifts of grace wrought and created in the soul, then Christ is united by the Spirit of God to the natural man; For without spiritual gifts, there is nothing but nature in us, to which Christ by his Spirit is united." J. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace, Most sweetly unfolded, and comfortably applied to a disquieted Soul, from that Text of 2 Samuel 23., Ver. 5.* (London, 1645), 30.

¹³² Here Cotton differed greatly from Edwards' *Religious Affections*. Edwards did affirm the importance of a "New Sense" of God's grace at justification, but he also illustrated other signs of authentic faith. Cotton so overemphasized justification that he placed many of Edwards' other signs into justification.

In his answer to the third question, Cotton continued to clarify the relationship of objective assurance found at justification with subjective assurance found in one's sanctification. In the process, Cotton also argued against the Antinomian position that faith somehow obviated obedience. In his answer, Cotton affirmed that justification resulted in both a change in affections as well as in a changed life marked by true obedience. The way Cotton made his argument did not deny the importance of works. Instead, it positively affirmed that salvation was completely from grace, but it resulted in a life marked by humility and changed affections. At the heart of Cotton's answer was his warning that if one takes their obedience as proof of grace, they were falling into two related errors. First, they were trusting in themselves and their obedience for salvation. For Cotton, this was the spirit of the covenant of works. As we have seen, Cotton consistently preached against this great error. Second, they were illustrating a spirit of pride that refused to give all the glory to Christ. This spirit of pride was the opposite of an authentic work of God, and it marked the covenant of works. Thus according to Cotton's reasoning, assurance must come from the objective witness of the Spirit in justification and not from works. Still, Cotton did not deny the reality of works in possibly witnessing to one's salvation. As we will see in the next chapter, within his thought, the ability to walk in humility was the surest proof of one's subjective assurance.¹³³ What he attempted to argue was that the witness of objective assurance in justification must go together with one's subjective assurance. In this unity, the objective assurance in justification was primary because without it, subjective assurance was impossible. In this answer, Cotton sought to affirm both the glory of Christ in salvation,

¹³³ Again, see below pages 165 *ff.* for Cotton's full thoughts concerning assurance of salvation.

as well as the radical change of affections brought by justification in the life of an individual. Yet, his confusion of the extent of justification and sanctification caused his more discerning hearers much room for pause concerning his teaching. Cotton's lack of clarity and theological precision were at the theological root of the Antinomian controversy.

A related question concerning salvation and assurance was found in the Elder's fourth question. In this question, they asked, "Whether some saving qualification may be a first evidence of justification?"¹³⁴ Again, the emphasis of this question was concerning whether some evidence of sanctification can be used as proof of justification. As we have seen, Cotton affirmed that unless one was justified, they cannot have assurance that their works were genuine. As he stated, "A man may have an argument from thence, (yea, I doubt not a firm and strong argument) but not a first evidence."¹³⁵ The first evidence must be work of the Spirit to bring a person to trust in grace alone for salvation. As he explained,

For I conceive, faith itself, which is an evidence of things not seen, and the first saving qualification that doth evidence justification, is itself founded upon a former evidence, even the free grace of God in Christ, revealed in the promise of grace, and applied to the soul effectually by the Spirit of grace, both in our effectual calling (even in the begetting of faith) and in our justification.¹³⁶

At the heart of Cotton's answer was his affirmation that true conversion promoted the exaltation of Christ and personal humility. For Cotton, there was nothing within a

¹³⁴ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 232.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

person's life or conduct that merited God's favor. Yet, a person in a state of rebellion against God will always believe that their works were worthy of merit in God's eyes. Cotton warned that such a trust in self illustrated the depth of one's deception concerning their true state. True justification could only be evidenced by the trust or rest in the promise of God's grace apart from and even in spite of human effort. While this position appeared to be polemic during the Antinomian controversy, it was consistent with Cotton's theology in England as well as with many within the Reformed tradition.¹³⁷ The question illustrated more the inflamed emotions of the debate than any true disagreement between Cotton and his fellow Elders. Easily it could be argued that both Cotton and the Elders agreed on the importance of humility and resting in Christ alone for salvation as evidence of true justification.¹³⁸ As both sides had time to discuss, such agreement became more apparent. Yet, Cotton's insistence that this recognition was a mark of justification instead of a step within sanctification that witnessed to true justification provided Shepard and others with room to doubt Cotton's teaching. Again, Cotton's confusion of justification and sanctification became a major source of disagreement.

The final question of the Elders illustrated their confusion over Cotton's understanding of the relationship between the covenant of grace and the covenant of works. As they asked, "Whether Christ and his benefits be dispensed in a covenant of

¹³⁷ For example of this preaching in the 1620s, see John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* 7, 237. For ties to the Puritan tradition see, Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I: 321-329.

¹³⁸ This was the argument of Hambrick-Stowe concerning the theology of Shepard and Hooker. He argued that both men taught the importance of true humility and brokenness within the conversion process. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 80 ff.

works?”¹³⁹ Interestingly, Cotton answered, “Christ is dispensed to the elect in a covenant of grace: to others He may be dispensed in some sort, (to wit, in a taste of Him) either in a covenant of works, or in a covenant of grace legally applied.”¹⁴⁰ Drawing on Paul’s argument in Galatians chapter 4, Cotton maintained that the covenant on Mount Sinai was understood and applied in two different ways. For the true seed of Abraham, it illustrated the covenant of grace by promoting faith in the sacrifice to come. Yet, for the carnal seed of Abraham, it promoted bondage by applying the law and the commandments upon the people for their righteousness. As Cotton explained in *The Way Cleared*,

Moses also himself, having recited the covenant on Mount Sinai, Deut. v, he maketh the observation of all the commandments to be the righteousness of the people, Deut. vi, 25 and their life, Levit. xviii, 4. And so Paul understandeth him, Rom. x, 5. Gal. iii, 12. Now that covenant which genderth unto bondage, and holdeth forth righteousness and life upon obedience to all the commandments, is a covenant of works.¹⁴¹

Cotton affirmed that the covenant of works illustrated the need for forgiveness apart from one’s obedience to the law. The problem was that a person apart from grace suppressed this knowledge; and instead in pride, attempted to build their own righteousness based upon their works. For Cotton, this was the definition of bondage. He also argued that within the covenant at Sinai there were hints of Christ’s sacrifice and the grace of God. These hints were not clear until the coming of Christ, but they were sufficient for the true seed of Abraham to place their faith in coming grace. Cotton argued that such an understanding of the covenant of grace and the covenant of works was held by most of

¹³⁹ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 233.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

the eminent divines.¹⁴² He also argued that once the Elders and he discussed their various positions, this question was no longer an element within the debate. A few months later, when the Elders distilled the debate even further in the published *The Conference*, they did not even pose a question regarding Cotton's teaching concerning the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. From this, it is safe to conclude that they found Cotton's thoughts regarding the covenant to be within the Puritan mainstream.¹⁴³

Throughout the debate with his fellow Elders, Cotton maintained his desire to emphasize justification as primary within salvation. In the process, Cotton also fought the old battle from the 1620s for God's free election and the supremacy of Christ in salvation. He also affirmed the passive nature of faith while not denying the need for individual response to the gospel. All of these thoughts matched well with Cotton's self-understanding as a defender of Reformed doctrines of grace against Arminian influences. Furthermore, Cotton's thought also matched well with many Reformed theologians, including John Calvin himself. As Calvin states in *The Institutes*,

But faith is the principle work of the Holy Spirit. ... Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears. Similarly, where he says that the Thessalonians have been chosen by God 'in sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth (II Thess. 2.13), he is briefly warning us that faith itself has no other source than the Spirit.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² The importance of covenant theology within Puritanism cannot be overemphasized. Cotton's understanding of his debate illustrated his knowledge of the scholarly literature. His understanding of Federal thought matched the teaching of Zacharius Ursinus and others. For a discussion of this literature, see David Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformational Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

¹⁴³ Within two years of the debate, Peter Buckeley wrote a series of three letters asking Cotton for insight into the nature of Covenant theology. The tone of these letters illustrated his sincere belief that Cotton had good insight and perspective concerning the topic of his *The Gospel-Covenant*. Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 334-343. See below pages 199-201 for details.

¹⁴⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes*, Book III, chapter 1.4

At the heart the New England Elders' questions regarding Cotton's teaching concerning the covenant of works and the covenant of grace was Cotton's emphasis on trusting in the covenant of grace only for salvation. Particularly in the Puritan religious culture of New England, Cotton felt compelled to warn his hearers against trusting in their own efforts for salvation. In Cotton's sermon to the church at Salem, he warned that the covenant of works deceptively blinded those under it into believing that their own efforts merited salvation. Cotton consistently warned that such deception illustrated a lack of authentic faith. Instead, he encouraged his hearers to look to Christ alone for salvation. Such resting was a mark of true justification, and it could only be brought about by an authentic work of the Spirit. In the midst of the civil and religious culture of New England in the 1630s, such teaching caused both revival and problems with those who believed that it threatened the moral framework of the society.

Conclusion to Cotton's Soteriology

Cotton's doctrine of salvation has been a source of controversy since the time of the Antinomian controversy. Both his contemporaries and modern scholars have puzzled over Cotton's teaching at the time of the controversy. As the debates unfolded, his contemporaries came to accept Cotton's doctrine as within the fold of traditional Puritan teaching.¹⁴⁵ Even in the months immediately following the initial five questions, the Elders accepted Cotton's answers as doctrinally correct. Cotton confessed to his own pride and lack of watchfulness over his congregation. He also confessed his lack of

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Shepard did not share this trust in Cotton's doctrine even as he preached a public sermon attempting to lessen the differences between Cotton and the other Elders. As Shepard stated in a journal entry in 1639, "Mr. Cotton repents not, but is hid." Michael Winship, *Making Heretics*, 222.

precision in his use of theological terms. As he stated in a letter to Samuel Stone, “only the want of cleare discerning of the Difference betweene the imputation of Christs righteousness, and our justification, did (in *the Conference*) putt me upon some incongruous Apprehensions.”¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, he then began to condemn the errors of the Antinomians, and he distanced himself from their cause. A compromise was reached; and as time crept by, the controversy subsided. To Cotton’s contemporaries, Cotton remained a great preacher who was respected for his insight.

Unfortunately for Cotton, scholarship has not been as forgiving or accepting. Following the lead of Thomas Shepard, several scholars assumed that Cotton’s teaching must have promoted the Antinomian cause. Scholars have taken great pains to illustrate Cotton’s changing doctrine. The problem was that all of these interpretations cannot explain how Cotton gained such fame in England and retained such influence after the controversy. Most argued that his teaching must have changed upon his arrival in America. Problematically, such arguments cannot find support from Cotton’s works. He addressed new and different issues, but he did so with the same tools and theological resources he developed in the early years of his ministry. If his teaching was Antinomian, it was Antinomian throughout his career. Other scholars have followed the lead of Larzer Ziff who argued that Cotton’s otherworldly scholarship made him susceptible to error: he just did not understand the possible consequences of his grace-centered preaching. In many ways this explanation has great merit. Cotton did not understand the needs and fears of the New England society. Even in America, he continued to support the system of government in England. He did not see himself as a

¹⁴⁶ The letter to Samuel Stone is found in Sargent Bush, Jr. editor, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 272-275.

pioneer of a new society based upon democracy and freedom. He understood himself as a pastor, a man responsible for the care of souls. In other words, he was not aware soon enough that the issues and problems of New England differed greatly from those in England. He was not concerned with how to hold together a holy commonwealth. He was concerned with preaching an authentic spirituality to his flock. When he encountered pride and judgment, he preached against this pride and asserted the need to rest in grace alone. He emphasized justification as foundation for living the Christian life. This message freed his hearers from the weight of the law for salvation, but it also hindered the structure of a society that insisted on obedience to the law. In this way, Ziff was correct that Cotton preached a message with unforeseen consequences within the colony setting.

Where Cotton failed the most as a theologian is in his inconsistent use of terms. As we have seen, Cotton misunderstands, or at the least misapplied, the concept of justification to the point of diminishing the role and witness of sanctification in the Christian life.¹⁴⁷ This lack of clarity was one of the primary theological causes of the Antinomian controversy. Yet, the heart of Cotton's doctrine of salvation was his emphasis on justification as foundational for a changed Christian life. Thus, one's subjective assurance of salvation must be based upon one's justification. As we will see in the next chapter, Cotton did not deny either preparationism or the validity of subjective assurance. Instead, he obstinately affirmed objective assurance found in one's

¹⁴⁷ Recent scholarship has illustrated that such an oversight ran counter to the accepted understanding of sanctification as witnessing to justification. Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 161. Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 45-48. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain* has argued that in the process of promoting justification as primary, Cotton destroyed the Puritan disciplinary teaching. As we will see in the next chapter, Cotton retained his emphasis on Puritan disciplinary teaching, but he transformed the teaching to emphasize humility. A move suggested by William Perkins. See pages 174-175.

justification as primary. As Cotton and the Elders discussed the issues over salvation and assurance during the Antinomian controversy, both sides came to understand the heart of the other's theological system. The result was a theological compromise in terminology, and repentance from Cotton concerning his lack of clarity in his use of terms. Once the enflamed passions were lessened by time, peace was made. This chapter has illustrated how theological peace could be made between Cotton and the Elders concerning salvation. Both sides had the same message of salvation, but Cotton's inflation of justification caused room for questions. As they discussed their various positions, a settlement was reached. In the next chapter, we will see how the remaining questions concerning Cotton's teaching about the Holy Spirit were understood and debated. In the process, we will come to a clear understanding of the real debate behind the Antinomian controversy.

CHAPTER IV

Holy Spirit

As a defender of traditional Reformed teaching concerning predestination, Cotton's thought emphasized the work of Christ in bringing salvation over any of an individual's efforts to embrace Christ. As we have seen, this emphasis focused the heart of Cotton's teaching upon the work of Christ being applied to the life of a believer by the work of the Spirit. The result for Cotton was an emphasis on justification as passively received by the individual. This teaching had many antecedents within both the Reformed tradition and Puritanism. It was a common emphasis when the theological foe was any sort of Arminian teaching. Yet, in the late 1620s and early 1630s, the theological foe was not Arminianism. It was an ant-legal brand of Puritanism that deemphasized works as proof of authentic faith- also known as Antinomianism.¹ It became a movement that competed with orthodox Puritanism for adherents by articulating an alternative vision of Christianity that diminished the need to pursue sanctification. As we have seen, Cotton's teaching in the 1630s so overemphasized justification that he incorporated many of the traditional teachings concerning sanctification into his defense of and articulations concerning justification. This overemphasis caused his thought to be questioned as Antinomian, and it was one of the major theological roots of the Antinomian controversy. Yet, as we will see in the next two chapters, Cotton's teaching did not join the Antinomian critique of mainstream Puritanism. Instead, his thought illustrated an attempt

¹ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain* and David Como, "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999).

to keep the difficult balance found within Puritanism and Reformed thought of retaining both divine sovereignty and human responsibility in growing in godliness. For Cotton, this balance depended upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a true believer. In this chapter, Cotton's teaching regarding the Holy Spirit will be explored. This teaching included Cotton's understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in bringing authentic assurance of faith. As we will see, Cotton's teaching concerning the work of the Spirit provided the first cause of disagreement between Cotton and Shepard in early 1636. This chapter will begin with a brief account of the historical situation that led to Shepard's questioning of Cotton's thought, and it will then explain the essence of Cotton's thought regarding the work of the Spirit in the life of an individual.

Soon after his arrival in New England and just after his wife's death and his call to the church at Cambridge, Thomas Shepard attended a Thursday lecture series by Cotton. As he listened, he became alarmed at Cotton's teaching concerning the importance of the Holy Spirit for salvation and the Christian life. Shepard's primary concern was that Cotton's emphasis on the Holy Spirit sounded like Familism. As he stated,

For we shall not be able to stir out this weeke many sad imployments being now upon our church; on thing more I doe with submission desire yow not to {be} mistaken in; as if that the Familists doe not care for word or ordinances but only the spirits motion; for I haue bin with many of them and hence haue met with many of there bookes; and I doe know thus much of them, that scarce any people honour word and ordinances more, for they will professe that there they meet with the Spirit and there superlatiue raptures.²

For Shepard, Cotton taught a doctrine that intimated too close of an association between the Holy Spirit and the individual Christian. He believed that Cotton's emphasis on the sealing of the Spirit mirrored the teaching of Hendrick Niclaes or HN, a Dutch mystic,

² Sargent Bush, Jr. edited, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 228.

who taught that Christ actually dwelt within each believer. The followers of HN, known as Familists, believed the indwelling of Christ meant that heaven was now on earth.³ In addition, they rejected the authority of scripture for the authority of the Spirit. The Family of Love, or Familists, were not a well organized sect by the 1620s, but HN's emphasis on the Spirit began to find many avenues into English religious life in the 1620s and 1630s.⁴ In combination with a growing Antinomian challenge to Puritans' use of the law, Familism began in the 1620s to cause difficulties for many orthodox Puritan pastors, particularly in London.⁵ It came to be believed by most orthodox divines that the teachings of HN were behind the growth of both Antinomianism and later Quakerism. When Shepard made the charge against Cotton of Familism, he accused Cotton of advocating one of the most pernicious heresies facing the Puritans in the 1630s.

At the root of Shepard's alarm was his insistence that the true church could easily be misled by those who claim special insight from the Holy Spirit. Shepard firmly believed that the way into the Kingdom of God was difficult for even those who have tasted God's grace.⁶ In both England and Cambridge New England, his ministry was marked by an ardent teaching that consistently warned his congregations that they must prove the sincerity of faith by godly living for authentic assurance of faith. In his famous sermon series preached just after the Antinomian controversy, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, Shepard went to great lengths to warn his congregation that while they may think

³ A helpful discussion of the Familist teaching and their importance for England is found in Appendix A of David Como's dissertation "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999), 414-425. Como's work is extremely helpful for understanding the growing Puritan concern for Antinomianism in England.

⁴ Como, 414.

⁵ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183-209.

⁶ Thomas Shepard, *The Sincere Convert*, 64-68.

of themselves as Christians, they may be mistaken. As he stated in explaining the Parable of the Ten Virgins,

This is the rude draught of the first part of the parable, the sum whereof is this: that the state of the members of some churches, about the time of Christ's coming, shall be this- that they shall not be openly profane, corrupt, and scandalous, but virgin professors, awakened for some season out of carnal security; stirring, lively Christians, not preserving their chastity and purity merely in a way of works, but waiting for Christ in a covenant of grace; only some of these, and a good part of these, shall be indeed wise, stored with spiritual wisdom, filled with the power of grace; but others of them, and a great part of them too, shall be found foolish at the coming of the Lord Jesus.⁷

The central thrust of Shepard's ministry was to convict hypocrites of their need for Christ. In this goal, he agreed completely with the pastoral emphasis of John Cotton. Where these two men greatly differed was in Shepard's affirmation that assurance of true faith could only be obtained through a carefully examined life that reflected God's holy character.⁸ He doubted any teaching that set primacy of the Spirit's work over the hard work of walking with God in holiness and purity. Such teaching he branded as Familist or Antinomian.

Shepard's determination to uncover the false teaching of the Familists was born from his early religious experiences. During his time at Emmanuel College, Shepard experienced a long and intense time of struggle with the claims of the gospel.⁹ During this time, he became convicted of the wrath of God against him and his sin, but he

⁷ Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 15-16.

⁸ Shepard was an excellent example of what Bozeman called the Precisionist Strain within Puritanism. See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

⁹ Michael McGiffert edited, *God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard* (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1972) 40-45. Also, John A. Albro, *The Life of Thomas Shepard* (Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1870) found in the introduction to Thomas Shepard, *The Sincere Convert and The Sound Believer* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999), xx-xxvii.

doubted that Christ would forgive him. In the midst of this struggle, he became attracted to the teaching of the Familist or Antinomian sect. As an early biographer recalled:

At another time, he “felt all manner of temptation to all kinds of religions, not knowing which to choose.” At last he heard of Grindleton, and was in danger of falling into Perfectionism, Familism, Antinomianism, or whatever that system was called which afterwards made such havoc in the infant churches of New England. He did not really adopt or believe any of the absurd doctrines of the Familists, but only went so far in these “miserable fluctuations and straits of his soul” as to question “whether that glorious state of perfection might not be the truth,” and whether old Mr. Roger’s “Seven Treatise,” and the “Practice of Christianity,”- books which were then esteemed as containing very sound theology,- “might not be legal,” and these writers “legal men;” a singular hallucination, from which he was soon delivered by reading in one the Familist books the astounding doctrine, that a Christian is so swallowed up in the Spirit, “that what action soever the Spirit moves him to commit, suppose adultery, he may do it, and it is no sin to him.” This passage, like an overdose of poison, operated exactly contrary to its nature and design. Tempted as he was to “all kinds of religion,” he could not digest this doctrine of devils; and the horrible absurdity of the proposition awakened in him an intense abhorrence of the whole system to which it belonged, which in after years, and in more critical times, rendered him a most determined and successful opposer of Antinomianism.¹⁰

Shepard’s opening remarks to Cotton illustrated that he understood himself as a defender of the truth against the errors of Familism and Antinomianism. He had narrowly escaped this teaching; and as he listened to Cotton, his ears were attentive to any mention of the work of the Spirit that could be tainted by such falsehood. Upon his arrival back at home, he drafted a strongly worded letter to Cotton warning him that his teaching was infected by the false doctrine of Familism. As we have seen, Cotton was shocked at both Shepard’s audacity for making such an accusation as well as that someone could mistake his teaching for such false doctrine. In his reply, he thanked Shepard for his concern, but he also attempted to dismiss his charges without engaging in serious discussion. Unfortunately for the peace of the colony, Cotton greatly underestimated Shepard’s

¹⁰ Ibid., xxiv.

determined opposition to any teaching that reminded him of Familism. While these opening letters between Shepard and Cotton were supposedly private letters between two pastors, the content of the letters soon grew to a public debate concerning the doctrines of grace. At the heart of the early debates within the Antinomian controversy was Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit.

This chapter will explore Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. The opening section of this chapter will illustrate the heart of Cotton's teaching concerning the person and work of the Spirit. This section will describe the general parameters of Cotton's pneumatology. The second section of this chapter will investigate both the Reformed and Puritan antecedents to Cotton's teaching as well as the objections to Cotton's teaching mentioned at the beginning of the Antinomian controversy with the published *Sixteen Questions of Serious and Necessary Consequence*.¹¹ Of these sixteen questions, the first six dealt directly with Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit and assurance, and it could be argued that five other questions, including question thirteen regarding the sanctification and the covenant of works, also involved Cotton's teaching regarding the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, as the debate progressed, Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit became less significant and substantial agreement was made between Cotton and the Elders. The third section will include several objections made by recent scholars concerning Cotton's pneumatology. These objections have become popular means of explaining Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. Each of these objections will be explored and answered from Cotton's thought and an

¹¹ Published in David D. Hall edited, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), Chapter 3 (43-59).

explanation of the Puritan and Reformed Tradition's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit and assurance.

The Work of the Holy Spirit: Sanctification

Perhaps Cotton's most important but under appreciated contribution to early New England theology was his emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Cotton's teaching reflected a thread within the Reformed tradition and Puritanism that emphasized the Spirit's work both in bringing salvation and within the Christian life. His teaching sought to exalt God in everything, and his emphasis upon the Spirit was an attempt to give God the glory in every dimension of salvation. Cotton's theology of the Holy Spirit began, as does all his theology, with an emphasis on the person and work of Christ. Within his Trinitarian scheme, the Father elected and brought a person toward faith, Christ did the work to secure both salvation and life for the believer, and the Holy Spirit applied the work of Christ to a believer in justification as well as guided the course of the entire Christian life.¹² The Spirit was the presence of God that brought salvation, reoriented an individual's affections, and brought assurance of God's love and pardon. Consequently, within Cotton's theology of the Christian life, the person and work of the Holy Spirit was vital for a correct understanding of both justification and sanctification.¹³

For Cotton, the tie between the Spirit and the person and work of Christ was so close that he identified the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. While he did retain the title Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost for the person of the Spirit, he also clearly taught that the Spirit was

¹² John Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practical Observation upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1654), 250.

¹³ A teaching very similar to the teaching of Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.1, xvi.1.

sent from Christ to continue His work. Similar to Luke's teaching in Acts 1:1 and 26:23, Cotton emphasized that Christ continued His work in the Church through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came to do Christ's bidding and to apply Christ's finished work in the world and in the life of each individual believer. The Spirit's application of Christ's work brought about salvation and from this work of the Spirit followed the entire Christian life. In Cotton's thinking, the work of the Spirit in applying the blessings of Christ to the individual was foundational for the entire Christian life. As we witnessed in the previous chapter, Cotton called the entire work of the Spirit in the life of a believer justification. The result was that he neglected the term sanctification even though his theology consistently witnessed to the need for the Spirit to work a change in affections within the life of an individual. In other words, Cotton neglected the term sanctification, but his theological system maintained the need for the Spirit to work for progressive growth in holiness for the individual Christian. The key to Cotton's thought concerning the Spirit was his insistence that both justification and growth in personal holiness or sanctification must be the result of the work of the Spirit.¹⁴ As he stated in a sermon preached in the 1620s,

Righteousness, both imputed from Christ to us, All that his perfect obedience and patience and righteousness ascribed to us is made ours, 1 Cor. 1.30. And righteousness of sanctification, not only Christ's righteousness imputed, but the Spirit of grace workes inherent righteousness in us; faith and patience, and humility and zeale, and whatever grace accompanies salvation; these be the royal robes of Righteousness God cloths his servants with, when they come out of afflictions.¹⁵

¹⁴ John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles or Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), 209.

¹⁵ John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 40.

For Cotton, the Spirit must work to bring both salvation and a changed life due to one's spiritual deadness brought about by sin. Only the Holy Spirit could bring one back to life so they could see, understand, and trust in the goodness of Christ. This teaching was similar to the thought of Thomas Goodwin, who argued that the Spirit worked salvation by giving an individual a new understanding of Christ and a new "spiritual sight of spiritual realities."¹⁶ Thus, the Christian life began with the work of the Spirit applying the truths of the gospel to the individual. Such teaching matched well with the Puritan and Reformed mainstream.¹⁷

Cotton's teaching concerning the work of the Spirit continued with his affirmation that the first result of the Spirit's work in salvation will be true humility. Cotton often explained that the beginning of the Christian life must be marked by true humility and brokenness before Christ. He argued that such humility can only come through the work of the Spirit: only by the Spirit can one abandon their own self-righteousness to trust in Christ's grace alone for salvation.¹⁸ The natural human condition apart from the work of the Spirit was that of pride and self-conceit. Such a spirit was antithetical to trusting in Christ for salvation because it relied only upon itself for meaning and life. Because of this pride, a natural person cannot embrace Christ by faith.¹⁹ Ultimately, Cotton's entire theology of the Christian life was based upon the premise that because of total depravity, all spiritual change was from grace brought to the individual by the Spirit. If one could

¹⁶ Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, ed. J. Miller (James Nichol: London, 1861), VIII:260. Quoted in J.I Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 180-181.

¹⁷ The similarities were numerous. For examples see Calvin, *Institutes* III.ii.19 or William Perkins, *Cases*, 347.

¹⁸ A point made by most Puritans. See the last chapter for Puritan and Reformed divines who agreed with this perspective.

¹⁹ John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 28; John Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practical Observation upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes*, 112; John Cotton, *Milk for Babes*, 1-2

see the uniqueness and goodness of Christ, they did so because the Spirit opened their eyes to this truth.²⁰ If one understood their need for a savior, this too was from the work of the Spirit opening the eyes of the blind.²¹ As we have seen, in all matters concerning salvation, Cotton attempted to give God all the glory. In terms of the Spirit, he taught that the Spirit must get the credit in both salvation and in changing affections to bring about true humility.

Pastorally, Cotton used this doctrine to encourage his hearers: if they had any spiritual light, it must be from the Spirit. He encouraged his hearers to fan into flames this work of God because it was proof that God was calling them to salvation and deeper faith.²² Such a pastoral application was foreign in the works of Thomas Shepard in the 1630s. Shepard charged his hearers that even the presence of spiritual light meant nothing certain: they might be hypocrites without authentic faith.²³ Consequently, the difference between Cotton's and Shepard's teaching concerning the work of the Spirit in bringing salvation was vitally important for understanding issues in the Antinomian controversy. Cotton taught that justification was easier to discern than sanctification for several reasons. First, he believed that if there was spiritual light and interest, it proved

²⁰ At this point, Cotton was in complete agreement with the Puritan and Reformed mainstream. See Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 41. An example of Cotton's articulation of this concept is found in a sermon preached in the late 1630s after the Antinomian controversy. As he stated, "This being applied by the spirit (the gospel of grace), it falls on him with power, and he sees the goodnesse of God in Christ, and the vanity of all things else: and seeing so much glory in Christ, and in particular to him also, this lets him see the vanity of all other courses; for this manifestation of Gods spirit doth effectually and manifestly open our eyes to see, and hearts to believe what the Lord offers, for faith is laid to receive what the Lord gives of grace; here is then that which makes calling sure, for otherwise how can we know it, but by the manifestation, and declaration, and revelation of the Spirit. The things that eye never saw, nor eare heard, nor ever entered into the heart of man, but he hath revealed them by his spirit, *1 Cor. 2.9,10.*" John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 151.

²¹ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 151.

²² This teaching was similar to the teaching of Richard Sibbes in his *The Bruised Reed* (1630). See John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 143 ff..

²³ For example see Thomas Shepard, *The Sincere Convert*, 64-68; *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, 26-29, 191-206.

the Spirit's work.²⁴ Second, he believed that even the most holy of saints on earth remained marred by sin. Thus, if one looked to their life as proof of God's work, they will see mixed results at best.²⁵ In a Spirit-led person, such a realization of remaining sin led to more humility, a deeper repentance of their sin, and a positive trust in Christ alone for salvation.²⁶ These were the marks of true justification. For Cotton, a hypocrite was one who worked for reformation in their actions, but they lacked the genuine humility of repentance and faith in Christ alone.²⁷ In the place of Christ, they trusted in their works to illustrate their goodness. The reason for this hypocrisy was that the individual did not have the Spirit. Again, this emphasis was contrary to the teaching of Thomas Shepard. He emphasized looking at one's works as the best indicator of the Spirit's authentic work and as the surest means of finding assurance.²⁸ These contrary understandings of authentic faith and assurance naturally led to dispute between these two champions against their respective heresies.

Second, Cotton also clearly taught that the work of the Spirit in the life of a believer will result in an outward life marked by holiness and godliness. In every sermon series, Cotton usually ended with several sermons that emphasized obedience to Christ and the need for godly living.²⁹ Cotton not only modeled such godliness in his own life,

²⁴ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 108. John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches in Christ in New England*, 58.

²⁵ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 203. John Cotton, *The Ground and Ends of the Baptisme of the Children of the Faithful*, 125.

²⁶ For examples see Cotton's thought during the midst of the Antinomian controversy. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 11. Also see his catechism John Cotton, *Milk for Babes*, 8-9.

²⁷ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation*, 152. John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 99

²⁸ Interestingly, Stoever used this trait within Shepard's thought as an illustration of normal Puritan wrestling with one's salvation. Shepard was not the best nor only guide at this point. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 148-149.

²⁹ For example clear example was at the close of one sermon series preached in the 1620s. He argued that the Christian life was marked by three cardinal graces including obedience. As he stated, "First, faith, to be

but constantly taught the concept of William Ames that “theology is the art of living gloriously.” Cotton called the growth in godly living a person’s inherent righteousness. This righteousness must shine before all people in order to give glory to God.³⁰ The concept of inherent righteousness was on the surface counterintuitive. It was not the righteousness of a person from birth or from their natural resources. Instead, it was the continuing work of the Spirit to change one’s affections after justification. It was a righteousness given by the Spirit that must result in a changed life marked by authentic godliness. As he stated,

The righteousness of Christ imputed (I mean the righteousness of Christ received by faith and imputed by grace) is a pure righteousness that shines before God, and not before men. But the righteousness inherent that’s not pure, (but very bright) before men. There is therefore a righteousness that is very bright, that’s the righteousness inherent, expressed in our conversation; and there is another righteousness, to wit, the righteousness imputed, which is incomparable more pure.³¹

Notice in the above quotation that Cotton made a distinction between inherent righteousness and imputed righteousness. Imputed righteousness was the work of Christ that freely and completely pardoned a person by the Spirit’s application of Christ’s work to one’s heart and life. This righteousness was pure and perfect, though it was not seen clearly by humanity. Imputed righteousness was found at the moment of justification,

first, strong, secondly, precious, applying the precious promises, and making us rich with them. Secondly, Repentance to abound in brokenness of the spirit through godly sorrow, melting into abundance of teares, or other affections suitable thereto. Thirdly, to obedience, to be first, fragrant, Secondly, and that with all manner of sweet fruits and good, that all that converse with us may smell a sweet favour from our conversation.” John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles or Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), 219-220. Also see, John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Third Sermon Sixth Vial, 12-13. John Cotton, *God’s Mercie Mixed with His Justice*, 72- 74. John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation*, 174. John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 141.

³⁰ John Cotton, *God’s Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 40.

³¹ John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Third Sermon Sixth Vial, 11.

and it resulted in one becoming a child of God. This righteousness was foundational for a believer, and it was completely pure before God because it rested in Christ's perfect and completed work. On the other hand, inherent righteousness was not pure and perfect. It was the working out of Christ's work in the life of a believer who remained tainted by sin and unbelief. This inherent righteousness was also the work of the Spirit, and it resulted in ever increasing Christian virtues.³² It flowed from one's justification, but it naturally brought about a change in life.³³ This change could be seen by others, and it resulted in God's glory through the life of the individual. In other words, true Christians were marked by Christ in every aspect of their lives. God's imputed righteousness transformed believers at the moment of justification by transforming their affections. This naturally resulted in a life marked by Christ-like humility, meekness, patience, honesty, faithfulness, diligence, and a transformation of their outward life.³⁴ This was not the topic of every sermon, but within every sermon series, Cotton argued for the need to grow in holiness, love and obedience to God.³⁵ Cotton's preaching did not neglect the topic of obedience to the gospel. He believed that the positive outworking of the Holy Spirit will result in a life marked by holiness and obedience to the commands of God.

Where Cotton excelled as a Puritan pastor was in his insistence that imperfect inherent righteousness must not be cause for despair and doubting of one's faith. In the quotation found in the last paragraph concerning inherent righteousness, Cotton claimed

³² John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles or Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), 123-124.

³³ John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 44.

³⁴ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 128 ff; 143 ff..

³⁵ For example see, John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 39. Also, John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 47-48.

that this type of righteousness was always imperfect, but it would shine brightly before others. Cotton used the imperfections of his hearers to drive them to Christ. He insisted that sin within the life of a believer should cause godly despair: a feeling of surrender toward one's own righteousness meriting God's favor. Instead, as one despaired of their self-righteousness, they were driven to Christ for forgiveness and grace. As a result, a true believer marked by the Holy Spirit, did not trust their sinfully divided heart, but instead rested only in Christ's grace. Such resting illustrated authentic humility, and it could only come through the work of the Spirit.³⁶ This approach to the Christian life was completely at odds with Thomas Shepard's and Thomas Hooker's teaching. Shepard and Thomas Hooker used sin within the life of a believer to promote what they understood as healthy doubt within the life of a potential hypocrite.³⁷ They emphasized the need to turn from that sin to illustrate Christ's work.³⁸ Cotton took the same sin, and he argued that it should not cause one to question their faith, but to exercise their faith by trusting in Christ for forgiveness and the power to change. In so doing, Cotton attempted to explain the reality of sin within the life of the believer while also exalting Christ and the power of the

³⁶ As Cotton argued a true Christian "watches unto his own heart that he does not trust to his own righteousness; and runs away from God by deceitfulness and unbelief of his own heart." John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Third Sermon Sixth Vial, 12.

³⁷ For example, Thomas Hooker, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ* (Morgan, PA: Sola Deo Gloria Books), 1-2. This trait of Hooker was also emphasized in Sargent Bush, Jr. *The Writings of Thomas Hooker: Spiritual Adventure in Two Worlds* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 147 ff., 252. Also see, Thomas Shepard's *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* (Morgan, PA: Sola Deo Gloria Books). Shepard's applications of doctrine often stressed the need to love God more, to hate sin more, and to strive for true faith. The entire first section of *The Ten Virgins* explained how most Christians were not prepared for Christ's return so they must prepare themselves so they can close with Christ.

³⁸ While Bozeman would call this the precisionist strain within Puritanism, it neglected the emphasis on salvation by grace alone through faith alone by Christ's work alone found within Puritanism and the Reformed mainstream. Bozeman's work, even in dealing with Cotton, neglected the inherent tensions within Puritanism for emphasizing new and deeper obedience with an understanding of salvation by grace. These tensions were at the heart of the disagreement between Cotton and the New England Elders led by Hooker and Shepard.

Spirit as central in changing a person's life. This teaching was not odd within Puritanism or the Reformed tradition, but in the 1630s, it gave place for Hooker and Shepard to question his teaching as representing Antinomianism.³⁹ Again, Cotton emphasized grace as the power to change by repentance and faith, while Hooker and Shepard emphasized obedience as the best proof of authentic faith. Neither Cotton nor Hooker and Shepard would deny the reality and importance of the other's position, but their respective emphasis was different.

Furthermore, Cotton also taught that the transformation of an individual by the Spirit occurred in progressive stages.⁴⁰ Cotton affirmed that growth in godliness occurred as an individual was led by the Spirit into a deeper fellowship with God. Paradoxically, such increasing intimacy occurred as the Spirit progressively illustrated one's sin so as to promote repentance and resting in Christ. This active faith in Christ then, by the power of the Spirit, resulted in the mortification of sin.⁴¹ From the perspective of those looking at the life of the Christian, such mortification of sin resulted in a life marked by increasing godliness. For the Christian, the process of mortification resulted in both a greater awareness of their internal struggle against sin as well as a greater need to trust in Christ's grace for salvation and life.⁴² Contrary to the teaching of the Familists, Cotton also affirmed that a true believer will grow in their hatred of sin. This hatred of sin again resulted in repentance and awareness of one's need to trust in Christ for forgiveness. Such repentance and faith allowed one to remain clothed in

³⁹ For example, Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (London, 1630).

⁴⁰ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 141.

⁴¹ John Owens, *The Mortification of Sin* found in Owen, *Works* VI, 8-11.

⁴² Again see Owens, *The Mortification of Sin*.

Christ's righteousness.⁴³ The final result of progressive sanctification was that a believer's life would be marked by an increasing intimacy with Christ by faith. Such intimacy was the goal of every Christian, and once it was obtained the Christian would guard against anything that could hinder that intimacy.

For Cotton, faith, repentance, and obedience were all related in their source: he believed all came from the work of the Spirit applying the grace of Christ to the life of a believer. The thought that the Spirit freed one to live a life of sin was absolutely foreign to the writing of Cotton. Instead, he consistently affirmed that an authentic Christian life will be marked by ever increasing faith, repentance, and then obedience to Christ and the Word.⁴⁴ Throughout his teaching and his career, Cotton emphasized that an authentic work of the Holy Spirit will result in a life marked by changed affections and a hatred of sin. Again, this emphasis was not found in every sermon Cotton preached, but it was clearly within each sermon series- typically in a sermon immediately following a sermon emphasizing God's grace in the gospel.⁴⁵ Cotton's teaching concerning the primacy of the Spirit in the life of the believer was vital for his theological system. Through the work of the Spirit, Cotton tied together his emphasis on predestination, total depravity, and the exaltation of Christ in all matters of salvation. His understanding of an authentic Christian life also flowed from his teaching concerning the Spirit. He believed that the Spirit prompted a true believer to rest in Christ alone for salvation since the Spirit

⁴³ John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Third Sermon Sixth Vial, 12-13.

⁴⁴ John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles or Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), 219-220.

⁴⁵ See particularly John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 1-14 with 127- 143. Sermon XIII 193-208 on faith with Sermon XIV, 209-226 on assurance found through prayer and works. Also John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles or Song of Solomon*, chapter 7 with an emphasis on justification and sanctification by faith on page 209 with works on page 219-220.

revealed sin and one's need for Christ. His teaching was in line with the teaching of Calvin, Perkins, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Goodwin, and several generations later, John Owen.

The Work of the Holy Spirit: Assurance

In a preface to the first account of the Antinomian controversy, Thomas Weld wrote in the mid- 1640s that the teaching of the Antinomians provided a “more faire and easie way to heaven.”⁴⁶ Picking up on this theme, several influential recent scholars have argued that at the heart of the Antinomian controversy was the pressing question of how to discern authentic assurance of faith. In the account of William Stoever, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit's work in bringing assurance was one of the major causes of the Antinomian controversy. In this telling, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit went against accepted Puritan teaching in its overemphasis of the Spirit's role in assurance and his under-emphasis of the human role in the same process.⁴⁷ As he stated,

Here lay the immediate issue in the New England controversy; what could be known objectively, without transcending the order of creation, about the Spirit's regenerating of an individual? Was assurance the work of a gracious human spirit, reflecting on personal behavior and motives in light of the rule of obedience and the conditional promises given in scripture, and so a human work? Or was assurance a work of the Spirit himself, “speaking peace” directly to the soul, and thus a divine work? Shepard and Bulkeley, in harmony with Reformed orthodoxy generally, maintained the former.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ A phrase coined by Thomas Weld in his preface to Winthrop's account of the Antinomian controversy in New England. *A Short Story of the Rise, reign and ruine of the Antinomians, Familists, and Libertines that infected the Churches of New England* (London, 1644). Also found in and contributing to the title of William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 11.

⁴⁷ A concern echoed by the recent research of Theodore Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

⁴⁸ William Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 169-170.

By implication and argument, Cotton's teaching maintained the latter that assurance came from the direct witness of the Spirit. Stoeber argued that Cotton's teaching did not allow human works any place in discovering authentic assurance. Similarly, the more recent work of Brooks Holifield also argued that Cotton's overemphasis on union with Christ led to an overemphasis on the Spirit over the biblical word in assurance.⁴⁹ Both of these scholars lay much of the blame for the Antinomian controversy upon the teaching of John Cotton. While this viewpoint has dominated the thinking of scholarship concerning Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy for the past forty years, the conclusion of this chapter will discuss the validity of these arguments in light of evidence from Cotton's teaching in comparison with the Puritan tradition. In this section, Cotton's teaching concerning assurance will be explored through his writings, and his ties to the Puritan and Reformed tradition will be discussed. In particular, Cotton's affinities to William Perkins will be explored. It will be illustrated that while Cotton's teaching may have gone against the tenor of New England Puritanism, it was based upon and found within the Puritan mainstream in England. After this presentation of Cotton's views concerning assurance, this section will conclude with a presentation of the Elders' questions from 1636 concerning the Holy Spirit and Cotton's responses to these questions. This section will illustrate how substantial agreement was reached between Cotton and the Elders concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life.

Cotton's teaching concerning assurance overlapped with his teaching concerning the work of the Spirit in bringing a person to authentic faith and in changing their character. Cotton began his teaching concerning assurance with the affirmation that

⁴⁹ Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-48.

authentic assurance will be marked by both a humble despair of self-effort for salvation and life as well as a sincere trust in Christ alone.⁵⁰ As we have repeatedly seen, Cotton used the doctrine of election mixed with the doctrine of total depravity to illustrate the two-fold truth that Christians will struggle with their faith, but God loved them and will carry on the work of grace in their lives even in the midst of their struggles.⁵¹ In numerous sermons, Cotton applied this central affirmation to encourage his hearers not to despair, but to turn to Christ for life and peace. Throughout his sermons, he also encouraged even the wicked folks within his congregation to turn to Christ because no one was beyond redemption.⁵² He called all who heard him to embrace a life marked by deeper repentance and faith. As we have seen, he emphasized Christ and he deemphasized one's work as absolutely proving true faith. In the 1620s, he went so far as to argue that the true power of God was found as God forgave the iniquities of his people. Thus, if one lacked spiritual power, this lack came from not believing that they needed God's forgiveness, strength and mercy. Conversely, if one understood the depth of their sin, they would understand their need for God's forgiveness, strength and love. In other words, authentic faith was marked by humility: a confession that one was a real and powerless sinner, and therefore they needed a real and powerful savior.⁵³ Thus the foundation of authentic assurance of faith was a growing trust in Christ's grace and a deeper understanding of one's sin.

⁵⁰As he stated in the late 1630s, John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation*, 174.

⁵¹From an early and a late work, John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 203. John Cotton, *The Ground and Ends of the Baptisme of the Children of the Faithful*, 125.

⁵²John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 64.

⁵³John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger* (London, 1641), 70-71.

Cotton's teaching did not contain long discourses concerning the availability of assurance for the average believer. The traditional Puritan understanding of assurance maintained that it was a gift God gave to a select few.⁵⁴ Yet, mainstream Puritanism also consistently emphasized that comfort and joy primarily come through assurance of one's faith.⁵⁵ Mainstream Puritanism also emphasized the need for each individual to strive for achieving assurance.⁵⁶ Cotton's teaching drew upon these foundations of Puritan thought. As with much of his teaching, his thought regarding assurance was both theoretical in its defense of predestinarian thought as well as pastoral in its application. His emphasis was consistently against the Romanist or works righteousness approach of individuals who sought to prove their faith by works.⁵⁷ As we have seen, such thought took glory away from Christ's work; and for Cotton, this made it anathema. Ironically, Cotton's attacks against works righteousness were most clear after the Antinomian controversy when he used the Roman Catholic teaching as a foil to condemn any sort of works righteousness. In these sermons, Cotton proposed that a correct understanding of the work of the Spirit was the only solid ground for authentic assurance. Again, he emphasized the work of the Spirit in bringing justification as foundation for the entire

⁵⁴ For example Richard Sibbes, *Yea and Amen*, 134-136. A complete list of scholarly literature concerning assurance of salvation within Puritan thought is lengthy. Within American Puritan studies see William K. B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven* and Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*. For a complete list of works concerning assurance, see the bibliography of Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999).

⁵⁵ For example see Richard Sibbes, "The Spiritual Jubilee," in *Works*, 5:244.

⁵⁶ Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth, Or, a Serious Discourse touching a well-grounded Assurance* (1654) found in *Works*, II: 335.

⁵⁷ In the late 1630s, Cotton used Roman Catholicism as a foil to preaching against works. An example would be John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 108.

Christian life.⁵⁸ For the sake of clarity, Cotton's words themselves assist in illustrating the importance of the Spirit. As he stated,

In our effectual calling, there is a declaration of Gods love to the soul in Christ Jesus by the spirit of grace, in the doctrine of the Gospel, for that is Gods call; in our calling, God calls for his part by his grace and spirit, and we answer that spirit, by that faith, which by the call of God if wrought in our hearts; I say, God calls effectually to his grace by manifesting the rich grace of God in Christ, electing freely, calling freely, from the obedience of sinne and Satan, to the liberty of the sons of God.⁵⁹

In this quotation, Cotton affirmed his foundational theological beliefs: one must believe in Christ alone by the power of the Spirit alone because total depravity has made the best human efforts tainted with sin. In his teaching, the Holy Spirit humbled a person so that they despaired of their own righteousness and sought grace in Christ.⁶⁰ Thus, humble acceptance of the gospel was a divine work that offered solid proof of true faith and election.⁶¹ It was the seal of the Spirit and from this acceptance of the gospel one's spirit answered the call of the Holy Spirit to authentic faith. Such teaching illustrated authentic justification and from this justification followed one's Christian life.

On the surface, such teaching appeared to support the thesis of Stoever and others. It is clear that Cotton's central affirmations cemented assurance in the work of Christ and not dependent upon human effort.⁶² As such, in his discussion concerning assurance, he maintained that it must be found by faith in Christ. He also spoke of the seal of the Spirit as bearing witness to true salvation. Cotton's teaching concerning assurance remained

⁵⁸ In this tendency, Cotton displayed the same issues Calvin faced when emphasizing justification and the witness of the Spirit against Catholicism. Cotton thought of himself as a defender of the same position against any form of works righteousness. See Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 166-168.

⁵⁹ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 151.

⁶⁰ In agreement with Richard Sibbes, "A Learned Commentary or Exposition Upon The First Chapter of the Second Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians," in *Works*, 3:467.

⁶¹ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 151.

⁶² Such a statement is the direct claim of William Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 41-42.

consistent with his teaching concerning God's work in election, total depravity, and the need for Christ. Even so, the difficulty with understanding Cotton's teaching and its place within Puritanism remains one of definition. Assurance of faith was not a topic Cotton often addressed in his sermons. When he did, he often used the doctrine as a means of speaking against works righteousness. From these sermons, Cotton's thought has been accused of over-emphasizing the Spirit and under-emphasizing human efforts in discovering assurance.⁶³ Unfortunately, Cotton's teaching and the model of assurance within Puritanism cannot be so easily broken into categories. Cotton's teaching concerning assurance had the same issues and questions from modern scholars as the teaching of Richard Sibbes, Calvin, and others within the Reformed tradition. In speaking about the issue of definition of assurance, Mark Dever, in his recent book concerning the theology of Richard Sibbes, made this point well when he stated, "Any discussion of assurance that is unclear in the object of assurance can hardly be expected to be clear in any other matter. It is vital to know whether one is discussing the objective assurance of faith that Christ is all he professes to be and will freely save whoever believes in him or the subjective assurance of faith in which one is assured of one's own salvation."⁶⁴ As a defender of predestinarian thought, Cotton's teaching concerning assurance often emphasized the objective assurance of faith. Such an emphasis did not negate his teaching concerning the subjective nature of assurance even if the works written in the 1630s illustrate well some of Cotton's strongest teaching concerning the

⁶³ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 284.

⁶⁴ Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 163. The terms objective and subjective assurance were also found within the Puritan literature. See Article XVIII.2.3 of *The Westminster Confession*. Also see the recent work on assurance within the Reformed tradition: Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999).

objective nature of assurance. As we will see, Cotton's teaching throughout his life did not ignore the pastoral encouragement of using natural means of finding subjective assurance. In addition, Cotton's teaching concerning objective assurance and the seal of the Spirit as witnessing to this objective assurance did nothing more than illustrate his affinities to Calvin and many others within the Puritan mainstream.⁶⁵

Cotton's teaching concerning the subjective recognition of assurance began with his emphasis that one's feeling of assurance could be lost if one lived in habitual sin. While retaining his understanding that justification illustrated objective assurance for those in great doubt, he challenged hypocrites within his church with the teaching that individuals can lose their peace or feeling of assurance. Through this teaching, Cotton affirmed both the covenantal and eternal nature of election as the basis of assurance as well as the Puritan emphasis that one's feelings about that assurance could change. This teaching can clearly be seen from *Christ the Fountaine of Life*. In this work, Cotton presented the differences between assurance and inward peace. In so doing, he illustrated clearly his understanding of the differences between objective and subjective assurance. He argued that inward peace was a fruit of the Spirit that should flow naturally from justification.⁶⁶ In a pastoral manner, he explained in three steps that while this might be true in theory, many Christians did not experience this peace in reality.⁶⁷ Thus, while

⁶⁵ Like Cotton, Calvin's primary discussions concerning assurance were given as opposed to Roman Catholic teaching and works righteousness. Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xiii.4. For an excellent discussion of Calvin's position concerning assurance as opposed to the writings of those who oppose Calvin with his successors, see Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 166-167. For others who emphasized the witness of the Spirit see, Calvin, *Galatians*, 121 and *Institutes*, III.ii.24. William Perkins, "The Foundation of Christian Religion Gathered into Six Principles," reprinted in *Breward*, 155-158. Richard Sibbes, "'The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law,'" in *Works* 4:220, 296; "Description of Christ," in *Works* 1:21-22; and *The Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter XVIII, ii.

⁶⁶ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 88.

⁶⁷ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 102-105.

assurance of salvation was eternally based upon election, one's inward peace or apprehension of this condition may be lost through unrighteous living. He began by explaining that true justification will result in an inward peace of conscience that impacted one's growth in righteousness. As we have seen, this imputed righteousness was the basis for one's justification; and from it followed a life marked by ever increasing inherent or visible righteousness. Yet, even with this knowledge of imputed righteousness, one's peace and joy of assurance could be lost. In a passage that illustrated this teaching well, Cotton stated,

Esa. 32.17 The word of righteousness shall be peace, and the effects of righteousness quietnesse, and assurance forever. He speakes of that righteousness, whereby we stand righteous before God, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to our soules. The worke of righteousness shall be peace; from this worke and effect you may gather what the causes of it is: blessed are such, it is quietnesse and assurance forever. Not that there is an everlasting sense of that peace, for the sense of it is sometimes obscured for want of watchfulnesse, and want of experience in the wayes of godlinesse; and sometimes through the buffetings of Sathan, or desertions from the hand of God, and so many times our peace may be over-clouded, and the sense of it taken away, but *the worke of righteousness is peace*; if sinne be pardoned, peace will follow upon it, and the fruit of this righteousness *is quietnesse and assurance forever*; the heart is now peaceable, quiet, and assured that God hath wrought this and that grace in me, which will abide in me forever.⁶⁸

Again, the foundation of assurance was clear: God's redeeming love will not end because if God's Spirit has brought an individual to repentance and faith, they were justified.⁶⁹

Yet, the peace of true assurance can easily be lost through lack of watchfulness, lack of godliness, or just the struggles of life. With this teaching, Cotton agreed with virtually all

⁶⁸ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 102.

⁶⁹ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation*, 174.

Puritan and Reformed divines.⁷⁰ He did not abandon his emphasis on justification as a better sign of assurance than continued sanctification, but he did confess that the feeling of assurance can be lost. In his thinking, Cotton preferred the faithfulness of God in salvation rather than choosing to focus upon the wayward action of humanity to promote assurance.⁷¹ In other words, he preferred to emphasize objective assurance, but he did not neglect subjective assurance. Such teaching remained consistent with his other theological distinctives.

Cotton's teaching concerning subjective assurance also included the idea that one's life in ever-increasing godliness was proof to the doubting soul of assurance. In particular, he taught that one marked by the Spirit will be careful to walk in true godliness.⁷² Again consistent with the remainder of his teaching, Cotton affirmed that the means of preserving the true life of the Spirit was through repentance and faith. With this teaching, Cotton argued firmly against the classic Antinomianism position. He affirmed his foundational teaching that a heart changed by the Spirit at justification will be marked by the desire to keep its peace with God. He argued that the Holy Spirit was the agent that kept this peace by illuminating one's sin so as to reveal what was blocking

⁷⁰ For examples see Richard Sibbes, "A Learned Commentary or Exposition Upon the First Chapter of the Second Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians," in *Works* 3:466-467, 478-482; "Divine Meditations and Holy Contemplations," in *Works* 7:211-212; "The Sword of the Wicked," in *Works* 1:110; "Faith Triumphant," in *Works* 7:430-431; "The Church's Riches by Christ's Poverty," in *Works* 5:517; "The Soul's Conflict with Itself," in *Works* 1:199. Special thanks to Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 181. Also see, John Owen, *Works* II: 249.

⁷¹ This was clearly the focus of his teaching during the time of the Antinomian controversy. As he stated, "Yet notwithstanding Gods covenant is firm and sure, though your ways and hearts are unsettled, and dishonored so, that God knows not many time where to have you; yet the Covenant of God doth remain sure and firm, therefore it is a sovereign medicine for all diseases: To apply the Covenant of God unto our souls, though there be many disorders in our selves and in our families, yet Gods Covenant is free; if we be hemmed in within this Covenant, we cannot break out, we might give God leave in our families to choose whom he will, and to take where he will." J. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 18.

⁷² John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 102.

intimacy with God. The Spirit then drew a believer to repentance of their sin against God and then to positive faith in Christ to forgive them. In comparison, a hypocrite did not put away sin from their life. Such a person only dealt with sin if it damaged their reputation in the eyes of the world. A hypocrite was not concerned with pleasing God through obedience to God's commands.⁷³ In this teaching, Cotton illustrated his pastoral concern that one despairing of their sin before God need not worry about the authenticity of their faith, but to take this godly despair as evidence of an authentic work of the Spirit.

Cotton's ideas concerning subjective assurance were clearly derived from previous Puritan and Reformed thinking. In particular, Cotton's thoughts had many ties to other Puritans in his emphasis on humility as the best mark of an authentic movement of the Spirit. In this area, Cotton's ideas matched well with the teaching of the Puritan theological master, William Perkins.⁷⁴ While Perkins was alive, his preaching became the nemesis of Cotton's conscience. His stress on resting in Christ by faith instead of one's works shook Cotton's spiritual complacency. Yet, several years after the death of Perkins, Cotton was converted to the Puritan cause, and he then adopted many of his theological perspectives. This was not surprising given that the Puritans within the Cambridge community viewed Perkins as the most reliable theological guide within the Reformed tradition.⁷⁵ In his *The Golden Chain*, Perkins listed ten steps that a common

⁷³ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 103.

⁷⁴ Many have argued that Perkins had the greatest influence on the development of Puritan thought concerning assurance. See Alexander McNally, "Some Aspects of Thomas Goodwin's Doctrine of Assurance," Th.M Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1972, 42; R.T. Kendall, "The Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology." In W. Stanford Reid ed., *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 199-214; and Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 111 ff.

⁷⁵ Thomas Goodwin recorded that ten years after Perkins' death, when he arrived at Cambridge, six of his instructors were still passing on the teaching of William Perkins. "Memoir of Thomas Goodwin," *The*

person will go through as they come to true faith.⁷⁶ These steps have been identified as the steps of preparation by many modern scholars.⁷⁷ Several Perkins scholars have condensed these ten steps into four basic elements: humiliation, faith, repentance, and new obedience.⁷⁸ Cotton's teaching illustrated not only great consistency with these four basic elements, but they were the template for much of his thinking concerning the Christian life and assurance. The biggest difference between Perkins' and Cotton's theology was that Perkins listed humiliation as the first few steps God used to humble a person before justification and faith, while Cotton used the idea of humiliation as the best mark of authentic spirituality before, during, and after conversion. As we have seen throughout, Cotton was adamant that an authentic work of the Holy Spirit will produce a humility that trusted only in Christ both for salvation as well as for the power to live the Christian life. Thus, while Cotton kept Perkins' formula for describing the Christian life, he also transformed it by emphasizing humility as the surest mark of authentic Christian experience. He used humility as a diagnostic tool to discern whether a person trusted in Christ alone for salvation and life or whether a person trusted in their own efforts and works plus Christ for salvation and life. As such, Cotton's teaching concerning subjective assurance always emphasized the need for humility in the Christian life. For Cotton, growth in godliness also meant growth in humility. This teaching followed in the footsteps of William Perkins, Calvin, and others within the Puritan tradition.

Works of Thomas Goodwin D.D., ed. John C. Miller (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), vol. 2, pp. xiii-xiv. Quoted in Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 84. Beeke argued that Cotton's teaching passed on the distinctives of Perkins.

⁷⁶ William Perkins, *The Works of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*. 3 Volumes (London: John Legatt, 1612-1613), 1:9-116.

⁷⁷ Hambrick-Stowe argued that these steps were more like stages. He also argued that perseverance was just as important as conversion within Perkins' thought. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 76 ff.

⁷⁸ Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 88.

Cotton's final mark of authentic subjective assurance was the thought that a person with true faith will express thankfulness to God for their salvation and life.⁷⁹ Again, such thankfulness will result in a desire to give God glory in all things. The result of such growing subjective assurance will be a deepening trust that one's sins were pardoned by Christ. The recognition of pardon did not negate the first two signs of assurance, but it resulted from a growing intimacy with God and it marked final subjective assurance.⁸⁰ For Cotton, one cannot have assurance if they doubt their relationship with God.⁸¹ Thus, his pastoral teaching consistently pointed his hearers to remember their conversion, and the fact they had experienced the love of God. He encouraged his hearers that their struggles with faith illustrated the sincerity of their desires for God. Such desires only could come from the Holy Spirit. Consequently, his theology of the Christian life began with a strong emphasis on justification, and it ended with an affirmation that assurance could only come from that same justification. Such assurance arrived through the witness of the Spirit as the Spirit applied the reality of grace to the life of an individual. Such teaching did not negate obedience. It affirmed that obedience followed from grace.

Cotton's teaching concerning assurance did emphasize objective assurance more than subjective assurance. His teaching also emphasized the importance of the Spirit in witnessing to one's justification. Yet, throughout his career Cotton also taught

⁷⁹ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 105.

⁸⁰ Thomas Goodwin, *Of the Object and the Acts of Justifying Faith* found in *Works* VIII: 379

⁸¹ This was in agreement with Calvin and the other Reformed divines who argued against Roman Catholicism's insistence that assurance was impossible in this life.

concerning the means of finding subjective assurance.⁸² As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, Cotton's teaching concerning assurance of faith and the role of the Spirit in the life of the believer were major problems for Thomas Shepard. As 1636 progressed, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit became an issue of public debate. In December of 1636, the Elders of New England proposed a list of sixteen questions for Cotton to answer concerning his theology.⁸³ These questions not only illustrate the tensions within New England, but Cotton's answers to these questions provided a clear presentation of his views concerning the Spirit in the mid-1630s. Of these sixteen questions, the first six dealt directly with Cotton's teaching concerning the work of the Spirit. The first six questions asked,

- 1.) What is the seal of the Spirit?
- 2.) Whether every Beleever be sealed with it?
- 3.) What ground from the Word of that distinction, a Broad Seale, and the other seale; and the differences between them?
- 4.) Whether a man may or ought to see any saving work of Christ in himself, and take comfort from it, before it be sealed by the Spirit?
- 5.) Whether the Testimony or Seale of the Spirit be so clear as witness immediately by it selfe, without respect of any Work of Christ in a man; or so constant, that it being once obtained, a man doth never after question his Estate?
- 6.) Whether a Christian may maintain like constant comfort in his Soule, when he hath fallen into some grosse Sinne, or neglected some knowne Duty, as when he walked most closely with God?⁸⁴

⁸² Even in the years immediately following the Antinomian controversy Cotton retained an emphasis on objective assurance while not neglecting the steps of subjective assurance. See John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation*, 184.

⁸³ The following was the list published in England in 1644 as *Sixteene Questions of Serious and Necessary Consequence, Propounded unto Mr. John Cotton of Boston in New-England, Together with His Answers to each Question* (London, 1644). The Stiles Paper, Yale University, and the Belknap Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, 46, 275-276 contained a list of sixteen different questions. This dissertation is concerned with the published list because they contain Cotton's answers. For the mystery of two different lists, see David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 44.

⁸⁴ David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 46-47.

To these questions, Cotton presented answers consistent with his previous teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. He continued to affirm the importance of the Spirit, and he systematically explained his teaching as it concerned the actual questions Shepard and others had concerning his teaching. By following through both the questions and Cotton's answers, it is possible to further clarify Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit and how this teaching matched with the accepted Puritan mainstream.

In his answer to the first question, Cotton answered that he generally did not use the term seal of the Spirit to avoid confusion. He affirmed that many understood the seal of the Spirit as occurring at justification. As we have seen, the Reformed and Puritan emphasis on objective assurance also agreed that the seal of the Spirit occurred at the time of justification.⁸⁵ He agreed with this understanding, but he also added that the witness of the Spirit was vital for those who experience subjective assurance. In this answer, Cotton illustrated his knowledge of both meanings of assurance- objective and subjective- as marked by the seal of the Spirit. As we have seen, this teaching had many antecedents within the Puritan tradition. To the second question, Cotton answered that "Every believer is not sealed with the Seale of the Spirit, if the Seale be taken for the Witsesse of the Spirit itselfe, but in the former sense, all Believers be sealed with it."⁸⁶ With this answer, Cotton again made a clear distinction between objective assurance, which was marked by the seal of the Spirit for all believers, and subjective assurance, which was given to only some mature believers. Again, such teaching was in conformity with accepted Puritan teaching.⁸⁷ To the third question, Cotton argued that he knew no

⁸⁵ Again, in agreement with Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xvi.1 and William Perkins, *Cases*, 74.

⁸⁶David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 48.

⁸⁷ For example see Richard Sibbes, "The Soul's Conflict with Itself," in *Works*, 1:266.

one who made a distinction between the Broad seal and the witness of the Spirit. For argument's sake he affirmed that if there was a difference between them, it must be that the Broad seal of the Spirit did the work of regeneration and renewal, while the witness of the Spirit provided the comfort found in the assurance of adoption. Again, such a distinction matched well with the teaching of Calvin and others in the Reformed tradition.

With the fourth question, the Elders began asking questions that pertained directly to assurance. In his answer to the fourth question, Cotton argued that for authentic assurance, the work of the Spirit must be primary over other normal means. As he stated, "yet full settled Comfort he cannot take, nor rest in, till it be witnessed unto him by the Spirit: for Comfort without the Word is a false comfort, and the Word without the Spirit yieldeth but dark comfort."⁸⁸ In this answer, he confirmed that the Word was vital for truth, but that the Spirit must apply the Word to the individual. In other words, the promises of grace were necessary for true assurance, but only the Spirit could make these promises personal. As with previous teaching, this understanding of the work of the Spirit in assurance matched well with the teaching of William Perkins. As Joel Beeke succinctly affirmed, Perkins listed in his commentary on Galatians that the grounds for assurance were:

First, the general *promise of the gospel*, which by faith becomes a personal promise; second, *the testimony of the Holy Spirit* witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God; and third, *the syllogism*, which rests partly on the gospel and partly on experience. His work on assurance is patterned on that of Beza and Zanchius, and only implicitly on the work of Calvin. Calvin planted the seeds for this threefold division, which would later be established by the Westminster Assembly.⁸⁹

⁸⁸David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 49.

⁸⁹Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 87. Perkins, *Works* 1:124.

Within the accepted Puritan and Reformed teaching concerning assurance, the work of the Spirit as witness to true faith was seen as vital for authentic assurance.⁹⁰ Such an emphasis did not mean that other means of assurance were invalid. As we have seen, Cotton also maintained each of these three means of assurance found in the teaching of Perkins and others within the Puritan mainstream.⁹¹ To the fifth question and sixth question, Cotton illustrated his complete affinity to the mainstream Puritan understanding of the work of the Spirit in providing assurance. He argued that while the seal or witness of the Spirit was clear to an individual at justification, it could also be lost through sin and unbelief. Again, Cotton's teaching affirmed the traditional Puritan understanding of the difference between objective and subjective assurance. Similarly in the final question he affirmed that one's assurance of salvation could easily be lost if one walked in gross sin. Again, objective assurance could not be lost while subjective assurance could change.

After Cotton answered these questions, the Elders accepted as orthodox Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit. Throughout the remainder of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton's pneumatology was no longer an object of contention. The reason

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Deuteronomie*, 913.b.60; *Galatians* 121; *Institutes*, III.ii.24. William Perkins, *Cases*, 76- 78.

⁹¹ Interestingly, Bozeman mentioned often the syllogism as significant within Puritanism, an affirmation that is obvious within the precisionist strain of Puritanism. Yet, he ignored or at least deemphasized the first two elements of assurance that emphasize the Spirit as witnessing in justification. This oversight explains Bozeman's quandary concerning Cotton's supposed double-mindedness. Bozeman's work overemphasized the subjective assurance pole within English Puritanism by ignoring the ample teaching concerning objective assurance as also foundational to authentic Christian faith. As he stated concerning Cotton, "He remained double-minded, standing undecided but resolute between opposing tendencies. To lower the status of sanctification but preserve commitment to a Puritan moral and ecclesiastical reformation, to magnify the Deity's operations upon and within the individual saint yet stop firmly short of a spiritist extreme, to strike at cherished ideals of the pietist turn while clinging to membership in the clerical network." *The Precisionist Strain*, 286. Cotton was singular-minded in his attempt to reconcile both objective and subjective assurance through the promotion of humility as the test of authentic faith. He was only double-minded if one deemphasized objective assurance's significance within Puritanism.

for this acceptance was not merely the Elders' hope in keeping Cotton within the fold.⁹² Instead, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit's role in assurance was not radical and different from the Puritan mainstream- at least the mainstream in England. His emphasis on objective assurance over subjective assurance only illustrated his concern with presenting the doctrines of grace against any form of works righteousness. Furthermore, Cotton did not deny the use of works in confirming subjective assurance, but he also believed that the use of works apart from humble faith was useless. In this teaching concerning subjective assurance, Cotton agreed with Perkins that the promises of the gospel personally believed and the witness of the Spirit in adoption were two of the three foundations for proper subjective assurance. He did not deny the syllogism, but he believed that the use of works in the syllogism without faith brought by the Spirit at justification was false comfort. This teaching emphasized the work of the Spirit in confirming one's justification. Such an affirmation was not radical within Puritanism, as it followed almost verbatim from the teaching of both Calvin and William Perkins. After discussion, both Cotton and his fellow Elders believed they agreed in principle in every question concerning the work of the Spirit. Reconciliation could be clearly seen in both Shepard's sermon before the General Court in May of 1637 and in Cotton's responses to the three questions posed in the summer of 1637.⁹³ In the end, Cotton's thought concerning assurance and the work of the Spirit must be understood as well within the Puritan mainstream.

⁹² Contra the argument of Larzer Ziff and many others who sought to explain how Cotton's deviant theology could be accepted by the Elders. Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 114-115. In reality, the differences were minor.

⁹³ John Cotton, *A Conference Mr. John Cotton Held at Boston With the Elders of New-England* (London, 1646). Also published as *Gospel Conversion* (London, 1646). Published in David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, A Documentary History*, 173-198. In his introductory remarks, Hall made the same argument.

Conclusion: Modern Objections

Modern scholarship has often debated and discussed the theological issues at the heart of the Antinomian controversy. In the center of these scholarly debates resided the often misrepresented theology of John Cotton. Several, following the thought of Perry Miller, have seen Cotton as a defender of true Reformed thought against the growing moralism and border-line Arminianism of his fellow New England Elders. This position argued that the growing preparationist doctrines of the New England Elders led them to favor the covenant of works over the covenant of grace.⁹⁴ Miller and others argued that while preparationism was not an official Puritan doctrine, it did become an accepted theological description of how a person comes to faith in Christ.⁹⁵ Preparationism's primary strength was descriptive: it presented a series of steps that an individual should go through to illustrate their sincere embracing of the covenant. Miller argued that preparationism was firmly embraced by Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, and Peter Buckeley- Cotton's greatest adversaries during the Antinomian controversy. Miller presented Thomas Hooker as a primary representative for the New England Elders. He argued that "Hooker marked off chronological phases (of entering into covenant), demonstrated the factual existence of a probationary period, in order to prove that regeneration was not a precipitate or instantaneous frenzy- with disruptive social consequences!"⁹⁶ Instead, Hooker described conversion as an orderly process where the

⁹⁴ Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 32 (1937), 248-56, 278, 284-86. Perry Miller, "'Preparation for Salvation' in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 4 (June 1943), 259-279. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, 2: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), ch. 4. 53-67.

⁹⁵ Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁹⁶ Miller, *The New England Mind, 2: From Colony to Province*, 57.

individual participated with divine grace to grow toward conversion. Miller argued that such a view was Arminian at its core: it both limited God, and it emphasized the human response and actions in salvation. Thus for Miller, Cotton was justified in his insistence upon the covenant of grace as primary. He then argued that Cotton was correct in opposing the ardent preparationism of Hooker and others. For Miller, this was the core of the Antinomian controversy. As we have seen, Cotton's self perception as a defender of predestinarian thought matched well with Miller's analysis of the controversy. In many ways, this dissertation has agreed and worked to illustrate the validity of Miller's original thesis.

Miller's ideas on the theology behind the Antinomian controversy have proven extremely fertile ground for modern scholarship. Unfortunately for Cotton, in the 1970s the general opinion of scholarship concerning his role in the affair began to change radically. Perhaps the best scholarship to illustrate this change was William Stoever's *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*.⁹⁷ Stoever argued that Miller's conclusions were overdrawn. Instead, he argued that in relation to much of the Puritan literature, "the chief New England Elders appear less radical than sometimes supposed, and John Cotton, their colleague on the opposite side of the antinomian dispute, rather more radical than sometimes represented."⁹⁸ In particular, Stoever argued that Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit went against the Puritan mainstream in two interrelated ways. First, he argued that Cotton's teaching promoted the view that the work of the Spirit overruled human will and effort in salvation. Such teaching placed the emphasis in assurance on

⁹⁷ William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978).

⁹⁸ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way*, 16.

God's work through the Spirit; and in the process, it destroyed the accepted Puritan understanding of the Spirit working through the proper means. Second, Stoever argued that in his overemphasis on the Spirit, Cotton rejected the accepted means of preparationism. In both of these points, Cotton denied the human element in changing toward Christ-likeness. Thus, Cotton's rejection of these natural means to illustrate human cooperation in the sanctification process made his teaching the true theological cause of the controversy.⁹⁹

At this stage, an analysis of Stoever's thought is in order. Stoever's conclusions were based upon his understanding of assurance of faith within the Puritan tradition. He argued correctly that within Puritanism there developed strong tensions concerning the best method of determining true faith. Central to his argument was the claim that Puritanism developed a system of determining assurance that emphasized behavior such as prayer and growth in sanctification as measurable signs of true faith.¹⁰⁰ He argued that Cotton's emphasis on the work of the Spirit in witnessing justification went against this accepted understanding, and thus it destroyed the human element in determining assurance. As we have seen, throughout Cotton's life and teaching he did not neglect what we have called subjective assurance (the human element) even as he emphasized the work of the Spirit in witnessing to faith. In his answers to the Elders, answers that were accepted as orthodox, he affirmed the doctrine he clearly taught both before and after the Antinomian controversy: objective assurance by the witness of the Spirit was primary but

⁹⁹ This argument agreed with that of Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America* and Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

¹⁰⁰ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way*, 119-122. Describing this system was the central thrust of Bozeman's new work, *The Precisionist Strain*.

subjective assurance through the syllogism was also valid. Stoever's argument hinges upon the notion that subjective assurance was the primary and surest means within Puritanism of finding assurance because from sanctification one could work backward to justification. As he stated,

Not all Puritans were as optimistic as Perkins about the evidential value of the 'first motions' of sanctification, and none believed that sanctification should remain the only ground of assurance in a Christian's life; nonetheless, most of the Puritans with whom this essay deals were sufficiently convinced of the coherence of the order of redemption to conclude confidently from the effects of saving grace in themselves to its causes, without always having consciously experienced the causes. Whether it was indeed possible to do this was one of the issues in the New England controversy.¹⁰¹

To prove this claim, Stoever primarily used the work of Richard Sibbes and William Perkins. He began by arguing that from Sibbes' work, one could find an accurate and succinct summary of the accepted Puritan teaching. As Stoever explained,

Puritans agreed that personal assurance of salvation derives from the testimony of the Spirit, who is the divine agent in regeneration. The Father elects, the Son redeems, the Spirit applies redemption to individuals, calling, working faith, and sanctifying. The Spirit also "seals" the regenerate, confirming that they are beloved of God, that they truly believe, and therefore are justified and saved.¹⁰²

In this dissertation, it has been argued that Cotton's teaching completely matched what Stoever argued was the Puritan mainstream.¹⁰³ He argued that the result of justification would be the Spirit's work in changing one's affections so that they grow in holiness. Even so, change in actions without the witness of the Spirit through the Word to bring

¹⁰¹ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way*, 126.

¹⁰² Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way*, 120.

¹⁰³ Stoever's summary is almost word for word from Cotton's teaching. See John Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practical Observation upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes*, 250.

faith was at best “dark comfort.”¹⁰⁴ Such teaching matched exactly with the teaching of Sibbes. Even in his explanation of Puritan teaching, Stoever argued from Sibbes that the witness of the Spirit to the individual was a “private seal (and) the true foundation of assurance.”¹⁰⁵ Such a work of the Spirit was a witness to one’s adoption as a child of God.¹⁰⁶ To explain this concept, Stoever argued from Sibbes that the Puritan movement developed the following teaching concerning the Spirit.

Sibbes identified four principal ways in which the Spirit of Adoption provides believers with “superadded confirmation” of their faith. In the first place, the Spirit’s witness “by a secret whispering and intimation of the soul (which the believer’s heart feels better than I am able to express), saying ‘Be of good comfort, thy sins are forgiven. . . . because thou believest, behold thou art honored to be my child.’” In the second place, the Spirit stirs up the heart, in prayer, to fervent and familiar supplications to God as Father. In the third, he stamps the soul, in sanctification, with “some lineaments of the heavenly image of Christ.” Finally, as a foretaste of heavenly glory, he works a sense of joy in successful performance of “holy duties” in triumph over “old lusts.” The first of these witnesses, as Sibbes acknowledged, is essentially ineffable, but the other three include elements of disposition and behavior in the individual and so possess a degree of objectivity.¹⁰⁷

In a move that is puzzling given his previous statements regarding the accepted Puritan understanding of assurance, Stoever argued that in Sibbes the emphasis of determining assurance falls to “behavior in prayer and on sanctification understood as conformity in disposition and action to the image of Christ.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, Stoever ignored the Puritan teaching concerning the witness of the Spirit as too difficult to determine, so he argued that visible sanctification became the accepted means of determining assurance. He also borrowed from William Perkins to illustrate this point. He argued,

¹⁰⁴ David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 49.

¹⁰⁵ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 120.

¹⁰⁶ Another teaching that directly overlaps with the teaching of Cotton. See John Cotton, *God’s Mercie Mixed with His Justice or His Peoples Deliverance in times of Danger*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 121.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

They held, namely, that the Spirit witnesses not extraordinarily but by applying the promises of the gospel particularly in the heart, as they are propounded in the ministry of the word. The Spirit, Perkins maintained, seals adoption in moving understanding and will to embrace the promises as our own; he moves us “by begetting a special trust and confidence” in us. The Spirit’s sealing is thus mediated through the biblical word and the actions of human faculties spiritually transformed. Similarly, when Sibbes came to specify concretely how the Spirit witnesses to the regenerate, he tended to speak most fully of human faculties that were held to reflect the altered disposition wrought by the Spirit in regeneration.¹⁰⁹

In other words, the Spirit witnesses by bringing faith. This faith was supernaturally brought, but it worked through the human faculties that were spiritually transformed. He argued that the surest means of determining these spiritually transformed human faculties for those who doubted their faith was through the witness of a changed life. As he concluded, “The Spirit’s presence is known by its effects, and his witnessing is discerned by and in them, even- the metaphor is almost routine- as smoke and heat disclose the presence of fire as yet unseen.”¹¹⁰ Cotton would attribute these spiritually transformed human faculties to the work of the Spirit as would the Puritan mainstream. Cotton’s thought argued that these changes occurred as a result of justification and as a witness to justification. Again, Cotton agreed with the Puritan mainstream on the work of the Spirit, but he confused the terminology by attributing it all to the work of justification instead of resulting sanctification.¹¹¹ This change left Cotton open to the charge that his teaching over-emphasized the work of God in the life of the individual while neglecting the human element in sanctification. Yet, an examination of his teaching illustrated that his thought retained a place for both objective and subjective assurance. His thought matched the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 122.

¹¹⁰ Stoeber, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 122. He borrowed the smoke and fire metaphor from, Sibbes, *Yea and Amen*, 133; Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 100, 112-113; Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 19; Perkins, *Exposition upon Galatians*, in *Works*, 2.224.

¹¹¹ See chapter III for details of his oversight and the reasons for Cotton’s position.

“orthodox” teaching of Richard Sibbes and Perkins almost perfectly- the only issue was his use of terminology. In other words, the substance of Cotton’s thought was not deviant, but his terminology needed correction.

Overall, Cotton’s teaching concerning the work of the Spirit illustrated his adherence to the Puritan mainstream not his theological deviancy. From the witness of Stoever and drawing on Cotton’s writings, several observations can be made. First, Cotton’s teaching concerning the Spirit did not promote a hyper-spiritual understanding of the Holy Spirit’s work within a person.¹¹² Cotton emphasized the Spirit’s work, but he did not neglect the human element of changed affections and changed response to Christ and the Word.¹¹³ As we have seen, Cotton did maintain that even faith was a gift of God, but he also maintained that faith was experienced through the witness of the Spirit through normal means.¹¹⁴ Even in the trial of Hutchinson, he attempted to mediate her statement concerning direct revelations by the Spirit by arguing that such a witness must come though the Word.¹¹⁵ It must be confessed that Cotton did maintain a belief in the passive nature of faith. Yet, this idea followed from his emphasis on defending predestination and the implication of total depravity. It also did not negate his teaching concerning the means of the Spirit’s work through the normal means.¹¹⁶ As a teacher of

¹¹² For example the articulation of Anne Hutchinson during her trial when she claimed direct revelation by the Spirit. David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 337.

¹¹³ Even at the height of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton emphasized the Spirit’s work through the normal means of the Word, and he encouraged his hearers to prepare themselves for the Spirit’s work. See *The New Covenant of God’s Grace*, 40-41. Also see *God’s Covenant of free Grace*, 27-33. Also see Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 194-195 for a discussion of Cotton’s thoughts concerning preparation and the work of the Spirit.

¹¹⁴ See pages 126-128.

¹¹⁵ David D. Hall, *A Documentary History*, 340-342.

¹¹⁶ John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 25, 34. John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 196, 200-202.

the Word, he consistently maintained that the Word and Sacraments nourished a Christian as they grew in godliness. Yet, he also maintained that such faith and growth occurred only as the Spirit worked through these normal means.¹¹⁷ In this teaching, he joined all of the major Reformed and Puritan teachers. For example, both John Calvin and William Ames argued that scripture was the vehicle through which the Spirit worked in the life of a believer.¹¹⁸ Cotton's thought consistently sought to give the glory of salvation to Christ by the work of the Spirit, but he also accepted the Puritan notion that this work was mediated by the Word.

Furthermore, Cotton's teaching concerning the primacy of the witness of the Spirit in finding true assurance also agreed with the Puritan and Reformed mainstream. As we witnessed above, even in Stoever's argument, he explained the Puritan emphasis on the witness of the Spirit in a witness to adoption. Unfortunately, he then passed over this material to emphasize the syllogism as the surest and most accepted means of determining assurance of faith.¹¹⁹ He did confess that there was much debate within Puritanism over the particulars of assurance and its relationship to justification,¹²⁰ but he concluded that the syllogism was the accepted means of finding assurance. Unfortunately, even his witnesses do not justify this conclusion. Both Perkins and Sibbes began their discussion concerning assurance with an emphasis on the witness of the

¹¹⁷ For example see *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 95, 193, 194, 196, 205 and 208.

¹¹⁸ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, IX, 3. See William Ames, *Theological Discussion on the Perfection of the Holy Scriptures* (Ames, *Disputatio de perfectione*). Also the argument of John Dykstra Eusden in his introduction to William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 63.

¹¹⁹ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 126-129. An emphasis shared by Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

¹²⁰ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 129-130.

Spirit.¹²¹ This emphasis matched the teaching of John Cotton. None of these individuals denied the need for subjective assurance, but all would affirm that subjective assurance without the witness of the Spirit in bringing justifying faith was shaky ground.¹²² Stoever also confessed that the debate within Puritanism included the characteristics of justifying faith.¹²³ As we have seen, on this subject, Cotton had much to say. In the end, even from Stoever's witnesses, it appears that the accepted Puritan position regarding assurance included the witness of the Spirit in justification. As a recent work by Joel Beeke summarized in discussing the Puritan tradition in light of William Perkins' thought, assurance was based upon "First, the general *promise of the gospel*, which by faith becomes a personal promise; second, *the testimony of the Holy Spirit* witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God; and third, *the syllogism*, which rests partly on the gospel and partly on experience."¹²⁴ It was true that Cotton emphasized objective assurance of what Christ promised to be for those who believe over subjective assurance. Yet, he did not neglect the importance of subjective assurance. The orthodox Puritan and

¹²¹ The Spirit brings all faith and assurance. See Sibbes, "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax," in *Works*, 1:59; "The Soul's Conflict with Itself," in *Works*, 1:172, 214.

¹²² Assurance without the witness of the Spirit in justification promoted hypocritical faith. All orthodox Puritans, including Cotton, also affirmed the opposite that the witness of the Spirit without the witness of subjective assurance was also false. This false teaching was labeled Antinomian or Familist. See chapter five for this tendency within Antinomianism. John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice*, 99. John Cotton, *A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636*, 57-58. In agreement with Sibbes, "Divine Meditations and Holy Contemplations," in *Works*, 7:200-201; "Witness of Salvation," in *Works*, 7:377.

¹²³ As Stoever confessed, "Despite wide acceptance of the practical syllogism in Reformed orthodoxy, among Puritans the precise relationship between the assurance derived from practical reasoning and the assurance ingredient in faith itself remained in a measure subject to discussion. In England in the early seventeenth century, 'justifying faith' was the object of continuing dispute between 'orthodox' Reformed Protestants, on one hand, and Continental Roman Catholics and Arminians and the 'Arminian' party in the English Church, on the other. This dispute was chiefly about faith's relationship as a human act to justification as a divine one, though it embraced the whole content of the *locus de fide*, especially in the case of Catholic disputants. Among Puritans, discussion focused on the nature of justifying faith itself, within the context of the Protestant conception of justification by faith alone, and in particular, on the sense in which may properly be said to *be* assurance." Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 129. Cotton's thought can be clearly seen as within this debate.

¹²⁴ He argued that Calvin planted the seeds for this threefold division, which would later be established by the Westminster Assembly. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 87. Perkins, *Works* 1:124.

Reformed view insisted that both objective and subjective assurance be held in tension. This was a position held by many including Augustine, Calvin, Sibbes, Perkins, and the Westminster Confession.¹²⁵ Cotton retained the traditional Puritan understanding that the Spirit worked through the Word and Sacraments to bring authentic faith, growth in godliness, and true assurance. His teaching differed in emphasis from that of Shepard and Hooker, yet all of these men agreed that the tension between objective and subjective assurance must be retained. Cotton's teaching was not radical, at least not until he came in contact with the issues and personalities in early New England.

Finally, in his teaching concerning the Spirit, Cotton also did not reject the concept or the application of preparationism.¹²⁶ A careful reading of Cotton's works illustrated that he affirmed the idea of preparationism.¹²⁷ As we have seen, Cotton retained the Perkins model of humiliation, faith, repentance, and then new obedience. Cotton also believed that humility was the mark of a true work of God because of his emphasis on the supremacy of Christ in all matters of salvation. Cotton's emphasis upon Christ and the need for the Spirit to bring faith and repentance did not mean that Cotton denied preparationism. In fact, Cotton often used preparationism as a pastoral tool to encourage people to place their faith in Christ. Much like Luther's distinction between law and gospel or Calvin's first use of the law, Cotton affirmed that the Word and Sacraments should be embraced in order to promote true humility within a person. His

¹²⁵ Cotton's agreement with Calvin also could be seen in both men's affirmations that Christ's work and meditation upon that work were the surest means of finding assurance. Calvin, *Galatians*, 121; *Institutes*, III.ii.24. Sibbes, "Bowels Opened," in *Works*, 2:8; "Lydia's Conversion," in *Works*, 6:521-525. *The Westminster Confession XVIII*.

¹²⁶ Contra Miller and Kendall.

¹²⁷ This is a point no longer in dispute. Cotton held to preparationism before, after, and during the Antinomian controversy. See Stoeber, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 194. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 213.

pastoral approach was to encourage his hearers that if they despaired of their self effort and trusted in their desperation in Christ alone for salvation, they had in fact been touched by the Spirit. To use theological terms borrowed from the Westminster Confession, the evidence of humility proved one's subjective assurance by witnessing to the fact they had found objective assurance in their justification.¹²⁸ Cotton's preaching method did not make a distinction between believers and non-believers. He preached as if all need a deeper repentance and faith in Christ. To this end, he affirmed that the proper and natural result of the Word and Sacrament was humility and brokenness.

An example of this teaching was found in the following passage from *Christ the Fountaine of Life*. In this passage, Cotton encouraged his hearers to seek Christ in the ordinances and to put away evil and wickedness from their lives so that Christ could work within them.¹²⁹ Even in *The Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, Cotton retained an emphasis on preparationism as a means of promoting humility before God.¹³⁰ Admittedly in this work, Cotton taught that preparationism was not saving.¹³¹ He also did not teach that preparationism alone could bring authentic assurance.¹³² Instead, he focused his hearers to use their subjective assurance to illustrate their true humility before Christ. Such humility would then be evidence of the Spirit's objective work in their life.¹³³ With this teaching, Cotton agreed with the teaching of Perkins that preparationism, without the personal application of the promises of the gospel and the

¹²⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter XVIII.

¹²⁹ John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: or Sundry Choyce Sermons on the Fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London, 1651), 40-42.

¹³⁰ John Cotton, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1662), 40-41.

¹³¹ This was the view of virtually all Puritans. This thought, in any form, has led to much confusion as the Puritan understanding of salvation. For a discussion concerning the role of preparation in preparing for saving faith see Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 125-132.

¹³² Again in agreement with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVIII, i.

¹³³ John Cotton, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, 39.

witness of the Spirit, provided a false assurance. Instead, Perkins argued that the witness of one's life must be used in conjunction with the Word and the Spirit.¹³⁴ Cotton's teaching agreed completely with this Puritan theological master. Contrary to Stoever's opinion, Cotton did not reject human participation with God in bringing assurance as a concept nor as a tool. Instead, Cotton used Perkins's model of preparationism as a pastoral encouragement to promote authentic humility before God: a humility that witnessed to the Spirit's objective work in bringing one to faith.

Cotton's pneumatology, while an object of debate during his lifetime and in recent scholarship, remained within the parameters of both Puritanism and the Reformed tradition. Perhaps Cotton's greatest achievement as a Puritan theologian was his emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in every dimension of the Christian life. His pneumatology followed from his understanding of Reformed doctrine of total depravity. He believed that due to total depravity an individual was unable to move toward God without the aid of the Spirit. Thus, the Spirit must work to bring saving faith by drawing an individual to Christ. Within Cotton's system, the work of the Spirit at the moment of justification had life-long consequences. A person granted saving faith by the Spirit will have changed affections that resulted in a desire to know God and to grow in personal godliness. Yet, Cotton remained a realist as to the condition of even true saints after conversion. He clearly taught that even after authentic conversion, a believer continued to struggle with sin and doubt. Because of this struggle, the believer needed the Holy Spirit to constantly apply the doctrines of grace to their lives. This process grew a

¹³⁴ William Perkins, *Cases*, 76-78. Also Perkins, *Works* 1:124 quoted in Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 87. Sibbes was in complete agreement with the position. There are many examples in his work. See "Bowels Opened," in *Works*, 2:63; "A Breathing after God," in *Works*, 2:216.

believer in outward godliness; but to that true saint, it promoted humility and the acknowledgement of their need for the grace found in Christ. This emphasis on changed affections, humility, and the process of growing in godliness had many ties within Puritanism. In particular, Cotton's indebtedness to Perkins and Sibbes cannot be emphasized enough, while his impact on Goodwin, Nye, and other leading English Independents also must be stressed.

While the whole of Cotton's pneumatology was within the parameters of the Reformed tradition and orthodox Puritanism, the particulars of Cotton's description of the work of the Spirit illustrated two desperate shortcomings within his work. First and most importantly, Cotton confused his terms in describing the work of the Spirit in justification. In an attempt to emphasize the work of the Spirit in justification, he ignored the work of the Spirit in sanctification. This confusion of justification with sanctification was a major mistake for such an eminent theologian.¹³⁵ The reasons for this confusion have puzzled scholars for several generations. This dissertation has argued that one reason Cotton maintained this position was his belief that he was a defender of predestinarian thought against any form of Arminianism. This self understanding came from Cotton's early ministry experiences, and it shaped his entire theological system. In many ways, Perry Miller was right concerning Cotton's emphasis- he was against any form of works righteousness or semi-Arminianism.¹³⁶ Perhaps a more likely explanation combines both Miller's thought with the recent observations made by Bozeman. Bozeman has illustrated the growing precisionist emphasis within Puritan that was

¹³⁵ See above pages 138-142.

¹³⁶ Perry Miller, "'Preparation for Salvation' in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IV (1943): 259-286.

opposed by the Antinomian party in the 1620s through the 1640s. The second half of his book illustrated what he took as Cotton's double-mindedness- his ties to both Antinomianism and his attempt to retain ties to Puritan orthodoxy.¹³⁷ This dissertation has illustrated the ways Cotton's theology remained within Puritan orthodoxy by retaining both objective and subjective assurance even as he emphasized the importance of objective assurance. Perhaps the reason for Cotton's emphasis on justification and objective assurance was his attempt to correct Puritanism move toward works righteousness in its combat against Antinomianism. His system was an attempt to address the concerns of the Antinomians while remaining within Puritan orthodoxy.

Yet, his lack of precision in his inflation of justification was the cause of his debates with his fellow Elders during the Antinomian controversy as well as his debates with Twisse and others in the 1640s. As we have seen, at the heart of Cotton's misunderstanding of justification with sanctification was his attempt to articulate the proper grounds for assurance of salvation. Cotton's work consistently illustrated his preference for resting in the objective assurance found in the completed and perfect work of Christ over any form of subjective assurance based upon one's works. He believed that subjective assurance apart from knowledge of one's justification provided a false assurance of faith. Following the lead of William Perkins, Cotton attempted to retain a three-fold understanding of the proper grounds of assurance. Cotton's theology emphasized the first two grounds: assurance was found in a personal application of the

¹³⁷ As he stated concerning Cotton, "He remained double-minded, standing undecided but resolute between opposing tendencies. To lower the status of sanctification but preserve commitment to a Puritan moral and ecclesiological reformation, to magnify the Deity's operations upon and within the individual saint yet stop firmly short of a spiritist extreme, to strike at cherished ideals of the pietist turn while clinging to membership in the clerical network." *The Precisionist Strain*, 286.

absolute promises of the gospel and through the witness of the Spirit that one was a child of God. Cotton argued that these two grounds were best found in the Spirit's work in justification. He did not disallow the third ground, the syllogism or preparationism, but he emphasized that the third ground without the other two provided extremely unstable ground for true assurance. The reason Cotton took this approach to assurance was his concern to articulate Reformed predestinarian theology as opposed to an Arminian emphasis on works. His lack of clarity cannot be excused, but the reasons behind his emphasis on justification make sense when placed within the context of his life.

CHAPTER V

ANTINOMIAN?

It has commonly been told that as Anne Hutchinson and her followers were banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Cotton's reputation as a Puritan pastor and scholar was not only tarnished but also irreparably damaged. According to this telling, Cotton's later years were spent attempting to regain his position and reputation within the colony and mainstream Puritanism. Many scholars, following the lead of both the English Presbyterians, who struggled against Cotton's Congregationalism, as well as Thomas Shepard, who remained opposed to Cotton's theology, not only blame Cotton for the Antinomian affair but also accuse him of radical inconsistency. In the eyes of many, Cotton's growing defense of the New England Way in the 1640s and 1650s illustrated his desire to regain the trust of his fellow Puritan elders.¹ Cotton's Presbyterian critics went even further when they used the accusation against Cotton of Antinomianism as an *ad hominum* argument against his support of Congregationalism. In their thinking, since he was guilty of Antinomianism, he also must be guilty of poor theological reflection concerning ecclesiology. This interpretation of Cotton's later life by both modern scholarship and his Presbyterian foes was easy to maintain if Cotton was seen as a shifting individual: one either willingly misleading people with his faulty theology or who compromised constantly before, during, and after the trial of Anne Hutchinson.² As we have seen, this interpretation of Cotton's life is difficult to defend. Cotton's actual

¹ See Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 201-229.

² The first was the argument of William Stoeber *Faire and Easie Way To Heaven*, and the second was the argument of Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*.

teaching illustrated his continuity with the Reformed and Puritan mainstream. His emphasis was different from Hooker, Shepard, and many of the New England Elders in his emphasis on objective assurance, but he did not reject the importance of subjective assurance or the proper use of the syllogism in the life of the believer. Furthermore, as we will see, his correspondence and the documents from the Antinomian controversy illustrated both Cotton's continued importance within the Puritan community as well as his acceptance as orthodox by his fellow Elders. In this brief biographical section, the last fifteen years of Cotton's life will be recounted to illustrate Cotton's continuing place within Puritanism. It will also illustrate through his correspondence and his later writings that both Cotton's theology and his importance within Puritanism did not radically change even in the years immediately following the Antinomian controversy. After this biographical section, Cotton's theology will be explored in light of the teaching of the Familists and Antinomians to clarify his relationship to both of the groups.

Even in the year immediately after close of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton's reputation as a theological advisor to his fellow New England Elders remained strong. In fact, in 1638 as Anne Hutchinson was being excommunicated from Cotton's church, Thomas Dudley wrote to ask for his help in dealing with William Denison, a layman excommunicated from the Roxbury church because of his opinions concerning the evidence of justification and justification itself.³ The amazing part of this request was Dudley's recent role as one of Cotton's greatest detractors throughout the Antinomian affair. Yet, he wrote Cotton to ask that he would advise Denison concerning the logic of his views. In the letter, he concluded that there was no major difference between his and

³ Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 288-289.

Cotton's opinion. As he stated, "Hee graunteth that the Spiritt can giue noe first eviden{n{ce unless} it worke grace, ad I assent that there can be noe grace {without the} Spiritt worke it, which agreeth with what passed at my hou[se betwee]n your self and mee: herein I perceave noe difference be{tween us}." ⁴ In this letter, Dudley confessed that both he and Cotton shared the opinion that the Spirit must work to begin a work of grace in a person's life. As we have seen in the last chapter, such an affirmation emphasized the importance of objective assurance. With this confession, Dudley affirmed that the disagreement between his position and that of Cotton was terminology and emphasis, not any major doctrinal differences. Such an affirmation served to confirm that basic agreement between Cotton and the Elders even during the Antinomian controversy. ⁵ This letter illustrated that Dudley understood Cotton as within the framework of accepted Puritan doctrine, and he asked him to lead Denison pastorally toward repentance.

Furthermore, within two years of the controversy, Cotton began a fruitful discussion with Peter Bulkeley concerning the covenant of grace. Bulkeley was an important member of what Knight calls the Intellectual Fathers of New England Puritanism. ⁶ He supposedly opposed Cotton and his grace-centered understanding of salvation. Yet over the course of three letters, Bulkeley sought to gain wisdom from Cotton concerning the covenant of works and grace. ⁷ He stated in the preface to his *The Gospel-Covenant* that he had been thinking about the relationship between the covenant

⁴ Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 289.

⁵ See pages 131-144 for details of this basic agreement in theology but differences in terminology and emphasis.

⁶ Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 29.

⁷ Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 334-343.

of works and grace since the time of the Antinomian controversy. From the letters, it was clear that he believed Cotton had a real and deep knowledge concerning the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.⁸ Bulkeley was not attempting to trick Cotton into revealing his heretical teaching.⁹ Instead, he addressed Cotton as a theological master who could assist him in understanding the complicated nature of covenant theology and how this theology was acted out in the life of a believer. To these questions, Cotton replied in a scholarly fashion as one who was advising a student to think through the implications of his thought.¹⁰ He also took complete liberty to address Bulkeley's questions and objections with the tone of one correcting a junior's obvious errors.¹¹ In the end, Cotton's correspondence, before unpublished, illustrated Cotton's continuing place as a spiritual advisor for the Puritan community. It illustrated that it is

⁸ Bulkeley began with the solicitation for Cotton's help with understanding the timing of the covenant of works. As he stated, "Le{tt m}e also {att} the [next o]pportunitye|| the light from you{conc[ernin]g the [time]} when g[o]d made the co[ven]t of wor]kes with Adam." Bush, 335. He then concluded with another flattering remark, "I loose much by this my retired wilderness in which I lieu, but the Lord will att last lighten my Candle. In the meane while helpe us with some of that which god hath imparted unto yow;" Bush 337. The tone of the entire correspondence was one of sincere questions with a great desire for Cotton to help him think through the implications of the covenant of works being before or after creation.

⁹ In Bulkeley's second letter dated less than a month later, he shared his conclusions to his questions before receiving Cotton's answers. The tone of the letter is one of excitement in having made a discovery and sharing it with his teacher. He also ends with an entreaty for Cotton to write back his thoughts soon. Bush, 338-339.

¹⁰ As Cotton began, "I am g[lad that] God inclineth your spirit to take paines in that noble and |||| Common- place of the Covenants: which the more wee study [the] more wee shall feare him: and the more wee feare him [, the] more wee shall understand his secret Counsell in them. Ps. [2]5: 14. Touching your question, I am wholly of their {mind} that ..." Bush, 340.

¹¹ "The 1. objection y[o]u putt, Then the Doctri{ne of the Couent} belonge[s] to Creation, not to Providence: w|| {sundry Divines} ferr[e] || it to Providence; It Receiveth this Answer, The {E}plicate Re{newall of the } Covenant of workes, belongeth to Pro[v]idence, but not the {first} striking of it." Bush 340. Cotton's approach to Bulkeley's questions was consistent with the tone and approach he used with many others. He saw himself as an advisor and theological expert. In the end he concluded, "If you concurre with me in Judgement, let me knowe: if not lend me your Reasons in opposition." Bush, 341. These letters illustrate a scholarly discussion with Cotton as senior advisor.

most likely that the Antinomian controversy did not irreparably damage Cotton's reputation with his fellow New England Elders.¹²

As for the general public opinion concerning Cotton, most within the colony greatly desired reconciliation. It was also clear that Cotton himself greatly desired peace with his fellow ministers. Soon after the exile of the Hutchinsonian party in December 1638, Cotton expressed in a fast day sermon his remorse for not dealing quickly and sufficiently with his wayward followers. He confessed his own "security, sloth, and credulity," and that he was thankful others had watched over him in his spiritual slumber. Interestingly, Cotton did not confess any error in his theology. Yet, his confession won the support of Nathaniel Ward and many others who were "gladdened in heart" by his public confession.¹³ For Ward and most in New England, Cotton's lack of contrition concerning his theological distinctions caused no worries. Based upon the evidence of his fellow New England Elders and popular opinion, the theological issues behind the Antinomian controversy could have been resolved through discussion if the charges against Cotton were not made issues of public debate.¹⁴ Hutchinson's testimony at the trials probably would still have condemned her to exile, but a trial would not have been as forthcoming if Shepard's initial disagreement with Cotton's thought had not become public.

As the controversy came to a close, Cotton briefly contemplated immigration to New Haven. His correspondence illustrated that he was quickly and easily persuaded to

¹² Such a favorable opinion of Cotton was not held by Thomas Shepard. Shepard retained his distrust for Cotton throughout his life.

¹³ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 219.

¹⁴ This was the initial impression of John Winthrop as he stated, "if men's affections had not been formerly alienated, the quarrel could have been fully resolved." Quoted in David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy: A Documentary History*, 173. Found in Winthrop's *History*, I, 264.

stay in Boston by Winthrop and others, who assured him his theological distinctives had a place in the colony.¹⁵ Most of the colony and Cotton himself were willing to believe that he had been taken advantage of and used by the Antinomians as support for ideas he would not endorse.¹⁶ After his public confession of a lack of proper pastoral oversight, Cotton retained his position of honor and esteem in New England. Even before the confession, as the Elders and Cotton discussed and then articulated the essence of their differences, the common person could not see much difference in opinion between both parties.¹⁷ In the minds of many New Englanders, the controversy over Cotton's thought ended in 1637. Furthermore, as the 1640s progressed, his articulation of Congregationalism as a middle way between Presbyterianism and radical separatism enhanced his reputation with some in both Old and New England. While Cotton began to face accusations from the Presbyterians at this time, his reputation and importance for New England were not lost because of the Antinomian controversy.

In New England, Cotton's greatest detractor was Thomas Shepard. Shepard did not trust Cotton. He rejected his confession concerning his sloth and lack of oversight for his congregation. He also did not believe that Cotton's theology was within the Puritan mainstream. As Shepard wrote in his journal in early 1639, "Mr. Cotton repents not, but is hid only."¹⁸ While Shepard made public overtures toward peace with Cotton, he remained adamantly opposed to his teaching concerning the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian life. In his preaching immediately following the Antinomian controversy,

¹⁵ Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 146; John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 241.

¹⁶ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared*, 238-257.

¹⁷ David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy: A Documentary History*, 173-174.

¹⁸ From Shepard's *Autobiography*. Found in Michael McGiffert ed., *God's Plot*, 74. Also, quoted in Winship, *Making Heretics*, 222.

Shepard continued in his attack against the errors of Cotton and the Antinomians. From his pulpit, he continued to attack the false doctrines of the heterodox in New England. He warned his congregation of God's coming wrath because of the unrepentant heart of many within New England.¹⁹ In his personal journal, Shepard recorded his theological and personal problems with Cotton. As he stated,

(1) When Mistress Hutchinson was convented he commended her for all that she did before her confinement and so gave her a light to escape through the crowd with honor. (2) Being asked whether all revelation were lost because all revelations were either to complete Scripture or for the infancy of the weak church, he answered that they were all ceased about particular events, unless to weak Christians, and seemed to confirm it now; whereas in the sermon it was to the weak church under the old testament, he did extend it to weak Christians also under the new. (3) He doth stiffly hold the revelation of our good estate still, without any sight of word or work.²⁰

In this three-part rant against Cotton, Shepard revealed both his complaints against Cotton as well as his own theological particularities. First, Shepard believed that Cotton was too lenient on Hutchinson. Shepard viewed Hutchinson's theology as a pernicious heresy that must be rooted out of New England. Since Cotton did not attack her personally nor did he have the same vehemence against her as Shepard, he was also an enemy. Second, Shepard continued to deny the validity of Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. In both the second and third complaint, he illustrated his distrust for the Spirit's work apart from works.²¹ Contra the model of Perkins and others within the Puritan mainstream, Shepard denied the validity of the Spirit's witness for assurance; and in its place, he overly emphasized the syllogism as the best and only means of promoting

¹⁹ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 222. Winship quoted several sections of Shepard's unpublished sermons found in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. These sermon notes were from an unpaginated collection of occasional sermons written in Shepard's hand preached between 1638 and 1640.

²⁰ Michael McGiffert ed., *God's Plot*, 74.

²¹ Thomas Shepard would be one of the best examples of what Bozeman called the precisionist strain within Puritanism. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*. Shepard's early struggles with Antinomianism and his personality tendencies pointed him toward this tendency.

true assurance. Obviously, Cotton's emphasis on the witness of the Spirit in justification as the best guide for assurance scared Shepard greatly. On the surface, both men would have affirmed the traditional Puritan teaching that both objective and subjective assurance have a rightful place in the individual's discovery of assurance. Where they differ was in their emphasis: Cotton emphasized objective assurance as primary while Shepard emphasized subjective assurance as primary.

In fact, Shepard's understanding of assurance probably emphasized subjective assurance to an unhealthy extreme. Even a cursory look at Shepard's journals illustrated his fear of losing the Spirit through his sin and guilt. Shepard obviously believed that his life had to reflect God's work of grace or he was not a true believer. The result of this theological particularity was Shepard's emphasis on intense introspection and holy living as the most reliable mark of authentic spirituality. In his own life, Shepard illustrated this tendency well. Within his journal, Shepard constantly bounced between the two poles of fearing for his salvation and then finding mercy in Christ. Interestingly, such mercy then prompted Shepard to promise to sin no more. When he fell into a period of apathy or sin, the process would begin again.²² While Cotton's theology promoted introspection, it emphasized an introspection that caused Christian to despair of one's best efforts to live the Christian life. He taught that this despair promoted a humility that drove one to a deeper faith in Christ for salvation and life. Cotton did not deny the need for holy living, but he taught that such living must flow from one's trust in Christ for all of life. In the end, Shepard's ministry continued to reflect a spirituality rooted in introspection, fear,

²² See Michael McGiffert, ed., *God's Plot*.

and struggle.²³ Shepard continued to distrust Cotton even while the remainder of the colony accepted both Cotton's apology for his lack of pastoral oversight as well as his theology as within the Puritan mainstream.

After the banishment of the Hutchinsonian party from the colony, Cotton's life quickly returned to normal. From the mid-1630s through the 1640s, Cotton enjoyed a time of productivity and personal blessing unlike any other in his life. During this time, five of Cotton's six children were born. With the addition of Sarah in 1635, Elizabeth in 1637, John in 1640, Mariah in 1642, and Rowland in 1643, Cotton's now six children (Seaborn was born in 1633 in route to New England) virtually assured him of much progeny.²⁴ Throughout this time Cotton also excelled as a writer. During the last twelve years of his life, Cotton published several books a year. These works addressed the changing theological concerns of the day even as they expressed his continued vision of theology. Furthermore, the affairs in England ensured that Cotton's role as a spiritual advisor would remain active. With the defeat of King Charles I by the Scots in the spring and summer of 1640, the Puritan cause in England enjoyed a long awaited time of flowering and recognition. With the calling of Parliament, King Charles was forced to make concession to the Puritan cause. For many Puritans, the time looked ripe for bringing further reformation to the English church. There were several immediate consequences for New England. First, the flow of immigration stopped, and for the next several years many began to return to England.²⁵ Second, Cotton and others began to

²³ Again, the witnesses to this statement included his sermons preached immediately after the Antinomian controversy. See *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, *Sincere Convert* and *The Sound Believer*.

²⁴ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 168-169.

²⁵ Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 170-171.

express the New England Way as the best model for the reforming the Church of England.

In England, the Presbyterians had the greatest following among the Puritans. These Presbyterians sought to establish the English church after the model of Scotland. In the midst of the debate concerning these proposals, the New England practice of Congregationalism proved to be another workable and perhaps biblical model of church government. For those in support of Congregationalism, it became their goal to prove both the biblical basis for and the workable nature of the New England Way. Against these arguments, the Presbyterians did all they could to discredit their claims of legitimacy. Cotton's later years were marked by his involvements in these debates and discussions. He represented and defended Congregationalism from those who disagreed with its model of church government. As we have seen, this position placed Cotton and his thought in the crossfire of the Presbyterians. Cotton was accused of heterodox teaching in an attempt to discredit the New England Way. Unfortunately for Cotton studies, most scholarship has followed the lead of both Shepard and the English Presbyterians in their evaluation of both Cotton's theology as well as his later life. The result has been a complete dismissal of Cotton's claims of his having been used and misrepresented by the Antinomians. It also resulted in a skewed understanding of Cotton's work in the colony after the Antinomian controversy.

Contrary to much Cotton scholarship, the last years of his life were not an attempt to regain fame after the Antinomian controversy. A careful look at Cotton's life in England illustrated the high probability that he did not promote Congregationalism and the New England Way to regain his reputation after the Antinomian controversy.

Cotton's place within Puritanism and his previous expressions of non-conformity in England made him a logical advocate of the New England Way. Cotton became a leader of non-conforming Puritanism during his time at St. Boltophs. As we have seen, Cotton's greatest invention in his practice of non-conformity in England was his insistence that the truly redeemed should be drawn into a fellowship that avoided the most scandalous of the ceremonies proscribed in the Book of Common Prayer.²⁶ This group of redeemed parishioners would then covenant together "to follow together after the Lord in the purity of his Worship."²⁷ He first proposed this fellowship of the saints in 1615; and predictably, he met with great resistance from those not chosen to be a part of the covenanter group. This invention allowed for a Congregational system of church government to begin to flourish within the parish setting of England. In other words, traces of Cotton's later Congregational impulse could be seen even from 1615 in England. From his core beliefs concerning God's sovereignty and human total depravity, he arrived at the conclusion that the Sacraments and church membership should be limited only to the redeemed. In his reasoning, only the redeemed should share in the blessings of full covenantal membership. The seeds of Cotton's Congregational impulses were planted in England. The soil of the New World allowed them room to grow and flourish, but the theological foundations of Congregationalism were laid years before his arrival in New England. Yet, Cotton consistently maintained that he did not promote Separatism.²⁸ He understood his position as bringing attempted biblical reform to the

²⁶ Ziff, 48-49. See pages 96-97 for more detail.

²⁷ John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish* (London, 1660), 3.

²⁸ Because of his distrust for separatism, he raised objections to Samuel Skelton and the separatist tendencies in Salem. Interestingly, Skelton had been a pastor in Lincolnshire who could not avoid the

Anglican Church. Cotton's practice of Congregationalism within the English parish system proved a marvel for many Puritans. It allowed him to influence the most theologically influential of English Independents, Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye.²⁹ When he arrived in New England, Cotton had the freedom to think through the implications for Congregationalism. The thoughts he expressed in the late 1630s and the 1640s were the mature reflections of a man who had promoted Congregational practices since the mid-1610s. The demise of Charles I and Archbishop Laud in the 1640s provided Cotton with the natural outlet to express his maturing thoughts concerning Congregationalism. Thus, it was probable that Cotton did not use his support of Congregationalism as a means to regain lost trust. Instead, his support of Congregationalism illustrated his growing maturity as the natural spokesman for the New England Way.

Importantly for this dissertation, Cotton's theology also remained unchanged in the years immediately following the banishment of the Hutchinson party. The proof of this consistency could be found in his preaching. In the late 1630s and early 1640s, Cotton began to preach the first of two sermon series on the book of Revelation.³⁰ A close look at these texts illustrated that Cotton quickly returned to his task of preaching

punishment of the authorities for his Puritan tendencies. Cotton probably understood himself as a senior minister to Skelton; and thus, he offered his advice to him.

²⁹ The Presbyterian apologist Robert Baillie said Cotton was "if not the Author, yet the greatest promoter and Patron of Independency." He also argued for Cotton's importance for Independency by stating, "Master Robinson did derive his way to his separate Congregation at Leyden; a part of them did carry it over to Plymouth in New-England; her Master Cotton did take it up, and transmit it from thence to Master Thomas Goodwin, who did help to propagate it to sundry others." In Robert Baillie, *A Dissuasive*, 58, 54. Quoted in Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 197-198.

³⁰ John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642) and *The Churches Resurrection, or the Opening of the First and Sixth verses of the 20th chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642). Both of these sermon series have been quoted extensively throughout this dissertation. Both retained and promoted Cotton's theological particularities concerning the need for repentance and faith brought by the Spirit.

the covenant of grace. Instead of dealing directly with the issue of pride and hypocrisy, as in the series *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace*, he used Roman Catholicism as the foil to express his distrust for the covenant of works and to encourage his congregation to rest their salvation in Christ alone. Scholars have often viewed these collections of sermons as both illustrations of Cotton's method of biblical interpretation, in particular his use of typology, as well as examples of his eschatology.³¹ While these sermons contained these elements and revealed his hatred of Roman Catholicism, they also revealed little change to Cotton's theological system. Cotton offered the continuing warning that God's wrath was about to be poured out on all religion that trusted in works as a means of illustrating a right relationship with God. Instead, Cotton called for distrust of one's works and a trust in Christ alone for salvation.³² He also continued to emphasize the work of the Spirit. He stated that only the Spirit can bring one to faith and only the Spirit can bring true assurance. In the following passage, he attributed the revelation of salvation to the work of the Spirit, and he did so in language that would make Thomas Shepard cringe. As he stated,

This being applied by the Spirit, it falls on him with power, and he sees the goodnesse of God in Christ, and the vanity of all things else: and seeing so much glory in Christ, and in particular to him also, this lets him see the vanity of all other courses; for this manifestation of Gods spirit doth effectually and manifestly open our eyes to see, and hearts to believe what the Lord offers, for faith is laid to receive what the Lord gives of grace; here is then that

³¹ See Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 170-202. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Typology in Puritan New England: The Williams-Cotton Controversy Reassessed," *American Quarterly*, XIX (1967), 166-191; Jesper Rosenmeier, "The Teacher and the Witness: John Cotton and Roger Williams," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Ser., XXV (1968), 408-431; Jesper Rosenmeier, "New England's Perfection: The Image of Adam and the Image of Christ in the Antinomian Crisis, 1634 to 1638," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXVII (1970), 435-459; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wis.: 1978); and Edward H. Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis: Method and Purpose," *Early American Literature* 17 No. 2 (Fall 1982), 119-138.

³² John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition of the 16 Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1642), Third Sermon Sixth Vial, 12.

which makes calling sure, for otherwise how can we know it, but by the manifestation, and declaration, and revelation of the Spirit. The things that eye never saw, nor eare heard, nor ever entered into the heart of man, but he hath revealed them by his spirit, *1 Cor. 2.9,10.*³³

As he emphasized before and during the controversy, Cotton taught the primacy of the Spirit in bringing both salvation and the assurance of salvation. This emphasis did not reject the process of finding subjective assurance or the syllogism, but it emphasized the work of the Spirit in promoting faith and objective assurance. Once again, Cotton preached that the Spirit was vital within every dimension of the Christian life. Cotton's theological emphasis upon God's free grace matched with his earlier understanding of himself as a defender of predestinarian thought. Cotton's sermon series immediately following the Antinomian controversy clearly illustrated that his fundamental theological premises did not substantially change after the Antinomian controversy. He did change some of his expressions after the controversy- something he freely admitted in many places- but his basic theological system remained the same. The only major difference was that after the controversy, he did not preach directly toward the pride of New Englanders, but he used Roman Catholicism as a means of addressing both Christian hypocrisy as well as one's continual need for Christ.³⁴

In the end, Cotton continued his ministry and preaching in much the same tenor as before. He did not preach again directly concerning the covenant of grace, but he used Catholicism as the foil to illustrate the dangers and attraction of the covenant of works. Many within the colony retained their support of Cotton, and only a few ultra-orthodox

³³ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: 1656), 151.

³⁴ A move suggested at the height of the Antinomian controversy when Cotton argued that trusting in works as proof of justification was similar to Roman Catholic doctrine. John Cotton, *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace*, 53.

pastors and their followers continued in distrust. The trust and affirmation of the vast majority allowed Cotton to spend the last ten years of his life defending and helping to define both Congregationalism and the New England Way. The most probable explanation for Cotton's unchanged theological perspective after the Antinomian controversy was that he remained a trusted advisor for the Puritan community regarding both the Christian life as well as ecclesiology. The fact that Cotton spent so much time and effort writing a defense of Congregationalism illustrated more the needs and questions of the 1640s and early 1650s than his desire prove his place within the colony.

The last years of Cotton's life were marked by both an enormous amount of writing and preaching as well as by a growing respect from those practicing Independency. Throughout these years, he became the advisor to rulers, and he continued as an advisor to many within the Puritan community.³⁵ In his sixty-eighth year, he traveled across the Charles River in November of 1652 to address the students at Harvard. In the midst of these travels, he had a long exposure to the elements while on the river. The result was what proved to be a fatal illness. Through November, Cotton finished preaching a sermon series on Second Timothy and one final sermon on the text in Gospel of John that stated, "And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his Glory, as the only begotten Son of the Father,) full of grace and Peace." As his first biographer and successor noted, "the matter in his last sermons, he chiefly insisted upon those Words, *Grace be with you all.*"³⁶ As he lay dying, throngs of visitors sought his company and to

³⁵ Cotton's intact correspondence included a letter written by him to encourage Oliver Cromwell (July 28, 1651) and Cromwell's response of thanks back to Cotton (October 2, 1651). This correspondence illustrated Cotton's continuing importance for the Puritan community in England Sargent Bush, Jr. ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 458-464, 468-470.

³⁶ Norton, *Abel Being Dead*, 43. Also quoted in Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 254.

receive last words of advice and encouragement from the dying pillar of Puritanism. As he lay on his deathbed, a comet was seen falling in the New England sky. Many thought of the event as a prophetic message that the greatest star in New England was coming to an end.³⁷ Finally on 23 December 1652, Cotton died. The entire New England population fell into mourning for the loss of the greatest of the first generation New England Puritans. Cotton died as he lived, a man celebrated and appreciated for his great learning, his godly life, and his teaching concerning the Christian life.

Was Cotton Heterodox?

With this dissertation as background for understanding Cotton's theology, it is now possible to draw several key conclusions concerning Cotton's thought. It is obvious that Cotton was a "lively stone" during the New England Antinomian controversy.³⁸ It is also obvious that Cotton's work rejected subjective assurance without the witness of the Spirit. In his recent work, Bozeman used this fact to illustrate Cotton's ties to the Antinomian critique of mainstream Puritanism.³⁹ This dissertation has illustrated that Cotton's thought had many ties to the Puritan and Reformed mainstream, particularly when these theological communities address the question of predestination. Yet, the question remains as to Cotton's actual ties to Familism and Antinomianism. Was Cotton's teaching truly close to the teaching of the Familists? Did his teaching in any ways mirror the teaching of the Antinomians? In this section, each of these questions will be addressed and the conclusions concerning these questions will be explored.

³⁷ Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 254.

³⁸ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 28-36.

³⁹ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 211 ff.

At the beginning of the Antinomian controversy, Thomas Shepard wrote Cotton a letter to warn him that his teaching bordered on the heresy of Familism.⁴⁰ Shepard's initial claim illustrated the primary issue he had with Cotton's teaching: his thought concerning the Holy Spirit. It was not an accident that he charged Cotton with teaching Familism instead of Antinomianism. At its center, Thomas Shepard objected to Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit on the grounds that the teaching promoted too familiar a relationship between the believer and the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, Cotton denied this initial challenge of Familism, and he attempted to dismiss his objections without debate. Unfortunately for Cotton, Shepard's issues soon became matters of public debate. Through this debate, it became clear that Cotton did not endorse any of the major tenets of Familism. First, he denied the claim that the Spirit bodily dwelt with a believer to such an extent that they somehow became divine.⁴¹ Second, he also denied that Christ's bodily dwelling within the individual meant that the kingdom of God now somehow had come to earth.⁴² Third, Cotton also denied that his teaching over emphasized the work of the Spirit so as to encourage the Spirit's revelation to an individual apart from the Word. As we witnessed, Cotton taught that the Word was the vehicle through which the Spirit worked.⁴³ This teaching matched the teaching of Calvin, Ames, and many within the Puritan tradition.⁴⁴ As Cotton addressed the questions of his

⁴⁰ See pages 150-154 for details of Shepard's claims as well as the reasons for these claims.

⁴¹ Cotton's rejection of this central claim of the Familist sect was found in 1636 at the conclusion of *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 27-33.

⁴² Such a claim cannot be found anywhere in Cotton's writings.

⁴³ See pages 126-128.. For a description of these Familist tendencies see, David Como, "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999), 414-425.

⁴⁴ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, IX, 3. See William Ames, *Theological Discussion on the Perfection of the Holy Scriptures* (Ames, *Disputatio de perfectione*). Also see the argument of John Dykstra Eusden in his introduction to William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 63.

fellow New England Elders, both sides came to agree that Cotton's teaching was within the Puritan mainstream. Questions concerning Cotton's pneumatology ended in New England: at least for everyone except Thomas Shepard. In the end, Cotton's New England contemporaries accepted his teaching as orthodox.

Still, even after the controversy died down in New England, Cotton was not able to escape the charges of heterodoxy in his understanding of the work of the Spirit. Many in England argued that his teaching was rife with heresy. Again, Cotton's historical situation promoted many of these charges. In the 1640s, the rise of many radical Protestant sects in England brought Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit back into the focus of both orthodox Puritans and the sects. In many ways, the Antinomian controversy in New England was a result of the debates between the orthodox Puritans and the Antinomians in the late 1620s in London as well as a foreshadowing of the questions and concerns in England in the 1640s.⁴⁵ The growing anti-legal claims of many leading Independents, including Philip Nye, Thomas Goodwin, Sidrach Simpson, and John Goodwin, also brought Cotton's teaching under attack.⁴⁶ Ten years after the start of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton again had to address theological questions concerning his understanding of the work of the Spirit. In *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared*, Cotton addressed the objection that his teaching emphasized too close of an association between the individual and the divine. It was

⁴⁵ For details of the 1620 Antinomian uprising, see Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183-210. Como argued that in the late 1620s and early 1630s, Laud and his followers attempted to portray all Puritans as radical Antinomians. In Laud's argumentation, if you emphasized predestination, then you were Antinomian because of your emphasis on the God's work in salvation. Because of this accusation, Puritans did all they could to distance themselves from and to discredit the Antinomians. Como, 346 ff.

⁴⁶ Como, 405 ff. Philip Nye and Thomas Goodwin had great respect for Cotton's teaching, and they were responsible for the publication of many of his works. Como argued that these leading Independents flirted with the anti-legal Antinomian tendency.

being taught in England that Cotton's understanding encouraged both Familism and the ancient heresy of Montanism. The Montanists were a second and third century sect of believers in Asia Minor who taught that their leaders were indwelt infallibly with the Holy Spirit. They believed that the Holy Spirit inspired the words of these prophets so that their teaching was equal or even surpassing the teaching of the Apostles in the Bible. Of particular interest for this discussion, they also taught that the Holy Spirit dwelt within believers, thus making them divine- a teaching that mirrored that of the Familist in England. In *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared*, a frustrated John Cotton explained his complete rejection of Montanist doctrine.⁴⁷ Instead, he argued that the Holy Spirit's indwelling of an individual as a deposit guaranteeing salvation was the plain teaching of scripture.⁴⁸ He argued that this did not imply that such indwelling made a person divine. Instead, he was attempting to follow and explain the biblical teaching that Spirit must enter a person's heart because of total depravity. This presence of the Spirit changed a person's affections so that they now seek to please God.⁴⁹ In facing his accusers, Cotton attempted to clarify what is meant by the inhabitation of the Spirit. It was clear that he believed and taught that the Holy Spirit indwelt believers. Yet, it was also clear that he rejected any notion that such indwelling made one divine. Furthermore, Cotton also did not teach that the indwelling of the Spirit somehow obviated the human dimension of an individual. As we have seen, Cotton believed that believers retained

⁴⁷ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 218- 257.

⁴⁸ Such a claim directly matched the teaching of Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Cor. 1:22; etc.

⁴⁹ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 219-220. This was also the teaching of Cotton in 1636 as seen in *Gods Covenant of Free Grace*, 27-28. In the passage, Cotton defined the indwelling the Spirit as a change in affections or holy dispositions toward God and holiness.

their propensity to sin.⁵⁰ These actual sins of individuals must be repented of so that the Holy Spirit could cleanse them and make them more holy. In this process, the indwelling of the Spirit occurred through indwelling habits of grace that transformed a believer. As he stated at the heart of the Antinomian controversy, “That there be in all such as are effectually called and united unto Christ, in-dwelling spiritual gifts of grace, wrought and created in us by the Holy Ghost, that is, by the begetting whereof, we are begotten and renewed to a spiritual life unto God, and so become fit members of his Church.”⁵¹ Cotton claimed that such teaching was not heterodox, but rather that it followed the lead of Perkins and others. This teaching affirmed that the indwelling Spirit was proof of adoption, but it did not mean that one became divine. In the end, the attacks from his Presbyterian critics in England did not reveal Cotton’s heterodoxy, but their attempts to discredit his support of Congregationalism. As he explained, his teaching, virtually word for word, could be found in the teaching of many eminent Puritan divines.⁵²

As we witnessed in the previous chapter, in the past thirty years Cotton’s pneumatology has again come under close scrutiny.⁵³ In particular, several American Puritan scholars have argued that Cotton’s teaching concerning the Spirit and assurance went against the Puritan mainstream. The first and most detailed of these critiques was made by William Stoever while a recent repetition of this argument can be found in Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America*.⁵⁴ As we have seen, Stoever argued that Cotton’s teaching concerning the Spirit went against the Puritan mainstream in two interrelated

⁵⁰ An idea opposed to the Antinomians and in agreement with the Puritan orthodox position. See pages 157-164.

⁵¹ Cotton, *God’s Covenant of free Grace*, 27. This is the central theme of his doctrinal conclusion.

⁵² John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Church Cleared*, 220, 222.

⁵³ See pages 182 *ff.* for details.

⁵⁴ William K.B. Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven* and Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 45-48.

ways.⁵⁵ First, he argued that Cotton's teaching promoted the view that the work of the Spirit overruled human will and effort in salvation. Such teaching placed the emphasis in assurance on the work of the Spirit; and in the process, destroyed the accepted Puritan understanding of the Spirit working through the proper means. Second, Stoever argued that in his overemphasis on the Spirit, Cotton rejected the accepted means of preparationism.⁵⁶ At the heart of both these accusations was the claim that Cotton's teaching so overemphasized the divine element of salvation that it ignored human participation in finding assurance. Thus, Cotton's teaching was the true cause of the controversy.⁵⁷ In agreement with Shepard, Stoever argued that Cotton's thought concerning the Spirit overemphasized the objective witness of the Spirit. In so doing, he presented Cotton's teaching as destroying the accepted Puritan understanding of the Spirit's work through the proper means.

In this dissertation, Cotton's teaching concerning the Spirit and its work through the proper means has been carefully explained. First, Cotton's teaching did not place the Spirit above the word. Cotton argued throughout his life that the Spirit and the Word operated in tandem: true faith or justification brought by the Spirit always promoted a love for and submission to the Word and Sacraments.⁵⁸ Throughout his ministry, Cotton

⁵⁵ See pages 183 ff.

⁵⁶ A similar argument was made by Bozeman except he stated it that Cotton's teaching rejected most of the precisionist strain within Puritanism. Bozeman's thought was more technically correct than Stoever on this point. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*.

⁵⁷ Also the argument of Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁵⁸ As Cotton stated in his earliest published work, "Faith saith *Zanchius*, is to be promoted; but by what means, such as God hath ordained, viz. The Word and the Sacraments: God would have us to be taught divine things, and all men as well vulgar as others to know things belonging to their Salvation; But whence or of what Instructors? Of those that he hath given to be Teachers unto us, not of those that do please ourselves: He hath given unto us the Book of the Creature, whence we may know many things of God: He hath given us the Book of the Scripture, which he would have continually to read, and to be explained in the Church; What canst though desire more? He hath given Sacraments, Glasses of divine mysterie: He

consistently taught that true faith must be grounded in the Word. He believed that any faith based upon something other than a clear witness of the Word was futile. He also argued that due to human pride, only the Spirit could bring one to submission to the Word.⁵⁹ Thus, matching the teaching of John Calvin and William Ames, Cotton taught that scripture was the vehicle through which the Spirit worked in the life of a believer.⁶⁰ In other words, the key to holding both the Word and the Spirit together was that an individual's humility before the Word and obedience to the Word could only be brought by the Spirit.⁶¹ Thus for the believer the witness of the Word was synonymous with the witness of the Spirit. This teaching did not negate the normal means, but it actually explained how the Spirit worked through those normal means.

Second, this dissertation has illustrated that while Cotton's teaching emphasized the objective witness of the Spirit, he did not neglect subjective assurance as a viable tool. This included his use of traditional preparationist language on occasions when he encouraged his hearers to seek subjective assurance of faith.⁶² Cotton understood and taught the accepted Puritan understanding of assurance. He believed that one's subjective understanding of assurance could be lost through living in habitual sin. He also taught a life marked by an ever-increasing godliness was proof to the doubting soul

hath instituted us a Ministry, and charged us to exercise ourselves daily in the Law of God; Ought not these Books and Teachers to be sufficient for us?" John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish*, 19.

⁵⁹ See pages 126-128.

⁶⁰ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, IX, 3. See William Ames, *Theological Discussion on the Perfection of the Holy Scriptures* (Ames, *Disputatio de perfectione*). Also see the argument of John Dykstra Eusden in his introduction to William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 63.

⁶¹ See pages 126-128; 187-191.

⁶² See pages 191-193 for a discussion of Cotton's use of preparationism. Unfortunately, many scholars readily accept the notion that Cotton abandoned preparationism. As we have seen repeatedly, this idea began with Miller and it has remained popular in scholarly literature through the recent work of Janice Knight (see pages 182-185 for a brief discussion of the scholarly literature). Cotton's retention of preparationism as a secondary source of assurance was also noticed in Michael Winship, *Making Heretics*, 36. In addition see Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 213.

of assurance.⁶³ For Cotton, humility and submission to the Word were the ultimate marks

⁶³ Such a life was the fruit of the Spirit, but not some sort of unnatural possession of the Spirit. Cotton retained the notion that the Spirit opened a person's heart to turn to Christ, but then the individual responds by turning to Christ and obedience. Some examples from his work include from an early work, "That though the heart bee drowsie and dead in sinne, yet it begins to arise and open to Christ; and then though Christ bee gone, yet the heart runnes after him, and though shee cannot of a long time find him, yet shee continues to seeke him; and this is when the Spirit of Adoption hath made it a broken heart." John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice*, 13. Again this is articulated, "Secondly, wee open the doors of our hearts when wee doe to God and openly confesse from our hearts all the despite and contempt we have put Gods grace too, when wee in confession open the mouth and heart together, and confesse that all God hath spoken to us of our dangerous course, hath beene the Word of his truth and goodnesse, when wee confesse former and latter sins, and judge ourselves as unworthy of any mercy, he that thus confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy." John Cotton, *God's Mercie Mixed with His Justice*, 21. In a sermon series from the late 1620s, Cotton explained the changed the Spirit brought to a person was a change in affections or inclinations. Such teaching matched the orthodox understanding of the work of the Spirit. "The Spirit is nothing else but the inclination, and disposition, the habit of it; the spirit of wisdom, is an habit of Grace; the Spirit of prayer, is an inclination or an habit of Prayer: they are several words, but all meane the same thing: *Be renewed in the spirit of your mindes*, that is, bee renewed in the inclination and disposition of your minde." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 98 also see 102. Such a work of the Spirit resulted in obedience. As he stated, "The third part of this worship of him is in our life: and in our life we worship Him, by obedience in doing his will, and by patience in suffering his will, or anything comfortably for his sake. Hearty obedience is a true and sincere, and reall signe of this worship of Christ, and true sincere obedience to him is a true having of him." John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, 12.

At the height of the Antinomian controversy, Cotton continued with the same theme of changed dispositions and affections. His language emphasized the work of the Spirit in bringing the change, but it also supported the notion that changed affections resulted in a changed Christian life. The reason the Spirit must act was his emphasis on total depravity. "The third reason is taken from the state of the person united to Christ, which being united, is not a natural, but a spiritual man. The Reason standeth thus: If there be no spiritual gifts of grace wrought and created in the soul, then Christ is united by the Spirit of God to the natural man; For without spiritual gifts, there is nothing but nature in us, to which Christ by his Spirit is united." J. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 30. In his conclusion to *The Covenant of God's Free Grace*, Cotton goes to great lengths to illustrate through the works of other theologians and church history that his emphasis on the Spirit did not mean that Christ somehow became the same as the believer. In this conclusion, he rejected Antinomian doctrine and instead argued for God doing the work in the individual (because God must due to total depravity), but the individual being changed in type so that the Holy Spirit could dwell (30-31). Such a change occurred as a person used their natural faculties, changed by grace, to embrace Christ. As he stated, "So when we come into Gods service, if he but a little hides his face, we think presently we are cast off, and that we were never any of his; but all this comes for want of experience of a Christian mans life, if you can be content to break off from all your evil ways, and with all your hearts cleave unto God, doubtless then God hath made with you an *everlasting Covenant, ordered in all things, and sure.*" J. Cotton, *The Covenant of Gods Free Grace*, 20.

After the Antinomian controversy, Cotton continued with the same line of thinking regarding the Spirit's work in changing affections without negating the changed human response. Such a combination of the Spirit's work and human response was found often in Reformed and Puritan literature. One example was from a 1640 sermon series. As he stated, "What doth repentance give God the glory of? As of his sovereignty, and justice, and truth, in making humble confession of it where we are called, if we have just occasion; so the Lord requires that we should give him the glory of his mercy and grace, that we look for all our pardon and mercy in the blood of the Lord Jesus, and in unfeigned seeking after fellowship with him, believing on his grace, confessing what is sinful, turning from our evil ways, laying hold of eternal life and of every gift of the Spirit, that might quicken us in every spiritual duty, that we might depend upon his grace for pardon, and healing of out bottomless depth of unbelief for the changing of our hearts, and the

of an authentic Christian life. Borrowing from the teaching of William Perkins, Cotton used humility as a diagnostic tool to discern whether a person trusted in Christ alone for salvation and life or whether a person trusted in their own efforts and works plus Christ for salvation and life. As such, Cotton's teaching concerning subjective assurance always emphasized the need for humility in the Christian life. Such humility was used in the syllogism to illustrate true from false faith. While it is true that Cotton emphasized objective assurance as primary within the Christian life, this tendency did not place him outside of the Puritan or Reformed mainstream. In fact, it merely illustrated his affinities to Calvin and many others within the Puritan mainstream.⁶⁴

Cotton's teaching concerning the Holy Spirit was not radical and outside of the Puritan mainstream. His articulations of the Spirit's work through the Word matched well with many Puritans. In addition, his preference for objective assurance over any form of subjective assurance did not destroy the accepted Puritan understanding of the Spirit's work through the proper means. Instead, Cotton's emphasis on justification as primary in the Christian life illustrated his desire to combat Arminianism in all its forms. He believed that subjective assurance apart from knowledge of one's justification provided a false assurance of faith. Following the lead of William Perkins, Cotton attempted to retain a three-fold understanding of the proper grounds of assurance.⁶⁵ Cotton's theology emphasized the first two grounds: assurance was found in a personal

quickenings of our spirits; this gives God the glory of his grace, thus repentance doth." John Cotton, *The Pouring Out of the Seven Vials* Vial 4, 23.

⁶⁴ For others who emphasized the witness of the Spirit see, Calvin, *Galatians*, 121 and *Institutes*, III.ii.24. William Perkins, "The Foundation of Christian Religion Gathered into Six Principles," reprinted in *Breward*, 155-158. Richard Sibbes, "'The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law,'" in *Works* 4:220, 296; "Description of Christ," in *Works* 1:21-22; and *The Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter XVIII, ii.

⁶⁵ William Perkins, *The Works of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*. 3 Volumes (London: John Legatt, 1612-1613), 1:9-116.

application of the absolute promises of the gospel and through the witness of the Spirit that one was a child of God. Cotton argued that these two grounds were best found in the Spirit's work in justification. He did not disallow the third ground, the syllogism or preparationism, but he emphasized that the third ground without the other two provided extremely unstable ground for true assurance. The reason Cotton took this approach to assurance was his concern to articulate Reformed theology as opposed to an Arminian emphasis on works.

In the end, this dissertation has argued that Stoever and Holifield overstate their case for Cotton's heterodoxy. As we will see in the conclusion, it is true that after the Antinomian controversy, Cotton's emphasis on the Spirit became the minority view in New England. His emphasis on the primacy of the Spirit in conversion remained within New England Puritanism, but it was a secondary trait until the Great Awakening in the 1740s. After the Antinomian controversy, a spirituality rooted in human participation with the Spirit became dominant. Such as spirituality did not lessen religious observance or eliminate discussion concerning objective assurance. Instead, it made suspect any spirituality that emphasized the work of the Spirit.⁶⁶ Yet, in England, Cotton's thought matched the teaching of both the Fathers of the Puritanism, Ames and Perkins, as well as the thought of Richard Sibbes and, a few generations later, John Owen. If Cotton would have remained in England, his thought would not have been accused of heterodoxy since there developed within Puritanism the recognition that both objective and subjective

⁶⁶ Even one hundred years later, Charles Chauncy's primary critique of Whitefield and the New Light teaching was that it emphasized the Spirit, so it must be Antinomian. See Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (Boston, 1743).

assurance had their place within the Christian life.⁶⁷ Such thought was not invented in the late 1640s to combat the growing Antinomian underground in England. Instead, it followed from the teachings of William Perkins in his *The Golden Chain*.⁶⁸ Perhaps the scholarly conclusions of Stoeber, Holifield, and Bozeman are in need of revision concerning the tensions within Puritanism over the best means of determining authentic assurance. They are correct in their understanding of New England thought, particularly after the Antinomian controversy, but they need revision in regard to the emphasis on objective assurance within Puritanism both before and after the time of Cotton. At the very least, Cotton's affirmation of both objective and subjective assurance should remove the burden of guilt from his thought. At its heart, his debates with Shepard involved each man's emphasis concerning the best means of determining authentic assurance. Shepard's past and his tendency toward doubt led him to distrust any sort of witness of the Spirit apart from works. Cotton's past and his tendency to defend Reformed thought led him to distrust any sort of witness of works apart from the witness of the Spirit. In the end, both men would have affirmed the conclusions of *The Westminster Confession*, but they would have argued for the primacy of their position over their opponent.

A second question regarding Cotton's possible heterodox teaching revolved around his relationship to Antinomian theology. Antinomianism and Familism were two different fringe groups that offered critiques of the Puritan mainstream. As we have seen, Familism emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer, and they came to

⁶⁷ For example see the two separate statements concerning assurance in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVIII. In the *Confession*, both objective and subjective assurance were granted a rightful place in the Christian life.

⁶⁸ William Perkins, *The Works of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*. 3 Volumes (London: John Legatt, 1612-1613), 1:9-116.

the conclusion that one indwelt by the Spirit became in some sense divine. The Antinomians also emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. Some of the more radical Antinomians even agreed with Familism that the indwelling Holy Spirit made a person divine.⁶⁹ Where they differed from the Familist was in their fuller understanding of the implication of the Spirit's work. Recent scholarship has illustrated that Antinomianism developed in England in the late 1620s and 1630s.⁷⁰ This movement was marked by a decided disregard for the learned and educated Puritan mainstream since they believed the Puritan mainstream had fallen into the error of the Pharisees with their emphasis on obeying the law and on the inherent struggle of the Christian life. The Antinomian sects understood themselves as representing true Christianity as opposed to the law bound teaching of the mainstream Puritans. As such, they were the true Protestants attempting to bring revival and true Biblical reformation to the church in England. At the heart of their debate with Puritanism was the issue of practical divinity.⁷¹ As we have seen, Cotton's debate with Shepard revolved around the same issue: both men sought to articulate the clearest path to proper practical divinity. Cotton emphasized the witness of the Spirit and justification as the basis for true spirituality while Shepard emphasized one's personal holiness as the surest indicator of true spirituality. In this dissertation, it has been illustrated that Cotton's thought matched many Puritans both before and after his time. It has been argued that Cotton's thought was not outside of the Puritan mainstream because he retained a place for subjective

⁶⁹ See David Como, 253-255. Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183-209.

⁷⁰ The most complete explanation of Antinomianism can be found in David Como, "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999). This work explored and explained the substance of Antinomian thought.

⁷¹ Como argued that the intensity of the disagreement between the Antinomians and the Orthodox Puritans was due to the fact that both groups claimed they represented the very heart of true Christian spirituality and devotional practice. Como, 346 *ff.*

assurance even as he emphasized objective assurance. Still, the question arises as to Cotton's relationship to actual Antinomian teaching. A comparison of Cotton's teaching with that of the Antinomians is now possible by comparing the findings of this dissertation with the recent work of David Como concerning Antinomianism in England.

Como argued that Antinomianism in England was marked by seven interrelated and key ideas. These ideas were all so closely related that one characteristic was often explained by the presentation of the next characteristic. This section will present Como's ideas as succinctly as possible. The first of these characteristics was "a propensity to argue that the Mosaic Law, including the Decalogue, was in some sense abolished, abrogated, or superseded for Christians."⁷² In reaction against the mainstream Puritan emphasis on obeying the law, the Antinomian sects began by affirming that Christ has nullified the Law's claims upon a believer. From this chief distinctive came the term Antinomian, or one against the law. The second characteristic of Antinomian doctrine was a decided tendency to reject works righteousness in all its forms. The Antinomians emphasized grace over law. They rejected the spirituality of mainstream Puritanism that taught obedience to the Law as the best mark of authentic spirituality. In an excellent description, Como wrote,

For all their attachment to the doctrines of predestination, unmerited grace, and justification by faith, English puritans had from a very early stage stressed the importance, indeed the preeminence, of moral, social and personal reformation. The life of faith as envisioned by godly preachers involved a strenuous and unremitting struggle to do God's will in the world—that is, to extirpate sin and to exalt and glorify God by promoting and performing his Law. In practical terms, this translated into a rigorous and disciplined mode of piety, which included Sabbatarianism, fasting and careful self-examination, as well as hostility to perceived sins such as sexual immorality, drunkenness and ceremonial idolatry. Sanctification, zealous

⁷² David Como, 21.

application of the ‘means of grace,’ and continuing repentance for transgression were taken to be the marrow of the godly life, the chief tokens and signs of a true, lively, and justifying faith. It was this rigid and preponderant obsession with divine precept and sanctification that was rejected, and rejected totally, by antinomian teachers. Those who earned the epithet “antinomian’ all saw mainstream godly divinity as a new form of works-righteousness, an outward, literal and ‘legalistic’ religiosity that nurtured a slavish devotion to the Law.⁷³

A third tendency of Antinomians was to use “images and motifs common to puritanism to attack mainstream puritanism itself.”⁷⁴ While Antinomians struggled against mainstream Puritanism over the issues surrounding practical theology, they nevertheless adopted many teachings from both Puritanism and others within the Reformed tradition. This tendency can be clearly illustrated in their fourth distinctive: Antinomians borrowed from many within the Reformed tradition to argue for the passive nature of the believer. As Como explained,

In this way, for instance, antinomians often portrayed themselves (in piously protestant fashion) as heirs of long-standing legacy of anti-pharisaism that had passed from Christ to Paul, to Augustine to Luther to themselves. Against the strenuous, active faith of mainstream Puritanism, they stressed the total passivity of the believer, providing us with a fourth antinomian impulse. Each of the antinomian thinkers examined in this study maintained that no act of human effort or will could do anything to earn salvation or assurance, both of which were to come solely from the overwhelming power of Christ’s life and death (or in certain formulations, through the inhabitation of Christ’s spirit in the believer’s soul). One and all, the figures examined below showed a marked tendency to emphasize the utter sinfulness and inability of naked human effort, while celebrating and emphasizing the raw and irresistible power of the divine will.⁷⁵

From this emphasis on total depravity and the resultant human passivity in assurance and salvation, Antinomians drew a fifth characteristic that firmly placed them outside of both the Puritan and Reformed tradition mainstream. Paradoxically, Antinomians used total

⁷³ Como, 21-22.

⁷⁴ Como, 22.

⁷⁵ Como, 22-23.

depravity to make the claim “that believers in their post-conversion state were transformed into exalted (and in some accounts, supernatural) beings.”⁷⁶ In their thinking, a person was so corrupted by sin that when the Spirit came to dwell within them by faith, it made them divine. As Como confessed, such claims were more extreme than anything seen within the mainstream of Reformed thought. Furthermore, Antinomians then drew a sixth conclusion. They argued that as a result of conversion and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, believers were now free from both sin and the need for constant self-examination. They declared that justification made a person free from the constraints of struggling to grow in godliness. They doubted the faith of those who struggled with their sin, and they accused such individuals of being dead, legal professors of Christ. Finally, Antinomians also maintained a seventh key characteristic. They argued that their vision of faith offered “believers a sense of assurance and joy that was more total, more satisfying and more final than anything to be found in mainstream Puritanism.”⁷⁷ Such assurance promoted godliness. In fact, they taught that the whole of their spirituality promoted godliness. Antinomians argued that their vision of the Christian life flew in the face of libertinism. They proclaimed that believers were freed from the terrors of the law to obey the law by grace. As Como explained,

Indeed, it may be said to have provided the underlying, emotional foundation for the more celebrated antinomian claim that believers were free from the Law: where pharisaical puritans obeyed out of fear and terror, carefully molding their lives to conform to the external rule of the Moral Law, true believers would obey God freely and joyfully without any extrinsic prompting at all.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ A thought similar to the teaching of the Familists. Como, 23.

⁷⁷ Como, 24.

⁷⁸ Como, 25.

As a result, Antinomians did not scandalize their Puritan adversaries with their lives, but with their theological presuppositions. Such a “faire and easie way to heaven” obviously appealed to many struggling souls in England.⁷⁹ The movement grew rapidly in the 1620s and 1630s. In the 1640s, it became the root of many sects that rejected mainstream Puritan divinity.⁸⁰ The central teachings of Antinomianism could be condensed into the following chart that outlines all seven key characteristics of the movement.

Chart A.

First	Rejection of the Mosaic Law as important in the Christian life.
Second	Rejected works righteousness in all its forms.
Third	Used images and motifs common to Puritanism to attack Puritanism itself.
Fourth	Borrowed from many within the Reformed tradition to argue for the passive nature of the believer in salvation or finding assurance.
Fifth	Believers in their post-conversion state were transformed into exalted (and in some accounts, supernatural) beings.
Sixth	Believers were now free from sin and the need for constant self-examination
Seventh	Believers then had a sense of assurance and joy that was more total, more satisfying and more final than anything found in mainstream Puritanism

In this chart, the key characteristics of Antinomianism can be clearly seen. They were in agreement with many in the Reformed tradition in their articulation of characteristic two, three, and in terms of salvation, number four. They clearly rejected the Puritan mainstream’s thought with characteristic one, four in regard to assurance, five, six, and seven.

⁷⁹ See William Stoever, *‘A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven’: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978).

⁸⁰ Como, 372 ff.

Against this background concerning Antinomianism in England, Cotton's thought can now be seen. First, Cotton supported the first part of the fourth distinctive of Antinomianism: he taught that the human soul was passive in issues of salvation. Unfortunately, this proves nothing in regard to his relationship to Antinomianism. As we have seen, he arrived at this teaching because of his emphasis on the traditional Puritan and Reformed teachings concerning total depravity and predestination. Furthermore, Cotton also affirmed that he arrived at this teaching by following the lead of William Ames, Calvin, and others within the Reformed tradition.⁸¹ While this theological move in regard to salvation was a mark of the Antinomians, it was also a mark of many within the Puritan and Reformed mainstream before and after the 1630s. It represented an attempt to relate total depravity to justification.⁸² In the 1630s, supporting the passive nature of soul in conversion was not popular among the Puritan mainstream because of the claims of the Antinomians.⁸³ Yet, both the orthodox Puritans and the Antinomians could claim this teaching as biblical. Where Cotton differed from the Antinomians was in his rejection of the second half of their claim. As we have seen, Cotton did not deny the normal means of grace in finding assurance through subjective experience.⁸⁴ He believed that one's assurance could be lost through habitual sin, sloth, or neglecting the

⁸¹ See pages 116-118.

⁸² Again, Cotton's desire to emphasize justification agreed with many within the Reformed community. His statements regarding justification were similar to the teaching of Calvin (*Institutes*, III:xi:23) and *The Westminster Confession*, VII:iii. For later Puritans see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677) found in John Owens, *Works*, V:4. Also see Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* (1692) found in Robert Traill, *The Works of Robert Traill* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1975), I. .

⁸³ See Como chapter 8, "Making Heretics." In this chapter, Como claimed that in the early 1630s, Puritans did all they could to discredit and distance themselves from the Antinomians. During this period, even a whisper that someone was Antinomian pushed their thought into question. This is exactly what happened to Cotton in 1636. Como, 346-371.

⁸⁴ See pages 171-176.

normal means of grace. He did emphasize that subjective assurance without the witness of the Spirit in justification was at best shaky grounds. Yet, his thought consistently retained an emphasis in personal effort in maintaining assurance. As such, he rejected the Antinomian claim of total passivity in regard to finding assurance of faith.

Second, Cotton's theology also somewhat supported the first distinctive of Antinomianism: he warned his hearers that their works did not merit God's favor and he emphasized grace over works of the Law as transformative in the Christian life. Consequently, he joined the Puritan mainstream in affirming that salvation was by grace alone and sanctification occurred as a work of the Spirit by grace. In terms of practical divinity, such affirmation led to several characteristics of Cotton's thought. First, he warned his hearers, particularly in the 1630s, against trusting in obedience to the Law as illustrating authentic conversion without a positive experience of faith resulting in the witness of the Spirit in justification.⁸⁵ As we have seen, such teaching brought to bear all three elements of assurance maintained by Perkins as well as affirmed by the *Westminster Confession*.⁸⁶ As we have seen the reason for this emphasis was Cotton's belief that the Law can deceptively mirror the doctrines of grace.⁸⁷ The result could be that one under the Law remained deceived as to their true state because they trust in their works instead of Christ for salvation. Such self-righteousness was the opposite of humble reliance on Christ alone for salvation. In Cotton's thought, such self-righteousness was the surest mark of a hypocrite, and it illustrated the most deadly result of total depravity. Such an

⁸⁵ See pages 76-81. In particular this idea can be seen in his sermon to the Salem church preached in 1636. Cotton, *A Sermon Delivered at Salem, 1636* (1713).

⁸⁶ First, the general *promise of the gospel*, which by faith becomes a personal promise; second, *the testimony of the Holy Spirit* witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God; and third, *the syllogism*, which rests partly on the gospel and partly on experience." Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 87. Perkins, *Works* 1:124. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVIII.

⁸⁷ See pages 76-81.

affirmation matched the Puritan mainstream. Furthermore, Cotton's thought also retained a definitive place within the Christian life for the law. He believed and taught that the Law's purpose was to illustrate the reality of sin so as to drive both believers and non-believer to trust in Christ alone for salvation and life. He also taught that in grace, a believer will do anything possible to keep their peace with God. This included observing the law.⁸⁸

Third, Cotton's thought also partially agreed with the second Antinomian distinctive against works righteousness.⁸⁹ Cotton joined a growing chorus of both Antinomians and orthodox theologians in condemning trusting in works to prove faith and provide assurance.⁹⁰ Again, the reason for the support of this tenet was two-fold. First, Cotton was an ardent supporter of Reformed thought. He made his reputation by defending the doctrines of free grace against the claims of works righteousness. Thus, his warnings against works righteousness sprang from his desire to defend orthodox doctrine not because he desired to subvert it. Second, Cotton's continued emphasis upon objective assurance over subjective assurance lent his qualified support to this Antinomian tenet. Cotton was skeptical of those who desired assurance of faith without the witness of the Spirit in bringing true faith in justification. Still, he did not reject

⁸⁸ See pages 171-176 for details.

⁸⁹ At this point, Bozeman would declare that Cotton's teaching departed from the precisionist strain within Puritanism. Unfortunately, his work ignored the many within orthodox Puritanism would also questioned the overuse of the law in the Christian life. Within Puritanism, the key was balance between the two poles of objective and subjective assurance. Both must be retained to remain within the Puritan mainstream. Cotton retained both throughout his ministry even as he emphasized objective assurance as primary. Conversely, Shepard also retained both throughout his ministry even as he emphasized subjective assurance. The conflict of these different perspectives was at the heart of the American Antinomian controversy.

⁹⁰ For example, Philip Nye, Thomas Goodwin, Sidrach Simpson, and John Goodwin all began to preach against the legal preaching of other Puritans. This preaching refocused the attack on Cotton's teaching since Nye and Goodwin were responsible for the publication of much of Cotton's works. Como, 404-413.

subjective assurance through the syllogism, even as he emphasized that such assurance without the witness of the Spirit was dangerous and possibly deceptive. Even with this being said, the tenor of Cotton's thought ran counter to the intent of this Antinomian teaching. He affirmed that a truly converted individual will perform works of righteousness. Such works naturally followed from the touch of the Spirit, and they evidenced justification.⁹¹ As we have seen, at this point Cotton's theology illustrated its greatest weakness in that Cotton neglected the use of the term sanctification. His overemphasis upon justification at the expense of sanctification was one of the primary theological causes of the Antinomian controversy.⁹² Still, we have seen that while Cotton's overall thought overlapped slightly with the Antinomian party, it also greatly overlapped with many Orthodox Puritan divines.

Even though Cotton's theology had some overlap with the theology of the Antinomians, his teaching concerning salvation and the work of the Holy Spirit clearly did not support most of the distinctives of Antinomianism as presented by Como. The first four characteristics of Antinomianism all had qualified support from the Puritan mainstream. In fact, the reason for Antinomianism's early success was its affinities to mainstream Puritanism, and it made inroads within the Puritan community because it emphasized many of the same characteristics as the Puritan mainstream.⁹³ Where Cotton agreed with English Antinomianism was in that movement's overlap with the Puritan mainstream. Furthermore, even in areas where Cotton his thought did somewhat agree with Antinomianism, he rejected the conclusions Antinomians drew from each point. For

⁹¹ See pages 128-130.

⁹² See pages 138 *ff.*

⁹³ Como, 346-371.

example, Cotton clearly taught that the soul was passive in matters of salvation. He affirmed this belief because of his emphasis on total depravity. Yet, he rejected the Antinomian inference that such passivity also applied to the Christian life and to finding authentic assurance. Instead, Cotton retained the traditional Puritan understanding that subjective assurance should be sought after even as he emphasized justification as primary in the finding this subjective assurance. Another example would be Cotton's understanding of the Law's place in the Christian life. He taught that the application of the Law without faith was deadly. Yet, he maintained the importance of the Law to the Christian if they had faith. Such a distinction marked the tensions found in the thought of the Puritan mainstream.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the most distinctive characteristics of Antinomianism, numbers five through seven, were all clearly rejected in Cotton's thought.⁹⁵ As Como confessed, these characteristics did not share any overlap with the Puritan mainstream.⁹⁶ As such, they were the distinct characteristics of Antinomianism as a movement. Cotton completely rejected the idea that a believer somehow was made divine because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. While he taught that the Spirit indwelt a believer, but he also clearly argued that a believer still struggled with sin and doubt.⁹⁷ His teaching emphasized that indwelling signaled adoption, not divinity.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ See Como, 78-115. Como explained the tensions within Puritanism in defining the relationship between law and gospel as well as between faith and works. He argued that from these tensions, Antinomianism gained a hearing within the Puritan community.

⁹⁵ Como lists three major threads of Antinomian thought in England. These threads were the early Antinomians led by John Traske, the 'Imputative' strain led by John Eaton, and the 'Perfectionist' strain led by John Everarade. Each of these strains embraced all the tenets of Antinomianism, but the "Imputative" strain led by Eaton, Robert Towne, and John Eachard was the closest to the Puritan mainstream. Eaton claimed to be a true Protestant who was attempting to rescue Puritanism from the legalists. While there was some overlap between Cotton's critique of Puritans embracing the law apart from faith and Eaton's thought, it is clear that Cotton did not agree with any of the radical conclusions Eaton drew from his theology. See Como, 162-214.

⁹⁶ Como, 23-24.

⁹⁷ See pages 157-165.

Furthermore, Cotton also firmly denied the sixth distinctive of Antinomianism. This distinctive argued that because of conversion and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, believers were now free from both sin and the need for constant self-examination. Cotton's pastoral teaching constantly turned his hearers toward facing the reality of their sin found through self-examination.⁹⁹ He believed that honest self-examination revealed the depth of one's sin and doubt. Such a discovery then forced a believer to repent of their sin and doubt, and it drove them to rest in Christ alone for salvation. Such an affirmation agreed more with the Puritan mainstream than Antinomianism. Finally, Cotton also denied the seventh distinctive of Antinomianism. Cotton's thought upheld the centrality of objective assurance in bringing true assurance, but he also affirmed the need to keep one's subjective assurance.¹⁰⁰ As we have seen, Cotton affirmed that subjective assurance can be lost through habitual sin and doubt. He also affirmed that continual growth in godliness was proof to the doubting soul of their assurance. Again, this teaching affirmed the position of the Puritan mainstream. It was true that Cotton emphasized objective assurance as primary within the Christian life, but he did not neglect subjective assurance. From a strictly theological point of view, Cotton's teaching was not Antinomian.¹⁰¹ Where he agreed with Antinomian tendencies, he did so because

⁹⁸ John Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), found in John Cotton, *John Cotton on the Churches in New England*, edited by Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 218-222.

⁹⁹ See pages 126-129.

¹⁰⁰ See pages 1701 *ff.*

¹⁰¹ Again, a comparison of Cotton and Eaton is revealing on this point. Both men were cautious about using any hint of the law apart from faith to determine true assurance, but Cotton's thought was much more restrained than that of Eaton. Cotton rejected all of the major tenets of Antinomianism while Eaton and his followers embraced these radical tendencies as newfound freedom from mainstream Puritanism. Even as both men investigated the nature of sanctification and free grace, Cotton's thought would have been labeled legal preaching by Eaton. Como, 162-214. For more on Eaton's teaching see Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 183-209.

the Antinomian teaching matched the teaching of many within the Puritan and Reformed mainstream.

In conclusion, Cotton's theology supported several of the tenets of Antinomianism, but his support only extended to those points that overlapped with many within the Puritan and Reformed tradition. Despite this conclusion, Thomas Shepard's distrust of Cotton and his dislike for his theology remained evident in his journals and his teaching. This fact did not condemn Cotton, but it illustrated that Cotton and Shepard were not in agreement on the best way to promote authentic Christian experience. Such a difference could most easily be explained not by either man's theological deviancy, but by their theological perspectives brought about by different debates. For Cotton, his primary theological trajectory was defined by the debates in the 1610s and 1620s over predestination. He desired to represent the Puritan cause in his battle, and his reputation and basic theological articulations were formulated within this fight. Thus, Cotton sought to magnify God's sovereign work in salvation and the Christian life against any form of works righteousness. Conversely, Shepard was a much younger man than Cotton. His first and most important theological battle was fought against the growing Antinomian and Familist underground in England. He readily admitted that as a young man in the late 1620s, he was attracted and almost captured by this pernicious heresy. Thus, he sought to gain a reputation by exposing and defeating any theological perspective that gave a hint of Antinomianism or Familism. In the mid-1630s in New England, Shepard was given his chance. He became the primary spokesman against the growing heresy of Antinomianism. He also took on John Cotton- a representative of orthodox Puritanism who has been mislabeled as a potential Antinomian.

In the end, the key to remaining within the Puritan mainstream was to hold both objective and subjective assurance in tension without denying the need for both. In Cotton's thought, particularly in the 1630s, he emphasized objective assurance as foundational for authentic assurance of faith. Yet, even in *Covenant of Grace*, he did not deny the need to pursue subjective assurance. Conversely, Thomas Shepard emphasized subjective assurance more than objective assurance. In response to the Antinomian debates in England and in opposition to Cotton and the threat of Antinomianism in New England, Shepard's thought in the 1630s tilted more toward favoring subjective assurance. Yet, Shepard did not deny the importance, at least in theory, of objective assurance found by the witness of the Spirit. The distinction and emphasis within Puritanism concerning both objective and subjective assurance explains the quandary presented by Bozeman concerning how Cotton could claim his place within the Puritan mainstream while affirming the importance of the witness of the Spirit.¹⁰² Bozeman often attempted to place semi-Antinomian teaching within Cotton's theological framework. In particular, he attempted to explain Cotton's thought as abandoning the syllogism.¹⁰³ Yet, he constantly affirmed that Cotton emphasized great caution in any trust in the work of the Spirit that abandoned the syllogism completely.¹⁰⁴ Bozeman concluded,

Finally, as with Brierley, Cotton's emphasis upon lowness and emptiness remained within the penitential ethos of Puritan tradition. He did not, like Eaton, Traske, or Crisp, seek explicitly to lighten the Christian mood

¹⁰² Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 286. As we have seen, Bozeman explains Cotton as double-minded in his emphasis on the work of the Spirit and yet his retention of various Puritan disciplinary themes. Cotton was able to maintain these two tensions through his understanding of both objective and subjective elements of assurance within traditional Puritanism. He was not double-minded, but constructive in his theological vision.

¹⁰³ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 269-275.

¹⁰⁴ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 275-280.

or to transform the Deity from prickly sovereign to kindly father. Taken together, the elements summarized here define an original brand of Protestant dissent, one at once passionately stated and intriguingly equivocal: a semi-antinomian, protospiritist gospel that still claimed a place in the disciplinary Puritan world.¹⁰⁵

Cotton claimed his place within the disciplinary Puritan world by affirming the Perkins' motif of humility and the Sibbes' motif of changed affections promoting this humility. His work remained within the Puritan mainstream through his retention of both objective and subjective assurance as essential for authentic Christian assurance. While his theology has been labeled as Antinomian or semi-Antinomian, such an accusation is unfair since his teaching denied the central tenets of Antinomians as explained by Como and Bozeman. Cotton's theology was not Antinomian or even semi-Antinomian at its core. Yet, given the personalities and political situation of the mid-1630s in New England, it was used by some and seen by others as potentially pernicious.

¹⁰⁵ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 280.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE PATH NOT TAKEN

At the time of Cotton's death, he was celebrated in New England as a godly leader and Puritan. His passing was mourned by all, and in many ways it heralded the end of the first generation of New England Puritan leaders. His labor had been to defend and to articulate the doctrines of grace against any religion of works. In this task, he had many supporters within this history of the Reformed tradition and Puritanism. As we have seen, Cotton's theology, even in the mid-1630s, was not odd within the spectrum of English Puritanism. This theological vision attempted to retain the traditional Puritan disciplinary theology through his emphasis on the Spirit's work to change a believer's affections so that they are marked by godly humility.¹ In his recent work *The Precisionist Strain*, quoted extensively in this dissertation, Bozeman described the disciplinary strain within Puritanism. He described Cotton as falling outside of the mainstream in his emphasis on grace and the Spirit's work even as he struggled to explain the reasons why Cotton claimed to remain within that mainstream.² His final conclusion was that his theology promoted a semi-Antinomian theology through Cotton's weakening of the power of the syllogism and emphasis on the work of the Spirit.³ Yet, even with these conclusions, he confessed that the vast majority of Cotton's thought remained within Puritan orthodoxy even as his emphasis on grace bordered on

¹ See pages 128-130.

² Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 282-290 with particular emphasis on 286.

³ His conclusion concerning Cotton's role in the Antinomian controversy, *The Precisionist Strain*, 288-289. A conclusion that matched the conclusions of Stoeber, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven* and Holifield, *Theology in America*. See pages 15-16 and 29-30 for the primary argument from these works. See pages 183 ff. for this dissertation's answer to Stoeber's claims.

Antinomianism. His final conclusion was that during the 1630s, Cotton continued to emphasize that justification and the discernment of the work of the Spirit could only be known by mature Christians well trained in the work of the Spirit and the Word.⁴ In Bozeman's work, such an idea proved Cotton's double-mindedness. This dissertation has argued for a different understanding of Cotton's theology. This dissertation has argued that Cotton's emphasis on justification and the work of the Spirit was well within the Puritan mainstream. It was even the dominant view when the primary theological foe was Arminianism since it emphasized God's sovereignty in matters of salvation.

This dissertation has illustrated the reasons why Cotton came to his theological conclusions. Primarily it has argued that Cotton arrived at these conclusions through his battles against Arminianism in all its forms. Cotton's early ministry successes shaped his articulations of Reformed theology so that he maintained a strict defense of predestination. This defense included a strong emphasis on total depravity and the work of the Spirit in justification. This emphasis was not an issue within mainstream Puritanism in England until his teaching came in conflict in New England with Thomas Shepard, who had recently come from fighting battles against Antinomianism in London. Shepard's theology emphasized the role of the individual in fighting against sin, and he de-emphasized the work of the Spirit because of Antinomian and Familist claims. This dissertation has argued that the root of the American Antinomian controversy was this difference in emphasis between two orthodox Puritan divines.

Furthermore, this dissertation has also argued that Cotton's conclusions were not outside of the broad spectrum of orthodox Puritanism. It has argued that orthodox

⁴ Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 289.

Puritanism was marked by the retention of both objective and subjective assurance. Cotton's thought, even in the midst of the Antinomian controversy, retained both the objective witness of the Spirit as well as the importance of the subjective witness of the practical syllogism as vital for the Christian life. His thought demanded that both be kept within practical divinity. Many have argued that his position was nothing more than sophistry.⁵ Yet, we have seen that Cotton's thought disagreed with and denounced the major tenets of both Familism and Antinomianism.⁶ We have also seen how Cotton's positive articulations concerning the Spirit's work in the Christian life matched many within the Puritan and Reformed mainstream.

Like all expressions of Reformed orthodoxy, Puritanism was a constantly changing movement. The core set of doctrines remained the same, but as the theological opponents changed, the articulations of how to express these core doctrines also changed. In other words, Reformed orthodoxy often holds two seemingly opposites in tension in its articulations of orthodox doctrine. On the one hand, Reformed orthodoxy emphasized Divine sovereignty and grace in matters of salvation; while on the other, it emphasized human responsibility and the Law as normative in the Christian life. Reformed orthodoxy and Puritanism argued that such a tension was not a contradiction, but a mysterious tension revealed in the Word. On a practical level, these two poles get emphasized at different times. When the foe was Arminianism, the Reformed pole of Divine sovereignty and the work of the Spirit was emphasized. When the foe was Antinomianism, in any of its forms, the Reformed pole of the law and Christian duty was

⁵ An argument denied within this dissertation. See Chapter I for a description of the thought of Ziff, Stoeber, and others who make this claim.

⁶ See chapter V for details; pages 231 *ff.* in particular.

emphasized. Yet, regardless of the perceived foe, both sovereign grace in salvation and human responsibility in pursuing godliness must be retained. According to orthodox Puritanism and the Reformed tradition, if one denies either pole, they have slipped or dived into heresy. From their thought, it should be concluded that both Cotton and Shepard remained with the Puritan mainstream. If their debate had remained a private discussion between two pastors, they might have been able to work out their differences. Instead and with the addition of the personalities of Anne Hutchinson and John Wheelwright, these debates became a firestorm that threatened the entire Massachusetts Bay Colony.

In the end, Cotton's theology emphasized a personal encounter with Christ by the work of the Spirit of God through the normal means of preaching and the sacraments.⁷ His theology encouraged all to seek after such an experience. At the same time, he argued that a desire to know God can only come through the work of the Spirit because of indwelling sin. Thus, he encouraged his hearers that if they have any desire for God, it must be a result of the Spirit's work in their lives. This work of the Spirit was the witness of the Spirit. He affirmed that all should fan even the smallest spark of grace into flames so that they may find faith and rest in Christ.⁸ The best indicator of true spirituality was a deep-seated humility that looked to Christ alone for salvation.⁹ The effort to promote this humility was the proper use of the syllogism in finding assurance. Apart from the changed affections toward God brought by the Spirit, such effort was in vain. Yet,

⁷ Such an emphasis matched the mystical element within Puritanism. See James F. Maclear, "The Heart of New England Rent: The Mystical Element in Early Puritan History," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLII (1956), 621-622.

⁸ A conclusion that matched the teaching of Richard Sibbes, "The Soul's Conflict with Itself," in *Works* 1:130; *The Bruised Reed* (London, 1630).

⁹ A conclusion affirmed by Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 263. He argued briefly that Cotton's emphasis on humility came from his earliest ministry experiences fighting Arminianism.

coupled with the witness of the Spirit issuing forth changed affections within the individual, the syllogism was the best means of promoting genuine assurance within the godly. In the end, his theology emphasized the grace of God in changing one's heart while not neglecting the human response to this grace.¹⁰ His theology also sought to emphasize the traditional means of finding assurance within Puritanism: a method that retained an emphasis on the witness of the Spirit while keeping the syllogism as a proper means of finding assurance.¹¹

At its heart, Cotton's disagreements with Shepard were primarily over the issue of how to promote and articulate an authentic Christian spirituality. As we have seen, within Puritanism the focus of this debate concerned the nature of assurance of salvation and the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. These questions were often posed and answered in amazingly different ways. Some ventured from the realm of orthodoxy and proposed ideas that rejected the accepted understandings of authentic Christian experience. These folks included the Familists and the Antinomians.¹² Meanwhile, the Puritan mainstream also included a spectrum of opinions that remained within the parameters of accepted orthodoxy. In *The Westminster Confession*, these various

¹⁰ A conclusion affirmed by Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain*, 261. He explained Cotton's emphasis on the Spirit and yet his continued emphasis on obedience. For Bozeman, these two issues were in tension. This dissertation has argued and explained why they were not in tension in Cotton's thought or the broader Puritan and Reformed context.

¹¹ A position explained and affirmed in *The Westminster Confession*, XVIII. Stoever's and Bozeman's conclusions illustrated correctly the tensions between Cotton and the New England Elders. Yet, they do not illustrate the complexity of Puritanism as it strove to keep hold on both Divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Cotton's position, while unpopular in the 1630s, was held by many within the Puritan mainstream both before and after the 1630s. *The Westminster Confession* illustrated both of these poles in opposition to the conclusions of both Stoever and Bozeman.

¹² This is the central argument of the first half of Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain* and Como, "Puritans and Heretics: The Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Early Stuart England." Both books presented Antinomianism and its related movements as first critiques from within Puritanism and then movements that moved outside of Puritanism. The key to these movements early successes were their ties to the mainstream Puritanism.

answers were placed within a confessional system that affirmed both those who emphasized objective assurance with those who emphasized subjective assurance. The key for remaining within the Puritan mainstream was for an individual to affirm both objective and subjective assurance as biblical and important for the Christian life. As we have seen, Cotton's theology remained within the Puritan mainstream because he did not reject subjective assurance even as he emphasized objective assurance as vital for authentic subjective experience. Ironically, Shepard also illustrated his affinity to the Puritan mainstream because within his thought, he also affirmed both objective and subjective assurance as biblical. The tenor of his writing emphasized subjective assurance as clearer than objective assurance, but he did not deny the objective witness of the Spirit. In the end, both Shepard's and Cotton's thought served as illustrations of the tendencies and parties within the Puritan community.¹³ Both of these parties were well represented in England; but with the exclusion of the Antinomians in New England in 1638, Shepard's vision of the Christian life gained a greater hearing on the colonies.

In the first one hundred years of New England religious history, John Cotton's thought played a pivotal part. Moving beyond the common themes of 'declension' and 'orthodoxy,' Cotton's thought represented a portrait of the often quickly changing thought patterns within Puritanism.¹⁴ When Cotton arrived in New England, he came as the recognized "Puritan Bishop."¹⁵ His popularity in England gave the colony its first superstar of the clergy world. Yet, within three years the central emphasis of his teaching

¹³ In agreement with Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. Knight labeled these parties differently, but this dissertation assisted her argument by identifying one primary area of difference within Puritan experimental theology.

¹⁴ A move suggested by David D. Hall, "Narrating Puritanism," in *New Directions in American Religious History* edited by Harry S. Stout and D.G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51-81.

¹⁵ Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 119.

came under attack. How could this rapid change in fortune occur? For many, the answer must be clear: Cotton must have changed. As we have seen, this explanation lacks explanatory power. It cannot account for the whole of Cotton's teachings. It also cannot explain why Cotton's basic message did not change after the controversy. No, Cotton did not change. Instead, perhaps it would be more helpful to see New England Puritanism as a living and changing entity.¹⁶ The petty jealousies of Shepard and others for Cotton's fame prompted an attack at his weakest point. Once the accusation was made, the damage was done.¹⁷ From that time, Cotton's thought has been seen as suspect even if it were definitively proven to be within the Puritan mainstream. As Cotton's brand of orthodox Puritanism was discredited, New England Puritanism developed in a slightly different direction. As a living organism, the major life event of the Antinomian controversy shaped the direction of growth. Even as many retained his central ideas in their Christian life, the official means of explaining orthodox religious experience moved away from mention of the supernatural and the work of the Spirit as central. Instead, a slightly different brand of Christian experience became the accepted model.

Ultimately, where this dissertation assists our scholarly understanding of early New England religious history is in its clear explanation of Cotton's thought. He was not a great systematic theologian because of his errors in expression concerning justification

¹⁶ In arguing against the idea of declension, Mark A. Peterson made the same point. He argued that trans-Atlantic Puritanism changed and developed. Within his system, the Cotton/Shepard discord illustrated the tensions and the growing pains within the colony. Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ As Como has argued, after the Puritan controversies with Antinomianism in London in the late 1620s, the charge of Antinomian or Familist was instantly alarming. When Shepard accused Cotton of these heresies, he permanently covered the core of Cotton's teaching concerning the Christian life with the mantle of potential heresy.

and sanctification.¹⁸ Yet, his thought followed a line of Reformed and Puritan spirituality that was well within the mainstream. The emphasis on the work of the Spirit in the process of conversion and the Christian life had many ties within the Reformed tradition included Calvin, William Ames, William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, *The Westminster Confession*, and later Puritans such as Thomas Brooks, Thomas Goodwin, and John Owens. Cotton's thought emphasized the objective witness of the Spirit as vital for authentic Christian spirituality. He did not reject subjective assurance, but his emphasis on objective assurance caused him conflict with Shepard and other New England elders. Such conflict did not reveal great theological deviancy by Cotton or Shepard. Instead, it revealed an ongoing debate within the Reformed tradition concerning how to best promote and encourage authentic Christian living. Cotton's thought revealed one answer: emphasize the work of the Spirit and grace so that a person responds to God's sovereign love with proper repentance and faith. Shepard's thought revealed another answer: emphasize the need to not take God's grace for granted by focusing the believer on how their life reflected God's holiness. One emphasized grace while the other emphasized obedience. Yet, neither of these men neglected the opposite pole in this equation: Cotton often discussed the need for obedience and Shepard often discussed the centrality of grace in the Christian life.

In today's debates within the conservative branches of the Reformed tradition, the same debate is often played out on Presbytery floors. At center stage within this debate is

¹⁸ Better examples from earlier Puritans include both William Ames and William Perkins. Both men articulated their thought in a systematic manner. During Cotton's lifetime, the *Westminster Confession* and *The Longer and Shorter Catechisms* were better expressions of systematic thought. After the time of Cotton, John Owen would be an example of a Puritan with a solid systematic presentation of accepted Puritan doctrine.

the question of God's grace and its role in the Christian life. In the Puritan era, the debate centered upon the question of assurance of salvation. In today's debates, the primary question is the promotion of authentic Christian experience. While the terminology is different, the heart of the debate is amazingly similar. One party emphasizes grace and God's work in transforming character through repentance and faith. They attempt to draw their hearers away from focusing on their works as the best measure of authentic Christian living because such a focus can lead to self-righteousness instead of humble trust in Christ alone for salvation and life. To some, such an emphasis smells and looks like Antinomianism. They argue that such teaching ignores the clear Biblical call to grow in holiness. They argue that only such growth in holiness can conclusively illustrate authentic spirituality and conversion. In the face of this opposition, those who emphasize God's grace label their critics as legalists. They claim that they miss the clear teaching concerning total depravity and the need for God's grace to transform one's heart to allow them to grow in humble maturity. Unfortunately, both sides often talk past one another, and they ignore the best answer to their debate: the Reformed tradition retains both an emphasis on God's grace as well as human effort in growing in personal holiness. These dual emphasizes are spelled out in *The Westminster Confession XVIII*, 2 and 3.

How does one find authentic Christian experience?

This certainty (of one's assurance of authentic faith) is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

Such teaching agreed with the teaching of those who emphasize God's grace as primary for authentic Christian experience. Yet, such teaching is balanced with the other side of the tradition's teaching in the next section.

This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

The key to remaining true to the Reformed tradition expressed in *Westminster* is for one to agree that authentic Christian experience must retain a belief in both the centrality of God's grace and promises in the gospel as well as a belief that emphasizes personal response to these promises by growing in holiness and obedience.¹⁹ As long as both poles are held, even in great tension, one remains true to the Reformed tradition at this point. In other words, the Reformed tradition not only has room for both supposed 'Antinomians' and 'Legalists', but it encourages both parties to learn from each other.

The second direction in which this dissertation assists our understanding of early New England history is more suggestive than conclusive. The debates between Cotton and Shepard illustrated the continuing struggles between the emphasis on grace and obedience within the Reformed tradition. In the one hundred years following the Antinomian controversy, both grace and obedience had their place within the New

¹⁹ In much the same way Paul encouraged the Philippians 2:12-13, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." NIV

England Puritan community. American Puritanism retained the notion of a religion of the heart, but it also emphasized the need for proper obedience to illustrate authentic conversion. Yet, as the new century began, the intellectual milieu began to change, particularly in Boston and the centers of intellectual inquiry. With the availability of Locke's work and the changing political situation in New England, the Enlightenment understanding of the role of reason and the emphasis on the individual began to inform every dimension of life. This included the religious sphere. Such a change in emphasis did not dramatically alter the intellectual and religious landscape. Instead, it only promoted and encouraged the emphasis on normal means of grace and the intellect as avenues for God's Spirit to work. Such an emphasis remained within the Reformed mainstream as long as it did not deny the need for the witness of the Spirit in changing one's heart.

Yet, within Puritanism and the Reformed tradition there consistently remains a minority position that emphasizes the witness of the Spirit through the promises of the gospel as central for authentic Christian experience. In early New England, this group was stunted in the 1630s by the questioning of the Antinomians and the accusation against Cotton's thought. Still from this pruning arose a revival tradition that brought continued renewal to New England Puritanism and that eventually issued forth to full flower with the Great Awakening. At its heart, this movement desired a direct touch from the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual. Such a touch would give a 'new sense' of God's holiness.²⁰ It would promote true evangelical humility.²¹ It would change them

²⁰ Often mentioned within the twelve signs of authentic religion in Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections*, edited by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 135, 271, etc.

so that they would love God and the things of God above their own worldly desires.²² Again, such a position was often found within Puritanism, and it was found within the thought of John Cotton.²³

In light of this continuing tension within the Reformed tradition and American Puritanism, the Great Awakening and the debates between the New Lights and the Old Light took on new significance. As the Old Lights de-emphasized the witness of the Spirit, there would naturally arise from the soil of Puritanism a corrective to re-emphasize the work of the Spirit. In the 1740s in New England, this corrective movement found a representative in the person and message of George Whitefield. It also found a theologian to explain the tie between the work of the Spirit and Christian living in Jonathan Edwards. In many ways, Edwards carried on and completed the work on which Cotton also labored. Cotton did not invent his theological perspective, but he inherited it from earlier Puritans, the Reformed tradition, Augustine, and the Bible itself. Edwards proved to be a much more capable theologian than Cotton but their message often matched. Both desired to emphasize the work of the Spirit in changing one's affections so that they could worship God. Both understood that because of total depravity, only the Spirit of God could change one's heart so they could love God. Thus, both challenged their hearers to embrace even the smallest hint of true humility as a work of God to bring conversion. In many ways, the debates of the 1740s were foreshadowed by the events of

²¹ Ibid., 238, 312.

²² Ibid., 314-315.

²³ Many quotes from Cotton would almost perfectly overlap with the teaching of Jonathan Edwards in *Religious Affections*. With this overlap, it appears if both men were attempting to explain the same experience.

the 1630s, but the 1740s had a more capable theologian to defend the witness of the Spirit.

The tension between the witness of the Spirit and the need for works to illustrate authentic Christian experience has marked the Reformed tradition from the start. It continues to shape the direction of the growth of this living movement of faith. In the whole of the living oak that is the Reformed tradition, Cotton's life and thought is nothing more than a small branch. Yet, the tensions within his thought and the tensions he addressed in his life anticipate similar debates and struggles that divided New England one hundred years later as well as many contemporary Reformed movements.

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