

COLONIAL AMERICA'S REJECTION OF FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

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Many free grace (FG) adherents assume that grace theology, the *de facto* doctrine of the first century church, was lost until recently. Such is not the case. Makidon has demonstrated, for example, that FG views surfaced in Scotland in the 18th Marrow Controversy.¹ The “Marrow Men” were clear: faith is the sole condition of justification and assurance is the essence of the gospel.

Eighty years earlier peace was broken in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (MBC) over these doctrines. That upheaval, labeled the “Antinomian Controversy,” occupied the MBC for seventeen months from October 1636 to March 1638. The civil and ecclesiastical trials of Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), whose vocal opposition to the “covenant of works”² gained unfavorable attention from the civil authorities, served as a beard for theological adversaries John Cotton (1585-1652) and Thomas Shepard (1605-1649).

In this workshop, we will survey the three main interpretations intellectual historians offer for the Antinomian Controversy. Our primary focus will be on the doctrine of assurance, so we will review sixteenth-century British Calvinism’s treatment of it. We will evaluate the opposing views of John Cotton and Thomas Shepard. Finally, we will consider the opportunity that FG theology missed in the Antinomian Controversy.

WHAT WERE THE ISSUES IN THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY?

At one time Anne Hutchinson was cast as the chief antagonist in the controversy. She was a strong woman who had spent years as a member of Cotton’s church in England. There she learned the pitfalls of covenant theology.³ Her father was a minister; at home, she became well versed in the scriptures. After arriving in the MBC, she developed an extensive teaching ministry in her home, often drawing larger crowds during the week than attended Sunday services. Her extensive biblical knowledge and quick mind made her more than a match for any of the MBC ministers. They were unable to refute her doctrinal views. Only when they cast her as a threat to the state welfare in a civil trial was she convicted and banished.⁴

Fresh documentary evidence published in recent years makes it clear that John Cotton, not Anne Hutchinson, was the major figure.⁵ Although Cotton was not an Antinomian, his differences with the other ministers in the MBC were at the heart of the controversy.⁶

The Antinomian Controversy was a complex web of social, political, legal, cultural, psychological, and theological issues. No single theory explains the entire event. It has attracted the interest of biographers,⁷ social historians,⁸ legal scholars,⁹ and other historiographers,¹⁰ providing a rich body of primary and secondary sources for students of this period. Unfortunately, the nature of the primary source materials complicates identifying the theological center of the storm.¹¹ Our interests center on the theological issues, several of which bear a striking resemblance to the debate between lordship salvation and FG.

Intellectual historians have offered three views about the essential doctrinal issues. Miller framed it as a debate about the role of human activity in the salvation process.¹² His theory about “preparationism” was the predominant view for much of the twentieth century. Stoeber offered a second view by emphasizing the theological issue behind preparationism. It is his opinion that this was a disagreement about how the divine will operates in the world.¹³ Hall and Winship offer a third view. From the literature, they have demonstrated that the doctrine of the assurance of salvation is the crucial issue.¹⁴

PREPARATIONISM

Preparationism taught that an unbeliever is capable of acting in ways that may lead to salvation. Preparation was a sequence of steps one followed in order to acquire the willingness to believe, if faith came. The preparationists were careful to note that preparatory acts are neither saving nor meritorious; they are necessary but not sufficient.

Preparationism rests upon the twin pillars of Ramist logic and the view that conversion is a process rather than an event.¹⁵ These enabled preparationists to imagine themselves capable of discerning the steps that the Holy Spirit used to draw the elect to salvation.

The first preparatory step was discovering the commandments of God and a futile attempt to fulfill them. The next step was to experience “disappointments and disasters” when the attempts to keep God’s law fails. Next in the sequence was an increasing sense of hopelessness that led to the recognition that only Christ could bring salvation. Then came “the infusion of saving grace,” sometimes, but not always, immediately apprehended. This was followed by a lengthy struggle between faith and doubt. Finally, the sinner recognized himself as a recipient of God’s grace. This process may or may not include a moment when the individual was certain of passing from “death unto life.”¹⁶

Two prominent pastors in the MBC, Thomas Hooker and his son-in-law Thomas Shepard, were preparationists.¹⁷ Their formulations “reversed the order of the conversion process as described by Calvin, who had held that humiliation occurred only *after* [Parker’s emphasis] God’s arbitrary ‘effectual call.’ ”¹⁸ Preparationism requires humiliation *before* the call, requiring active effort on the part of the aspiring convert.

Preparationism paved the way out of a serious dilemma for the MBC. Its founders had tied the colony’s political welfare to covenant theology.¹⁹ They held that God makes covenants with groups, treating them as a single unit, in the same way that He makes covenants with persons. A covenant bound the group to a specific political scheme.²⁰ God blesses the group as long as they keep the political terms of the covenant.²¹

This meant that the community’s political welfare was a soteriological issue. When its members were regenerate, a pure church would ensue, insuring God’s blessings upon the community.²² Each person’s good works was essential to the MBC’s survival, but there was no intrinsic motivation for doing those good works because they could not result in personal salvation. This set them on a collision course with the Reformed view of total depravity.

This left the community’s political welfare in a precarious position, hanging on the covenant obedience of unregenerate people who had no interest in the covenant’s strictures. The challenge was to work out the doctrines of election and total depravity in a political setting.

The solution lay in one fortuitous consequence of covenant theology. Covenant theology frames the relationship between God and man as a contract. Before entering the contract God discloses the terms to the person considering the relationship.²³ The preparationists seized on this concept, and by 1630 preparationism had become a familiar and widely descriptive term in puritan teaching.²⁴

Like good Calvinists, they were quick to note that the works, taken as works, had no merit and could not produce salvation. Their theological innovation was to posit that these preparatory works were *necessary* but not *sufficient*.²⁵ “If the covenant had any meaning, it signified a willingness on man’s part to believe in Christ’s redemptive power *before* [Battis’ emphasis] Christ would accept him in spiritual union. The regenerative process was not an abrupt seizure of the will, but was advanced by easy stages wherein the prospective believer might prepare himself and show his readiness to believe.”²⁶

This allowed them to maneuver around the Westminster Confession’s assertion that man “is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”²⁷ Preparationism served both the theological need to preserve the doctrines of election and total inability, and the political need to cultivate a moral populace.

NATURE VERSUS GRACE

Stoever goes beyond Miller’s preparationism hypothesis, arguing that the controversy was a disagreement over “the proper relationship between created nature and divine activity in the process of regeneration...”²⁸ The Reformers labored to insure that salvation was entirely a work of grace, accomplished in a fashion that did not short-circuit nature. According to Stoever, the emphasis on human activity in preparation and on a works-dependent sanctification was not a departure from Reformation principles; it was an effort to preserve the balance between nature and grace. Because God’s will operates through secondary means, human agency “participates legitimately in effectual calling” when restored by grace.²⁹

The issue in Massachusetts Bay may be posed as follows. Does God, in regenerating individuals, employ instruments that belong to the created order—church ordinances, for example, and the words of scripture—and does he respect and work through the inherent capacities of human beings, empowering human faculties to perform holy actions? ... Or does God act directly on human beings, overruling their natural capacities and transforming them apart from or in spite of any activity of their own?³⁰

Stoever presupposes the point he needs to prove. “Divine sovereignty and human inability to achieve salvation were indeed cardinal points of Reformed teaching. It bears noting, however, that acceptance of these tenets did not mean that human activity, as such, was excluded from regeneration.”³¹ John Cotton would have contested Stoever’s breezy claim. In refuting Shepard’s assertion of divine and human cooperation Cotton wrote, “To works of creation there needth no preparation; the almighty power of God calleth them to be his people.... and by calling them to be so, hee maketh them to bee so.”³²

Stoever overplays the orthodoxy of the MBC ministers³³ and misrepresents Cotton’s theology.³⁴ Since the opponents in the controversy did not frame their disagreement in Stoever’s terms, neither shall we.

ASSURANCE

Hall and Winship identify assurance as the heart of the Antinomian Controversy.

On no topic was the [socially conditioned] and provisional nature of godly knowledge more evident than the one over which the free grace controversy was fought, assurance of salvation... What legitimately constituted assurance and how it was legitimately obtained were issues that were thrashed out over a range of venues that stretched from public doctrinal and scriptural debates to the most intimate and private recesses of personal identity formation and experience.³⁵

The controversy broke out during a period when British Calvinism was drifting away from the view that faith and assurance are synonymous.

[E]arly Elizabethan puritan divines spreading the Reformation gospel expressed a powerfully self-confident conception of assurance. It was not something one strove for; it came along with faith. Indeed the most common definition of faith was that it was assurance – God’s declaration of justification produced its own testimony of his love. ‘If we be in the covenant of his grace,’ militant presbyterian Edward Dering said in the early 1570s, ‘it is impossible wee should not feele the comfort of it.’ Around the same time, John Moore, the ‘apostle of Norwich,’ audaciously claimed that true faith carried an assurance as certain ‘as if I performed [Christ’s sacrifice] in mine own person.’ ... The sanctification, or holiness, that followed justification was presumed to spring from assurance of salvation....³⁶

The great message of salvation preached by the early Elizabethan divines was twofold. Salvation came through faith, not through good works or sacraments, and believers could have certainty that their predestining God had pronounced them unalterably justified – Catholics hoped they were saved; the Reformed knew.... So central was the doctrine of assurance that they, like the early continental Reformers, tended to equate it with faith itself.³⁷

The following section will explore the upheaval in British Calvinism over the doctrine of assurance. Here we simply note that while the doctrine was undergoing radical transformation, the desperate need to insure a godly populace confronted the MBC.³⁸ A confluence of threats to its existence, religious revival, and increasing ungodliness in the community flowed together to create what was, in the minds of many, a genuine crisis. Given the theological ferment and political turmoil, the Antinomian Controversy was inevitable. The controversy itself produced a wealth of documentary evidence that assurance was the central *theological* issue of the day.³⁹

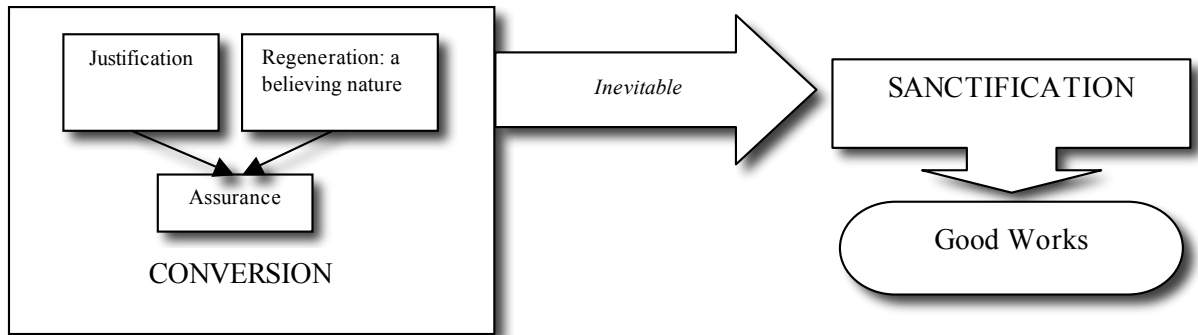
TWO VIEWS OF ASSURANCE IN THE MBC

ASSURANCE IN 16TH CENTURY BRITISH CALVINISM

Sixteenth century puritans were preoccupied with two questions: “What are the avenues of grace and what are the means of assurance.”⁴⁰ The application of Ramist logic to the theological task led to detailed descriptions of the salvation process. This created numerous problems in attempting to develop a reliable doctrine of assurance.

Earlier puritans assumed that holy living followed justification, and that assurance preceded sanctification. In 1570 the martyrologist John Foxe preached, “Faith groundeth upon Christes passion, faith geveth the sappe of love, love blossometh forth in good works.” Richard Greenham declared, “That joy with [a convert] conceiveth inforceth him, and putteh life

into him, for the performance of those things, which are pleasing unto God.”⁴¹ Others at the time echoed similar sentiments.⁴² Their views on the relationship between salvation, sanctification, and assurance looked like this:

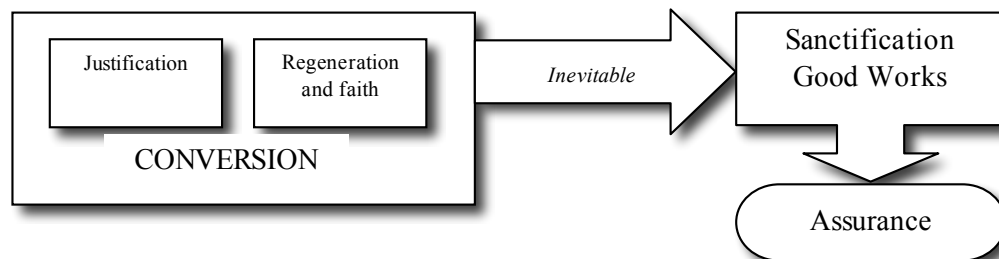


Earlier Puritan View of Assurance

Conversion bestows assurance. Assurance has no direct connection with good works but logically precedes them in the process. It was inevitable that the regenerate nature would eventually show itself in good works, which are sanctification’s visible product. However, the practical reality was that many church members failed to live up to the high standards set for believers⁴³ while others seized on assurance presumptuously.⁴⁴ This led to grave doubts about whether this view of assurance was correct.

At the same time the earlier view of assurance was coming under scrutiny, Richard Rogers (1550-1618) and William Perkins (1558-1602) were discarding the view that conversion was an instantaneous episode that overcomes the elect, like Paul’s experience on the Damascus Road. They treated conversion as a process rather than an event.⁴⁵ This brought assurance into question because it was impossible to identify when regeneration occurred in the conversion process. By revisiting the earlier doctrines of conversion and assurance the later puritans broke the link between faith and assurance.

Perkins, Rogers, and Thomas Hooker⁴⁶ (1586-1647) helped create and eventually stepped into the breach between salvation and assurance. They not only de-coupled assurance from salvation, they held that holiness was a sign of salvation. Rogers concluded, “If you practiced strict and ongoing piety and compared it with God’s conditional promises, that visible piety proved you were saved.”⁴⁷ Perkins claimed that sanctification was “an infallible sign of salvation.”⁴⁸ Soon others were following in the path that Rogers and Perkins had blazed. Their views on the relationship between salvation, sanctification, and assurance looked like this:



Later Puritan View of Assurance

At conversion, the elect are justified, receiving a regenerate and believing nature. This new nature will inevitably reveal its sanctification in good works. These declare the presence of the regenerate nature and, ergo, one's certainty of election is possible.

THE SITUATION AT THE TIME OF THE MBC

By the time of the Antinomian Controversy, numerous unanswered questions clouded the doctrine of assurance in England. Were reading and meditation in the scriptures the source of assurance, or did it come through the Word preached? Was assurance a once-and-forever event? Or was ongoing participation in the life of the church required? Did assurance inure against doubt? Could one doubt salvation, or should the issue never be visited again, even after falling into monstrous sin?

Given the lively debate going on within British Calvinism, the Antinomian Controversy was inevitable. The clash between Cotton and Shepard illustrates the two bases on which Calvinists develop their doctrine of assurance, both of which are wrong. On one hand, John Cotton anchored his doctrine of assurance on intuition, or the inner witness of the Spirit. On the other, Thomas Shepard relied on practical obedience to the law for assurance. As we shall see, both are wholly subjective and neither is satisfactory.

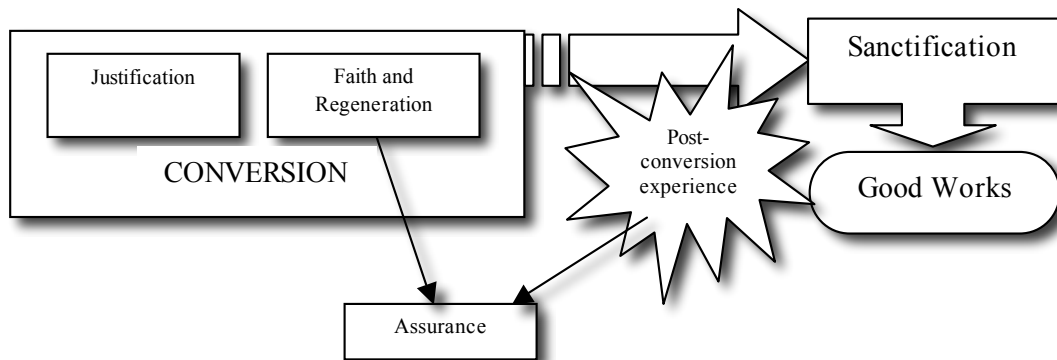
INTUITION

Earlier in his career, John Cotton held the view that works were the source of assurance,⁴⁹ but he began to shift from that position when it was brought to his attention that supralapsarianism – the view that God decreed eternal damnation of sinners before he decreed Adam's Fall – was manifestly indefensible.⁵⁰ In the process of rethinking his views and rejecting covenant theology, he disconnected assurance from a constant stream of inward and outward duties.

In New England Cotton was firm: even the upright saint cannot safely advance his sanctification as proof of his state of grace, unless justifying faith was first plainly manifest.⁵¹ Rejecting works as the basis of assurance forced Cotton to turn within, searching for assurance in the awareness of union with the Holy Spirit. "Those in a true state of grace bore within themselves an all-essential witness that was to be more closely regarded than works as an evidence of regeneration."⁵² When pressed by the other MBC ministers on this point, Cotton was firm.

To the last part hereof, wherein you add other things besides the Image of God in Adam concurring to the making up of Christian sanctification, we cannot assent; because we conceive that faith is the medium whereby we are sanctified... and the indwelling power of the Holy Ghost the procreant and conservant Cause.⁵³

Although Cotton was correct that assurance is not a product of sanctification, he did not go far enough. Assurance was, in Cotton's scheme, something experienced internally. Furthermore, Cotton's view of assurance was highly idiosyncratic: At justification, the believer received assurance from the Son, mixed with doubt and fear. In time, the Holy Spirit would grant a Pentecost experience that would "so clearly reveal our acceptance through the righteousness of Christ, that from thence springeth peace unto the soul, which groweth until it passeth understanding."⁵⁴



Cotton's View of Assurance

When in October 1636 the General Court took these matters in hand, "Cotton suffered no doubt that the essential witness of salvation lay in the immediate testimony of the Spirit."⁵⁵

OBEDIENCE

Thomas Shepard taught assurance is a product of practical obedience to the moral law.⁵⁶ He asked Cotton "Whether a Christian having once his sonship sealed to him by the spirit ever doubts agayne of God's love to him as a son, though he fall into diverse grosse and scandalous sins..." criticizing the subjectivity of Cotton's view.⁵⁷ In contrast, he asserted that the regenerate undergo a "double alteration." Not only is Christ's righteousness imputed in justification, it is implanted in sanctification.⁵⁸ Thus the MBC ministers, under Shepard's lead, asked Cotton "Whither Habits of Grace doe not differ a sainte from an Hypocrite?" and "Whither hee that hath received the Witnessse of the Spirit ought not to try it by Witness from sanctification?"⁵⁹ In his autobiography, Shepard recites the principle cause of the problem that led to the Antinomian Controversy. He recites the trouble suffered by the churches and the whole country, naming Hutchinson and Cotton as the source of it. In his opinion, the principle cause of the trouble was Cotton's rejection of works as an evidence of justification.

The principal opinion and seed of all the rest was this, viz., that a Christian should not take any evidence of God's special grace and love toward him by the sight of any graces or conditional evangelical promises to faith or sanctification, in way of ratiocination (for this was evidence and so a way of works), but it must be without the sight of any grace, faith, holiness, or special change in himself, by immediate revelation in an absolute promise.⁶⁰

In Shepard's view, justification changes our legal status and sanctification changes our character. The implanted "graces of sanctification" are empirical evidence of justification. Those who discover works of sanctification in themselves may reasonably take assurance of their justification before God. The works themselves do not produce justification but merely declare the fact. They often presented their view as a syllogism:

He that is truly sanctified is justified.
 But I am such,
 Ergo, I am justified.⁶¹

BOTH VIEWS FAIL

Shepard and Cotton both made a critical error by requiring the believer to look to himself, either his works or his inner self, for the source of assurance.

Shepard's challenge to Cotton was valid. If the inner witness of the Spirit is the basis of assurance, what happens to assurance when we no longer sense that witness? How do we know that the ensuing doubt of God's love is only doubt rather than evidence that we are in fact reprobate? Because assurance rested entirely upon internal awareness of the Spirit's activity, it was entirely subjective.⁶²

Cotton's challenge to Shepard was also valid. "If a man has only his own sanctification as [proof] of his justification, then his faith is not set on Christ's righteousness, nor on the free promise of grace, but only on his own works."⁶³ By pointing to Christ Cotton came close to moving from intuition to the view that assurance is the essence of faith.

Cotton professed himself unable to believe it possible for a person to maintain that grace works a condition in him, reveals it, makes a promise to it, and applies it to him, and still not to trust in the work. If a person did not trust in the merit of the work, he would at least be tempted to trust in the right of it to the promise, and he probably would not dare to trust a promise unless he could see a work.⁶⁴

Cotton could have pointed out that when pressed, Shepard's view was also subjective.⁶⁵ When asked to distinguish works of believers from those of the unregenerate, Shepard turned within, to motive, attitude, and emotion. He acknowledged that while works may be deceptive, they might serve as reliable guides when understood in the context of proper spirit and motivation. Stoeber helps us navigate Shepard's logic.

That a person obeyed the commandments meant little; *how* and *why* he obeyed them were the vital points. Right, sincere, sound sanctification... involves the entire man, body and soul, substance and faculties... It makes the sanctified wary of sin and desirous of living wholly after God... it makes him keenly aware of his own want of grace and of his dependence on Christ for strength. Those who have passed from death to life may know it, if not intuitively then by reflective examination of their behavior. The truly sanctified render universal obedience to God, simply because they delight to do so.⁶⁶

Shepard hoisted himself on his own petard. His doctrine was faulty because he urged people to take comfort in gracious works, but only those done for the right reason! This left people at the mercy of internal emotional states.⁶⁷ When asked how one could know if he is elect, Shepard would reply that it was by means of the Spirit's work in the soul, expressed in good works. This led to the question of how one could know if good works were the expression of the Spirit's sanctifying work in the elect.⁶⁸ A believer "may know the blessedness of his estate 'by the peculiarity of a work within him.' The elect are distinguished by certain kinds of acts that are the effects of the Spirit's work; and *through these acts, judged according to the revealed word* [my emphasis], the Spirit's work can be known, even as God's power, wisdom, and goodness are known by their effects in creation."⁶⁹ Despite his best efforts, Shepard left a *subjective* standard by which to distinguish the believer's good works from those of a hypocrite. It is up to the individual to make an interpretive judgment of his own actions in light of how he understands scripture.⁷⁰

Although Cotton and Shepard began their respective doctrines of assurance differently, both ended up digging in the same bottomless pit of subjectivity.⁷¹ Both walked into a theological *cul-de-sac* from which there was no escape by seeking knowledge of facts in the spiritual world (God's elective intent toward the individual) by working from data gathered in the natu-

ral world.⁷² Their epistemological folly left the question about the means of assurance unanswered.

A “MISSED OPPORTUNITY” FOR FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

Although the Antinomian Controversy was a dispute between Calvinists, many of them expressed views that should receive a warm welcome in FG circles. Had they been allowed freedom of religious expression, perhaps Colonial America may have had the chance to embrace FG theology! As things ended, an opportunity was lost. In this final section, we consider briefly the views of key figures with which FG adherents may agree.

JOHN COTTON

Cotton was a Reformed theologian through and through. Nonetheless, some features of his thought were friendly to FG positions. He objected to the notion that works have anything at all to do with accomplishing or revealing the Spirit’s regenerating work. Human activity cannot reveal whether a person is regenerate. He flatly denied that gracious habits dwelt within the regenerate in such a way that they operated by their own power.⁷³ Without close personal communion with the Holy Spirit, believers are not capable of a godly and pleasing life.

Cotton’s definition of faith is also familiar to FG adherents. “The Spirit of God sent into the Soule worketh Faith, That is the Union... In this union the soule Receiveth Christ, as an empty vessell receiyveth oyle; but this receyving is not active, but passive. By this declaration of the union the spirit giveth onely a being to Faith: but noe power to actual Receyving: for that cometh after, as a fruit of the union.”⁷⁴ This definition of faith as the passive reception of something offered should be welcome in FG circles, with appropriate caveats.

ANNE HUTCHINSON

The sketchy records that have survived indicate that Anne Hutchinson developed a robust doctrine of assurance through biblical study and personal reflection while she was in England. She determined that assurance rests solely upon God’s promise.

Her original experience of assurance came through her understanding of an absolute promise found in Jeremiah 46:27-28. She understood Jeremiah’s utterance, “Fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith the Lord: for I am with thee” as a promise that she was among the elect. “The Lord shewed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants.” Although she understood this portion of the text in personal terms, it had prophetic significance. “I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee: but I will not forsake thee.” She associated the warning with England’s imminent destruction but took comfort in a promise of personal protection.⁷⁵

This initial sense of assurance did not last. To regain it she followed the puritan prescription by seeking proof of her election in the signs of her own practical holiness. In that process a lucid and remarkable insight occurred. She realized that in searching for assurance in her works she had turned away from grace. “She unconsciously expected God to save her not through his free grace but because of her own good works... She had shifted her reliance from Christ to herself.”⁷⁶

Apparently, she learned the lesson well and began to administer it to others. Upon her arrival in the MBC both Wilson and Cotton questioned her as to her views on these matters. At that time, she insisted that sanctification could provide assurance only after justification was known.⁷⁷

During her residence in the MBC, she pressed the correct doctrine of assurance upon the women to whom she ministered.⁷⁸ Cotton later recalled that she “readily fell into good discourse with the women about their spiritual estates.” She explained how easily they could fool themselves that they were saved by grace while trusting in their good works. They might engage in all the practices expected of godly laity: “secret Prayer, Family Exercises, Conscience of Sabbaths, Reverence of Ministers, Frequenting of Sermons, Dilligence in calling, honesty in dealing and the like.” They might even find “flashes of spirituall comfort in this estate”⁷⁹ but without faith in God’s promise, they would remain among the unregenerate.

JOHN WINTHROP

In the midst of the mounting crisis, then governor John Winthrop wrote a lengthy theological essay in January 1637, prompted by “the new opinions which had broken out in the church of Boston, ‘that a man is justified before he believes; and that faith is no cause of justification.’”⁸⁰ Winthrop did not realize that these “new opinions” from the Boston church were nothing of the sort; they were standard Calvinist teaching. His reaction belies the degree to which he had been schooled in preparationism.

In response, he entered into a lengthy period of prayer, fasting, and Bible study to find illumination of the issues. The fruit of his effort was a lengthy treatise that included the “declaration expounding his conviction that faith must precede justification and is in part a cause of it.” This promising beginning may have led to further reconsideration of preparationism and perhaps the Reformed doctrine of total inability. Sadly, he submitted this document to Pastor Wilson who then conveyed it to Thomas Shepard. Shepard recognized the danger inherent in Winthrop’s views. He persuaded Winthrop, whom he had already co-opted in the political trials, to quash its publication. The document has not survived and all that remains are notes in Shepard’s writings.

JOHN WHEELWRIGHT

John Wheelwright was Anne Hutchinson’s brother-in-law. In June 1636, he arrived in the MBC and became pastor of Eaxe Chapel at Mount Wollaston, Boston. He was soon embroiled in the controversy.

On January 19, 1637 the MBC held a fast to restore the peace that had been broken by dissension in the churches. Wheelwright preached in the Boston church that day. His sermon raised the Antinomian Controversy to a fevered pitch.⁸¹ The sermon was preserved from shorthand notes taken by Robert Keayne,⁸² and two versions of the manuscript are still in existence.⁸³ In it, he declared that those who have called for the fast had tacitly admitted that the Lord was not with them or with their teaching.⁸⁴

“I wrap all up in one poynt of Doctrine, and that is this. The only cause of the fasting of true beleevers is the absence of Christ. Either Christ he is present with his people, or els absent from his people; if he be present with his people, then they have no cause to fast: therefore it must be his absence that is the true cause of fasting, when he is taken away then they must fast.”⁸⁵

Wheelwright denounced those who turned first to their own works rather than to Christ, or who seek comfort in the fruits of their sanctification rather than in God's promises.

What is the course we must take? Must we especially looke after the removing those evill things and procuring those good things? This an hypocrite will do... and the Lord will grant the desire of hypocrites. What must we do then? We must looke first, at the Lord Jesus Christ, and most desire now that Jesus Christ may be received in other nations and other places, and may be more received amongst ourselves. We must turne unto the Lord and then he will will turne all into a right frame....

So the children of God are a company, a generation that seeke the Lord and his strength evermore, they do not only seeke the gifts of his spirit, but the Lord himself, they doe not seeke after the strength that is in the Lord, they do not seeke only to know the Lord by his fruits and effects, but look upon the Lord with a direct faith they seeke his face.⁸⁶

Although Wheelwright's sermon seems mild, removed as we are by 370 years from the controversy, it was inflammatory and seditious. It led to his expulsion from the MBC.

CONCLUSION

A full and lucid presentation of FG theology was unavailable to the community of believers that had gathered at the MBC, but views that distinguish the FG position were under discussion. Among them were the doctrine of assurance, the definition of faith, and faith before justification. An innovative form of Calvinism,⁸⁷ remarkably similar to today's lordship salvation, discarded them all. Thus, it is fair to say that the MBC rejected key elements of FG theology, and would have rejected FG theology in its entirety.

It is also clear that the MBC ministers, following the lead of Perkins and Beza, had departed from Calvin's theology. Their views on preparation and assurance were not Calvin's theological legacy, and had he the opportunity to confront their views, would have rejected them.⁸⁸

The Antinomian Controversy demonstrates that data perceived in the natural world cannot produce certain knowledge of facts in the spiritual world. This includes data gathered by observing and interpreting one's practical obedience to the law, and data gathered by searching for evidence of the Spirit's activity within. Any attempt to develop assurance on anything other than revelation will inevitably fail because it is necessarily subjective. Assurance *is believing* God's promises.

In the course of this study three final questions about lordship salvation occurred.

First, it is evident that the lordship position evolved out of covenant theology. This leads to the question of whether dispensational lordship advocates find themselves in the odd place of holding a soteriology that is at odds with their eschatology.

Second, if God's elective intent toward any person is a fact that resides in the eternal, spiritual world, have the lordship advocates fallen into an epistemological trap by attempting to determine that fact from data gathered in this world? Perhaps better scholars than I may be able to exploit this to advantage.

Finally, if assurance a product of scripture (specifically of the promises in scripture), how should we evaluate those who claim that assurance requires something *in addition* to scripture? Is it not true that the lordship position denigrates the sufficiency of scripture and devalues the power and scope of God's promises?

Sola gratia.

¹ Michael Makidon, "The Marrow Controversy" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Theological Society* 16:31 (Autumn 2003), 65-77. See also Edward Fisher, "The Marrow of Modern Divinity" online edition at <http://www.mountzion.org/text/marrow/marrow.html>.

² She was vocal in her opposition to the regnant view in the MBC that the unregenerate were capable of preparing themselves for conversion through a prescribed sequence of actions deemed necessary but not sufficient.

³ Anne encountered puritan doctrine at St. Botolph's Church in Boston, England, under the ministry of John Cotton. Cotton's determination to minimize the role of moral effort in the regenerative process conditioned her against preparationism and what today we would call "lordship" theology. Upon her arrival at the MBC, shortly after Cotton's, she began embellishing his views at Bible study classes in her home. Her influence in the community grew widely and rapidly, including prominent businessmen and even MBC's young governor, Henry Vane.

⁴ See David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd edition (Duke University Press, 1990), 311-348 for the transcript of her civil trial before the court at Newton and 349-388 for the transcript of her ecclesiastical trial before the church at Boston. Michael Ditmore, "A Prophetess In Her Own Country: An Exegesis of Anne Hutchinson's 'Immediate Revelation'" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57:2 (April 2000), 349-392, demonstrates that Hutchinson's claim of "immediate revelation" – for which she was convicted and banished – was not uncommon. Even a chief antagonist at the trial, Thomas Hooker, teasingly reported having received prophetic communications (p. 354). Contrary to the accusations that she had abandoned the Bible, the trial transcript shows that she relied extensively on biblical references all through her trial, which frequently confounded her accusers. Ultimately, the divide was not between Hutchinson and her ministerial inquisitors, but between her and John Winthrop, the political power in the MBC. Her "charismatic" practices *per se* were not the problem; it was the threat her views posed to the political order.

⁵ Hall, 4.

⁶ R. T. Kendal, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Paternoster Press, 1997), 169.

⁷ Emery John Battis, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), identified Anne Hutchinson as a menopausal woman of fierce temperament and rebellious nature who followed John Cotton and expanded on his teachings because her husband was a weak and ineffective male leader.

⁸ Lyle Koehler, "The Case of the American Jezebels: Anne Hutchinson and Female Agitation during the Years of the Antinomian Turmoil 1636-1640," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, No. 31 (1974), 55-78, portrays her as a latent feminist who served as a foil for John Winthrop's consolidation of power.

⁹ Richard B. Morris, *Fair Trial* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 3-32 and Michael Belknap, *American Political Trials* revised, expanded edition (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 1-24.

¹⁰ Ann Fairfax Withington and Jack Schwartz, "The Political Trial of Anne Hutchinson" *New England Quarterly* 51:2 (June 1978), 226-240, cast as an undesirable whose views were a political threat to the survival of the Commonwealth. Jon Meacham *American Gospel* (New York: Random House, 2006), 49-52 and Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States* (New York: Sentinel, 2004), 30-34, both cast Hutchinson and her views as a threat to God's continued blessings to a new society that had willingly entered into a covenant relationship with God. Her view that the believer is not obligated to observe the moral law of the covenant threatened the divine hand of protection upon the MBC at a time when external threats to their continued welfare were widespread. See also Marilyn J. Westerkamp,

“Anne Hutchinson, Sectarian Mysticism, and the Puritan Order” *Church History* 59:4 (December 1990), 482-496; Edmund S. Morgan, “The Case against Anne Hutchinson, *The New England Quarterly* 10:4 (December 1937), 635-649; Jeffrey M. Kahl, “The Antinomian Controversy and the Puritan Vision: A Historical Perspective on Christian Leadership” *Ashland Theological Journal* 35 (2003), 55-72.

¹¹ Those involved did not produce substantial systematic works like the continental Reformers. Their work was largely confined to sermons, letters, and journals. The printed sermons were often transcriptions put into circulation by those who heard them. The letters and journals often did not enter the literature until decades later.

¹² Perry Miller, “Preparation for Salvation in 17th Century New England” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4:3 (June 1943), 253-286; Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, 2nd edition (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1958); Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1962).

¹³ William K. B. Stoever, *“A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven”: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesley University Press, 1978). Stoever’s effort to ferret out the underlying theological presuppositions is puzzling because the parties to the debate did not frame the issue in Stoever’s terms. Nor would they be considered skilled exegetes. Hooker was not careful in his theology or exegesis; he was a pastor with an agenda, and his method of interpreting scripture suffered accordingly. See, for example, Alfred Habegger, “Preparing the Soul for Christ: The Contrasting Sermon forms of John Cotton and Thomas Hooker” *American Literature*, 41:3 (November 1969), 342-354. Habegger provides solid documentary evidence that Hooker’s approach to the biblical text was governed by Ramist logic, not inductive exposition, or careful theological method. It is doubtful that Hooker would have appreciated Stoever’s nuanced theological analysis. Even Iaian Murray, who goes to great lengths to extol Hooker’s views on conversion and assurance, tellingly acknowledges that much of Hooker’s ministry was agenda driven. Hooker wanted to reform the Church of England by troubling unbelievers who fancied themselves Christian merely because they were the king’s subjects. Iaian Murray, “Thomas Hooker and the Doctrine of Conversion, Part 1” *Banner of Truth Magazine* 195 (December 1979), 19-29; “Thomas Hooker and the Doctrine of Conversion, Part 2” *Banner of Truth Magazine* 196 (January 1980), 22-32.

¹⁴ Michael Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), concurs that assurance was the central issue in the debate.

¹⁵ Ramist logic is a dialectic process of continually dividing and subdividing areas of knowledge by twos. See *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, s.v. “Ramism.” The earliest English churchmen followed Zwingli in viewing Paul’s Damascus Road experience (Act 9) as a normative conversion. But as early as 1570 influential puritans began to ask if regeneration might be a process rather than an event. See Norman Pettit, “Hooker’s Doctrine of Assurance: A Critical Phase in New England Spiritual Thought” *The New England Quarterly* 47:4 (December 1974), 518-519. Kendall sees preparationism as a pastoral device to allay the fears of those who dreaded the possibility that they were reprobate, anchoring it in the doctrine of predestination. Kendall, 5. In light of the fact that the Synod of Dort explicitly rejected preparationism, it is unlikely that pastoral concerns over the doctrine of predestination alone are a sufficient explanation for the rise of preparationism. See page 4, note 33.

¹⁶ Leonard, Bill J. “Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture” *Review and Expositor* 82:1 (Winter 1985), 115.

¹⁷ “Hooker, often mistaken as representative of New England orthodoxy, explored preparation at extraordinary length and in extraordinary detail in his preaching. There is no evidence that anyone else, including Shepard, preached preparation with anything like Hooker’s convoluted detail. Shepard shared roughly the same Rogerian [referring to the Puritan Richard Rogers] emphasis, however, and he cared about it strongly. He claimed that failure to grasp that sin had to be severed before justification could occur was the ‘cause of all that counterfeit coin and hypocrisy in this professing age.’” Winship, *Making Heretics*, 270, note 25.

¹⁸ David Lowell Parker, *The Application of Humiliation: Ramist Logic and the Rise of Preparationism in New England*, Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 16-17.

¹⁹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Harvard University Press, 1953).

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ From here it becomes a relatively easy matter to work out why antinomianism was seen as a great threat to political survival. Thus, the civil governments of Massachusetts and Connecticut exercised greater control over the religious sentiments of its citizens than any European government had ever attempted. Their *political* need to realize a pure church of pure saints resulted in the absolute necessity to suppress heresy and schism with the organs of government. Miller, 119-120.

²² Ibid., 54.

²³ Miller, 55.

²⁴ Ibid., 56. See also David Laurence, "Jonathan Edwards, Solomon Stoddard, and the Preparationist Model of Conversion" *Harvard Theological Review* 72:3 (July – October 1979), 267-283. The customary practice among English historians is to lowercase "puritans" and "puritanism" because the term refers to tendencies within the Church of England rather than a clearly identifiable movement. This article will follow that custom.

²⁵ They were necessary because God had ordained not only His divine purpose, but the secondary means by which they would be accomplished. But the net result was that without these preparatory works there would be no regeneration!

²⁶ Batts, 163.

²⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter IX, Section III.

²⁸ William K. B. Stoever, "Nature, Grace and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy." *Church History* 44:1 (March 1975), 22.

²⁹ William K. B. Stoever, "A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven": Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts (Middletown, CT: Wesley University Press, 1978), 8.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Hall, xiii. Contrary to Stoever, the MBC ministers departed from standard Reformed theology in several important aspects. For example, they expected positive disposition of the soul before regeneration, not merely the conventional legal preparation that Stoever suggests. They also required that prospective church members be able to convey their experience of grace. Baird Tipson, "Review: 'A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven': Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 36:3 (July 1979), 480-482.

³³ Preparationism first came under scrutiny at the Synod of Dort (1618-1619). The Continental Calvinists refused to be persuaded on the matter. Bishop Joseph Hall, who represented the English Calvinists, did not yield. Although Hall agreed that the unregenerate man's will has no power to achieve his own conversion, he maintained before the Synod that "there are certain foregoing acts that are pre-required to the conversion of a man... as the knowledge of God's will, the feeling of our sin, the fear of hell, the thought of deliverance, some hope of pardon" because God's grace "doth not use to work upon a man immediately by sudden ruptures, but by meet preparations." Bishop Hall thus agreed that salvation is by grace alone while allowing for the elect's cooperation. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, 126-127.

³⁴ Stoever calls Cotton a "crypto-sectary" who came perilously close to invalidating human agency altogether. Stoever, 177. Stoever's assessment tells us more about his theology than it does about Cotton's. Kendall cogently observes that Cotton stood almost alone in hopes of reversing the slide toward experimental predestinarianism. Kendall, 169. If anything, Shepard *et al* were crypto-Arminians!

³⁵ Winship, 4. Hall writes, "I argued in 1978, and would argue again, that assurance of salvation was the central issue in the controversy." Hall, xiv. He overstates his case against preparationism as the central issue. "In point of fact there was almost nothing about preparation in the controversy," xv. Two pages earlier he had said, "As several historians have established, this quarrel had to do with the order of salvation, or the ways in which God accomplished the "work of grace," and acknowledged preparationism and assurance were intertwined. Pettit observes that preparationism was largely neglected, suggesting that this was a

measure “of how sensitive the preparationists had now become to the vulnerability of their doctrine.” Pettit, 144. Although the controversy was a battle over the doctrine of assurance, preparationism was lurking on the sidelines.

³⁶ Winship, 14. The problem with this view of assurance, which predated the Antinomian Controversy by more than sixty years, lies in the phrase “it is impossible wee should not feele the comfort of it.” This has the unfortunate results of grounding one’s assurance in the perception of God’s comfort and love, rather than leaving it grounded in the nature of faith and the promises addressed to it.

³⁷ Michael Winship, “Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospellers: Assurance of Salvation and the Pastoral Origins of Puritan Practical Divinity in the 1580s” *Church History* 70:3 (September 2001), 465.

³⁸ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 119-120. He states, “The fundamental problem of life for English Puritans was not social: it was the salvation of the soul, out of which would flow purification of the church and a regeneration of the state,” 54.

³⁹ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 5.

⁴⁰ Battis, 21.

⁴¹ Winship, *Weak Christians*, 466.

⁴² Winship, *Making Heretics*, 14.

⁴³ William Perkins complained that the earlier puritans linked assurance and faith “at so high a reach as few can attaine unto it.” Winship, 14. It seems that none of the puritans ever bothered to question whether sanctification was inevitable. It was simply assumed because they did not recognize the differences between the standards for believers (faith alone!) and those for disciples (faith and obedience).

⁴⁴ A comment by Winship on this matter exposes the puritans’ failure to distinguish between believers, who are regenerate, and disciples, who are striving for sanctification. “John Knewstubb complained in 1577 that... most acknowledged that only faith in Jesus saved them. Yet they failed to understand what it really meant to renounce one’s righteousness and rely on Christ...” Winship, *Weak Christians*, 467. This suggests that renunciation of one’s own righteousness is an essential component of faith in Christ.

⁴⁵ The earlier Elizabethan puritans had developed a robust concept of assurance that included it in the act of faith. “Indeed the most common definition of faith was that it was assurance...” Winship, *Making Heretics*, 14.

⁴⁶ Pettit, *Hooker’s Doctrine of Assurance*, 519.

⁴⁷ Winship, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ There is a double irony here because Thomas Shepard had flirted with the view that assurance is the promise of the gospel while in University studies.

⁵⁰ Winship, 30.

⁵¹ Battis, 33. Kendall claims that after 1636 Cotton’s views could be summarized under three points. First, that faith alone is the evidence of justification. Second, that there is no saving preparation for grace prior to regeneration. Third, that sanctification is no proof of justification. Kendall, 169. He also states that for Cotton “assurance is the essence of saving faith, op. cit. Before FG adherents embrace Kendall’s conclusion they need to recall Cotton’s subjectivity. Cotton “... tends to make faith an experience – a subjective emotional feeling,” 171.

⁵² Ibid., 38-39.

⁵³ Hall, 67.

⁵⁴ Winship, 35.

⁵⁵ Hall, 121-122. The precise nature of this inner witness of the Spirit is difficult to define precisely. Winship, *Weak Christians*, 473 notes that “earlier divines tended to speak of that witness in terms of an I-thou

encounter or in emotionally exalted terms.” It was variously described as a state of tranquility, a sense of divine comfort or consolation. It was, at bottom, an inner sense of being.

⁵⁶ While at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, Shepard had earnestly sought to experience the presence of God. He never enjoyed that experience. Being devoid of any sense of the Holy Spirit’s seal, he was highly suspicious of those who claimed assurance on that basis. Francis J. Bremer, John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father (Oxford University Press, 2003), 281.

⁵⁷ Hall, 27.

⁵⁸ Stoever, 44-47.

⁵⁹ Hall, 45. The questions suppose that the witness of the Spirit – on which Cotton built his doctrine of assurance – ought not be tested in light of one’s works of sanctification. This was *the crux* of the debate.

⁶⁰ Michael McGiffert, God’s Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge (University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 67. This was a clear departure from Calvin’s warning that in the matter of sanctification, “if you contemplate yourself, that is sure damnation,” *Institutes* III.ii.24. Kendall observes that the one thing “Calvin does not do, then, is to urge men to make their calling and election sure to themselves,” page 25. It is hard to take seriously Stoever’s claim that Cotton, who said virtually the same thing on assurance, is a “crypto-sectary” who had departed from Calvin on this matter.

⁶¹ Stoever, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55. In commenting on Cotton’s views Stoever makes an amazing admission. “One cannot argue to justification from acts of faith and sanctification, as to a cause from its effects, because one cannot know, apart from the Spirit’s revealing, that one’s faith and sanctification are true, there being nothing distinctive about the works of either by which to recognize them. True faith of assurance rests solely upon its proper object – God’s mercy and free grace offered in Christ – and then only as ‘revealed to me in some divine testimony,’” p. 56. With some modification of this statement, Stoever might be mistaken for an adherent of free grace! God’s revelation is the only basis of assurance.

⁶⁵ In 1578 Chaderton, Perkins’ tutor at Cambridge, had observed “we can never thynke, will, speake, or doe any good thing with pure heartes.” Winship, *Weak Christians*, 466. The more closely we analyze our works to understand the *how* and *why* of our obedience, the more clearly we become aware of our impurity. It is a fool’s errand to imagine that we can ever fully understand our motivation for doing anything!

⁶⁶ Stoever, 74.

⁶⁷ “By the middle of the seventeenth century, New England clergy shared with many other Protestants a conception of the Christian life as a journey that required an incessant, never-ending struggle against sin.” Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, xix.

⁶⁸ Stoever, 120-121.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁰ The “hopeful saint... must examine his behavior rigorously in light of conscience and God’s revealed will.” William K. B. Stoever, “Nature, Grace and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy” *Church History* 44:1 (March 1975), 27. An additional argument that should have been raised against Shepard, et al, is the unquestioned assumption that the conscience is capable of understanding the motivation behind our acts.

⁷¹ For Shepard as well as Cotton, the most certain evidence of one’s election was the “privy seal” of the Spirit, an inward witness of the Spirit to the soul that cannot be mistaken and is conclusive. Yet when it came time to qualify or quantify this privy seal, the objective criteria were *always* framed in terms of the Spirit’s comfort, a change in behavior motivated by the Spirit, a change of character, and finally, a sense of joy in obedience.

⁷² Cotton was working with data about the “immediate testimony of the spirit” which must eventually resolve itself into an *interpretation* of sensory and emotional data. Shepard was working with data points about one’s observance of the law that must eventually be measured against some arbitrary standard. Whether the data set was of one’s interior condition (Cotton) or one’s exterior behavior (Shepard), sure knowledge of eternal truths cannot be discovered therein.

⁷³ Stoeber, *Nature*, 28.

⁷⁴ Hall, 37. This last sentence may be Cotton quoting another authority; the manuscript is unclear.

⁷⁵ Winship, 38.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 41. Presumably justification was known by virtue of faith in God’s promises, as she experienced earlier in England.

⁷⁸ Hall, 309, 412.

⁷⁹ Winship, 41.

⁸⁰ Pettit, 140.

⁸¹ Hall, 152.

⁸² Winnifred King Rugg, *Unafraid: The Life of Anne Hutchinson*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 133.

⁸³ Hall, 153.

⁸⁴ Adams called Wheelwright’s sermon “perhaps the most momentous single sermon ever preached from the American pulpit.” Charles Francis Adams, *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History, Vol. 1*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 368.

⁸⁵ Hall, 154.

⁸⁶ *John Wheelwright* (Boston: The Prince Society, 1876), online edition <http://books.google.com/books?vid=OCLC01437303&id=zfUYwP1fGRwC&pg=PA9&lpg=PA9&dq=antinomian+%22John+Wheelwright%22&num=100#PPP1.M1>, 158.

⁸⁷ Kendall has demonstrated that puritanism was not the theological legacy of Calvin or the continental Reformers; it was the unraveling of Reformed theology.

⁸⁸ This is Kendall’s thesis. See page 18, note 2.