

The Half-Way Covenant of 1662: Some New Evidence

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RECENTLY, A GROUP of documents pertaining to the Synod of 1662 and the Half-Way Covenant were located in the library of the American Antiquarian Society. These manuscripts, including lengthy treatises by Nicholas Street and John Davenport, constitute a larger body of material than that on which the standard histories of the Half-Way Synod have been based. The standard sources concerning the synod were published contemporaneously, that is, between 1662 and 1664. The most influential histories of the Half-Way Covenant have been based primarily on these sources, though more recent historians have added important archival material, particularly regarding the acceptance of the Half-Way Covenant in Puritan society.¹ No history of the synod itself, however, has used the manuscript sources described below. It is important, therefore, that these documents be noted and discussed.²

¹ For example, Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), and Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (New York, 1963). The standard narrative of the synod is in Williston Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1898; repr. Boston, 1960). An excellent monograph is Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant* (Princeton, 1969). A more recent interpretive essay is Ross W. Beales, Jr., 'The Half-Way Covenant and Religious Scrupulosity: The First Church of Dorchester, Massachusetts, as a Test Case,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 31 (1974):456-80.

² John Davenport's 'Third Essay,' described in this paper, was used by E. Brooks Holifield in his important book, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven, 1974).

A brief outline of the synod and the events following during the 1660s may prove useful in evaluating the documents. Between seventy and eighty representatives of the Massachusetts churches met in Boston in three meetings in March, June, and September 1662. Seven propositions regarding the baptism of infants and their membership within the church were debated and eventually adopted by a large majority of those present. Only ten or twelve delegates dissented. Beyond these bare facts we know very little about the organization and progress of the synod. We are uncertain of the names of most of the representatives, the positions they took in synod deliberations, and how they voted. The General Court, upon whose order the synod met in the first place, accepted the synod majority's conclusions and ordered them printed and circulated. The ensuing book, *Propositions Concerning the Subject of Baptism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1662), was the opening salvo in a heated controversy which persisted for at least ten years.³

The debate centered on Proposition Five, which created a new class of church membership in which adults from successive generations could claim membership and put themselves under the moral discipline of the church without becoming communicants. Similarly, they were without a vote in church affairs—and without that ultimate experience of conversion which alone satisfied the early founders as a criterion for full, communicating membership. Because it seemed to some that a half-way membership was thus proposed, the majority's proposals came to be nicknamed the Half-Way Covenant. This new category of membership played an important role in the development of New England Puritanism over the next fifty years, and many believed that the fate of Massachusetts' errand was at stake. Participants in the debate wrestled long and hard with the inner contradiction between, on the one hand, man's deepest desire to raise his children within his

³ The book was reprinted in Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, pp. 301–39.

church, and, on the other, the puritan zeal for a pure church, a gathered church of the converted.⁴

So divided was the government of Massachusetts that no sooner was the majority report of the synod ordered to be printed than the minority leaders were given permission to publish their objections. Such open-mindedness had been unheard of. The colony had always tightly controlled its press, as the summary fate of earlier opposition groups in 1637, 1646, and 1659, as well as the public burning of books by such prominent Puritans as William Pynchon and John Eliot, all testify.

Until now the history of the Synod of 1662 has been written almost exclusively from evidence contained in five books. The first, *Propositions Concerning the Subject of Baptism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1662), is the official report of the synod's conclusions and contains an introduction by John Mitchell. The second, *Antisynodalia Scripta Americana* (London, 1662), was published over the signature of Charles Chauncy, the seventy-three-year-old president of Harvard College. This was the first opposition statement and contains two essays, each signed by four of the minority ministers at the synod. John Davenport's *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1663), the third book, is the second opposition statement. It contained essays by Increase Mather, Davenport, and Nicholas Street, Davenport's colleague at New Haven. The fourth, *Animadversions upon the Antisynodalia Americana* (Cambridge, Mass., 1664), by John Allin, constituted the first response on behalf of the synod majority to its critics, specifically to Chauncy's tract, cited above. The fifth and last, *A Defence of the Answer and Arguments of the Synod Met at Boston in the Year 1662*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1664), by Richard Mather and John Mitchell, was the second reply to criticism, that of Davenport's *Another Essay*. These five books

⁴ The far-reaching questions of church membership are variously elucidated by the authors mentioned in notes 1 and 2, above.

have constituted the bulk of available evidence concerning the synod. The only important manuscript evidence brought to bear on the synod itself in recent years has been the Pulsifer Transcripts in the Dexter Collection at Yale University. They are largely transcripts of tracts already printed in the books mentioned above, but they did enable Robert G. Pope to clarify some issues relating to these publications.⁵

There are in the library of the American Antiquarian Society nine additional manuscripts written during the synod or as part of the ensuing controversy. First is a manuscript from the pen of Thomas Parker, minister at Newbury and a representative of his church to the synod. This document in the Curwen Family Papers consists of two folio pages heavily but quite legibly covered with what is either a cipher or a shorthand system similar to Thomas Shepard's. It is dated 1662 and addressed to the synod.⁶ Evidently, no one has attempted successfully to decipher this manuscript.

Next is a comment by John Rayner, minister of the church at Dover, New Hampshire. His essay, found in the Mather Family Papers, is a sewn quarto of eight leaves (one now missing), with the outside leaves serving as blank covers. It contains nine closely written, numbered pages in which he cautiously disagreed with the results of the synod. Rayner wrote in the first person, but did not sign the essay or give any other indication of authorship. Since he mentioned none of the published polemics, we may guess that he wrote this essay early, before Chauncy's and Davenport's books were in circulation. When Increase Mather acquired the tract, he endorsed the back, 'This by Mr. Reyner Pastor of the Church in Dover,' and on the front, 'Crescentius Mather 1664, Bostonia NovAngliâ.'

Third is a similar document, also found in the Mather Family Papers. It is a sewn quarto of eight numbered pages,

⁵ Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, pp. 46, 297.

⁶ Walker, *Creeks and Platforms*, p. 267, n 1.

but without outside leaves, and so perhaps incomplete. There is neither date nor name, and the anonymous author wrote in the first person. He referred to Richard Mather's counterattack against Davenport, and also criticized the increasingly active baptists, whose presence in Boston was by 1665 very apparent. At the same time the author made several favorable references to Richard Mather, and we may speculate that this pamphlet was composed by a man who favored the half-way measures.

Fourth is a quarto, complete in ten leaves, cover intact, unsigned and without title. This essay, also in the Mather Family Papers, is partly identified by Increase Mather's notation: 'Transcribed out of Mr. Russels copy (lent to me) written with his own hand. Dec. 1672. Crescentius Matherus.' On the front cover Mather wrote, 'Mr. Russel's Antisynodalia.' Russel was probably John Russel of Hadley, a long-time associate of both Increase Mather and John Davenport. In this pamphlet Russel came close to describing the Half-Way Covenant as a threat to the entire social structure of New England: if we 'adulterate visible holyness, wee change our governors and government and Interest.' The remark is particularly interesting because it reveals the connection in the minds of some contemporaries between government of the ministers and government of the magistrates. John Russel of Hadley continued to oppose the innovations of 1662 long after Increase Mather had accepted them.⁷

Among the remaining five manuscripts, one of the most important is 'Errata Synodalia' by Nicholas Street. Street was Davenport's colleague in the New Haven church and therefore close to the center of opposition to the synod. Street, however, also played his own role in the events of the 1660s. The manuscript under consideration was written in 1665. Its full title reads: 'Errata Synodalia, or Exceptions against the Synodalia that have bin some time with mee, and not a little

⁷ Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, p. 239.

exercising and afflicting. 1. Against the propositions in generall. 2. In especiall against the 5th proposition. 3. Against some passages in the Synode booke, and the writings of those who have defended the propositions.' This manuscript is written in twenty-six closely written quarto pages, amounting to about 20,000 words. Two copies survive in the American Antiquarian Society library, one of them complete, the other missing pages 1-5, but having attached to it a copy of a letter of transmittal to Richard Mather, dated New Haven, 1666. The complete copy is endorsed, 'Crescentius Matherus 1666.'

Street's manuscript makes clear that at least some opponents of the synod feared the practical consequences of half-way membership for the churches. The new members, Street feared, would quickly take over control ('I cannot see how it can possibly be avoyded'), and seek both the vote and the Lord's Supper. 'They being many in number, farr exceeding the rest of the church, sundry of them heady and of a boisterous spirit, some witty, and able to manage an argument, what sad consequences are like to ensue.' Street's fears proved unfounded, but perhaps only because for fifteen years the voting majority in most churches agreed with him and refused to allow half-way membership in their individual congregations.⁸ Meanwhile, Street's position on baptism came close to that of the baptists themselves: 'The best way if not the only way to keep churches pure from Antichristian filth and pollution in the Administration of Baptisme is to place the ground of Baptisme upon faith only, discovered by confession, and Gospel repentance.'

Nicholas Street, like others on both sides of the controversy, was sensitive to the damage to the New England churches that could be caused by public disagreement among the ministers. He hesitated to feed fuel to the argument, but the issue grew in his mind until he felt compelled to commu-

⁸ For the general acceptance of the Half-Way Covenant after 1675 see, *ibid.*, pp. 271-72.

nicate his thoughts. He forwarded the manuscript to a friend in Boston, a rich and devout merchant, Samuel Bache. Street left it to Bache to decide whether to send 'Errata Synodalia' on to Richard Mather.⁹ Street enclosed a gentle and respectful letter to Mather which Bache evidently forwarded. In the letter, Street suggested that the first two propositions of the synod (permitting infant baptism of visible saints, thus undercutting the baptist position) should stand but that another synod should be called to discuss Proposition Five.

When secondary copies of 'Errata Synodalia' began to circulate, a copy of Street's letter to Mather was attached, as it was to the Antiquarian Society's second and incomplete copy. In 1668 Street wrote to Eleazar Mather, who, with his brother Increase, was an outspoken opponent of their father and the synod. Eleazar, one can infer, was incensed at the support for the synod's innovation in the Connecticut River Valley. Street tried to pacify the younger man. Men on both sides, he argued, were conscientious. He had himself joined in the Lord's Supper with those who favored the synod. Judge not too harshly men of good will, Street counseled.¹⁰ Street's 'Errata Synodalia' is considerably more substantive than any opposition tract known heretofore.

The next manuscript, although it is not new evidence, needs nevertheless to be introduced for the sake of some textual features. It is John Mitchell's folio manuscript titled 'Results of the Synod.' This document constitutes the earliest known statement of the conclusions of the synod. Williston Walker reprinted the published version in his useful *Creeeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, from which it has become the standard text.¹¹ What is worth pointing out here is that this manuscript was dated by Mitchell 'July 30, 1662,' which

⁹ Street to Samuel Bache, New Haven, May 15, 1666, Prince Collection, 1:34, Boston Public Library.

¹⁰ Street to Eleazar Mather, New Haven, April 14, 1668, Curwen Papers, 1:57, American Antiquarian Society.

¹¹ Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, p. 238.

indicates that it was written after the second meeting of the synod and before the third. It contains the seven propositions to which Davenport's essay refers, and then, in a far longer section, the arguments supported by scriptural texts which confirm the propositions. Mitchell drafted the arguments as of July 30, though they were not seen by the synod members until the last session, starting on September 9. Moreover, Mitchell's arguments were extensively revised before conforming to what was later printed as the official results of the meeting.

The author of the remaining manuscripts was John Davenport of New Haven, the principal opponent of the synod. His 'A Reply to 7 Propositions Concluded by the Synod Sitting at Boston, June 10, 1662,' found in the John Davenport Papers at AAS, as well as among the Pulsifer Transcripts at Yale, was written in response to what had transpired by June 10 during the middle session of the synod.¹² Presumably a friend in Massachusetts transmitted the proceedings of the synod to Davenport in New Haven. Davenport responded to seven major propositions, writing, 'the perticular Scriptures and Reasons from them whereupon the Propositions are to be grounded . . . are to be drawne up and prescribed in due season ie at the next session which is to be the 9th of 7ber [September] . . . I marvel at this that they wold first vote and conclude the propositions And then appoint another tyme three months after, to bring in their proofs from Scripture and Reason.' The pamphlet is a quarto of eight unnumbered pages, written by a scrivener.

The evidence contained in these last two documents suggests a somewhat different course of events from what historians have heretofore conjectured. Recent historians assert that the critical debates which resulted in the Half-Way Covenant came during the last session of the synod, in September

¹² Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, p. 46.

1662. Davenport and Mitchell, however, have each left a manuscript, just now described, which establishes that the seven propositions were determined as early as July, six weeks before the final session. In Mitchell's draft the arguments supporting the propositions were heavily corrected, and the corrections mirrored what was printed. The seven propositions, however, were printed just as Mitchell (on July 30) and Davenport (shortly after June 10) had written them. The standard sources refer several times to heated disputes over the propositions, particularly numbers three and five. Perhaps these are references to the earlier sessions, or to the arguments in support of the propositions. In any case, the narrative of developments in the synod meetings needs to be clarified.¹³

When the General Court met in October, the representatives of the synod presented the majority report. Increase Mather launched a last-ditch effort to prevent the Court from accepting the majority conclusions. He failed in that, and failed too in his effort to read to the Court counterarguments. Nevertheless, Mather was told that he and his associates were at liberty to publish their opposition papers. Thereupon Chauncy sent to London the manuscript of *Antisynodalia Americana* and Davenport wrote *Another Essay*, which was published with a preface by Increase Mather and a short essay by Nicholas Street. Richard Mather and John Mitchell responded the next year, 1664, with a reply. Until now this was supposed to have been the end of the exchange. Street, however, followed with the recently discovered 'Errata Synodalia' and Davenport with two documents.

The first of these two remaining works of Davenport is a very brief essay, 'A Vindication of the Treatise entitled *Another Essay . . . being a Reply to A Defence of the Answer . . .*,' which exists now among the Davenport Papers at AAS in the

¹³ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, pp. 267-68; Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, pp. 47-48.

form of a nineteenth-century copy. Isaiah Thomas, in making a gift to AAS of books and manuscripts he purchased in 1814 from Hannah Mather Crocker, described in his manuscript list of items included in this important accession the original as a quarto of six pages, closely written and signed by John Davenport. Davenport wrote a conciliatory essay in which he veiled disagreement and chose not to mention his antagonists by name. He alluded to the controversy over baptism in abstractions, and gave little indication of intense controversy. Davenport insisted that, despite disagreements, the religious unity of New England could not be doubted. 'We all agree that infants or children in minority of Beleevers confoederate in true Christian Churches are the subject of Baptisme,' he wrote. Davenport was writing, he explained, only because some parts of his previous book, *Another Essay*, had been distorted.

The second essay from Davenport is a very different kind of document. It is, first of all, a major work, a manuscript of book length, longer than any of the earlier pieces on either side of the debate, published or unpublished. Davenport titled it '*The Third Essay for Investigation of the Truth*', and in it he presented his fullest argument against half-way membership. He added as a preface a historical introduction which was as emotional and detailed as the short 'Vindication' was veiled and abstract. The whole manuscript, an octavo of more than 160 closely written pages, is a draft with many changes and corrections in the text, as well as marginal comments, possibly in the hand of Increase Mather. On the back of the last page appears the endorsement, 'Crescentius Matheri Liber, ex dono Authoris. 3. 19. 1665.'

Davenport introduced his 'Third Essay' with a historical sketch which began in the 1650s, when a manuscript had been sent to him from a colleague in Massachusetts arguing the right of children to baptism. At that time Davenport had responded, but, he wrote later, his response had never been

acknowledged. As the pressure to enlarge the privilege of baptism continued to mount, with Richard Mather its strongest proponent, the General Court of Massachusetts sent 'Twenty-One Questions' to the colony of New Haven. The government there asked Davenport to formulate a reply. He did so, stating his opposition to more frequent baptism of infants. Davenport objected particularly to Question Ten, 'Whether the child admitted by his Father's covenant, be also a deputy for his seed, before, or without personal covenanting?', a question which seems to have expressed the very concept later formulated as the Half-Way Covenant. Davenport's opinion came to nought for in 1657 an assembly of Massachusetts ministers agreed in principle to the baptism of the children of baptized but non-communicating members.¹⁴

Davenport's retrospective introduction then moved to the Synod of 1662. It had been, he wrote, a meeting of ministers and elders from Massachusetts churches only, although the matter would affect all New England churches. By tradition, he argued, all churches should have been asked to send representatives. Shortly before the final session, he continued, while in Boston, he was given the opportunity to read the propositions. Alarmed at one proposition which would 'bring a new sort of member' into the church, Davenport asked for further consultation with the members of the synod, and wrote at this time his 'First Essay' to express his anxiety with the synod's proceedings. At first he thought he had been successful in delaying the conclusion until dissenters had had time to put their arguments into writing. On the very morning of the last session, he wrote, he thought that only one or two of the members were against such a postponement. But

¹⁴ Manuscripts in the American Antiquarian Society library which pertain to this series of events include 'Mr. Davenport's Answer to 21 Questions to the Reverend Author. Written Propria Manu.'; Richard Mather, 'Answer to 21 Questions'; Richard Blinman, 'An Answer to divers Reverend Elders of New England, Respecting their Resolution of Question 10th.' See Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, pp. 253-62, for a narrative of events leading to the Synod of 1662.

that same afternoon, when Davenport was sitting as an observer at the synod's meeting, the captain of the ship taking him back to New Haven sent word that the wind had changed and he must weigh anchor. Davenport left the synod with high hopes, according to his account, that a postponement would be made.

But, he wrote with wry humor, they 'concluded what they had before proposed, finished that Last Session, and published in print their determinations.' Friends in Boston asked Davenport for his 'animadversions' against the results of the synod as printed, and when Davenport obliged them, they were printed as his *Another Essay* to supplement his first and ineffectual one.

Sensitive to charges that he had created scandal and division by publication of *Another Essay*, Davenport answered that the fault lay not with himself, but in those who had by their 'unseasonable printing . . . first necessitated our Brethern [the dissenters] to take this Course for the Vindication of the truth.' Davenport, of course, went further. Not only did he object to the untimely printing of *Propositions Concerning the Subject of Baptism*, but he also rejected the synod's conclusions and noted that they were neither infallible nor 'forbidding all after-disquisitions.' Indeed, he observed that since it was necessary for the synod's conclusions to be printed in order to circulate them, it was similarly necessary that the grounds of dissent be circulated. Inasmuch as the synod's conclusions had been quickly drawn, a carefully written dissent would facilitate more careful and proper consideration of the propositions.

The bulk of Davenport's extensive 'Third Essay' which follows this introduction is a carefully wrought explication and exegesis of the arguments from scripture used to defend the conclusions of the synod in the 'booke Composed by Sundrye Reverend Elders (Richard Mather and John Mitchell) and Entitled, "A Defence of the Answer and Arguments of

the Synod met at Boston in the yeare 1662.' ' Davenport was offended by the title of the Mather and Mitchell book and observed that it sounded 'as if wee were in a fight.' Davenport reiterated his own benign title—*Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth*—and now his present effort, 'A Third Essay for Investigation of the Truth.' 'Brotherly disquisitions to find out the truth,' Davenport concluded, ' . . . are honourable to God.'

Davenport's 'Third Essay' is far too long to be summarized here. It and Nicholas Street's 'Errata Synodalia' are the most elaborate statements written by the opposition, and they are also the only extant replies to the majority arguments of 1664. The documents presented here are essential to gain understanding of the practical and theological fears of the ministerial opposition to the Half-Way Covenant. It is in this context, for example, that the continuing survival and growing prosperity of a small group of baptists, discovered in Boston in 1665, takes on new significance. These Boston baptists were in and out of jail during this decade and the next, but the iron will of the Puritan government was no longer capable of ensuring strict conformity, as it had been in crushing nascent Quakerism only a few years earlier. The strict conformity issuing from the Alien Act of 1637 was breached. It was no secret in Boston that in the 1660s the arguments published by opponents of the synod helped the baptists.¹⁵

So too did older congregations seem to opponents of the synod to be making too many compromises with the Holy Word; the half-way proposition of 1662 was one such compromise. A consequence of such compromises was the schism experienced by the First Church in Boston in 1667–68. A conservative majority of church members issued a call to John

¹⁵ On the appearance of a baptist church in Boston and its struggle to survive, see William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 7, 50–77, and William G. McLoughlin and Martha Whiting Davidson, eds., 'The Baptist Debate of April 14–15, 1668,' in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 76(1964):91–133.

Davenport, but a large minority asked to be dismissed from the church for the purpose of forming a new congregation.¹⁶ Declension, innovation, invasion of liberties, and 'the utter devastation of these churches' seemed to follow the unprecedented publication of opposing views on the Synod of 1662. Thoughtful people realized even the most revered of ministers could be wrong; the government, people came to think, was scarcely justified in using ultimate force over issues on which consensus could not be achieved. Taken together, the manuscripts described in this article constitute a rich lode of new evidence about this crucial episode in the internal history of New England Puritanism.

¹⁶ The best brief narrative concerning the disruption of the First Church in Boston is Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, pp. 152-84, 269-71. The documentation is in Hamilton A. Hill, *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston, 1669-1884* (Boston, 1890).

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