Milton's Peter Thacher:
The Life and Faith of a Second Generation New England Puritan Minister

Abstract

Historians continue to debate the nature of second generation New England Puritanism. Specific to this debate is the question of declension, or whether later Puritans suffered a dilution of doctrine and weakening of faith in relation to the standards of their fathers. In order to investigate these issues, both the professional and personal lives of the Reverend Peter Thacher of late seventeenth-century Milton, Massachusetts were examined.

The contention was that a study of one representative individual would illuminate the general nature of the second generation Puritan ministry. Thacher was chosen as the subject for several reasons. He was the descendant of a long line of Puritan ministers. Throughout his life he maintained contacts with leading Boston Puritans both of his own and the first generation. Perhaps most importantly, he left extensive journals, hitherto largely unused by historians, in which he detailed many aspects of his personal and professional activities during a good portion of his life in Milton.

Thacher's life and faith were analyzed through his journal writings. To assess his degree of declension, he was compared to a representative first generation minister, Thomas Shepard, using the latter's autobiography and journal. Throughout, Thacher was also placed within a historiographical context by means of relevant secondary sources from key historians of New England Puritanism.

It was found that Thacher shared with the first generation certain attitudes and approaches toward preaching, pastoral work, and prayer. He differed significantly in his attitudes toward church membership, professionalism, family and secular pursuits, and in his relationship with God. The second generation was more comfortable enjoying this world and its gifts than was the first generation whose daily thoughts and actions remained focused on the divine. Thacher's attitude did not represent so much a declension as it did a healthy and realistic adaptation of faith and practice to the demands of his later generation New England experience.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The historiography of New England Puritanism, particularly that related to “declension” or the weakening of doctrine and commitment between the first and second generation, can be daunting. Not only are the issues debated complex, but the accumulated scholarship is formidable. The question for the student becomes: how approach the field of battle, how attempt to join the debate? One way may be to narrow and sharpen the focus by concentrating on one Puritan. The hope is that an individual portrait will contribute in some small way to the extensive, multi-subject work-in-progress which is the historiographical mural of New England Puritanism.

This thesis details the personal and professional activities of one late seventeenth-century New England Puritan minister, Peter Thacher of Milton, Massachusetts. The contention is that his specific story helps illuminate the general nature of life and faith in second generation Puritan New England. Structurally, the paper looks at Thacher the minister as well as Thacher the man. In the former instance, its sections examine sermon preparation and preaching, pastoral duties and recruitment of new members to the church, degree of professionalism, and overall effectiveness. For his latter role it analyzes his relationships with God and family and his varied secular pursuits. Throughout, Thacher’s conduct is placed within a historiographical context, with particular attention to the issue of declension by comparing him to the first generation.
It will be seen that Thacher shared some similarities with his ministerial fathers. Surviving from the first generation into the second were attitudes and approaches toward sermon preparation and preaching, some aspects of pastoral work, church discipline, and an intensely personal relationship with God based upon a fervent belief in the power of prayer. Where the later generation minister took a significantly different tack from the earlier was in his more inclusive approach to church membership, his considerable professionalism, his strong attachments to family and secular pursuits, and his often ambivalent and at times openly questioning relationship with God. In the second generation, it would appear the focus had shifted appreciably from the divine to the earthly world, from anxiety and submission to assurance and confidence, as later Puritans enjoyed the fruits of their New England labors and adapted their faith according to their experiences.

The Reverend Peter Thacher is a valid and valuable subject for such a study. He was a late second generation New England Puritan. The first minister called to the church in Milton, Massachusetts, he arrived there in 1680 at age twenty-nine and remained pastor until his death in 1727. The descendant of a long line of impeccable English Puritans, both his father and his father-in-law were ministers, the latter John Oxenbridge of the First Church in Boston. His situation tended to prove Perry Miller’s contention that “the ministerial families . . . intermarried so extensively as to become within three generations a distinct caste.” (1) Thacher maintained strong and intimate connections with both first and second generation leading Puritans on the Boston religious and political scenes. The Mathers were his friends, the Sewalls his Harvard classmates and European travel
companions. Finally, and most importantly, he left extensive journals which have thus far been referenced by historians only in passing.
CHAPTER 2

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thacher was the first minister to settle in Milton, Massachusetts permanently. He had three predecessors, but the Milton church was not officially gathered until 1678. They formally called Thacher in 1680 and ordained him the next year after a successful trial period. His salary was set by the town at a rate of sixty-five pounds, “a third of the whole to be paid in mony” and “the other two thirds in marchantable town pay.” (2) Born in Salem, Massachusetts on July 18, 1651, Thacher was twenty-nine years old when he came to Milton, a graduate of Harvard, and a descendant of a long line of English Puritan ministers. Previously, he had tutored, preached at several churches in and around Boston, and had spent a year at the Barnestable church where disunity among the congregation and opposition to him from one of the leading citizens no doubt facilitated his decision to accept Milton’s call. He remained the town’s godly shepherd for forty-seven years until his death on December 17, 1727. Dying on a Monday, he had preached both morning and afternoon sermons, as usual, on the day before.

Thacher left an estate in excess of seventeen hundred twenty-eight pounds, indicating that he had achieved more than average financial success as compared with other Milton residents. David Hall has pointed out that New England ministers were usually among the ranks of the wealthiest fifteen percent of colonials. (3) Among his possessions at death were silver plates, a silver watch made in London, and diverse articles of gold jewelry, as well as considerable livestock. Cotton Mather preached his funeral sermon, remarking upon Thacher’s “early piety” and “the fluent, copious expressive beauties” of his prayers. Samuel Sewall noted in his diary that he was forced to go directly to the
cemetery and not attend the service for Thacher because the congestion of horses and vehicles belonging to his friend’s many mourners prevented him from reaching the church. In his obituary, Thacher was described as beloved by his congregation, possessing “grace and wisdom” and being “cheerful, affable, humble and free of speech to the meanest he met with.” (4)
The premier historian of New England Puritanism, Perry Miller, maintained that the Puritans must be taken at their own words. In his writings he “allowed the men themselves to speak as often as possible.” To penetrate the thought processes and outlook of his subjects, and thus to be able to meet them on their own terms, was perhaps Miller’s most central historiographical aim. Miller studied the Puritans’ theology by means of their sermons and essays, or “what is said and done publicly.” (5) Peter Lake, a historian of English Puritanism, suggests that what separated Puritans from the rest of the people was the private person, “the inward spirit that informed them.” (6)

In the case of Peter Thacher, the historian has an opportunity to blend the advice of both these experts. Thacher meticulously recorded both his private thoughts and his public activities in his extensive daily journals. Thus it is possible to examine both Thacher’s professional and personal life. Thacher’s journals cover his brief residence as unordained minister in Barnestable and a good portion of his residence as official minister in the town of Milton, Massachusetts. They were written from 1678 to 1686 with sporadic entries in later years, with gaps, up to 1699. All dates are in old style (here converted), with March as the first month of the year.

The journals provide a quality and a quantity of evidence regarding Thacher the minister and the man. They reveal his approach as he interacted with his congregation and his town. In them he described his prayer and study habits as he prepared for Sabbath preaching. Perhaps most importantly, they detail his activities as shepherd of his flock.
They also provide an extensive record of his relationships with wife and children and his activities as farmer and businessman.

In his early History of Milton, A.K. Teele mentioned that the Thacher family may have “seen fit to suppress some entries of a private and family nature” before making the journals public, although he did not believe anything of significance was omitted. A later historian of Milton, E.P. Hamilton, seemed to concur as to the accuracy and relative completeness of the material which was eventually transcribed by a Thacher descendant in 1907. (7) There are some pages of the original books (two in number, a third missing) which have been lost, as well as places where mending has obscured words. On the whole, however, these issues do not appear to greatly impact the historical usefulness or value of the texts for the solid eight-year portion of Thacher’s life which they detail.

Additional primary sources used extensively in this paper are Thomas Shepard’s Journal and Autobiography, edited in one volume by Michael McGiffert. Shepard’s works are compared and contrasted with those of Thacher as first to second generation minister. Shepard was a well known first generation minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His works are the only surviving documents of their type from the time period.

Major secondary sources include the works of Perry Miller, Stephen Foster, and Sacvan Bercovitch on the issue of declension. David Hall’s work on the nature of first and second generation New England ministries is quoted often. Edmund Morgan is referenced in relation to Puritan family life. Thacher’s ministerial approach and effectiveness, including his attitude toward church membership and his professionalism
regarding matters of salary and administration, are examined with the help of the works of Hall, Morgan, and Patricia Tracy’s study of Jonathan Edwards’ career in Northampton.
Since Perry Miller introduced the concept of declension to the study of New England Puritanism, it has dominated the scholarly debate. Miller’s contention was that, in response to the challenges and opportunities of the new world, second generation New England Puritans exhibited a falling away from the strict old world faith and religious passion of their fathers and a prioritization of material pursuits over moral responsibility. He pointed to the type of sermon known as the jeremiad, a lamenting over the failure of the second generation to live up to the terms of New England’s covenant with and mission from God, as the means by which the second generation both recognized and excused itself from its guilt. Miller declared that they were “the professions of a society that knew it was doing wrong, but could not help itself, because the wrong thing was also the right thing.” (8) All subsequent scholarship must address this issue in part or in toto, directly or indirectly, because central to the study of any religious faith is how its adherents balanced the demands of their faith with the ever-changing concerns of everyday life. In other words, how successfully did they reconcile theory with practice, the spiritual with the temporal, the ideal with the real?

Among those historians who propose an alternative and more positive reading of the differences between first and second generation New England Puritanism are Stephen Foster and Sacvan Bercovitch. In his work, The Long Argument, Foster agrees that American Puritanism changed during the seventeenth century, that it moved “from English coherence to American fragmentation,” but sees this movement not as decline
but as part of an evolutionary process the seeds of and the influence for which were evident in English Puritanism of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In Foster’s view, the accusations of declension voiced in the jeremiads were no more than political maneuvering and the sermons themselves become “partisan documents in an internal controversy” which had long been a part of English Puritanism. Specifically, the ministerial class was attempting to consolidate its power, in effect “wrapping itself in the mantle of Jeremiah in order to assert its preeminence in Puritan society.” (9)

To Foster, the New England experiment was a data point on the continuum of the history of Puritanism, a piece of an organic whole. What was lacking in America was not true faith but rather the English religious and societal structures which facilitated the growth and maintenance of that faith. As a result, second generation Puritans were unable to duplicate the intense conversion experiences of their fathers. They suffered from “the lack of a nurturing environment in which to enact an individual spiritual progress.” (Miller said something quite similar when he declared that later Puritan generations “while recognizing that they had declined . . . had lost the measure by which to decipher exactly how much or why.”) In Foster’s view, therefore, changes in approach from first to second generation Puritans were nothing more than necessary and logical remedies for this situation. Reforms such as the Half Way Covenant were then examples of New World Puritanism’s “reparation of this deficiency” which is, after all, “the real mission of the Puritan movement in its American maturity.” (10)

In his book, The American Jeremiad, Bercovitch suggests that the underlying message of the jeremiads was not of failure but of inevitable success because even declension was
part of God’s master plan for Puritan New England. As Bercovitch explains it, “affliction and promise are entwined” in the fate of New England. (11) Only those people chosen by God, those for whom he had reserved a special place and whom he considered worthy and capable of carrying out his directives, received God’s “corrective” attention. In other words, the very fact that New England experienced a decline in faith was proof of its ultimate success.

Bercovitch concludes that the underlying message of the jeremiads was a positive one because the second generation Puritans believed “their punishments confirmed their promise.” He sees the jeremiads as proof of continuing faith rather than as testimonies to declension. Borrowing his imagery from Miller, he declares they “attest to an unswerving faith in the errand” and they furthermore “grow more fervent, more absolute in their commitment from one generation to the next.” Like Foster, Bercovitch also sees New England Puritanism as able to modify its tenets to suit the demands of the American environment without losing its original nature and focus. In his view the Half Way Covenant was an example of this modification process. It represented continuity with rather than disruption of tradition. He sees the reform as “less a departure from old ideals than it was an effort . . . to extend and adapt those ideals to new conditions.” (12)
CHAPTER 5

THE MINISTER

Sermon Preparation and Preaching

Historians have noted an often excessive focus on preparation as characteristic of Puritan ministers. Francis Bremer comments on the “common Puritan practice of meditation as a means of preparing the soul for religious activities.” He also notes about the process: “True to their effort to unite the spirit with learning, clergymen sought to spiritually prepare themselves for their tasks.” Foster echoes this analysis, concluding that “sermons were . . . the product of study and reflection, and they were to be written in a carefully prepared, prayerful mood.” (13)

Before any actual writing took place, Puritan clergymen attempted to place themselves in the proper frame of mind for sermon creation. Thacher spent much time researching, writing, and preparing his sermons, considering preaching his most sacred duty. Thacher’s fervent prayer was that “the word might be saving to my soul and I instrum.all to save my selfe and they that hear mee.” Saturday was usually devoted to preparation for the next day’s work, although he spent at least a portion of every day reading in his study. He memorized his ordination sermon. His obituary referred to him as “a very Evangelical preacher.” The journals provide abundant evidence of his belief in the power of the spoken word. Here Thacher lined up consistently with the first generation Shepard who also spent much time agonizing over his sermons. A passage in the Cambridge minister’s diary reflects his practice of earnest sermon preparation, which
was apparently not always easy or successful. He wrote: “I was much troubled with sense of my own inability to think of anything to be preached.” (14)

Thacher suffered anxiety over his Sunday responsibility, often expressing his sense of unfitness for the task. As he revealed in the journal, he “was much distressed in my spirits about my Sab. work.” He believed that he could preach successfully only with God’s inspiration. Fortunately, that assistance was most often forthcoming. The day after the above entry Thacher noted that “god graciously warmed my heart in the duty.” Thacher seemed most concerned about keeping his own spiritual house in order that he might not be a hypocrite to his people. He had to live what he spoke. As he summarized the issue, his wish was that “I might not preach to others and be my selfe a Cast away.” (15)

In this doubting of his sermon writing and preaching ability, Thacher’s journals again echo thoughts expressed and approach taken by the first ministerial generation. As he prepared his sermon, Shepard wondered “can God make use of such a poor wretch to preach the gospel by?.” But inspiration came to Shepard as to Thacher and he was comforted in the same knowledge that the minister needed only to open himself to God’s intervention in order to cure his writer’s block. As Shepard’s struggles were rewarded and the pen flowed more freely, he observed “it was the pleasure of God’s grace to help all that prayed to it.” Both first and second generation shared a humility and a trust in God’s essential role in their sermon preparation. This theme of divine inspiration imparting to the minister’s words a force they could never possess on their own was one which appeared in both early and later Puritan generations. David Hall’s analysis of the
nature of Puritan preaching detected this strain. He observes that “the faithful shepherd must seem to speak as though the Spirit moved his tongue.” (16)

Puritan services were in the morning and then again later in the day. Thacher officiated at both sessions himself, only occasionally inviting another minister to take the pulpit in the afternoon. Journal entries suggest the sermons lasted for about an hour. Longer pieces of three or four hours or more seemed to be related to special occasions or fast days. The hours of preparation and the excitement of preaching took their toll. There are several entries in the journals which echo the spirit of the one from April 9, 1682: “I was very weary and spent at night soe that I had little rest.” But there was proof for Thacher that his efforts were appreciated. The church invited him to preach at informal gatherings at members’ homes and the town asked him to lead the Town Meeting in prayer. At the suggestion of the deacons, he began preaching once a month to the nearby Ponkapoag Indians. Furthermore, at least one member of his flock made a point of telling Thacher his message had been heard and accepted. The minister recorded that on February 12, 1683, “Jonathan Badcock being touched with the sermon came to mee and I said much to him and prayed with him.” (17)

A preaching style which reflects the inner man touched by God’s hand has been noted by Hall as characteristic of early generation Puritan ministers. He believes that “the essential mark of the faithful shepherd was a “gracious” heart.” McGiffert comments relative to Shepard’s preaching that “it was the sweetness of grace, the tenderness of Christ, that Shepard sought above all to communicate.” Cotton Mather called Shepard “Pastor Evangelicus.” Interestingly, he saw the same quality in Thacher. In his funeral sermon for the latter, Mather specifically mentioned the moving nature of his preaching,
indicating “we admired his prayers . . . for the fluent, copious expressive beauties of them and the heavenly entries we perceived in them.” (18)

While Thacher directed his sermons to the congregation as a whole, he took particular interest in the young and looked to them as the future of religion. On March 30, 1683, he remarked in his journal: “I Gave my People a sermon. Especially designing it for the riseing Generation.” Patricia Tracy has noted this same appoach by Jonathan Edwards in Northamption. It may have represented an attempt by later generations of ministers to counteract early societal forces tending toward declension. (19)

According to historians of Puritanism, this emphasis by ministers upon their preaching was well-founded. As Hall observes about the culture of early New England, “people . . . perceived speech and writing as continuous and interchangeable.” Miller concluded that preaching was more important than written admonitions since “the word as uttered and not as printed was the ordinary instrument for preparing the heart.” Moreover, the preacher’s words carried divine force. They were invested with a power beyond that of even the most skillful speaker. As Miller commented, “when God chose to manifest Himself to a people, He came to them under the guise of ministerial eloquence.” (20)

Pastoral Duties

In his study of what he considers an historiographically neglected side of the ministry, pastoral work, George Selement concludes that “pastors . . . were abroad in their communities, involving themselves in every aspect of New England life.” Thacher was definitely very much involved in the lives of his flock. For example, he was the acknowledged authority on questions of morality and didn’t hesitate to use that authority
to chastise offenders. When he received a visit from a neighbor “who had drank to
much,” he remarked that he “dealt ronldy with him for it.” Surveying the congregation
one Sunday and finding many faces missing, the minister used the occasion “sharply to
reprove they that absented them selves from the house of god.” When Sargeant Vose’s
daughter Jane ran away because her father wouldn’t let her marry Peter Lion, Thacher
was called in to mediate. He met with Jane (living with Peter), “giving her much good
counsel.” Soon the lovers employed Thacher to return to Vose and ask him to relent.
When he refused, Thacher tried to reconcile Jane to the disappointment by persuading her
“to take off her affections.” (21)

Thacher’s people relied on him to counsel those who were suffering, emotionally or
physically. He was one of those Puritan preachers Darrett Rutman describes as “patient
physicians of the soul.” On August 16, 1682, Thacher wrote: “Being sent for I went to
G.man Craines Daughter in law that was in great distresse of mind I prayed with her.”
He visited Thomas Swift “who was in trouble of mind” and then came back another day
to pray with the man’s sick child. Thacher noted the passing of one child who died
before the minister could reach the house. He commented sadly that it was the first
instance of a “child that dyed of my baptizing” and added “I was at the funerall.” That
there was real affection between Thacher and his congegation is apparent. He felt keenly
their misfortunes. Returning home late one night after praying at the bedside of a sick
woman, Thacher was emotionally spent. As he observed in his journal, “My spirits were
soe dull and heavy that I could doe little.” (22)

Thacher was very much involved in the social life of his town. He and his wife
entertained at home often, had supper with neighbors, and paid visits to friends in
Cambridge. Thacher himself dined with the local militia officers, as well as with the governor and magistrates in Boston. In June of 1681, his wrote in his journal that one of the Milton townsmen “came to invite mee to goe a strawburing.” That same year, after his neighbors helped with the December wood-cutting, Thacher provided them with supper and then some lively entertainment. He recorded that “wee had the viol afterward.” (23)

It is difficult to get as complete a picture of the pastoral practices of Shepard as of Thacher. The first generation minister’s journal rarely mentioned interactions with his congregation. It dealt more with the private man, with Shepard’s endless and painful introspection. This fact in itself is significant: it argues for a shift in priorities from first to later generations. Shepard spent most of his time worrying about his own spiritual health, while Thacher placed greater emphasis and focus on that of his flock. It also appears that Thacher was the more ever-present, aggressive custodian of morality than Shepard, who saw his role as a more mild, fatherly one. McGiffert speaks of Shepard’s pastoral work as “tempering the wind to the shorn lambs.” Again, this difference may reflect changing priorities. Thacher felt it was more important for him to become involved with others who were struggling with key life decisions than to remain in his study contemplating his own inadequacies, as did Shepard a good portion of the time. (24)

Church Membership

Thacher’s approach to church membership can be seen as evidence of a preparationist view of salvation. Hall has noted the same of Shepard. (25) The preparationists are those who believed that the individual had to go through a period of preparation for the receipt
of grace. The soul was initially “called” by God and the Puritan then began to be more receptive to the second and definitive call when it came. People in this state acted morally because it was a means of preparation for salvation, and their “works” had value and meaning as evidence of receptivity to saving grace. Given the place of moral behavior within this view, the potential benefits for ministerial influence and social order were significant. It was also potentially a more hopeful and flexible approach for both minister and constituent since the latter did not simply wait helplessly for grace to descend but rather “prepared” himself or herself for the event.

Like the first generation, Thacher was evangelistic in approach in that the primary goal of his pastoral work was to bring new members to the church. There seems to be a second generation difference, however, in his recruitment policies in terms of qualifications and numbers admitted. Thacher’s journals indicate that he was more lenient about criteria for acceptance of applicants for church membership than were the previous generation of ministers and that he consequently increased the fold at a greater rate than typical of first generation pastors. This is not to say that he did not maintain a high standard in terms of acceptable testimony of the receipt of grace. He remarked that Mr. Atherton speaks but “weakly” of his supposed experience. But Thacher employed alternate means to bring him around, coaxing him for his next attempt. In company with one of the elders, he asked him “diverse questions” to test his assertions. The church admitted the man two weeks later. It would seem that Thacher’s priority was to judiciously but consistently augment the size of his flock, not to create a church membership composed of a spotlessly Puritan few. As he told one of his congregation, he was willing to embrace “any that were charitably fit.” (26)
Significantly, most of the people Thacher approached about joining the church or who approach him did become members. Goodwife Kinsley was admitted to full communion within three weeks of her testifying to her conversion experience before Thacher and one of the elders. Goodwife Glover’s admission followed a similar schedule. Both Samuel Daniels and his wife came to Thacher for help in becoming church members. In fact, in November of 1681, the Milton church welcomed two couples on the same day. On April 27, 1683, three people arrived at the minister’s house to provide an “Account of the profisciency under the means of grace.” Moreover, Thacher’s efforts to target the younger members of the congregation were not in vain. A journal entry of August 1683 mentions three young men he was preparing for full communion. Pleased with their progress, he wrote: “What workings of his holy spirit I perceive upon the hearts of these three.” (27)

Thacher was quite focused on bringing new members to his church, as his journals show clearly. He was a tireless crusader on this front. His journal entry for January 31, 1682 shows him hard at work. In the afternoon he rode to Samuel Gouliver’s and chatted with that gentleman “about his coming under the watch of the Church as a child of it.” Samuel agreed. Thacher’s next stop was the Craine household, where he “spake to Stephen Craine about the same.” He then noticed another family member as yet outside the fold, Henry Craine, to whom he “propounded it too.” After much mutually satisfactory conversation, Thacher finally returned home. (28)

The task was not always such a smooth one, however. Some people did resist Thacher’s efforts. Mr. Hore was particularly difficult to convince, even insisting that his wife, who at least attended service, stand with him in defiance of the church. In the only passage in
the journals remotely humorous, albeit unintentionally, Thacher described the incident:

“Mr. Hore went out and called his wife from us and said the blind Lead the blind and both fall into the ditch.” (29)

Thacher did not abandon those who hesitated or who did not win admission at first try. Patience Black had much trouble convincing the church of her sincerity and in curbing her temper with her neighbors. After Thacher worked with her, however, she finally was able to render “a more full discovery of hers[elf].” When the elder Vose was rejected for his “passionatenesse,” Thacher convinced him to own his sin and then pushed and prodded the members into admitting him. The younger Vose, not a full member, tried in vain to escape the minister’s attention. On March 17, 1684, Thacher noted in his journal that he “had much serious discourse with Sergant Vose in the study about his not joyning to the Church.” (30)

The convert with whom Thacher spent the most preparation time was his first wife, Theodora. She did not join the church as a communicant until September of 1681, at the age of twenty-two. Two years before this time Thacher wrote in his journal of asking God to assist Theodora’s conversion: “I kept this day till one a Clock in private prayer for my dear wife that the Lord would fit her for, incline her heart unto, and open an Effectuall door unto her injoym. of, god in all his ordinances.” Thacher helped prepare his wife for admission to the church with discussion and counseling. As with other events in their life together, they approached this task as a team. In October of 1680 he wrote that “my dear and I had discourse about her spirituall condition after which I went to prayer with her in my study.” Within another year, Theodora was ready. She had felt God’s influence upon her. Thacher and one of the elders of the church witnessed her conversion tale. He noted
that “This Evening my dear gave father Tucker and I an account of the work of grace upon her soul in order to comeing into full communion.” She was an accepted member a week or so later. (31)

The minister did not reserve his attentions solely for his own flock. His thoughts were with others outside of his immediate circle. In prayer he asked for “converting grace upon unconverted relations” and, as mentioned above, preached to the local Ponkapoag tribe. Bremer has noted that this sense of mission toward Native Americans was not uncommon among New England ministers. Thacher also expended significant energy on the deluded Quakers. There are a few entries in his journals which show him to be somewhat fixated on convincing members of this sect of the error of their ways. When he heard that there was to be a Quaker meeting one night, he rushed to the designated spot to exercise his persuasive powers. He is much disappointed to find only two lone participants and “soe came home againe.” A few months later, perhaps fearing he would never capture a large number together, Thacher engaged one fortunate member of the group in discussion. He reported that he “discoursed a Quaker about two hours.” The Milton church took its cue from its leader and eventually took up the challenge. A meeting was held at a member’s house where these Puritans debated “about the Quaker opinions.” (32)

Thacher was in a very interesting position regarding the decision of the Synod of 1662 to endorse the Half Way Covenant. His father, Thomas Thacher, was associated with Old South Church, which split off from the First Church in Boston in support of this measure. His father-in-law, meanwhile, was called as pastor by the opposing party at First Church in 1670. It would appear Thacher would be much preoccupied with the debate. Yet the
younger minister did not exhibit any particular sense of urgency or anxiety about the matter. He recorded simply and briefly in his journal on July 31, 1681, “I also spake to the Chh about the baptizing of members Children according to the fift proposition of the Synod and they all seemed very free for it.” (33)

The fact of Thacher’s church not making more of the Half Way Covenant issue, one which caused schisms in several New England churches, may indicate how far both he and his congregation had moved from the intensity of the first generation. It apparently seemed a good plan to them and they saw nothing in it which represented a diminution of piety. Miller called the Half-Way Covenant “the first symptom of accommodation” by the second generation to a changing constituency. In his acceptance of the proposal Thacher was simply listening and responding well to the needs of his congregation. He was adapting effectively to the reality of his world, which included many not so saintly people. As Miller pointed out, “in New England the unregenerate were an ever-present reality,” the victims of “a church system which not only held them without the pale, but insinuated they were in all probability damned.” Thacher had made the decision to include, rather than exclude, whenever possible. In fact, several slaves were baptized and one taken into full communion during Thacher’s pastorship. (34)

Again, as with pastoral issues in general, there is not an abundance of comment in Shepard’s journal about new church members to allow comparison to Thacher. McGiffert does note about Shepard that he was concerned mainly with emphasizing “the mercy rather than the wrath of God,” which would indicate a similarly supportive approach. However, on close reading of the entries, he did not project the determination or confidence in his ultimate success in recruitment which the later generation minister
clearly felt and used to his advantage in Milton. A brief remark about acceptance of new members in Cambridge indicates it was not a too common occurrence: “I saw my poor labors in my ministry blessed in some measure” which briefly “raised my drooping and discouraged heart.” Citing Shepard’s experience as typical of first generation ministers, Hall speaks of “the mixed success of his ministry.” (35)

Shepard was preoccupied with the unworthiness of both himself and candidates for membership. Despairing of being able to bring others to God, Shepard remarked “my own weak spirit would not carry me along in my work” and recognized that he “was not a burning and shining light.” According to Hall, this preoccupation with self was found among the first generation but not in the second which had distanced itself from “an understanding of the ministry that tied its power and authority so much to personal character.” (36)

Moving among his flock, Shepard saw not the positive but the negative in their nature. He saw not the potential for conversion which Thacher worked upon but instead shuddered at “the unsavoriness of people’s spirits and their unreadiness to hear.” What was a challenge for Thacher stymied Shepard. From a second generation perspective, the latter’s preoccupation with his own and others’ sins ultimately proved a serious handicap to his evangelism and maybe to other aspects of his pastoral work. In a very telling and unministerial passage, Shepard admitted that, with his consciousness of the evil in men, “my heart began to withdraw itself from my brethren and others.” His attitude was consistent with the first generation ministers who, according to Hall, came from a tradition of “preaching catered to the saints.” Shepard’s concern for maintaining a posture of “otherworldliness” may have made him less effective than Thacher in terms of
new memberships. The first generation minister was unwilling or unable to adapt to the needs of a flock far less saintly than those to whom he preached in Old England. (37)

Professionalism

McGiffert notes the strict belief in church discipline common to early Puritans in general and Shepard specifically, remarking that they were “leaning on rules and rituals” and deriving “strength from settled patterns of authority, role, and status.” In the first generation tradition, Thacher adhered strictly to church rules. For example, he respected highly the process of “calling” to a pulpit. Informally invited to Barnstable, he was leery of acting precipitously and without formal call. Perhaps he was also concerned about appearances. In June 1679, one of the elders of the Barnstable church approached Thacher informally upon coming to his church. Choosing to wait for an official letter from the members, he told the man that “I did not love to goe before I was called, I did not Judge it meet to be to forward in soe waity a concerne.” (38)

In the level of professionalism exhibited in areas other than church discipline, however, major differences between first and second generation approach are evident. In this sense, professionalism meant a prioritizing of financial over religious considerations evident in the dealings of ministers with their congregations. It also entailed increased insistence upon the respect due to them because of their status as ministers. This sort of professionalism belonged more properly to later generations.
Hall comments that this change in attitude in the second generation resulted from a variety of reasons. Firstly, later ministers did not share with their congregations the journey to the New World as did the first and so were not joined emotionally to a particular group. Secondly, because they were not part of the initial settlement and consequent granting of land, second generation ministers had to obtain land as part of their conditions for acceptance of a call. Thirdly, and most importantly, the second generation was reacting in self-defense to the general spirit of “contention” found in most New England towns as laymen vie for religious, social, and political power. Ministers sought security from this strife and from the financial instability it often created as congregations in turmoil often argued over control of the selection of a minister. (39)

Hall sees evidence of lay attempts to control the ministry in the statistics showing that second generation ordinations usually occurred much later after a minister settles in a town than did those of the first. So men like Thacher resorted to professionalism in their dealings with these contentious churches, invoking ministerial rank and insisting upon a “recognition of their status” in their dealings with them. Significantly, it was in the latter half of the seventeenth century that contracts between ministers and towns detailing financial terms became widespread in New England. The result of this professionalism was what Hall terms “a higher definition of the ministry.” (40)

Jonathan Edwards conduct in Northampton is a good example of later generation professionalism. He constantly wrangled with his congregation over salary issues. Although his method of preaching and everyday interaction with his flock harkened back to the shepherd-like approach of the first generation, it can also be seen as a clear
example of subsequent generation concern for such worldly matters as salary, degree of control over the church, and his own independence. The younger Edwards finally challenged custom and suggested the town of Northampton guarantee him a certain remuneration for the length of his tenure. Patricia Tracy notes that he sent a letter to the town council to this effect in which he wrote: “The thing that I would propose is . . . you would settle a certain salary upon me . . . “ His reasons for making the request included a sentence which suggested he was looking to ensure a measure of professional autonomy: “There will be some that will be unjustifiably meddling with a minister’s affairs . . .” (41)

Thacher’s stint as minister at Barnstable well illustrates second generation professionalism. The course of his interactions with the people of Barnstable tell the story of a man very much concerned with establishing recognition of the social and financial status he felt was due him as a minister. Because his time there was so fraught with controversy and dissension, the entries show how he operated under pressure (experiencing opposition as did Edwards although not nearly as extensive) and what treatment he considered essential to his self-respect and image of himself as a professional. What becomes clear from the account in his journals of his stay in Barnstable is that Thacher had a strong sense of his capability and talent and believed he could and should look at several positions before choosing one. Hall remarks that this conduct was common to second generation ministers who, not wanting to get trapped in an undesirable town (most of the good ones were already taken), definitely “shopped around.” (42)
It early became clear for Thacher that at least one man in Barnestable opposed his coming. Mr. Hinckley, a man of considerable political power, began immediately to cause trouble by spreading reports that as much as a third of the church members did not support Thacher. Subsequent journal entries show that he was exaggerating the scope of opposition, perhaps hoping to scare Thacher away. The latter maintained his distance for a time, telling messengers from Barnestable that he was in no hurry to make a decision. Thacher indicated he had had offers from several churches and that he didn’t need the money, having “the where with to live some time unsettled.” (43)

Thacher did not agree to go to Barnestable until some months had passed, arriving in October of 1679. Hinckley continued as his nemesis. At one point the two squabbled over who would host one of the church elders for the night. Hinckley’s wife stole the man from under Thacher’s nose and he wrote that “this really angered mee.” It is not clear from the journals just what about Thacher Hinckley didn’t like. The only clue is that he accused the minister of “preaching false Doctrine” in a sermon Thacher delivered on the topic of following the dictates of one’s conscience. Thacher’s response was textbook Puritanism. He declared himself ready and able to defend his position and he cited one of the founding fathers of English, non-separating Puritanism as his authority. In one of the few entries which touched upon doctrinal issues, he wrote: “I told them I had said nothing but what I was reedy to make good and it was the very words of Doct Ames.” A subsequent accusation that he came to Barnestable unbidden and without formal call prompted Thacher to maintain “the Legality of my procedure.” Not surprisingly, one of his sermons at this time drew its inspiration from Titus: “They are to
slander no one, to be peaceable, considerate, exercising all graciousness toward everyone.” (44)

As the conflict escalated in the early months of 1680, Thacher adopted a posture of self-defense. He kept his own counsel. When the same elder who contacted him in the first place tried to glean from him whether he intended to stay or leave, Thacher talked with him but without “fully acquainting him with my purpose.” A delegation of church members came to his house to beg him to stay. He discussed the situation with them but revealed little of his own opinion. As he said, he “was very wary of my discourse.” Thacher also dug in his heels and refused to do more than conduct Sunday service. When the elder asked him to preach at a special meeting, his replied he was “not willing to it.” (45)

During this period, Thacher received a letter of invitation to preach in Milton. He began a round of consultations with colleagues, family, and friends as to whether he could legally leave Barnstable and as to whether he should accept Milton’s offer. At the same time he preached the dangers and sin of disunity to the Barnstable congregation and advised them to unite in support of the next minister. It appears that most of them didn’t disagree and that they had perhaps been a contentious bunch for some time before Thacher arrived. Despite this fact, it seems he was able to reach many of the congregation and that he was popular in the town. Groups of people came to his home to plead with him to stay or “Else they told mee the place was like to be undone.” In fact, the Barnstable church gave him a formal call. (46)
But the verdict was in by May of 1680 from his advisors, who counselled him to relocate to Milton. Thacher was concerned about making his decision and the reasons for it perfectly clear. He didn’t record the text of his formal answer to the church but he did say that he asked to read it aloud “that there might be noe mistake.” Ironically, they wouldn’t let him go. Members continued to invite him to preach and there was even talk about trying to obtain his release from Milton. To these overtures Thacher responded: “I would not be uncivill if spoke too but otherwise I counted my work in the place was over.” He did actually relent as far as preaching was concerned. No doubt still feeling some ministerial responsibility for the lost sheep who were the Barnestable congregation and also the weight of his responsibility to do God’s work, Thacher suffered from the strain of his position as he tried to discharge his Sabbath duties. In his journal entry of June 13, 1680 he recorded that “this day I was in a great sweight concerning my preaching” and “was very Ill this day.” (47)

As Thacher packed his belongings for the journey to Milton, Hinckley once again engaged him in verbal battle. Thacher did not indicate what the fight was about. On August 28, 1680 his journal recorded that the two “had a very hot dispute.” Since Thacher was leaving, there seemed no real reason for continued exchanges except, perhaps, mutual desire to assess blame. It does seem that Hinckley was the aggressor. But Thacher gave as good as he got. His opponent’s parting shot, delivered literally as Thacher departs, was a hope that the minister would be more careful of his conduct at his next post. Not to be outdone, Thacher was ready with an equally cutting remark. He noted his precise answer in his journal: “I thanked him and told him I wished hee might show more real love to the next than hee had done to mee.” Moreover, the last laugh
must be awarded to Thacher, since he was escorted on the road to his new town as far as
Sandwich by a splendid troup of fifty-seven horsemen. His journal entry of September
10, 1680 is short but speaks volumes: “This night wee came safe and well to Milton
blessed bee the Lord.” (48)

Thacher’s conduct in Barnstable, at least in relation to the quarrel described above,
appears very dissimilar to that of Shepard in Cambridge. Thacher aggressively joined the
battle while, as McGiffert observes, Shepard’s approach was “gracious” and “sweet” with
his congregation. (49) It is somewhat hard to judge accurately just how much Shepard
got involved in disputes with the people of Cambridge because he did not speak much of
such matters in either his autobiography or his journal. He mostly concentrated on his
inner turmoil about personal salvation and about his relationship with God. But perhaps
this contrast in content between the two ministers’ writings in and of itself speaks
volumes about the differences in approach of the two generations.

In Milton, Thacher finally found a church and a town unanimous in their call to him. The
people seemed overjoyed at his coming. A contingent helped him to unpack and ready
the ministerial abode, while another group brought welcoming gifts of “burnt wine and
Cakes and a loafe of bread” and “a Chease and an apple py and some turnops and bread.”
But Thacher had learned his lesson well in Barnstable and withheld his commitment,
while testing theirs. He asked the town to pay for the transport of his goods. He sought
assurance that Milton was united behind him. He wrote: “I was not willing to say
anything till I understood the mind of the congregation.” After subsequent votes of
church and town showed results universally affirmative, Thacher still hesitated. He
demanded the respect owing to himself and his position. When the church renewed its
call in late January 1681, he responded by indicating that he needed more convincing. According to his journal, he told the church messengers: “Tho I would not make proposalls to them yet I expected they should to mee they knew what was Costimary in the respect in other places.” (50)

By May, Thacher had finally accepted the call. His conditions for settlement reflected first generation concerns for the peace and order obtained by adhering to church discipline but also second generation focus on absence of contention, ministerial privilege, and financial security. He declared he had to be able to work without distraction, be paid a salary adequate to support his family, have members adhere to church discipline and structure, see peace reign over the congregation and the town, and be allowed to “enjoy the Liberty of my Judgem.” There was a disclaimer further clarifying his position. He informed the church that he would remain only “soe long as you are one amongst your selves and for mee; all due means being used or at least tendred for healing in Case of difference, proveing in Effectuall I am at liberty.” In other words, if the members did not observe the terms of the contract, Thacher as professional was free to seek employment elsewhere. (51)

Ordination Day for Thacher was June 1, 1681, with several of the major Boston Puritan divines officiating and all of them attending. The corresponding journal entry reads: “This day I was Ordained (the most unworthy) Pastour of the Church in Milton.” Because the church was only three years old and because Thacher was the first ordained minister, he performed the first baptism (his son, Oxenbridge) and administered the first Lord’s Supper to eighty communicants. (52)
Another example of professionalism for the Puritan minister might have been viewing himself as not only pastor to his flock but also a member of the clerical class and functioning actively as a member of that group. Thacher maintained his professional contacts with the Boston religious elite, continuing his practice of consulting with them about major issues or decisions he faced. (Interestingly, as he establishes himself in Milton, he appeared to rely more on his own judgement in purely ministerial matters, having recourse only occasionally to his mentors and then usually on specific items of church discipline.) Thacher also was sometimes guest preacher at other churches, while his counterpart came to Milton.

Thacher’s main pipeline to his professional brethren, however, was through ministers’ meetings, where he and his colleagues gathered at the home of one of them in the surrounding towns on a rotational basis to debate various “questions.” The topics tended to be of a practical, rather than a theoretical nature. A Dedham meeting in November 1681 discussed “how wee are to be have ourselves in the house of god.” The Weymouth meeting of September 1683 tackled the issue of “Spirituall declension.” Unfortunately, Thacher did not record anything about the actual debates. But in an entry of April 9, 1684, his words suggested that he found the issue at that day’s meeting particularly significant to himself. Under consideration was the topic of “how wee may manage our ministeriall work unto divine acceptance?” He wrote that he “spoke to the question god warmed my heart.” Thacher considered attendance at the ministers’ meetings an important part of his work. In his journals he noted his studying in preparation for them. He also seemed to enjoy the experience. In April of 1682, only half of the usual group of
eight or so ministers can attended the meeting. But Thacher and his colleagues held it anyway. (53)

Edmund Morgan has seen the ministers’ meetings as part of an overall program by the Puritan clergy in the late seventeenth century to enhance their authority and increase the scope of their work. This view accords with Thacher’s concern for his status. On the lighter side, the meetings seemed to function also and more simply as intellectual outlets and occasions for ministerial camaraderie. In fact, things got quite cozy at a meeting hosted by Thacher. The ministers usually stayed the night since many of them travelled some distance to attend the meetings. Faced with finding sleeping space for his friends, Thacher had to share his own quarters. While some of the group lodge at neighbors’ houses, he noted in his journal that “the other four lay together in my bed.” (54)

Effectiveness

The degree of effectiveness of a minister is subjective to a large extent. Patricia Tracy’s criterion for evaluating Jonathan Edwards’s performance perhaps is applicable to all Puritan ministers. She remarks that Edwards was, first and foremost, “a pastor” and therefore “his vocation was to persuade others to share his vision of divine glory.” (55) For the purposes of this thesis, an effective pastor was one whose opinion and advice were sought, respected, and usually followed by the congregation and townspeople and who brought new members into the church.

Thacher was an effective minister. The journals provide abundant evidence of his power of persuasion, as detailed above. They show how well he was accepted by and how often he influenced the behavior of his people. The congregation considered his advice and
assistance key in all matters. The most telling evidence is his considerable success in bringing people into the church. Here Shepard did not show similar results, a situation consistent with what Hall describes as the failure of the first generation to deal effectively with the larger and different audience they found in the New World.

Further evidence of Thacher’s effectiveness as a minister is the acceptance of his leadership and his friendship by the people of Milton. The town records show faithful voting of his salary each year. An entry from October 16, 1682 indicated that the town was willing to guarantee his stipend: “If any neglect or Refuse, the said Constable to gather in the same by distrese and pay it in to Mr. Thacher.” His journals indicate that, while a snow storm might delay payment, he usually received monies, goods, and services when and as promised. Thacher helped his young church to establish its structure through the appointment of deacons. He also regularly catechized the children and youth of the town. (56)

Foster contends that intense and varied involvement with their flocks, such as Thacher had with his people, helped to erode the effectiveness of later generation ministers. They were no longer above the fray. Working against their attempt to maintain their leadership position was “their growing inability to remain aloof from the neighborhood warfare.” Tracy suggests that Jonathan Edwards’ ultimate lack of effectiveness (he got fired) and loss of position were the result of his failing to understand that later generation congregations no longer looked to the pastor as the central authority in their lives. Edwards went down “holding fast to an ideal vision of community life and ministerial influence” to which his constituents no longer subscribed. Thacher’s experiences would seem to disprove both these contentions. The more he interacted with his congregation,
the more he was asked by them to do so. The more he rendered assistance on matters of
religion and morality, the greater the esteem in which he was held. In fact, Thacher’s
career seems to refute Hall’s contention that second generation ministers suffered from
“diminished charisma.” (57)

Notwithstanding the passages in his journals which mention bouts of fatigue and self-
doubt, Thacher’s ministry was definitely a labor of love. Thacher revealed to one of his
congregation, a Mr. Atherton, how he viewed his role as minister. As he summarized his
position: “God had by his alwise-disposeing hand of providence set mee in the place that
they must come to mee God had made mee the porter of his house.” This view is
consistent with Hall’s description of the role of the minister. He says that they “stood in
place of Christ, and their stance was both human and divine.” (58).
CHAPTER 6

THE MAN

Relationship with God

Thacher’s personal relationship with God was in some ways similar to Shepard’s. It is a very intense one, filled with emotion. He did not hesitate to appeal to God for assistance or guidance, trusting that He would listen and respond. Both ministers exhibited strong belief in the power and efficacy of prayer. It was when writing about prayer that Thacher’s language was most direct, less the conventional journal formula and more expressive of the inner man. At one point he hoped simply that “the Lord grant I may live much with god and live much to god.” When one of his close friends among the church members was seriously ill, Thacher prayed with him for his recovery. The old man summoned him to say that the prayers had relieved his suffering. Thacher’s fervent words in his journal for that day were: “The Lord is the hearer of prayer I desire to pray to him as long as I live.” (59)

The question for discussion at the December 1683 ministers’ meeting Thacher attends was “how wee may pray prevailing and successfully.” Thacher no doubt had much to say on this topic, since his journals show that he considered prayer perhaps his most important and most efficacious ministerial tool. Bremer observes that “New Englanders earned a reputation as a praying people.” Thacher prayed constantly and for everything. When rain prevented him from laying out the boundaries of the land given to him by the town at his settlement, Thacher rose in the middle of the night and prayed successfully
for an end to the storm. His journal noted about one of his son’s illnesses that “quickly after prayer the child revived.” (60)

Thacher’s usual routine before Sunday service included a request for divine assistance in his forthcoming work. He detailed his practice in a journal entry of March 5, 1682, where he explained that “I did as I always have been want just before I went to the house of god breifly pray . . . for his presence and blessing in praying and preaching.” Yet prayer didn’t always come easy to Thacher. One day he may have felt connected to God, the next remote from his influence. Consecutive journal entries show this phenomenon clearly. On March 14, Thacher wrote that “this night I was cold in family and secret prayer.” The next day he “had sweet breathings of soul after god when I first awaked” but later in the day was “troubled with wandering thoughts to[o] many.” (61)

Some of the most eloquent passages in the journals are those where Thacher recorded the text of his prayers or described his feelings about the act of praying. These instances highlight the fact that Thacher’s relationship with God was an intensely personal and ever-present one. As Thacher wrote, “My soul did greatly breath after god.” A particularly affecting line is one where Thacher described his journey to a Weymouth church lecture. Alone on the road, he gave himself over to contemplation of the divine presence in his life. Thacher recorded that “god warmed my heart in my meditation when riding to his house and met my soul there.” (62)

Thus it appears that Thacher’s relationship with God was in large part one of largely instinctive or intuitive communion. Entries in Shepard’s journal indicate that the first generation minister’s approach to prayer was similar. After a night of intense prayer he
remarked: “I found my heart drawn more sweetly to close with God.” On the difference between knowing God by reason as opposed to faith, Shepard eloquently observed: “I have seen a God by reason and never been amazed at God. I have seen God himself and have been ravished to behold him.” Like Thacher, Shepard believed implicitly in God’s willingness (or even commitment) to hear and answer prayer. He was always praying for his own benefit and assumed that others’ prayers are equally important in the divine scheme. He concluded that it was “God’s good pleasure to hear every prayer.” (63)

Significantly, Thacher’s personal relationship with God was not always the submissive one associated with first generation Puritans. He often questioned, even challenged God’s actions when they threatened his temporal affections. For example, Thacher’s attachment to his children frequently tested his faith. His moments of doubt and defiance usually occurred when his children were sick. He was often ambivalent about and sometimes rebellious toward a God who brought suffering as well as joy. Miller contended that the Puritans embraced a theology based upon a covenant between God and man in order to make sense of divine actions and reactions. In other words, since there existed this mutual agreement or contract, men could count on God fulfilling his obligations as long as they fulfilled theirs. This sense of security had perhaps grown strong enough in the second generation that Thacher felt justified in his anger against a God who did not seem to be playing fair.

When she was only a few months old Thacher’s daughter, Theodora, became quite ill. Calling her “my Little daughter Theodora,” the father prayed fervently and continually for her recovery. He described this activity almost as if it were a battle he waged with God. His language is revealing: “I wresased with the Lord for the Life of the Child.”
She appeared better, then had a relapse. Thacher was again imploring God’s mercy. His belief in the glories of heaven did not preclude him wanting to keep his child here on earth. As he wrote, “god did strongly carry out my soul in pleading for her life.” When both his son and daughter had been ill for some days and the doctor indicated that Theodora was on the mend but Oxenbridge remained in jeopardy, the news rendered Thacher unable to concentrate on his work. He stayed up all night with the boy. He would not resign himself to his son’s possible death. As he said, “I could not bring my will to stoup to gods in being willing to submitte.” Thacher did finally accept his own powerlessness in the situation and rediscovered his faith in God’s mercy, but not without much “hard tugging with my heart.” It seems a somewhat tardy reconciliation and one which only came once the heat of passion had subsided. (64)

As does the serious illnesses of his children, his father’s death shook deeply Thacher’s faith. It was likely no coincidence that, after two days of intensive study of his father’s manuscripts, Thacher wrote in his journal that he experienced a “coldnesse deadnesse and wandring of my heart.” In another instance, he spoke of relating a verse of Isaiah to himself. The passage in question was: “Your wrath lies heavy upon me; all your waves crash over me.” Thacher’s brother became dangerously sick, and this occurrence, combined with the recent deaths of his father and sister (who died just prior to the father), were too much for him to bear. He questioned God’s apparent cruelty. Wondering why he should have been met with “soe awfull a dispensation of providence,” he asked God if “hee would give mee to understand wherefore he did soe sharply Contend with mee and if it where possible to cause this Cup to passe from mee.” (65)
Contrast these passages with Shepard’s comments when members of his family were sick or died. There was none of the resentment or combativeness of Thacher. In fact, when his wife almost died after childbirth, Shepard accepted the occurrence as necessary instruction. He said that “as the affliction was very bitter, so the Lord did teach me much by it, and I had need of it . . . .” His reactions during his wife’s difficult childbirth did not indicate that he was challenging God’s will but, rather, that he was fearful of it and grateful when his fears for mother and child proved unfounded. Once the danger has passed, Shepard remarked: “Hereupon I saw the Lord’s mercy and my own folly...not rather to submit unto the Lord’s will, come what can come, to be quiet there.” In all earthly dangers to his children Shepard recognized his duty to let go of any thoughts of influencing or controlling events. Confident of the ultimate wisdom and goodness of God’s plan, he said that he “turned them over to God.” The illness of his son on the ship his family took to New England, moved the first generation minister to distraction at the thought of losing his child. But he did not forget his proper place and that he had no right to approach God in any manner other than that of a suppliant. When things were not going well, he observed: “But yet the Lord would not be entreated for the life of it.” Thacher wrestled with God while Shepard entreated. (66)

Family Life

It is reasonable to assume that both first and second generation Puritans loved their families and dedicated a good portion of their energies toward providing for their material needs. In fact, it was their duty to do both according to Puritan doctrine. But it was also the Puritan’s duty to guard against excess in temporal attachments lest these
rival spiritual duties. As Edmund Morgan remarks, “When earthly delights dimmed their vision, it was time to break off.” (67)

Specific to the Puritan creed was the dilemma of how to be lovingly and productively engaged with the persons and things of this world without that wordliness diluting religious fervor or gaining ascendancy over love of God. Morgan frames the central Puritan question quite succinctly: “How love the world with moderation and God without?” (68) The conflict was perhaps more ever-present and more poignant for those in the ministry than for laymen because a minister dealt with it not only for himself but also served as an example and guide for the members of his congregation. His spiritual duties as shepherd of his flock were juxtaposed everyday with his temporal duties as husband and father.

It can be argued that, for the New England Puritans in the seventeenth century, this problem of balancing the temporal with the spiritual was perhaps more critical than for their English brethren. Old England’s Puritans had the all-consuming and unifying task of defending their minority faith against various theological, political, and economic assaults to keep them focused on their otherworldly goals. In contrast, the New England Puritans were the only game in town. They quickly established religious, political, and economic security in America and were thus at liberty to practice their faith largely unchallenged from outside their ranks. Miller suggested they were not prepared for this situation because, having been used to struggle, “they never took thought for what their problem might become in the face of triumph.” (69)
Consequently, New England Puritans were left to enjoy the things of this world. Indeed, to a great extent, they created their temporal world or at least the rules governing it. And for most it was a good world, conducive to domestic bliss and commercial success. For second generation New England Puritans, who inherited this situation and who thus never knew the temporal insecurity of their fathers, the possibility of living too well in this world and losing focus on the next was an everyday reality.

Thacher definitely and unapologetically cared much for the persons and things of this world. Fully half if not more of his journal writing was taken up with detailing his interactions as husband, father, friend, businessman. Shepard rarely spoke of his family and never mentioned other types of secular concerns.

Thacher’s large and intense love for his family pervaded his writing. Morgan has remarked that “Puritan love . . . was . . . a rational love, in which the affections were commanded by the will under the guidance of the reason.” Judging by the accounts of his experiences with his wife and children contained in his journals, it appears Thacher had no intention of holding to this creed. During the period of Thacher’s life the journals cover, he was married to the first of his three wives, Theodora Oxenbridge, daughter of a Boston minister. She was eighteen when they married, Thacher twenty-six. They had nine children together, only three of whom survive their father. Theodora died in 1697, after twenty years of marriage. Thacher referred to her always as “my dear” or sometimes “my dear Yoke fellow.” She was frequently the subject of prayers for her physical, as well as spiritual, well-being. At one point his supplication was “that shee might be fat and flourishing in the Courts of the house of the Lord.” Their relationship
appears to have been one of mutual affection and Thacher was quite solicitous of her. In one journal entry he described accompanying her to Roxbury and then rushing her back home when a storm came up, “shee being afraid of thunder.” When she woke in the night, frightened by lightning and thunder, Thacher went to her side to comfort her with prayer. Theodora suffered somewhat from nerves. Thacher was nothing if not empathetic. On November 21, 1679, she lay in bed at night “Exceedingly surprized with fear of death & terreur” while Thacher brought her “cordiall water” and talked her through her fears. (70)

Thacher nursed his wife when she was sick and curtailed his social and professional activities until she recovered. When Theodora had a toothache, he explained to his visiting cousin that he was unable to entertain him properly since he needed to attend her. When his friends called one night, Thacher relegated them to the kitchen “because my dear was Ill.” On June 3, 1680, Theodora was recovering from childbirth and was once again ill. Thacher hoped she would break into a fever, thereby throwing off the illness. He wrote that he “went to bed to her to see whether the heat of my body would not bring her into a heat.” When she and the children were sick on the day he was supposed to preach at Salem, he described “my selfe” as “disordered” with worrying and cancelled his engagement, pleading incapacity. (71)

Thacher’s concern for Theodora’s health was heightened during her pregnancies (which were almost yearly) and especially strong when she was in childbirth. He asked God for “a blessing upon my dear in soul and body that shee might be preserved unto and In, and delivered safely out of the hour of travel [travail] etc.” Thacher faithfully recorded the
stages of his wife’s recovery after each delivery. On June 8, 1680, he noted: “This day my
dear had her head Comed and it was the first time after her lying in.” Three days later
he observed: “This was the first time of my deare goeing out of the Hall since her lying
In.” He read to her to pass the time of her convalescence. Thacher suffered with
Theodora when she was in labor and maintained a place by her side. She had a difficult
time with the birth of their son, Oxenbridge. He noted in his journals: “My dear was in
Travell all the night. I went not to bed.” The next morning the baby had still not arrived.
Thacher was “Earnest with tears at the throne of grace for Mother & Child.” (72)

It is clear that Thacher and Theodora were true helpmates and that Thacher derived not
only pleasure but support from her company. When he was upset about the conflict in
Barnestable over his staying and torn as to his decision, she counselled patience and trust
in God, “which words were a stay to mee.” She accompanied him to view the plot of
land Milton offered them for their house. They went together to consult with the town
doctor about their son’s rickets. They were often together, whether it was on trips to
Boston, picking strawberries on Milton’s Brush Hill, or visiting family on Cape Cod.
Thacher wrote to Theodora whenever travel forced him to be away from her, even if he
was gone for only a matter of days. When he journeyed alone to Duxbury, she was there
at his return: “My Dear . . . came to meet mee to welcome mee home.” (73)

Significantly, Theodora was a frequent visitor to her husband’s inner sanctum, his study,
praying with him before service on the Sabbath or discussing family issues. He missed
her presence when she was unable to be with him during sickness or recovery from
childbirth. Thacher thankfully noted Theodora’s return to normal activities after the birth
of their son: “This day my dear was up staires and in my study, blessed bee the Lord.”

There is only one entry in the journals suggesting any discord between them and it clearly shows that Thacher blamed himself for the temporary problem. As he described the situation, “my dear and I had jarring The Lord humble mee for my pasionatenesse.”

Their was evidently a most happy, most loving relationship. The support and comfort Thacher found in his marriage is a consistent theme throughout the journals. He commemorated his fifth wedding anniversary, November 21, 1682, by writing: “This day five year I was maried and desire to bless the Lord that brought us together and continued our lives.” Morgan contends that Puritans learned to temper their affections in part because human relationships did not survive death. As he says, “after all, marriage ended at the grave.” Thacher’s conduct would seem to indicate that such was not his belief. (74)

Juxtapose Thacher’s words about Theodora with Shepard’s about his wife. Although his love for her is apparent from his journal, he constantly strove to put that love in its proper place, of secondary importance to his love of God. He said of his attitude toward his wife: “I began to grow secretly proud and full of sensuality, delighting my soul in my dear wife more than in my God.” He felt he had lost sight of his duty to maintain proper proportion in his earthly affections. These constant reminders to himself by the first generation Shepard of the dangers of too intense conjugal love are strikingly missing from the later generation Thacher’s writings. While Thacher allowed his adoration of his wife to shine from every page on which she was mentioned, Shepard chastised himself for the same types of feelings. He apologized for these emotions, feeling he sinned in his propensity “to prefer the creature above the Creator.” (75)
Despite experiencing more than his share of infant and child mortality, Thacher was very attached to his children. He constantly recorded the details of their health in his journals, and, as with his wife, tended them during their illnesses. The children were often sick. Two daughters died as infants during the time of the journals. These experiences clearly did not delay or diminish Thacher’s considerable emotional connection with his children. Indeed, this attachment began when they were in the womb. When his wife fell and hit her stomach against a chair while pregnant, both she and he were greatly upset, fearing miscarriage or deformity. In 1685 Mary was still-born, revived, then died three days later. Thacher had kept a solitary vigil at cribside throughout this time, leaving only to preach on Sunday morning. In one of the most poignant entries in the journals, Thacher described the day before Mary’s death: “My daughter Mary lay a dying and I prayed with it; and was in the room much of the day.” In another striking passage from the journals, Thacher wrote of a brief return to Barnestable where he visited the burial site of another of his infant daughters. Much moved, he remained there, alone, for some time. As he noted, “this morning I went to see my dear Bathshua grave and the [grave] stones and retired my selfe in the woods was much Inlarged.” (76)

Thacher considered all the years of his children’s lives so many blessings. His daughter Theodora was born on November 1, 1678. On her first birthday, he observed the day in his journal by writing that “this day my child was a year old blessed be god that hath yet spared it.” He was a connected, caring father. Receiving word that his son, Oxenbridge (born May 17, 1681), was dangerously ill, Thacher immediately galloped home. His journal entry says that he “rid very hard fearing lest hee should bee dead before I got home.” Theodora shared her parents’ bed on at least one occasion when she cried in the
middle of the night. Thacher’s Indian slave girl could testify to his concern for his
daughter. Accidentally dropping the infant, she suffered her master’s wrath, who “beat
the Indian to purpose till shee promise never to doe soe any more.” When traveling,
Thacher was somehow always receiving reports from relatives or friends as to the health
and well-being of his family. Upon returning, he noted in his journals the condition he
finds them in upon his arrival. He commended his children to divine protection before
leaving on his journeys, asking “gods gracious presence with my little ones.” (77)

Thacher, the proud parent, used his journals to record the events of his children’s
childhood. When the family visited Thacher’s brother in Boston, Thacher saw fit to note
that “this was the first day that Little Theodora saw Boston.” On another trip to the city,
he bought his three-week old son some finery. He reported the purchase: “bought
Oxenbridge aCoat which Cost ten shillings.” Thacher spoke of Theodora “breeding a
great tooth” and burning herself “by falling into a dish of meat.” When she was five
years old, he paid one shilling and three pence a month for her schooling. (78)

In a more general, theological sense, Morgan sees the Puritans’ concern for and focus on
their children as resulting in a “tribalism” which ultimately caused the decay of the
system. Second generation New Englanders confined their evangelical efforts to the
children of the saved to the exclusion of all others. When the children proved unable or
unwilling to testify to the intense conversion experiences of their parents, church
membership dwindled away. The reason for this, according to Morgan, was that the
second generation forgot the precepts of the first regarding earthly attachments. In their
misdirected focus “they had allowed their children to usurp a higher place than God in
their affections.” His words apply well to Thacher. (79)
Shepard, of course, loved his children also. In speaking of his son he said, in his gently expressive way, he was “very precious to my soul and dearly beloved of me.” Whether it was a storm at sea on the way to New England or a bout with childhood sickness later on, the father suffered with and for his children. But he was ever mindful of not allowing that love to become immoderate and to take precedence over his first love, God. (80)

Shepard mentioned his children in his autobiography and journal only in times of crisis and usually when he thought he had crossed the line toward excess of feeling. At these times, it was never long before the first generation Puritan recognized his error. After one such episode he remarked: “And the Lord showed me my weak faith . . . immoderate love of creatures and of my child especially.” While Thacher literally dropped everything and rushed to them when his children were sick, Shepard schooled himself to put such events in their proper place. The latter clearly believed that excessive attachment to family served to distance him from the divine. The lesson he learned was that “so long as the creature is something in mine eye, that something will stand between God and me . . . .” (81)

Thacher’s father was the other family member who loomed particularly large in his life. Interestingly, his reaction to his father’s death is the only instance in the journals where Thacher’s usual equanimity and assurance about himself and his religious performance appear to be temporarily shaken. Thomas Thacher, who came to America in 1635, died a few months before his son’s journal commences. As the first book opened in January of 1679, Thacher was attempting to adjust to his father’s decease. Throughout the early months of that year, there were repeated entries referring to this traumatic event with
which the son seemed preoccupied. Thacher obsessively reviewed his father’s papers and arranged his library. In March he wrote that he “Overlooked fathers short hand Notes and placed them and read in some of them.” The next month he noted: “I spent my time amongst fathers papers” and “I began to sort my fathers Library and to take a Catalogue of the bookes.” In May he was still at it, this time with the help of his sister: “Sister Rawson and I spent a good part of the day Classifying my Dear Fathers Library.” In July he moved his father’s books into his own study. (82)

Several entries make clear the fact that the trauma of his father’s death had a strong effect on Thacher emotionally and perhaps even physically. For twelve days at the beginning of July and prior to consolidating his father’s library into his own, Thacher was quite ill with a severe cold or bronchitis. He thought that this sickness “was much like that which fath[er] dyed of.” While preaching one day, he suddenly thought of his father and was temporarily overcome. As he related, “I was greatly surprized with fear and sorroe remembering my Honoured and Dear Father.” Two days later, after dining with his brothers and sister, he chose to describe the event as “the first time that wee had Eat altogether since . . . Fathers decease.” Late in July Thacher was still dating his activities in terms of his father’s death. Invited to preach at the home of a church member, he declared that that day “was the first time I spake at any private meeting . . . since fathers disease.” After attending the Harvard commencement in August, Thacher recorded in his journal the fact that the speakers mentioned Thomas Thacher often. (83)

One of the few instances in the journal where Thacher might have been questioning his ability to live up to the standards of the first generation was when he talked of his father’s death. He clearly felt intensely the loss and, as mentioned above, was a long time in
coming to terms with it. Besides his obvious love for his father, perhaps Thomas Thacher exercised such a hold upon his son after death because the younger Thacher feared he had rather large shoes to fill. In fact, the elder’s last words to his children related to their practice of religion. According to Thacher, “my Fathers dying Charge” was that the siblings renew their covenant with God every year because “other wise hee told us Religion would dy in our familys if not in our Generation yet in the next.” Moreover, Thomas Thacher was the first pastor and a well-known and highly regarded preacher at Boston’s Old South Church. So, the parent was also the professional mentor. No doubt Thacher felt keenly the loss of his father’s professional advice and support. On October 15, 1679, the year anniversary of Thomas Thacher’s death, his son wrote in his journal: “The Lord grant that I may follow him soe far forth as hee followed Christ.”

Secular Pursuits

Besides being a husband and father, Thacher played a variety of roles in order to support and maintain his immediate family and his larger household, which included cousins, servants, and both Indian and Negro slaves. The journals provide fascinating details of this aspect of his life as head of a farm household and as businessman. This part of his life reflected what Hall sees as a logical shift in focus to worldly responsibilities. He observes that “secular priorities were being reasserted as the colonists tried to make a living off the harsh New England soil.”

There is no equivalent discussion of secular duties by the first generation Shepard. In his journal he never spoke about his “worldly” responsibilities. Either he did not actively
pursue such areas or he did not feel they were significant enough to be mentioned. Whatever the reason for the omission, it speaks volumes about what Shepard considered his priorities and these did not include secular roles. He remarked in his journal: “I saw my heart was not prepared to die because I had not studied to wean my heart from the world.” Shepard focused solely upon spiritual issues and his painful striving toward a perfect relationship with God. His writings indicate he would have been all too happy to distance himself as far as possible from secular issues: “But for the sake of others and their good I would meddle no more with this world.” (86)

The second generation Thacher was merchant, horse-trader, sometime carpenter, tutor, and amateur physician. He referred to these pursuits as “domestick concerns” or “secular affairs” and, judging by the amount of space he accorded them in his journals, he did not see them as any less important or acceptable in God’s eyes as his role of minister. Certainly he devoted as much time to detailing these activities as he did to religious ones, so any discussion of Thacher the man must include this side of his life. Miller noted this comfort with material pursuits of the second generation in the correspondence of a Boston Puritan merchant which “mingle piety and business without embarrassment.” Typical of Thacher’s journals is the juxtaposition of entries on March 17, 1684, where he was at first talking with a man about joining the church and then carefully laying out the boundaries of his newly acquired land. Earthly concerns complement heavenly ones in Thacher’s world. At prayer he asked “gods blessing upon our outward Estate soe far at least as that I may pay my debts.” (87)

Thacher was actively involved in the running of his farm. He raised horses, sheep, hogs, goats, and had milk cows. He kept “a swarme a Beas” for honey and some “tame
“Pitcheons” for which “Neighbor Redman made a house.” He had difficulty keeping his cows at home and had one of his horses stolen at one point. Although the townsmen assisted him in the fields with plowing and harvesting, he also worked extensively himself to prepare pasture land, plant vegetables, and mend fences. On May 5, 1682 he entered in his journal: “This day wee planted our Corne.” While working in the fields he dined on “bread and Chease and strong bear.” For some of the harder field work, like clearing a meadow, he hired an Indian. Thacher’s farming was on a large enough scale to warrant twenty-three “reapers” for “all my English graine.” In August of 1683, Thacher himself harvested hay and then prepared his barn for threshing. The next year, during a November snow storm, Thacher wrote: “I was ingaged in ordering things in the barne in order to make room for my Creatures.” The simplicity and the language of the line conjure up the picture of a man who, though educated at Harvard and accepted in the elite social circle in Boston, felt quite at home and at peace in a quiet barn filled with animals on a snowy day. (88)

Thacher was very handy around the house, a bit of a carpenter. Having fallen or almost fallen down his stairs one evening, he noted that he “mended the stare which breaking the night before had like to have done mee a great Injury.” While living in Barnestable he knocked down the wall between his study and the next room so that he could “set up the square bedstead in it.” He also made himself a chest to store his books. When he was unable to go to Cambridge as planned because his horse ran away, he instead “mended the garden gate.” Gardens and garden gates were to be popular items in the Thacher household. With his wife and some Boston neighbors he “set roots and sowed seads in the Garden.” In preparation for his Milton ordination reception in his garden he
mentioned that “this day the gates were hung and they made an Arbour to Entertaine the Messengers of the Churches.” Four years later that garden still required his attention. In fact, he had to shorten his study time because “we were about agate for the garden; sometime I spent about the affair.” (89)

Thacher was a successful business man with commercial ties to Boston and London. He sold some of the produce of his farm and household in the city. Separate journal entries noted him sending his live-in cousin, Lidea Chapin, to Boston to sell “mint water” and butter. He bought, sold, and traded horses. In 1681 he bartered two horses for a Negro slave. According to historian Edward Pierce Hamilton, he also shipped horses to the West Indies for sale. Thacher owned property in Boston, Bridgewater, and England, in addition to the land given him by Milton for settlement (to which he added by purchase twenty-three acres in 1682). For his city house he collected rent. For the Bridgewater land he set a selling price of fifty pounds but settled for thirty-five. He mentioned in his journal that he was looking for a London lawyer to handle the sale of his house and land in England, for which Thacher eventually received one hundred thirty pounds. (90)

Thacher’s business agent in England was a Mr. White with whom he corresponded and who wrote him in June of 1679 to tell him that he had lost in shipment “goods . . . as much as might have yielded mee 40 pounds here.” Five months later Thacher received “three and 30 pounds of English goods.” A journal entry from 1682 shows that Thacher also purchased luxuries for his own use. It details items sent to Thacher from England, including “two knit wascoats.” That same year Thacher was sending to White in England through a Daniell Tailor in Boston “a Bill of Exchange . . . for 30 starling and hee was to give mee 37-10 here for it.” Thacher reconciled his accounts quite carefully. He
discovered that the young man who lives with him as an apprentice bookkeeper was cheating him. He said that he “talkt roundly to Thomas Swift about lying and being unfaithfull in my business.” One of the most amusing facts about Thacher is that he was always borrowing money from people. Apparently he had cash flow problems. This entry from 1679 is representative: “I went to Captain Hull in the morning and Borrowed 15 pound money of him then went about business.” Fortunately, he had a good relationship with his mother-in-law, who helped him out with ten shillings when he came to visit one day. (91)

Thacher supplemented his income by tutoring and by serving as town physician in Barnestable and Milton, although his medical work was often unpaid. He took on a pupil who wanted “to learne to writte of mee.” He also taught writing to Thomas Plum and accounting to Christopher Wadsworth. As a young college graduate, Thacher travelled to England with classmates Samuel Sewall and Samuel Danforth where he studied medicine for a time. It remained one of his interests. Townspeople in Milton asked his advice about treatments for various ailments. In Barnestable he prescribed “five drops of Elixerate Balsame” for a cold and “some walnut water and pil rufi” for a sick child. To his own daughter he gave an interesting remedy. He wrote that he “gave her some powder of fox lungs” measured out according to “as much as would ly upon a three pence.” (92)

Thacher was somewhat of a conspicuous consumer. His house in Boston had a “Looking Glass in the Hall.” He ordered the hall and kitchen in his Barnestable house whitewashed and paid twenty-five shillings to construct a fireplace for the hall. On October 6, 1679 he noted that “this day I bought seven Chaires which Cost Sixteen shillings and six pence.”
He participated in household work, making candles and soap, brewing beer, and washing clothes. In fact, he seemed willing to lend a hand on any task to be done. An entry from 1680 reads: “After dinner wee put up the Curtaine in the Hall.” No portrait of Thacher is complete without a brief discussion of his recreational activities. He knew how to enjoy himself. He actually had a bowling alley built while living in Boston. As soon as it was finished, he invited friends to help him try it out. On April 29, 1679, he spent the night “playing at nine-pinnes in my Alley.” The pins and ball together cost him five shillings and six pence. According to his journal, Thacher’s alley was still a popular night spot for the neighbors a month later. (93)

He was an avid and skilled horseman. One journal entry mentions that “this day my new saddle came home which Cost six and twenty shillings.” Later he bought “black leather to make me a pair a breeches.” The way Thacher recorded the details of his riding activities indicated that he was knowledgeable about horses and that he was attached to his animals. In June of 1684 he wrote that “I rid my little horse and had him shod.” He was a successful horse trainer also. Purchasing a horse for his wife, he found that the horse’s gaits needed some work before the animal would be suitable for her. Thacher said that he “tryed to teach my mare to amble by crosse spanning of her.” Four years later he tried the same technique on another horse meant for his wife’s use. He reaped the benefits of the training himself when he borrowed the animal for a journey. As he commented, “my wifes horse brought mee home comfortably.” (94)
Chapter 7

Conclusion

Thacher was a blend of first and second generation conduct and influences with a definite weighting toward the latter. In terms of his similarities to earlier ministers, Thacher preserved the concern for order and authority as represented by church discipline of the first generation and was evangelical in his approach, as was Shepard. He believed in the power of prayer, using this vehicle as often as Shepard both to assist him in his ministerial labors and to cultivate an intense and very personal relationship with God.

The main difference between Thacher and Shepard, and it was a significant and ultimately defining one, was in level of anxiety versus assurance about both personal piety and the acceptability of attachments to “wordly things.” Thacher elevated love of family to an almost equal status to that of love of God. His journals spoke often of his interactions with others in his roles of husband, father, and businessman while Shepard rarely, if ever, focused on anything but his interactions with God. As Michael McGiffert notes about the subject of most of the latter’s journal entries, they dealt primarily with how “Shepard suffered privately the anticipatory torments of the damned.” (95) It was not that Shepard and Thacher did not feel the same love of family and pull toward material concerns. It was rather that they reacted differently to these impulses: Shepard with guilt and anxiety and an intensified focus on God, Thacher with an absence of serious or lasting guilt, less fear and contrition, some resentment toward the Puritan God’s demands for such single-mindedness and sacrifice, and an ultimate assurance of the worthiness of his actions.
Thacher’s career and life seem closer to an historiographical view of second and later generation Puritanism as an adaptation to new conditions specifically related to America and to the need to attract new members in order to keep the faith a viable one. With his various business enterprises, his strawberrying in the Blue Hills, and his mission to the Ponkapoag Indians, Thacher was very much connected to his life in New England. His approach to church membership, his working closely with his people to prepare for conversion, indicate a sincere and intelligent response to the needs of his congregation. After all, not only did the ministers have conflicting claims on their time and attention in a new world environment, so did the members of their congregation. If a minister’s job was to reach people, he had to know what their lives were like and modify his strategy to address that.

David Hall has summed up the interplay between the Puritan religion and its New England location by observing that “the myth imposed itself upon the land, yet the land would affect the myth.” Thacher’s obituary in the “Boston Weekly Journal” of December 23, 1727 contained a revealing, though unwitting, comment to this effect. The author indicated Thacher exhibited “a vein of piety, agreeably mixed with entertaining turns and passages.” Thacher was a New World minister and man who successfully mixed first and second generation approaches in order to create one which allowed him to function faithfully and effectively within his environment. In this he was typical of the second generation as described by Hall when he maintains that the later ministers forged “their own version of the middle way” which “lay not only between purity and moderation but also between old forms and the challenge of experience.” (96)
Perhaps what has been seen as declension in the second generation, or as a falling away of the original faith and losing sight of the original goals of Puritanism, was rather the creative response of an inherently and essentially very adaptive creed to the accelerated pressures of the New England environment. The wonderful self-knowledge and consequent personal strength Puritanism gave its adherents prepared them for the challenges of faith and life in a brave new world. Whether the jeremiad’s reflected a genuine perception of failings by the second generation or were simply means to religious, social, or political control, they represented internal and therefore subjective opinion. Viewed from the (theoretically) objective perspective of the historian, as well as within the context of New World demands, these “failings” were indeed major successes. They allowed the ministry to connect with an audience of more diverse levels of faith and with less economic reason for tribalism.

The influence of America, this “interaction of ideas and situation” as Hall terms it, made for a more private, personal, self-confident religion. (97) Assurance had triumphed over anxiety. Later generations were more assured as a natural result of the absence of persecution and the presence of considerable material success (which to the Puritans was itself evidence of God’s favor). They did not need to protest their piety so much. The degree of their religious commitment became an issue between themselves and God, and they did not agonize over it as much, either publicly or privately. Maybe the instance of publicly related conversion experiences declined not because fewer people had them but because fewer people saw the necessity for such a display. Thus it was not that the
second generation lost their spirituality but rather that they did not feel they needed to share it. Piety did not decline, but rather became a strictly private concern.

Maybe, as in all things historical, the key to understanding second generation Puritans is to judge them by their own standards. Hall warns that “we risk asking more of people in the past than they themselves expected.” Thacher’s life and faith did not reflect extreme ambivalence about worldly affections and concerns, nor did anxiety drive his actions as it did with Shepard. Most importantly, he did not see himself or his flock as guilty of declension. Any nagging doubts he may have had as to commitment or level of piety among his generation were not evidenced in the scope and quality of his interactions with family or congregation. Thacher was comfortable with himself and with his world. His posture was consistent with Hall’s description of the Harvard training of second generation ministers. These men were not taught, as were their fathers, to be ready “for waging war against a hostile culture.” Rather, their shepherding skills were “absorbed as routine” in preparation for careers composed most likely of much milder adventures. (98)

In speaking of the first generation Shepard, Michael McGiffert has observed that “the great problem of Puritan piety” was “to maintain anxiety while simultaneously converting it into assurance.” It would appear that Thacher the second generation Puritan lost the intensity of and reason for that anxiety. He was far more assured of his faith and of his various earthly roles than was Shepard. Contrasting the two men’s dying words illuminates this point. Shepard exclaimed: “Lord, I am vile, but thou art righteous.” Thacher proclaimed: “I am going to Christ in glory.” (99)
ENDNOTES


10. Ibid., 173-174; Miller, *Colony*, 28.


12. Ibid., 27.


25. Ibid., 164.


28. Thacher, **vol.1**, 252.

29. Ibid., 237.


31. Thacher, **vol.1**, 18, 186, 230-1.

32. Thacher, **vol.2**, 8; **vol.1**, 180, 202, 249.


36. Ibid., 127; Ibid., 181.

37. Ibid., 115, 113; Ibid., 61.


40. Ibid., 186-87, 190, 192-94.


42. Hall, *Faithful*, 186.

43. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 25, 34-5, 42.

44. Ibid., 81, 111, 122, 125.

45. Ibid., 83, 99, 84.

46. Ibid., 125, 121, 123, 148.

47. Ibid., 127, 130, 146.


51. Ibid., 204, 208, 212-13.

52. Ibid., 215.

53. Thacher, *Journal, vol.2*, 11; *vol.1*, 238; *vol.2*, 59-60, 83; *vol.1*, 204; *vol.2*, 13.


55. Tracy, 7.


57. Foster, 304; Tracy, 122; Hall, *Faithful*, 181.

59. Thacher, \textit{vol. 2}, 73; \textit{vol. 1}, 236, 248; \textit{vol. 2}, 2-4, 102, 3-4, 250.

60. Thacher, \textit{vol. 2}, 73; \textit{vol. 1}, 236; Bremer, 54.


63. McGiffert, 111-12, 135, 133.


66. McGiffert, 125, 61, 125, 55.


69. Miller, \textit{Colony}, 76.

70. Morgan, \textit{Puritan Family}, 52; Thacher, \textit{vol. 1}, 1, 18, 25, 80, 65.

71. Ibid., 59, 132, 143, 20.


73. Ibid., 85, 38-9, 149, 152; \textit{vol. 2}, 2.


75. McGiffert, 55, 98.


77. Thacher, \textit{vol. 1}, 60, 92, 97, 34, 18; \textit{vol. 2}, 12, 11.

78. Thacher, \textit{vol. 1}, 3, 213, 226, 221; \textit{vol. 2}, 82.


81. Ibid., 61, 118.
82. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 6, 11, 12, 16, 27.

83. Ibid., 26, 5, 29, 32.


85. Hall, *Faithful*, 89.

86. McGiffert, 90, 103.

87. Miller, *Colony*, 142-3; Thacher, *vol. 1*, 46; *vol. 2*, 39, 80, 8.

88. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 218; *vol. 2*, 25, 15-16; *vol. 1*, 130, 209; *vol. 2*, 15-16, 22, 56-7, 99.

89. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 67, 9, 30, 54, 33, 212.

90. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 225; *vol. 2*, 50; *vol. 1*, 203; Hamilton, *History of Milton*, 126; Thacher, *vol. 2*, 34; *vol. 1*, 50, 97, 99; *vol. 2*, 70-1, 113.

91. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 21, 67; *vol. 2*, 22, 40; *vol. 1*, 51, 56.


94. Thacher, *vol. 1*, 15-16, 53; *vol. 2*, 38, 88; *vol. 1*, 176-7; *vol. 2*, 94, 98.

95. McGiffert, 10.


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