OTHER BOOKS BY Edmund S. Morgan

The Puritan Family
Essays on Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England

Virginians at Home
Family Life in the Eighteenth Century

The Stamp Act Crisis
Prologue to Revolution
[WITH HELEN M. MORGAN]

The Birth of the Republic, 1763–89

The Puritan Dilemma
The Story of John Winthrop

Prologue to Revolution
Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764–1766
[EDITED]

The Gentle Puritan
A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727–1795

VISIBLE SAINTS

The History of a Puritan Idea

BY

Edmund S. Morgan

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

1963

tested members for an experience of saving faith. But within ten years the procedures for founding a church and admitting new members to it did include such a test. During this decade some twenty thousand settlers landed in New England, and eighteen churches were set up in Massachusetts alone. By 1640 the New Englanders had evolved practices so uniform that both critics and advocates could agree in describing them, and evidence is so abundant that we need not resort to speculation.[45]

The founding or "gathering" of a church began with at least seven men, who had to satisfy one another both about their knowledge of Christian doctrine *and* about their experience of saving grace. The ministers of some nearby churches had to be present along with some of the civil magistrates of the colony. If these experts thought the prospective founders of the church to be not properly qualified, the group was obliged to wait until suitable saints were forthcoming. Once a church was gathered, by subscription of the first members to a covenant, it elected officers: a pastor or teacher (or both in a large congregation) and a ruling elder or elders and deacons. Then, as qualified candidates appeared, it admitted new members.

Because the procedure for admission occasioned much dispute between the Puritans of New England and old, the details of it are fully recorded. A person seeking admission to the church first approached the elders who in a personal interview examined both his knowledge and his religious experiences. Any obviously ignorant, "graceless," or scandalous person was turned back then and there. But if the examination was satisfactory the ruling elder proposed the candidate to the church, requesting the members to make inquiry about him. Members were expected to report any known offense committed by the candidate and he was required to explain or show his repentance for it, in private for private offenses and before the church for public ones.

45. The ensuing account is based on the detailed descriptions offered by John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (London, 1645), pp. 6–10, 54–58; Richard Mather, *Church Government and Church Covenant Discussed* (London, 1643), pp. 23–24; Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Boston, 1867), pp. 12–29; Edward Johnson, *A History of New England (Wonder-Working Providence)*, ed. J. F. Jameson (New York, 1910), pp. 214–17. Cotton's and Mather's tracts were written some years before the publication dates.

If the candidate passed these hurdles, several members testified at a church meeting to his good behavior, and he was called upon to demonstrate the work of God in his soul. For women and for men who were excessively diffident, the elders might simply repeat to the church the result of their private examination of the candidate but normally he was expected to make a narration, perhaps fifteen minutes in length, of the way in which God's saving grace came to him. Questions might be put to him about this experience by any member in order that all might be certain of its genuineness; and in some cases the whole demonstration may have consisted of questions and answers.

If the members or a majority of them were satisfied by the narration, the candidate went on to make a profession of faith, that is, a statement of the main doctrines of Christianity in which he believed. Though at first the candidate might state his beliefs in his own words, the profession or confession ultimately became standardized, but differed in wording from church to church. Following it the members voted on the candidate's admission. The ruling elder then tendered him the church covenant, which he assented to with relation to the church and the church with relation to him. With this action he became a member.

Although these procedures were probably more elab-

orate than those of the Separatist churches in Holland, the only radical difference from the Separatist practice lay in the candidate's demonstration of the work of grace in his soul. Inquiry into his good behavior, the profession of faith, and the subscription to the covenant had all been practiced by the Separatists. But the demonstration of saving grace was a distinct addition. It meant that every member of a New England church must be able to describe personal experiences corresponding to those which theologians like Perkins and Hildersam had defined. According to Thomas Lechford, an unfriendly witness, the candidates had to show "that they have beene wounded in their hearts for their originall sinne, and actuall transgressions, and can pitch upon some promise of free grace in the Scripture, for the ground of their faith, and that they finde their hearts drawne to beleeve in Christ Jesus, for their justification and salvation, and these in the ministerie of the Word, reading or conference." [46] John Cotton, teacher of the Boston church, has left on record some of the questions normally put to candidates there: "How it pleased God to worke in them, to bring them home to Christ, whether the law have convinced them of sinne, how the Lord hath wonne them to deny themselves and their owne righteousnesse, and to rely on the righteousnesse of Christ." [47]

Some narratives were written down, either by the candidate or by the elders (the Reverend Michael Wigglesworth took down several in shorthand in his diary).[48] A number of these have survived, and they demonstrate clearly the familiarity of the narrators with the morphology of conversion, a familiarity produced, no doubt, by

46. *Plain Dealing*, p. 19.
47. *A Coppy of a Letter of Mr. Cotton* (1641), p. 5.
48. "The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth," ed. E. S. Morgan, Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications*, XXXV (1942–1946), 426–

a great many sermons on the subject. The pattern is so plain as to give the experiences the appearance of a stereotype: first comes a feeble and false awakening to God's commands and a pride in keeping them pretty well, but also much backsliding. Disappointments and disasters lead to other fitful hearkenings to the word. Sooner or later true legal fear or conviction enables the individual to see his hopeless and helpless condition and to know that his own righteousness cannot save him, that Christ is his only hope. Thereafter comes the infusion of saving grace, sometimes but not always so precisely felt that the believer can state exactly when and where it came to him. A struggle between faith and doubt ensues, with the candidate careful to indicate that his assurance has never been complete and that his sanctification has been much hampered by his own sinful heart.

If the candidate neglected any point, the elders or the members might question him about it. An exchange recorded by Michael Wigglesworth is typical. A candidate was asked: "Do you never find a heart that can't prize Christ but had rather walk after the way of your own heart?" If he had answered that he always prized Christ above all else, he would have failed the test. His actual answer was perfectly phrased: "Yes I have seen it many a time but I have considered that was the way to ruin both me and mine after me. I have searched to see whether I loved God's company or no and I have found indeed my opposition against it. Yet I have found in some poor measure that God hath helped me to take delight in his will." [49] This was faith in its proper imperfection, and one may be

44. Thomas Shepard recorded fifty narratives of members admitted to the Cambridge church. The manuscript is in the possession of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. I have consulted the photostat copy in the Massachusetts Historical Society.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 440.

sure that the candidate was admitted. On the other hand, Captain John Underhill was clearly on shaky ground when he sought admission to the church by asserting with full assurance that saving grace had come to him while he was enjoying a pipe of the good creature tobacco.[50]

Sometimes the candidate might entertain the church with an all too lengthy spiritual autobiography. So at least we may infer from Thomas Shepard, who felt obliged to defend this part of the admission procedure against the objection that "there are many odd confessions by those that are received, and extravagant enlarged discourses of the set time of their conversion, and their Revelation, and ill Application of Scripture which makes such long doings, and are wearisome and uncomely." To this objection Shepard answered with a prescription for a proper narrative. "I confess," he said, "it is not fit that so holy and solemn an Assembly as a Church is, should be held long with Relations of this odd thing and tother, nor hear of Revelations and groundless joyes, nor gather together the heap, and heap up all the particular passages of their lives, wherein they have got any good; nor Scriptures and Sermons, but such as may be of special use unto the people of God, such things as tend to shew, Thus I was humbled, then thus I was called, then thus I have walked, though with many weaknesses since, and such special providences of God I have seen, temptations gone through, and thus the Lord hath delivered me, blessed be his Name &c." [51]

The introduction of this new spiritual test for membership was not accompanied by any relaxation in the old demand that members demonstrate knowledge of the principles of religion, that they voluntarily assent to the covenant, and that they live lives free of scandal. The New England churches were fully equipped with powers of discipline and exercised them to expel members who lapsed from good behavior. But the new demand for signs of grace gave the New England churches a different character from the old Separatist churches. In England and Holland, anyone who wished to join a Separatist church could qualify himself to do so by actions that lay within his own power. In New England, membership required an experience that was beyond the power of a man to attain by his own efforts. Hypocrites might dissemble it, and the New Englanders were the first to admit that their churches contained hypocrites; they did not dream of perfection in this world, and they joined the chorus against the Donatists and Anabaptists.[52] But they held it a duty to exclude from the church everyone who failed to persuade them in speech or writing that he possessed saving grace. While affirming the old distinction between the visible and the invisible church, they thus narrowed the distance between the two far more drastically than the Separatists had done.

50. Winthrop, *History*, I, 324–25.

51. Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* (London, 1660), II, 200. Though published in 1660, this work was based on sermons preached 1636–1640.

52. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), pp. 68–81.

It is certain that the new system was fully established in Massachusetts by 1640; yet it is highly probable that it did not exist in 1629. How, then, did it come into existence?

The evidence is fragmentary. Cotton Mather, writing in 1701, when the system was under attack and he and his father were defending it, related a tradition, which he did not attempt to refute, that:

. . . the first Churches of *New England* began only with a Profession of Assent and Consent unto the *Confession of Faith* and the *Covenant* of Communion. Afterwards, they that sought for the Communion, were but privately examined about a Work of *Grace* in their Souls, by the *Elders*, and then publickly propounded unto the Congregation, only that so, if there were any scandal in their Lives, it might be objected and considered. But in the year 1634, one of the Brethren having leave to hear the Examinations of the *Elders*, magnified so much the Advantage of being present at such an Exercise, that many others desired and obtained the like leave to be present at it; until, at length, to gratifie this useful *Curiosity*, the whole Church always expected the *Liberty* of being thus particularly acquainted with the *Religious Dispositions* of those with whom they were afterwards to sit at the Table of the Lord; and that Church which *began* this way was quickly imitated by most of the rest. . . .[53]

Cotton Mather was writing long after the event, without firsthand knowledge but from a wide acquaintance with the writings, published and unpublished, of the founders. William Hubbard, who graduated from Harvard in the first class in 1642, was a little closer to the events. His account, from which I have already quoted, confirms Mather's and offers a further detail:

Those that came over soon after Mr. Endicot, namely Mr. Higginson and Mr. Skelton, Anno 1629, walked something in an untrodden path; therefore it is the less to be wondered at, if they went but in and out, in some things complying

53. *Magnalia*, book V, p. 43.

54. Hubbard, *General History*, pp. 181–82. Cf. Mather, *Magnalia*, book III, pp. 20–21: "There were divers Churches gathered in the Country, before the Arrival of Mr. *Cotton;* but upon his Arrival, the Points of *Church-Order*, were with more of Exactness revived, and received in them, and *further* observed in such as were gathered after them."

55. Hubbard, *General History*, p. 186. It would not be surprising if the Watertown church was somewhat more forward than the others in Congregationalism, because at least one member of it, Richard Brown, the ruling elder, had had experience in the practice of Congregationalism before coming to the New World. Brown had been one of the founders of Henry Jacob's church in London in 1616. See Hubbard, *General History*, p. 187; Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, II, 294.

too much, in some things too little, with those of the Separation, and it may be in some things not sufficiently attending to the order of the Gospel, as themselves thought they understood afterwards. For in the beginning of things they only accepted of one another, according to some general profession of the doctrine of the Gospel, and the honest and good intentions they had one towards another, and so by some kind of covenant moulded themselves into a church in every Plantation, where they took up their abode, until Mr. Cotton and Mr. Hooker came over, which was in the year 1633, who did clear up the order and method of church government, according as they apprehended was most consonant to the Word of God. And such was the authority they (especially Mr. Cotton) had in the hearts of the people, that whatever he delivered in the pulpit was soon put into an Order of Court, if of a civil, or set up as a practice in the church, if of an ecclesiastical concernment. After that time the administration of all ecclesiastical matters was tied up more strictly than before to the rules of that which is since owned for the Congregational Way. . . .[54]

Hubbard also tells us that George Phillips, the minister of Watertown who came to New England with Winthrop in 1630, "was, at the first, more acquainted with the way of church discipline, since owned by Congregational churches; but being then without any to stand by him, . . . he met with much opposition from some of the magistrates, till the time that Mr. Cotton came into the country, who, by his preaching and practice, did by degrees mould all their church administrations into the very same form which Mr. Phillips labored to have introduced into the churches before." [55]