

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hidden in Plain Sight: John Cotton's Middle Way and the Making of the Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline

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Abstract

The 1648 Cambridge Platform, Congregationalists' first, guided New England Congregationalist church practice well into the next century. Yet the synodical deliberations that shaped the platform remain largely a closed book. Were the contents of all three preparatory platform drafts known, a baseline could be established for inferring those deliberations. But it has long been taken as a given that John Cotton's draft is missing.

The now-recovered draft was, among other things, Cotton's vehicle for working reforms restraining Congregationalism's democratic and fissiparous tendencies into the Cambridge Platform. He had first laid out those reforms in *Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644), a book that attracted widespread attention, including at the English Westminster and Savoy Assemblies. Yet the slender amount of scholarship on the Cambridge Platform has offered, at most, generalized acknowledgment, if any, of Cotton's considerable and complicated impact on it. That neglect leaves a large gap in our understanding of the platform, the synod, and Cotton himself, as well as of the unstable dynamics of clerical authority in an awkwardly peripheral emergent puritan church movement that emphasized lay empowerment.

Keywords: John Cotton; Cambridge Platform; Congregationalism; Westminster Assembly; Savoy Assembly

The 1648 Cambridge Platform was Congregationalists' first collective description of their three-decades-old variation on Reformed church government. By that time, networks of cooperative but autonomous Congregationalist churches had emerged on both sides of the Atlantic, but it was no coincidence that Massachusetts was where a synod convened to write the movement's first platform. Congregationalist networking had begun in Massachusetts, and only in puritan New England did Congregationalism serve as an exclusive de facto church establishment with all the responsibilities, privileges, and pressures that accompanied that position, including both the means and the felt necessity of drafting a platform.¹

¹Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1893), chap. 10, remains the best introduction to the Cambridge Platform. The first congregational church, distinguished from

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The Cambridge synod performed its task well enough that the region's churches functioned according to the dynamic its platform outlined well into the next century.² Yet the deliberations that shaped a coherent platform out of New England Congregationalism's multiple variations in practice and intention have remained largely a closed book for want of sources.³

One avenue to the deliberations has been long thought to have been closed off. If we knew the contents of all three platform drafts the synod ordered in 1647 to kickstart its stalled deliberations, we would know with certainty what it rejected, what it took from them as-is, what it revised, and what it added during its deliberations. But it has long been accepted that of the three drafts, Nathaniel Partridge's, Richard Mather's, and John Cotton's, only the first two survived. Cotton's was last heard of in the early eighteenth century.⁴ No small loss, especially since Cotton, teacher at the Boston church, was perhaps New England's most transatlantically engaged minister and had played a large role upon his arrival in 1633 in giving definition to Massachusetts's somewhat inchoate Congregationalism.⁵

But in fact, Cotton's draft has been hiding in plain sight all this time, along with the others in the Mather Family Papers at the American Antiquarian Society, in the form of rough and fair copies of the unsigned manuscript "Of the Church and Its Government."⁶ In a note on the fair copy's final leaf, Ezra Stiles in the mid-eighteenth century assigned the authorship to the Boston church's pastor John Wilson on the basis of this copy's handwriting. "I suppose," Stiles added, "Mr. Wilson contributed this towards forming the Cambridge Platform." The attribution has gone unchallenged by the few historians who have made passing use of the manuscript.⁷

But "Church" is not by Wilson; it is by John Cotton, as witnessed by the rough draft's handwriting. The American Antiquarian Society accordingly changed the attribution around fifty years ago, but the Mather Family Papers' finding aid was not updated to reflect the change, and the general scholarly community has remained

separatist churches by a recognition of at least some English parish churches as true churches, was gathered in Southwark in 1616. The first network began with the arrival of the Winthrop fleet in Massachusetts in 1630. See Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), chaps. 4 and 6.

²James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chaps. 9 and 10.

³The exceptions are a few contemporary comments on the synod's failure to expand baptism and Cotton Mather's much later misleading remark about its failure to extend the scope of the ministry. See Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 18. For Mather's remark, see n103.

⁴Ralph Partridge, "Modell of Church Discipline," box 11, folder 10, and Richard Mather, "A Modell of Church-Government," box 1, folder 5, Mather Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society [hereafter AAS], Worcester, MA. Both documents can be accessed at <https://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/series2/MatherFamily>. Richard Mather, *An Answer to Two Questions* (Boston, 1713), ii.

⁵William Hubbard, *A General History of New England: From the Discovery to MDCLXXX* (Boston, 1848), 186; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 21–22.

⁶John Cotton, "Of the Church and the Government of It," box 11, folders 11 [rough draft], 12 [fair draft], Mather Family Papers, AAS. The rough draft can be accessed under John Wilson's name at <https://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/series2/MatherFamily>.

⁷Robert F. Scholz, "The Reverend Elders': Faith, Fellowship, and Politics in the Ministerial Community of Massachusetts Bay, 1630–1710" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1966), 153; James R. Beasley, "The Success of the Cambridge Platform: Interchurch Communion in Early Massachusetts" (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1980), 91–92; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 82–83.

unaware of it.⁸ Moreover, “Church” is plainly Cotton’s platform draft. Although it has only six chapters to the Cambridge Platform’s seventeen, content from every one of its chapters appears in the platform, either verbatim or adapted. Proportionately, the synod relied upon it more than either of the other drafts, using all or almost all of chapters four, five, and six, as well as substantial parts of chapters two and three. Moreover, “Church” does not relax Congregationalist baptismal norms, which could already be inferred about Cotton’s draft.⁹

Strands of Cotton’s previous writings run through “Church.” The resemblance of two passages in the Cambridge Platform to passages in Cotton’s book *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* was noted in the nineteenth century; the immediate source of those passages is “Church.”¹⁰ The draft’s chapter four, “Of the Communion of Churches,” is constructed almost entirely out of paraphrases and quotations drawn from Cotton’s section on the same topic in *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*, numbered in the same sequence. In addition, the draft takes from *Keyes* at least two other near-identical quotations and a closely paraphrased paragraph.¹¹ Moreover, the distinctive edge of “Church’s” ecclesiology is *Keyes’s*.¹² In short, “Church” is either a Cotton manuscript that the synod treated as his draft or the draft itself, and at this point, Occam’s razor makes its cut.

“Church” is not only an important document for reconstructing the Cambridge synod’s deliberations. It also fills in a gap in our knowledge of a transatlantic process of critical engagement with Cotton’s work on church government. That process began in the early 1640s with criticism of Cotton’s then-manuscript *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*. In reaction to the criticism, Cotton developed arguments increasing church officers’ and synods’ power to counterbalance the perceived democratic and fissiparous tendencies in the Congregationalism of *Way*. Those arguments were published in London in 1644 in *Keyes*. Because of Cotton’s stature, the perceived importance of the issues he was tackling, and the importance of the English Congregational ministers who published and supported *Keyes*, and because his solutions could be seen as having a Presbyterian tilt, *Keyes* underwent collective puritan scrutiny on an extensive scale, at the Westminster Assembly, dominated by Presbyterians, and the English Congregationalist Savoy Assembly, as well as at the Cambridge synod. The very different English assessments of *Keyes* provide benchmarks for the Cambridge synod’s assessment, the only one from the three gatherings that led to transformative results.

What makes the Cambridge synod’s absorption of *Keyes* especially significant is that it was selective. The synod measured Cotton’s innovations about church power, reiterated in his platform draft, against its own collective understanding of fundamental Congregationalist principles—an understanding not so far removed from *Way’s*. Sometimes it adjusted Cotton’s innovations to fit, however awkwardly, with its

⁸Information on the AAS’s reattribution of “Church” to Cotton was provided by Ashley Cataldo, Curator of Manuscripts, AAS, who agrees with it. A note in the rough draft’s folder with the reattribution, is, she surmises, a label from an in-house exhibition from the 1970s or 1980s (private communication).

⁹Increase Mather, *The First Principles of New-England* (Cambridge, MA, 1675), does not mention Cotton’s draft, although Mather possessed it, while producing as much evidence as possible to demonstrate that first-generation ministers supported such relaxation, including the relevant sections from the other drafts.

¹⁰Walker, *Creeeds*, 212n2, 213n2; Cotton, “Church,” 5–6.

¹¹Cotton, “Church,” 12–18; Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven and Power Thereof* (London, 1644), 17–20.

¹²Cotton, “Church,” 11, 12; Cotton, *Keyes*, 15, 16, 23.

principles; sometimes it adjusted those principles; and sometimes it simply rejected the innovations. Yet the slender amount of scholarship on the Cambridge Platform has proceeded with, at most, generalized acknowledgment, if any, of Cotton's impact. That neglect leaves a large gap in our understanding of the platform, the synod, and Cotton himself, as well of the unstable dynamics of clerical authority in an awkwardly peripheral emergent puritan church movement that emphasized lay empowerment.¹³

I. *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*

Cotton's transformative journey to his platform draft started when some Massachusetts brethren and elders approached him for a treatise on New England Congregationalism.¹⁴ Cotton finished the treatise *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* in late 1641 or early 1642, as King Charles I was losing his grip on Parliament and it looked as if the long-desired puritan reform of the Church of England might occur. Cotton closed *Way* by sketching a path for the Congregationalist transformation of England's parish churches and hoping that his treatise could contribute to "the great worke of Reformation in England" for which God was "opening a door."¹⁵ Cotton later claimed that his "intent" in sending this intervention in England's religious upheavals across the ocean was that it either see "timely" publication "or (by advice of friends) utter suppression."¹⁶

Way, however, was neither suppressed nor quickly published. It did not appear in print until 1645, a year after *Keyes* had contradicted its arguments about church power.¹⁷ The puritans who eventually published *Way* indicated that this publication

¹³For generalized acknowledgments, see Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 227–229; David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, or. pub., 1972), 118–120; David D. Hall, *Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 331.

¹⁴John Cotton, *A Defence of Mr. John Cotton* (London, 1658), 36.

¹⁵John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New-England* (London, 1645), 111–116, quotation, 111. Cotton's desire was overoptimistic, given that Massachusetts Congregationalism had already come under heavy criticism from more moderate puritans. See Michael P. Winship, "Straining the Bonds of Puritanism: English Presbyterians and Massachusetts Congregationalists Debate Ecclesiology, 1636–40," in *Puritans and Catholics in the Trans-Atlantic World 1600–1800*, eds. Crawford Gribben and Scott Spurlock (London: Palgrave, 2015), 89–111.

¹⁶John Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), 2nd pag.: 2, 5 (quotation), cf. *Way*, sig. A2r. Cotton, *Defence*, 38, was much more opaque about the timing of his writing of *Way* and his involvement in sending it to England, probably related to the fact that he was responding to a Presbyterian treatise stressing the inconsistencies between *Way* and *Keyes*.

¹⁷*Way's* editors, who identify themselves as N. H. and I. H., are generally assumed to be the English Congregationalist minister Nathaniel Homes and the ex-Massachusetts magistrate John Humfrey. See Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 402 [hereafter cited as *Winthrop, Journal*]. See also Sargent Bush, Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 381n3. Cotton, *Defence*, 38, called the published version "abrupt in the entrance, and imperfect otherwise." Cotton neither identified the imperfections nor claimed that they altered *Way's* sense. He acknowledged that specific controversial passages and the general themes of the published version were his. See Cotton, *Defence*, 23, 35–36, 38–39. Numerous passages from another manuscript of *Way* were quoted, abridged, or paraphrased, or some mixture of the three, with no indication of which was which, in Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries* (London, 1644). Only one of Rutherford's examples is clearly a variant from the published version. See Rutherford, *Due Right*, 38; and Cotton, *Way*, 99.

delay largely came about because whoever Cotton sent *Way* to felt bound by a fragile agreement between English Congregationalists and Presbyterians not to air their differences about church government in print (the agreement did not collapse completely until 1644).¹⁸

Looking back in 1652, Cotton noted another obstacle to publication: some of the manuscript's readers on New and old England had a variety of issues with it. "One maine Point of Dissatisfaction," Cotton remembered, "was the Authority given to the Fraternity," the male church members, otherwise called the "brethren," or simply the "church." Passages recognizing the brethren's authority in a church to censure all their elders came in for particular criticism (the ordained elders usually consisted of two ministers, one designated the pastor and the other the teacher, and a ruling elder).¹⁹ Cotton's account of these objections is supported by *Way's* 1645 published version. Its editors placed asterisks alongside passages with which they themselves did "not yet fully close." Passages emphasizing the brethren's authority over the elders almost invariably attracted asterisks, as Cotton noted.²⁰

Such objections about the brethren's authority might seem understandable. Congregationalists never claimed that their church government was a pure democracy. Instead, like Presbyterians, they agreed that it was "mixed." Christ was each church's monarch, ruling by edicts laid out in the bible, the elders were the aristocracy, and the brethren constituted the democracy.²¹ As befitted aristocrats, the elders' various office powers—administering sacraments, preaching authoritatively, and ruling over the church—came from Christ. How then could they also be under the authority of their churches' laymen?

The path to the answer started with the agreement of most leading Congregationalist ministers around the time Cotton wrote *Way* that both Christ and the church that chose their elders from among their membership were sources of those elders' powers.²² It was

¹⁸Cotton, *Way*, sig. A2v -A2[i]r. Eliot Vernon, *London Presbyterians and the British Revolutions, 1638–64* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021), 33–39, 79–85, 97.

¹⁹Cotton, *Defence*, 36, 37. An English Presbyterian claimed to have been "warned" by "some" in Massachusetts that the manuscript of *Way* was "not consented to by the rest." See William Rathband, *A Briefe Narration* (London, 1644), 3.

²⁰Cotton, *Way*, 45, 96, 98–100, sig. A2r-v; Cotton., *Defence*, 37.

²¹Cotton, *Way*, 100; cf. John Davenport, *An Apologeticall Reply* (Rotterdam, 1636), 240–241; Davenport, *The Power of Congregational Churches Asserted* (London, 1672), 41; Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* (London, 1648), 1st pag.: 206, Richard Mather, *Church-Government and Church-Covenant Discussed* (London, 1643), 51 (composed in 1639; see Increase Mather, *The Order of the Churches in New England Vindicated* [Boson, 1700], 73); Thomas Shephard, *Subjection to Christ in all His Ordinances* (London, 1652), 96 (preached c. 1641).

²²William Ames and Robert Parker were major sources for this strain of Congregationalism. See Stephen Brachlow, *The Communion of Saints: Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology 1570–1625* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 171–173. For an emergent strain of Congregationalism with which Cotton would be heavily involved, see 8–9. See also 7, n29. Elder William Brewster and the other separatists at Plymouth would have picked up much the same assumptions about a church and its elders as those discussed here from their pastor in Leiden, John Robinson. See Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 153–159; and Brachlow, *Communion*, 193–202. Hall in his new preface to *Faithful Shepherd*, xxivn13, notes that George "corrects" *Faithful Shepherd's* depiction of a heavy emphasis on a contractual relationship between a minister and his church in Robinson's ecclesiology. That depiction plays into *Faithful Shepherd's* analysis of the distance between the first decade of Massachusetts Congregationalism and the Cambridge Platform. See Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 39–41, 102–104, 109–110, 119.

true that a church had not received its officers' powers from Christ "formally"—the officers' powers were not ones a church could employ in the absence of those officers. Nonetheless, the church had received them "virtually," for the only reason the elders themselves could employ those office powers was by virtue of the church's choice of them.²³

Since a church possessed its elders' powers virtually, along with its own actual powers, Congregationalists concluded that the "whole body of Church-power" was "given to the body of the Church," as Cotton put it in *Way*. A church, even a tiny fledgling church in the Euro-wilds of New England, Cotton explained, was "the first subject and receptacle of all Ecclesiasticall power." Being the first subject of the keys of church power, as this all-encompassing ecclesiastical power was called (Matthew 16: 19), was what made a Congregational church distinctively congregational, beholden neither to any other church nor ecclesiastical body but only to itself and God for its very existence and for its government's subsequent creation.²⁴

Because Christ initially bestowed the elders' office power on the brethren, if only virtually, the brethren could take that power away from them. Taking transpired through the most important of the brethren's God-given actual powers, the power of judgment. This power enabled a church collectively to admit members, choose elders, and, if necessary, discipline and excommunicate both members and elders.²⁵ Once a church had officers, Cotton acknowledged in *Way*, the officers would exercise their own "great authority" over the church's power of judgment by "directing" the church as it exercised it.²⁶

Nonetheless, Cotton, following a well-trodden, if soon-controversial Congregationalist path, insisted in *Way* that it was not just the elders, but the whole church, "which holdeth forth their Authority" in church censures. He stressed as well that it was that same "authority" that the brethren exercised if they needed to censure and excommunicate the elders.²⁷ In Cotton's last surviving pulpit exposition on a church's "authority" over its elders, circa mid-1641, he placed this authority among the effects of Revelation's fifth angel pouring out its vial on the seat of Antichrist (Revelation 16:10).²⁸

New England critiques of Cotton's emphasis on a church's authority over its elders could have come from a number of sources. One would have been those few Congregationalist ministers who harkened back to the more hierarchical understanding

²³Cotton, *Way*, 44, 27; cf. John Davenport, *An Answer of the Elders of the Severall Churches in New-England* (London, 1643), 76; Davenport, *Power*, 82, 90, 96, 105; Hooker, *Survey*, 1st pag., 210; Shephard, *Subjection*, 99; Brachlow, *Communion*, 173, 173n72.

²⁴Cotton, *Way*, 45, 43; cf. Shepard, *Subjection*, 78–79 95; Hooker, *Survey*, 1st pag., 192–193, 209–211; Mather, *Church-Government*, 44, 45; Davenport, *Apologetical Reply*, 43, 89–90; Davenport, *Power*, 41, 89.

²⁵Cotton, *Way*, 45; cf. Hooker, *Survey*, 1st pag., 34, 191, 192, 214; Davenport, *Apologetical Reply*, 43, 76–77; Davenport, *Power*, 89, 102.

²⁶Cotton, *Way*, 102.

²⁷Cotton, *Way*, 99, 45, 101; cf. Mather, *Church-Government*, 45, written in 1639; Davenport, *Apologetical Reply*, 239, 241; William Best, *The Churches Plea for Her Right* (Amsterdam, 1635), 76; and heavily influencing them all, Robert Parker, *De Politia Ecclesiastica Christi*, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1616); for which see F. B. Carr, "The Thought of Robert Parker (1564?–1614?) and His Influence on Puritanism before 1650" (PhD Thesis, University of London., 1965), 167–170. In 1648 Cotton listed Parker as one of the three most important sources for the foundational tenets of Congregationalism (Paul Baynes and William Ames were the others). See Cotton, *Way Cleared*, 1st pag., 13.

²⁸John Cotton, *The Powring out of the Seven Vials* (London, 1642), "The Third Vial," 17, "The Fifth Vial," 9–10; cf. Cotton, *Way*, 101. The dating was inferred from Richard Mather, "Sermon Notes," Folio Volumes, 2, Mather Family Papers, AAS; and Winthrop, *Journal*, 351–2.

of proto-Congregationalists like Paul Baynes and William Bradshaw about the relationship between elders and brethren.²⁹ Another may have been ministers and laity yet to be entirely convinced by Congregationalism itself. They had gone along with Congregationalism, as one put it, for the sake of “Charity and Christian Peace.”³⁰ There might have been a more general sentiment that this was the wrong time for Cotton, or anyone else, to be stressing the authority of a church over its elders, given that in 1641 the colony was still feeling the aftershocks of Cotton’s failure to assert his authority over his congregants Anne Hutchinson and her supporters and allies, which failure Cotton only belatedly acknowledged.³¹

That last crisis has been credited by historians and contemporaries in reorienting Massachusetts Congregationalism in a less democratic direction.³² In the early 1640s, Newbury’s ministers Thomas Parker and James Noyes began to discuss the “confusion . . . depending on the government which hath been practised by us here.” By 1643, they had decided that the “ordinary exercise of government must be so in the Presbyters [i.e., the elders], as not to depend upon the expresse votes and suffrages of the people.”³³ In September 1643, they gathered around forty elders, including Cotton, from across New England in Harvard College, where their new ideas were debated, along with a variety of other points of view.³⁴ Some attendees argued, as Cotton had in *Way*, that the brethren had an “authoritative concurrence” in disciplinary cases.³⁵ One minister quoted the French Calvinist minister Jean Moreley, a name anathema to most Congregational ministers for his espousal of democratic church government.³⁶ “Many *learned and godly men*,” reported a subsequent letter to England, were concerned enough by what they feared as “popular” empowerment to warn “*that if their policy should make the government of the Church popular, they should give up the cause.*”³⁷

By the time of this conference, Cotton had worked out his own new “policy” for rescuing Congregationalism from the danger of overweening popular government. At least parts of that policy, “much contrary to that which they ordinarily teach,” were circulated and discussed at the Cambridge meeting. Shortly thereafter, a letter to England summarized Cotton’s revisionism about church power and noted that it was also held by “some

²⁹For Baynes and Bradshaw, see Brachlow, *Communion*, 168–171; Samuel Stone, “Whole Body of Divinity,” ed. Baird Tipson, 261–262, accessible at <https://www.congregationallibrary.org/neh/series/2/StoneSamuel>.

³⁰James Noyes, *The Temple Measured* (London, 1647), sig. A[i]v.

³¹Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 219–220, 223–224.

³²Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, chap. 5, attributes this reorientation to “disenchantment with the laity” (111) in the wake of the Antinomian Controversy, among other factors. Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 169, emphasizes the “need to go on the defensive” in the 1640s against newly empowered, more conservative English puritans. Cooper, *Tenacious*, 53–67, 68–75, critiques their arguments and questions the extent of reorientation. For Hall’s reappraisal of his own arguments, see his review of Cooper, *Tenacious*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2000), 124–125. See also Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist* (London, 1648), 177.

³³Thomas Parker, *The True Copy of a Letter* (London, 1643), 3, 4.

³⁴Richard Mather, *A Reply to Mr. Rutherford* (London, 1647), 79; Rutherford, *Due Right*, 2nd pag. 476, 477–481; John Goodwin, *A Reply of Two of the Brethren to A. S.* (London, 1644), 7; Winthrop, *Journal*, 476.

³⁵Rutherford, *Due Right*, 2nd pag., 478.

³⁶Giles Firmin, *Weighty Questions Discussed* (London, 1692), 23.

³⁷Rutherford, *Due Right*, 2nd pag., 481; Giles Firmin, *Separation Examined* (London, 1651), 100, attributes the warning to John Norton.

others.”³⁸ Ten months later, in June 1644, two English Congregationalist friends of Cotton, Philip Nye and Thomas Goodwin, published *Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* as a definitive statement on the distribution of power in Congregationalism and therefore as an important contribution to the fraught dialogue between Congregationalists and Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly, of which they were members and which Cotton had been planning to attend, on Parliament’s invitation, backing off only when news of England’s civil war reached Massachusetts.³⁹

There may be an important, albeit probably unrecoverable, element missing in this account of *Keyes’s* genesis, however, for Cotton’s innovations bear a striking resemblance to those already being developed by Goodwin and Nye and other then-exiles in Holland in the late 1630s. Goodwin and Nye professed in 1644 never to have discussed their emergent variant of Congregationalism with their brethren in Massachusetts, but they did acknowledge that “many of our friends” and even some opponents had “long” been aware of it. Given all the puritan to’ing and fro’ing across the Atlantic, in person and by letter, that is a significant qualification.⁴⁰

II. The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven

In *Keyes*, Cotton systematically unraveled the skeins of logic that wound together the “popular” power of the keys of church government and the excommunication of a church’s elders. By the time he had finished exploring the new possibilities that this exercise opened up, he had discovered the authority of ministers extending into places where Congregationalism had never hitherto found it, and he had outlined significant modifications to Congregationalist church practice.⁴¹

Cotton began this unravelling, as he later explained, by cutting the tie between a church’s “virtual” power to choose its officers, which he affirmed, and the church being the first subject of those officers’ powers, which he denied. To be the first subject of a power, Cotton now insisted, one had to be able to receive and use it immediately, “as Fire (the first subject of Heate) can Heate without Intervention of any other subject.” Churches, however, could not access any of an officer’s powers, such as administering the sacraments, immediately themselves, but only through that officer’s exercise of them. Therefore, they, unlike officers, could not be the first subject of office power.⁴²

A church, Cotton concluded in *Keyes*, was the first subject of the key of office order in general, but that key of order was divided into two keys of power. One key went to the brethren. It gave them “a great stroke or power in the ordering of Church affairs,” Cotton acknowledged, and, in a tacit nod to what he and others had written and preached, Cotton further acknowledged that this power “many times goeth under the name of rule or authoritie.” But that common understanding was incorrect, Cotton insisted: “In proper speech it is rather a priviledge or liberty then authoritie.”⁴³

³⁸Rutherford, *Due Right*, 2nd pag. 481, 478–479; Richard Mather and William Tompson, *A Modest & Brotherly Answer to Mr. Charles Herle* (London, 1644), t.p., 7, 8.

³⁹Winthrop, *Journal*, 403–404.

⁴⁰Cotton, *Keyes*, sig. A2[ii]r-v; Hunter Powell, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), is perhaps the first historian to give these claims the weight they deserve.

⁴¹For an excellent description of *Keyes* and its relationship to other kinds of Congregationalism, see Powell, *Crisis*, 125–133, 154–155.

⁴²Cotton, *Defence*, 51–54, quote 52; cf. Cotton, *Keyes*, 35.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 7–8, 36; Powell, *Crisis*, 125–130, 131–133.

The reason the common understanding of the brethren's power was incorrect was because "authority" and "rule" belonged exclusively to the key received by the "superior order" of the elders. The critical point about this redistribution of power was that the brethren's power of judgment, by which, according to Congregational conventional wisdom, they could excommunicate the elders, was in reality incomplete; it lacked any power of ruling or authority but was merely "a judgement of discretion, by way of privilege." Only the officers' exercise of judgment was an "act of authority or rule."⁴⁴ Indeed, when excommunication was involved, it was, according to Cotton, "one of the *highest* acts of *Rule*," as well it might be, for ministers in their solemn charges to convicted sinners not only expelled them from their church, but delivered them to Satan (1 Corinthians 5: 5), hopefully for the benefit of their eternal souls.⁴⁵

Therefore, Cotton concluded almost in passing, although this would be his longest-lasting contribution to Congregationalism, "No act of the peoples power or liberty doth bind, unlesse the authoritie of the Presbytery concur with it." The decisions requiring approval from both brethren and elders included virtually all those that a church could make, ranging from approval of synodical declarations to the selection of a new elder to disciplinary verdicts. The conclusion Cotton was driving toward with this argument was that even if a church urgently wanted to excommunicate any or all of its officers, it lacked a complete power of judgment within itself to do that on its own—one elder at least had to agree for an excommunication to occur. This need for joint consent in decision making, which came to be called the negative voice, meant that elders could neither be excommunicated en masse nor overwhelmed in decision making by "popularity."⁴⁶

However, in solving the problem of popularity, Cotton created a new problem. What happened if elders and brethren could not agree about decisions even after other churches intervened to broker an understanding? Suppose the elders, Cotton suggested, found themselves facing "the offence of a whole Congregation?" The elders could neither force their conclusions on them nor discipline them. Or suppose "the whole Presbyterie offend?" It was the same situation in reverse; the united offending elders could not be disciplined by the brethren.⁴⁷

Elders faced with an irremediably wicked church could at least leave. But since Cotton had disarmed the laity of their power to excommunicate, the church appeared to be stuck with its erring elders. To extricate churches out of this potential dead end into which his theorizing had driven them, Cotton added to the "liberties" possessed by a church's brethren, a novel one. Since the brethren had voluntarily professed their "subjection" to their elders, Cotton explained, they had the liberty of withdrawing that subjection and could "avoid" those elders.⁴⁸ Cotton did not explain why simply avoiding a minister was sufficient for a church to dissolve the formal relationships of membership and office it had created with its elders, and his silence perhaps indicated less than complete inner certainty, as will be seen.

It may have been in part to forestall this novel, confusing parting of the ways that Cotton worked out *Keyes's* other major innovation: the empowerment of congregational

⁴⁴Cotton, *Keyes*, 11, 14, 16; Powell, *Crisis*, 130–131.

⁴⁵David C. Brown, "The Keys of the Kingdom: Excommunication in Colonial Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (Dec. 1994): 531–566, here 533, 551, 557–558.

⁴⁶Cotton, *Keyes*, 36.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 22–23, 16–17.

synods. The existing limitation of such gatherings was that they had no intrinsic authority beyond the authority of the scripture verses upon which they based their conclusions. It was true that the archetypal scripture model for a synod (according to most Congregationalists), the meeting of the Jerusalem and Antioch churches in Jerusalem, laid a “burden” on the Antioch church (Acts 15: 28). But, also according to Congregationalists—the Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly and more conservative Protestants, as well as Catholics, could not have disagreed more—the Jerusalem synod neither did nor could compel the Antioch church to institute its findings. The weight of the “burden” came entirely from the authority of the scriptures that lay behind the synod’s conclusion. Absent correct scripture interpretation, Congregationalists insisted, a synod had no authority at all, and it was the responsibility of individual churches to determine for themselves that a synod’s conclusions were scripturally sound. Therefore, Congregationalists concluded, a synod had no mandate to do more than give advice and counsel.⁴⁹

In *Keyes*, Cotton rejected that conventional Congregational wisdom. “We dare not say,” Cotton insisted, “that [a synod’s] power reacheth no farther then giving counsel.” Synodical decrees, Cotton explained (and Presbyterians would agree), had a “binding power” distinct from scripture’s binding power. It emanated from the synod itself, “formally, from the synod’s power and authoritie,” much as a judge’s sentence bound not only because it was correct, but because it was being given by a judge. Like judges, synods could “command and enjoyn the things to be believed and done.”⁵⁰ They could issue a “judiciall sentence” of a “censure.” Synods possessed a “Key of authority,” Cotton claimed; they were a “Church of churches.”⁵¹ “A Synod of Churches,” Cotton concluded, “. . . is the first subject of that power and *authoritie*, whereby error is *judicially convinced and condemned*, the truth searched out, and determined, and the way of truth and peace declared and *imposed* upon the Churches.”⁵²

This newly discovered Congregationalist synodical power came largely from another of Cotton’s innovations. Since an elder’s church conferred on him his office authority, Congregationalists believed that this office authority did not extend beyond that church. When elders attended synods, therefore, they had no more ecclesiastical authority than their church’s laymen. Cotton denied that conventional wisdom; elders, he concluded, brought their office authority into synods. Thus, in synods as well as in churches, Cotton explained, “It will be most safe to preserve to the Church of *Brethren* their due liberties, and to reserve to the *Elders* their due authority.” At synods, the brethren would use their “power of liberty” to “*dispute their doubts* modestly and Christianly amongst the *Elders*” as they did in Massachusetts churches, perhaps not always modestly. And as in Massachusetts churches, the brethren would then “join in determining the sentence.” But the “authority” of a synod’s “Decrees” lay “chiefly” in the elders present,” as was also true in each individual Massachusetts church, at least as re-envisioned by Cotton.⁵³

What a synod could still not do was make a sentence juridically binding. A synod, for example, had the power to “determine, and to publish and declare. . . the

⁴⁹Davenport, *Apologetical Reply*, 26; Welde, *An Answer to W.R.* (London, 1644), 36, 39; Mather, *Church-Government*, 32, 64–66; Scholz, “Reverend Elders,” 60, 112.

⁵⁰Cotton, *Keyes*, 25.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 49.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 47.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 25–26; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 37–45, 58–67.

excommunication of such as we find do deserve it . . . but the administration . . . we should refer to the Presbytery of the severall Churches, . . . whereof the person to be excommunicate is a member.”⁵⁴ And if elders and/or brethren of a church concluded that the synod’s determination did not accord with scripture, as Cotton also stressed, that determination of excommunication would be left as it started, with neither juridical power behind it nor disciplinary consequence.⁵⁵

Goodwin and Nye in their preface to *Keyes* praised it extravagantly. Although they did not agree with its every detail, they explained, it sketched out the “very Middle-Way” between the Scylla and Charybdis upon which previous puritan attempts at recreating New Testament church government had shipwrecked. Thanks to its requirement of mutual consent between elders and brethren, it avoided “that which is called *Brownisme*” which “put[s] the chief (if not the whole) of the rule and government into the hands of the people and drowns the Elders votes . . . in the major part of [the people’s].” “Brownisme,” as Goodwin and Nye defined it, could be taken to include not only separatism, but pre-*Keyes* conventional Congregational government. At the same time, like all variants of Congregationalism, Cotton’s did not recognize a power of jurisdiction within larger church assemblies and thus a power to excommunicate. It thereby escaped the dangers of “*Presbyteriall-government*, as it is practised” which “doth . . . swallow up, not only the interests of the people, but even the votes of the *Elders* of that *Congregation*.”⁵⁶ As the true middle way through various puritan errors about church government, *Keyes* would also serve, according to its title page, “to reconcile some differences about discipline.”

III. Assessments of *Keyes* at the Westminster and Savoy Assemblies

There could not have been a more critical time than 1644 for such a reconciliation. At the Westminster Assembly hopes remained that the assembly’s Presbyterians would be able to reach an accommodation over church government with its handful of Congregationalists, allowing the latter’s fifteen but expanding, still-illegal English churches, c. 1644, to participate in the reformed Church of England.⁵⁷ As a model for that accommodation, however, *Keyes* was a nonstarter, given that Presbyterians rejected its claim of jurisdiction being restricted to single congregations as strongly as *Keyes* asserted it.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Ibid., 28.

⁵⁵Ibid., 26.

⁵⁶Cotton, *Keyes*, sig. a2 [ii]r, , A[iv]r; cf Vernon, *London Presbyterianism*, 95–96.

⁵⁷For earlier 1644 accommodation attempts, see Powell, *Crisis*, 211–214; Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly* (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 446449; Joel Halcomb, “A Social History of Congregational Religious Practice during the Puritan Revolution” (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2010), 24–35.

⁵⁸Powell, *Crisis*, argues that Goodwin and Nye published *Keyes* “to provide a basis for accommodation at the Westminster Assembly with [the Scots ministers George] Gillespie and [Samuel] Rutherford.” Powell infers that intention not from their professed goals but from what he calls “deep structural similarities” between *Keyes* and the Scots’ understanding of church power (220). Gillespie and Rutherford, in turn, “embraced” *Keyes*, according to Powell (141), although Gillespie said very little about *Keyes*, and “embrace” is perhaps not the most precise word to summarize Rutherford’s response (see below). Powell suggests that had it not been for tactical choices the Scots made at the assembly, *Keyes* “could have been the basis for an accommodation between the Presbyterians and the [Congregationalists]” (243). He does not suggest what shape a plausible accommodation could have taken while noting that differences between

Nonetheless, some Presbyterians regarded *Keyes* as leaving Congregationalists well-positioned to make the final concessions required for accommodation, recognizing that it approached Presbyterianism more closely than previous Congregational treatises. As Richard Hollinworth, a leading Lancashire Presbyterian, wrote at the end of 1644, Cotton was “deservedly the chief” among the Congregationalists who came “neerer the Truth than others,” and using *Keyes* to disabuse Congregationalists of their errors, which included the errors still in *Keyes*, would “help Accommodation.”⁵⁹

The four Presbyterians who commented on *Keyes* and accommodation on the Westminster Assembly’s floor did so with a Hollinworthian agenda. The Scots minister George Gillespie cited *Keyes* three times to refute what he regarded as errors by Goodwin and Nye.⁶⁰ Once he invoked a passage in *Keyes* to demonstrate that Congregationalists should support an argument of his, but what passage Gillespie had in mind was lost when that page of the minutes was torn.⁶¹ In his final and most revealing citation, Gillespie referred to a section of *Keyes* in which Cotton made “cases of common government, and cases of scandal and mal-administration” the business of synods. He claimed that Cotton thereby “proved” that associations of churches had to be, as in Presbyterianism, fixed “standing courts” (which Cotton would continue to fail to realize he had proven).⁶²

Like Gillespie, the English Presbyterian Jeremiah Whittakers, in his solitary floor remark on *Keyes*, urged Congregationalists to follow *Keyes*’s logic to its as yet unrealized Presbyterian conclusion. The conclusion in this case was the right to appeal censures, rejected by Congregationalists. To that end, Whittakers on February 17, 1645, referred the assembly to page fifty-four of *Keyes*, where Cotton called synods a “Holy ordinance” and explained how a church “fallen into any offence” lost the power to bind and loose and could be censured by a synod. From what Cotton acknowledged, it was clear to Whitaker, “If ther be particular cases wherein the churches censures are null & voyd, not ‘bound in heaven’,- then it is noe great power [for a synod] to rescind that sentence.”⁶³ Whittakers’s arguments fell on deaf Congregationalist ears, but by this time, hopes for accommodation had pretty much vanished.

Immediately after Whittakers finished, Samuel Rutherford made the assembly’s final floor comment on *Keyes*, a one-sentence elegy for Presbyterian hopes about the book as a vehicle for accommodation: “When I read through that treatise of the *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*,” Rutherford said, “I thought it an easy labour for an universall pacification, he comes soe neare unto us.”⁶⁴ Just how near Cotton came and where he fell fatally short in terms of accommodation Rutherford clarified in a treatise published thirteen years later. The treatise’s highly critical focus was on Thomas Hooker’s *Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, published posthumously in 1648, which in

Congregationalists and Presbyterians on the central jurisdictional issue of excommunication were “fundamental” (199).

⁵⁹Richard Hollinworth, *An Examination of Sundry Scriptures* (London, 1645), “The Preface to the Reader.”

⁶⁰George Gillespie, *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh, UK: Ogle, 1846), 80, 83, 99. See also George Gillespie, *Aarons Rod Blossoming* (London, 1646), 257–258.

⁶¹Chad van Dixhoorn and David F. Wright, eds., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1653*, 5 vols. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), vol. 3, 269 (hereafter cited as MPWA).

⁶²Gillespie, *Notes*, 82–83; Cotton, *Keyes*, 53–55.

⁶³Cotton, *Keyes*, 53–54; MPWA 3: 543.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 543.

turn contained some sharp criticism of Cotton's innovations.⁶⁵ Rutherford scattered praise throughout his treatise for what he called *Keyes's* "true principles."⁶⁶ These mostly involved the power Cotton granted to synods and to the elders who attended them, and all were absent from Hooker's treatise.⁶⁷ However, what logically followed from these principles, Rutherford explained, was that individual churches and the brethren could not be the first subjects of the keys either in Hooker's or Cotton's manner and that synods had juridical power.⁶⁸ Rutherford added in a retrospective aside that although Congregationalists yielded a great deal in one 1644 accommodation proposal, since they failed to yield on jurisdiction, "nothing is yielded."⁶⁹

The fourth comment on *Keyes* and accommodation came from the Scots minister Alexander Henderson on December 31, 1644. The assembly had just begun a debate over an accommodation-heavy Directory on Excommunication. It was not only Congregationalists who needed accommodation, but Presbyterians as well, since some believed that only classical presbyteries and synods could excommunicate while others, with no less conviction, included individual churches. To avoid "long, dangerous & difficult debate" the assembly was charged only with finding a common practice that all three groups could agree to, not to sort out underlying principles.⁷⁰

Goodwin and Nye that day voiced concerns about a passage in the directory calling for immediate excommunication in the case of "atrocious sins." Henderson, who had written this draft's first iteration, replied that he thought that "the words of this paper" were taken from *Keyes*. While this draft of the directory has not survived, the sense of the passage made it to the final draft, and the same sense can indeed be found in *Keyes*.⁷¹ It is also unlikely to be a coincidence that the accommodation formula at the heart of the Directory closely tracks the sense of what *Keyes* has to say about synods and excommunication (see above), only substituting "classical presbytery" for "synod." A classical presbytery, the directory claims, can "declare and discern" that someone is to be excommunicated, but the local presbytery carries the sentence out with the consent of its church.⁷²

The Westminster Assembly devoted a month-long debate to this *Keyes*-tinged effort at accommodation. In its course, the Congregationalists got into fierce losing disagreements with the Scots in defense of the Congregationalists' conviction that sinners who had espoused grave doctrinal errors should be given the chance to repent instead of facing automatic excommunication.⁷³ Nonetheless, when the Congregationalists dissented in the February 3, 1645 vote to send the directory to Parliament, this issue was swallowed up in a larger one. They explained that they had understood all along, erroneously, that the intended accommodation would leave each of the groups free to

⁶⁵Hooker, *Summe*, 1st pag., 194.

⁶⁶Rutherford, *A Survey of the Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline* (London, 1658), 359.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 194, 202, 310, 359.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 231, 243, 296–301, 468.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 460. The accommodation proposal came from a Parliament-organized committee with four English Presbyterians and Goodwin and Nye who occasionally dissented. See Gillespie, *Notes*, 104, 106. Rutherford's problems with the proposal extended beyond jurisdiction.

⁷⁰MPWA 3: 500–502. For an account of this episode in its totality see John R. de Witt, *Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government* (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1969), 142–146.

⁷¹MPWA 3: 493. Cotton, *Keyes*, 43.

⁷²MPWA, 5: 170, 175.

⁷³Gillespie, *Notes*, 97–98; MPWA 3: 517–523.

“retain their sense and practise of the Censures in the Church . . . without breaking the common Rule”—an accommodation, in other words, that required none of the three groups to accommodate itself to it. The assembly acknowledged that the Congregationalists had voiced this expectation once, but it had been “condemned as a thing injurious and prejudicial to Accommodation,” and they had thought that this clarification was the end of it.⁷⁴ The Congregationalists’ expectation might explain the caution Gillespie gave them in early January before he returned to Scotland that accommodation required a common practice, whatever differences of principle remained.⁷⁵

At least one more, very brief *Keyes*-based sketch for accommodation with the Congregationalists was worked out during these debates in the Westminster Assembly. This one, however, was written in Holland shortly after *Keyes* appeared. Its author, the leading Dutch Presbyterian theologian Gisbertus Voetius, had learned English in order to read puritan tracts and was receptive enough to *Keyes* to adapt its arguments about the distribution of power within a church.⁷⁶ His accommodation was to be based at least on a common practice, although ideally also on common principles, and it was to be between the Congregationalists and Europe’s community of Presbyterian churches. The binding power Cotton recognized that synods possessed in making a judgment of excommunication, Voetius wrote, meant that he must recognize they could also actually excommunicate, or at the very least recognize that they could perform with power the equivalent of an excommunication. And that being the case, Voetius concluded, there were no obstacles hindering Congregationalists from setting up or accepting Presbyterian synodical church government.⁷⁷ From the clerics of Scotland and England at the Westminster Assembly to Voetius in the Dutch Republic, Presbyterians who might disagree on other aspects of Presbyterianism could agree that *Keyes* had brought Congregationalists close enough to Presbyterianism that they should have been able to perceive that their synodical middle way was not a stable resting point.

The thinly documented 1658 Congregationalist Savoy Assembly, English Congregationalists’ first synod-like gathering, was attended by 200 delegates from around 120 of the now roughly 200 English Congregationalist churches.⁷⁸ A six-member committee assigned to draft the Savoy “Declaration of Faith and

⁷⁴MPWA, 5: 169, 173, 174–175.

⁷⁵George Gillespie, *Wholesome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty* (London, 1645), 36; cf. MPWA, 3: 498.

⁷⁶Helmer J. Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 67; Marius Bouwman, *Voetius over het Gezag der Synoden* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1937), 423–425.

⁷⁷Bouwman, *Voetius*, 342, 352. Powell, *Crisis*, 167, 169, 179n148, 179n167, claims that Voetius agreed with Cotton about synods, citing Bouwman, *Voetius*, 336–338, 388. His first citation is a description of *Keyes*, not Voetius’s own opinions, while the second is on a different topic. For Voetius’s own discussion of *Keyes* and synods, along with Bouwman’s commentary on it, see *Ibid.*, 340–352. Powell, *Crisis*, 249, alludes briefly to my argument about Plymouth colony’s influence on Massachusetts congregationalism c. 1630 and notes correctly that “whatever influence Plymouth separatism had on John Cotton, it does not explain how Voetius, Gillespie, and Goodwin [from the late 1630s to 1644] developed surprisingly similar views of church power [to the ones Cotton developed in the early 1640s].” Powell suggests that anyone arguing otherwise implicitly argues that Plymouth influenced Voetius through Cotton, which would “shock” historical theologians, as well it might. See Winship, *Godly Republicanism*, 137–158.

⁷⁸Halcomb, “Social History,” 207, 261–271. See also A. G. Matthews, ed., *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658* (London: Independent Press, 1959), 9–47.

Order” was decidedly *Keyes*-friendly. It included Goodwin and Nye, along with three other Westminster Assembly members, and John Owen, who, before he read *Keyes*, had assumed that his only choice was between Presbyterianism and “democratically confusion.”⁷⁹ Despite the committee’s membership, however, there is no evidence that a general Congregationalist embrace of *Keyes* had followed on its publication. The handful of English Congregationalist ecclesiological treatises published since that event make much the same assumptions about church government as Cotton did pre-*Keyes*—the brethren are the first subjects of the keys; they have authority over the elders and can excommunicate them; and synods only give advice.⁸⁰ Thus, there was ample room for disputes as the assembly worked on the Savoy Declaration’s chapter on church government, “Of the Institution of Churches.”

An agreement to disagree probably explains “Institution’s” silence over a central issue for *Keyes*. Each church, it stresses, is the seat of “all that Power and Authority” needed for worship and discipline, but whether and to what extent each church possesses this power and authority before it has officers is never discussed, let alone whether the brethren and elders have separate keys of power. “Institution” maintains a related silence on topics such as joint consent between brethren and elders and a church’s power to excommunicate its elders. This consistent lack of overt approbation for what Richard Baxter approvingly called *Keyes*’s “healing concessions” left that leading moderate puritan assuming the worst about “Institution’s” meaning. After inquiries, Baxter accepted that “many good & peaceable men” (i.e., sympathizers with *Keyes*) at the Savoy Assembly “intended not the dividing, distant sence” that he found in “Institution.” However, Baxter suspected that “too few besides these will understand” it as they did.⁸¹

On one controverted topic, a dividing, distant sense appears to be exactly what “Institution’s” drafters meant. “Institution” limits synods to “advice.” They cannot so much as “threaten Excommunication, or other Church-censures.” Those Congregationalists who did not agree with *Keyes* on this topic very likely would have made it plain that their churches would have nothing to do with synods that claimed to issue censures or binding decrees. Even supportive Congregationalists would have been acutely aware that Presbyterianism was resurgent, and calls were mounting for a new national assembly of divines to sort out the differences between Congregationalists and the much greater number of Presbyterians.⁸² They might have feared that their endorsement of *Keyes*’s synodical power could soon serve as a hostage to fortune, much as Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly had attempted to make of it. *Keyes*’s synodical binding power, such as it was, ultimately proved too Presbyterian for English Congregationalists, even as it had proven too Congregational for Presbyterians.

⁷⁹John Owen, *A Review of the True Nature of Schisme* (Oxford, 1657), 34–35, cf. n117.

⁸⁰See, for example, William Bartlet, *Ichnographia* (London, 1647), 27, 40, 50, 110; Nicholas Lockyer, *A Little Stone Out of the Mountain* (Leith, 1652), 64–70, 89; and John Rogers, *Ohel or Beth-shemesh* (London, 1653), 102–103, 158, 461, 496, 499. Thomas Goodwin, *The Constitution, Right Order, and Government of the Churches of Christ*, was written c. 1646 but only published in 1696.

⁸¹Walker, *Creeeds*, 403 (“Institution,” section 4); cf. Powell, *Crisis*, 127; Richard Baxter, MS Baxter Treatises, folio 6, item# 201, f 203r, Doctor Williams Library, London; cf. Baxter, *Church Concord* (London, 1691), 25, 28–29, 33–34.

⁸²Walker, *Creeeds*, 407, 406 (“Institution,” sections 26, 22). Vernon, *London Presbyterians*, 258; Anthony Milton, *England’s Second Reformation: The Battle for the Church of England 1625–1662* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 351, 354.

IV. The Cambridge Platform

The *Savoy Declaration's* mostly hands-off approach to Congregationalist divergences differed sharply from the approach Massachusetts Congregationalists had taken a decade earlier when working out the Cambridge Platform. The Massachusetts General Court in its 1646 request to the churches for a synod warned that "some differences of opinion and practice of one church from another do already appear amongst us, and others (if not timely prevented) are like speedily to ensue, and this not onely in lesser things, but even in pointes of no small consequences." To avoid this growth of differences, the court called on the Cambridge synod to meet until at least the majority "shall have agreed & consented upon one forme of goverment & discipline, for the maine & substantiall pts thereof." Churches from all the puritan colonies sent delegations, although location and population ensured that Massachusetts delegations predominated.⁸³

The Cambridge synod's short, unproductive sessions in 1646 and 1647 led to the decision to facilitate the final 1648 two-week session by having Cotton, Mather, and Partridge write preparatory drafts.⁸⁴ None of the drafts, however, contains an antecedent to the Cambridge Platform's chapter five, which goes to the heart of the dispute between Cotton and more conventional New England Congregationalists, as its title suggests: "Of the First Subject of church powr, or to whom church power doth first belong." Despite the title, chapter five in its two short sections provides no clear resolution to this dispute. It concludes that the officers' power is "said to be in [the brethren] in that they design [i.e., designate] the persons unto office, who only are to act, or to exercise this power." The platform elsewhere and other sources indicate that the intended meaning was the usual one that the church was the first subject of the keys of church power. But expressed as sketchily as it was, it could have been acceptable to Cotton, which was perhaps intentional.⁸⁵

If chapter five might have been to some extent an olive branch to Cotton, it was the platform's only one. Cotton, for example, contributed six of the eleven sections of the platform's chapter ten on church government. But the synod systematically gutted those sections of his distinctive arguments. Where Cotton wrote that the brethren could choose their officers, the synod added that "therefore there is great reason they should have power to remove any from their fellowship again."⁸⁶ The discussion where Cotton explained how the brethren could withdraw from the elders was omitted.⁸⁷ Cotton listed among the officers' powers the power to withdraw from the brethren, and that too was removed.⁸⁸ He wrote that the "whole church" had to "join with the rest of their Elders"

⁸³For the small number of known attendees, see Henry Wilder Foote, "The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 3rd ser., vol. 69 (Oct. 1947–May 1950), 92n14. William Hooke of New Haven also attended. See John Davenport, "The Third Essay for Investigation of the Truth," Davenport Papers, AAS, 147.

⁸⁴Walker, *Creeds*, 169, 170, 175.

⁸⁵Walker, *Creeds*, 211–212 (Cambridge Platform, chapter five, section two, henceforth cited as CP 5: 2); *Ibid.*, 210 (CP 5: 1), 217 (CP 10: 2); Mather "Platform," 46 (sec. 6); Mather "An Answer of the Elders to Certayne Doubts," *Octavo Volumes*, vol. 1d, Mather Family Papers, AAS, 8. "Answer" can be accessed at <https://www.congregationalibrary.org/neh/series2/MatherFamily>. Hubbard, *General History*, 538. For Cotton, see section II, paragraph 2, beginning "Cotton began this unravelling, as he later explained . . ." and Cotton, *Way Cleared*, 2nd pag. 22.

⁸⁶Walker, *Creeds*, 218 (CP 10, 5); Cotton, "Church," 10.

⁸⁷Cotton, "Church," 10–11, 2.

⁸⁸Walker, *Creeds*, 219 (CP 10: 8, 9); Cotton, "Church," 9.

to excommunicate an elder. The synod removed Cotton's reference to the other elders in the process of drastically reworking this section, making it perfectly clear, as elsewhere, that the brethren possessed the power of judgment and could on their own excommunicate their elders.⁸⁹

However, what on the face of it appears to be a simple rejection of *Keyes's* middle way is in reality the synod's own middle way between the older New England normative distribution of church power and Cotton's revisionism. Despite the brethren possessing the power of judgment, they are never acknowledged in the Cambridge Platform in any circumstance to exercise rule, authority, or government.⁹⁰ To that restrained appropriation of *Keyes*, the platform appropriates a restrained version of Cotton's principle of joint consent, despite Cotton having built the principle around a denial of the brethren's full possession of the power of judgment, which the synod rejected.⁹¹

The new final section of the platform's chapter ten presents the synod's new middle way as a single package. The section begins with a summary of the synod's reframing of its conventional distribution of church power in partially Cottonian terms: "The ordinary powr of Government belonging only to the elders, powr of priviledg remaineth with the brotherhood (as the powr of judgment in matters of censure, and powr of liberty, in matters of liberty)." From there, the section segues into a carefully worded, hedging endorsement of joint consent: "In an organick Church [i.e., a fully organized church], & right administration; all church acts, proceed after the manner of a mixt administration, so as no church act can be consummated, or perfected without the consent of both."⁹²

At least some ministers came to the synod with this perhaps conceptually awkward conservative appropriation of *Keyes* already worked out. Richard Mather, in his 1645 manuscript "A Plea for the Churches of Christ in New England," for example, advocated for joint consent repeatedly, lightly paraphrasing *Keyes* without acknowledgment while doing so.⁹³ He noted shortly thereafter that "all the government belong to the Elders alone, yet all the power doth not . . . as is cleared by Mr. *Cotton* in his treatise of the *Keyes*" (Mather was tacitly correcting his own earlier claims).⁹⁴ Yet in the same manuscript, Mather vigorously affirmed the brethren's power to depose their elders.⁹⁵ Ipswich's minister John Norton combined the same previously disparate

⁸⁹Walker, *Creeeds*, 218–219 (CP 10: 6); Cotton, "Church," 10; Walker, *Creeeds*, 215, 219, 220 (CP 8: 7; CP 10: 7, 11).

⁹⁰Chapter ten stresses the brethren's obedience to the elders' rule, while acknowledging that a church can censure elders for maladministration (Walker, *Creeeds*, 219, 220 [CP 10, 6, 10]). Richard Mather later remarked ("Answers," 16) that maladministration included clerical sins like restraining speech or enjoining silence "against the Rule [of scripture]. Mather ("Modell," 49) also noted that God "commanded" the brethren "to . . . judge of the doctrines and dictates of their Elders" in order to prevent "oppression and tyranny." The brethren's obedience thus included their duty to be assured, by discussion and debate if necessary, that the elders themselves were obedient to Christ before they gave or denied consent to the elders' decisions, or, if worse came to worst, disciplined the elders.

⁹¹See below, the paragraph starting "The reason the common understanding of the brethren's power was incorrect . . ."

⁹²Walker, *Creeeds*, 220, (CP 10: 11). Joint consent is inferred in Cotton, "Church," 10–11, 12.

⁹³Richard Mather, "A Plea for the Churches of Christ in New England," Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, 4th pag., 81–82. This section was published as Richard Mather, *An Answer to Two Questions* (Boston, 1712), 17–18; cf. Mather, "Plea," 3rd pag., 219–221.

⁹⁴Mather, "Plea," 4th pag., 84; Mather, *Answer*, 20; Mather, *Church-Government*, 46–47, 49–50, 56–57.

⁹⁵Mather, "Plea," 4th pag., 82; Mather, *Answer*, 18.

elements much more systematically in his Latin treatise that year. The synod adapted Norton's passage on joint consent for its own synthetic statement.⁹⁶

The negative voice, as David Hall conventionally terms joint consent while wrongly attributing it to Mather, is rightly called by Hall the high point of the synod's effort "to strengthen the authority of ministers." It is thus the high point of the synod's cautious appropriation of *Keys*.⁹⁷ But there was good reason why the platform, like most early Massachusetts discussions, including Norton's and Cotton's, eschews the term "negative voice" and emphasizes the aspiration to joint consent.⁹⁸ "Negative voice" gives a partial and misleading impression of the process that the synod was envisioning, as does Hall's conventional characterization of this negative voice as a "veto." There is certainly an implicit veto-of-sorts for the elders in the emphasis on mutual consent. That veto-of-sorts, however, was not intended as the end of a deliberative procedure. Rather, it served as a warning flare, alerting a church to the potentially catastrophic collapse of its capacity to reach decisions—its power of the keys, as Cotton would put it—and thus to the need for intervention from other churches.

The synod's broad understanding of how mutual consent was to function, including its implicit veto-of-sorts, can be teased out from an invaluable post-synod source. The synod sent the platform to the General Court in October 1649, which ordered it printed and distributed to the churches for their objections. After a very slow process, in 1651, the Court passed the objections on to the ministers. Richard Mather wrote a response, "An Answer of the Elders to certayne doubts," after repeatedly consulting with Cotton and as many other ministers as could be arranged, producing what amounted to a semi-official commentary on the platform. He presented "Answer" to the General Court for its October 1651 session.⁹⁹

As Mather recorded in "Answer," a number of the laity also read this section of the Cambridge Platform as bestowing a straightforward veto on the elders, and they read it, therefore, as a very bad thing. "This establisheth a prerogative power," charged Joseph Hills, "or a negative vote in churches." The Salem church "questioned whether it can be said [that] . . . without limitations . . . no church act" could pass "without the joynt consent of Elders and brethren." If that were indeed the case, they warned, "the church is in a wofull plight."¹⁰⁰

Mather replied that the passage "doth not put the case unlimitedly." He drew attention to its qualifier: the necessity for concurrence of brethren and elders hinged on "right administration." And if there was right administration, Mather added, "there is not any danger at all that there should be concurrence of all."¹⁰¹ That was a roundabout

⁹⁶John Norton, *The Answer to the Whole Set of Questions*, trans. Douglas Horton (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1958), chap. 4. The relationship between Norton's text and this section is clearer in Norton's Latin than in Horton's translation. See John Norton, *Responsio ad totam quaestionum* (London, 1648), 67; and Norton, *Answer*, 88.

⁹⁷Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 111, citing Mather's passage in "Plea" that paraphrases *Keys*; Hall, *Puritans*, 331. Hall's other highpoint, *Puritans*, 331, is that the platform, "confined" ordination's "laying on of hands . . . to the ministry." The platform, however, stresses this confinement is optional. See Walker, *Creeeds*, 216 (CP 9: 4).

⁹⁸Besides Norton, *Answer*, 88, see Davenport, *Power*, 156; and Urian Oakes, *New England Pleaded with and Pressed to Consider the Things which Concern Her Peace* (Cambridge, 1673), 46.

⁹⁹Bush, ed., *Correspondence*, 463–467; Mather, "Answer," 21. For another, overlapping list of objections, see Bush, *Correspondence*, 526–527.

¹⁰⁰Mather, "Answer," 21; Bush, ed., *Correspondence*, 527.

¹⁰¹Mather, "Answer," 21.

way of saying that when a church was functioning well, elders and brethren should have been able to reach agreement.

Mather further emphasized that the decision-making process did not halt if the brethren or the elders refused their consent to a decision the other group favored. “Fault” for the deadlock had to lie somewhere, he wrote, either with the “people” or with the elders themselves, “who unjustly withhold their consent from that which of right ought to be done.”¹⁰² Should the church not be able to agree as to who was at fault, the platform noted the remedy in its chapter on church communion, based almost entirely on the same chapter in Cotton’s draft (including one controversial, ambiguous post-*Keyes* clause about churches lending ministers to each other¹⁰³): “Whenever a Church wanteth peace and light amongst themselves,” Cotton wrote and the platform repeated, it should call a synod.¹⁰⁴

If the requirement for mutual consent did not really grant the elders a final say over decisions, neither did it introduce an entirely new dynamic into New England church decision making. In “most churches,” Mather wrote in 1645, the elders would “prevail,” provided that they offered “strong reasons.” Or at least, Mather qualified, the elders would prevail to the extent that the brethren “would not easily proceed against the judgement of their Officers.”¹⁰⁵ If elders and the brethren found themselves deadlocked, multiple sources claimed that they would seek the counsel of other churches.¹⁰⁶ Joint consent, in effect, was intended to formalize as a collective best practice the already widely, if erratically, accepted deference to elders in decision making to the advantage of the elders. If elders chose to interpret this delicate new formal middle way between aristocracy and democracy as giving them a straightforward veto, they risked the brethren exercising their power of judgment and excommunicating them, as the platform made clear was always an option, although in one circumstance with some restraints.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰²Ibid., 21.

¹⁰³Cotton, “Church,” 13, and the Cambridge Platform 15: 4 (Walker, *Creeds*, 232) state that churches with multiple ministers “doe willingly afford one of their own ministers to supply the place of an absent or sick minister of another church for a needful season.” That wording might mean that a minister could use his office powers, including sacramental ones, temporarily in other churches, an innovation, or that he could preach there simply as a layperson, which was already practiced. Mather, “Answer,” 36–38, responding to laity who feared the platform intended the innovation, insisted that it “only mentioneth what is our practice,” which, he stressed, did not include “acts of office,” contra Hall, *Puritans*, 331. Mather went on, in a gesture of protest, to explain why there was “no just reason” for this restriction to be placed on ministers. Then at some point, he lightly crossed his protest out (his own platform draft, “Modell,” 79–80, includes the innovation unambiguously). Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2 vols. (Hartford, 1853), 2: 237–238, a half century later, quoted his grandfather’s protest, which he strongly endorsed and presented as the synod’s understanding of the passage’s intention before speculating on why the synod articulated that understanding so ambiguously. He passed over in silence the rest of his grandfather’s answer which complicates his presentation, and he does not seem to have been familiar with Cotton’s draft, both of which make his account less than ideal to use as the primary interpretive source for this elusive section of the platform; see, for example, Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 107. John Cotton expressed himself unambiguously in favor of the innovation in 1652. See Cotton, *Defence*, 58. For other efforts to create a credibly Congregational context for the innovation see John Allin and Thomas Shepard, *A Defence of the Answer Made unto the Nine Questions* (London, 1648), 134, and Norton, *Answer*, 100–107.

¹⁰⁴Walker, *Creeds*, 232 (CP 15: 2); Cotton, “Church,” 14.

¹⁰⁵Mather, “Plea,” 3rd pag., 217; Cotton, *Way*, 93; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 39–40.

¹⁰⁶Mather, *Church-Government*, 62; Allin and Shepard, *Defence*, 169; cf. Davenport, *Answer*, 72.

¹⁰⁷Walker, *Creeds*, 215 (CP 8: 7) states that when an elder offends “incorrigibly,” with “contumacy [i.e., obstinate resistance],” the “counsel” of other churches “where it may be had” should “direct” the church, if

The Cambridge synod's receptive but selective response to Cotton's boosting of elders' authority in their own churches was mirrored by its selective approval of his boosting of synodical authority. The synod did not commence with a consensus about synodical power, any more than did the Massachusetts churches as a whole, where lay suspicions of the Cambridge synod becoming coercive delayed the synod's start.¹⁰⁸ The platform drafts do not agree on the topic, with Partridge's draft reiterating the conventional claim that synods can only "advise and counsel" and Mather's claiming no more than that synods bind as an ordinance of Christ.¹⁰⁹ A position paper from the truncated 1646 synod session strongly argues for the binding power of a "Synods declaration of the truth." Such a declaration, it asserts, "binds the conscience, and that by way of the highest institution that is meerly doctrinall." The synod read the paper and "commended" it "unto more serious consideration" for the 1647 session.¹¹⁰ Indignant objections came from John Davenport and Thomas Hooker when they belatedly learned of the paper. Those objections might help explain why no more is heard of it, although neither was to attend the synod to impress upon it their concerns (Hooker was fatally ill when the 1647 session convened).¹¹¹

The Cambridge Platform's chapter on synods follows Cotton's draft fairly closely, with one significant alteration. His draft includes a short passage intimating the office authority that elders bring to synods: "The next efficient cause of [synods] under Christ is the power of the churches, sending forth their Elders as messengers." The Cambridge synod wiped out that intimation by replacing "as" after "Elders" with "and other." It drove its erasure home by replacing Cotton's final section directed against Presbyterian synods for a section taken from Richard Mather's "Plea," in which Mather explained that elders were valued at synods for their expertise but were otherwise on the same footing as the laity attending. In response to a lay question about the platform, Mather reiterated that elders did not attend synods in their office capacity.¹¹² The only other substantive addition the synod made to Cotton's chapter was to reiterate that scripture was the "principall ground" of synodical decrees' binding power and that without that scripture grounding, "they bind not at all."¹¹³

The platform provided no substitute for the elders' office authority to explain how synods could bind, beyond Cotton's claim that synods were an "ordinance of Christ."

it decides to censure him. The church would have the "liberty" of choosing the churches. Mather, "Answer," 16, makes it clear that the section is a preemptive effort to induce an outside intervention in a kind of intractable church conflict not limited to elders that tended to bring about such interventions anyway.

¹⁰⁸Walker, *Creeds*, 171–174.

¹⁰⁹Partridge, "Modell," 11; Mather, "Modell," 84. Mather, "Modell," 84, grants "classes" (meetings) of elders the same "binding doctrinal power" as synods. Cotton, *Keyes*, 43, mentions them only in passing and Cotton, "Church," 12–18, adapted as CP 15, does not mention them at all. For this difference's significance, see Robert F. Scholz, "Clerical Consociation in Massachusetts Bay: Reassessing the New England Way and Its Origins," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Jul. 1972): 391–414.

¹¹⁰Walker, *Creeds*, 168–174; Churches of Massachusetts, *The Result of a Synod at Cambridge in New-England, Anno. 1646* (London, 1654), 64–65.

¹¹¹John Davenport, "Third Essay," 155. George Leon Walker, *Thomas Hooker: Preacher, Founder, Democrat* (New York, 1891), 147.

¹¹²Cotton, "Church," 18; Walker, *Creeds*, 233 (CP 16: 2), 234 (CP 16: 6); Mather, "Plea," 3rd pag., 176–177; Mather, "Modell," 36.

¹¹³Walker, *Creeds*, 234 (CP 16, 5, 6); Cotton, "Church," 19. Cotton adapted a passage from the Westminster Confession for this passage. See Westminster Assembly, *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines . . . Concerning a Confession of Faith* (London, 1647), 53–54 (chap. 31, sec. 3).

That vacuum provoked the Wenham church to ask what “that synodical power or authority” was by which synodical declarations bound, apart from the binding power of scripture itself. Mather replied simply that synods bound “in like sort” with “preaching” and “counsel,” for all three were ordinances of God.¹¹⁴ What in *Keyes* had been a binding force stemming mostly from the cumulative weight of the office authority of the ministers attending a synod was now undifferentiated from the binding force of a pious lay puritan warning a neighbor to heed the apostle Paul and flee fornication. The platform had in a similar manner diluted Cotton’s restriction of authority and rule to the elders and the scope of his negative voice by preserving the brethren’s power of judgment. All these downward adjustments were markers of what was required for a large enough community to accept that Cotton’s innovations made sense within the bounds of Congregationalism as they understood it.

In this process of give and take, Cotton, too, made adjustments. In 1648 or later, and very likely at the synod itself, Cotton executed a significant about-face on the central issue that drove his innovations. He affirmed that the brethren could excommunicate their elders. Cotton explained in 1652 that he had misunderstood in *Keyes* what the term “excommunication” encompassed. “Largely taken,” he realized, it simply meant the power shared by every community, secular or sacred, to expel its members. In that sense, a church’s brethren could certainly excommunicate, and, thus, they did have their own judicial power, independent of the elders. But an excommunication that delivered a sinner to Satan still could only be performed by elders.¹¹⁵ Another way of describing this change of mind is that Cotton decided that what he had been too narrowly understanding as withdrawal could be easily recast as excommunication, provided that the term was taken (very) largely.

It is entirely possible that Cotton’s new-found expansiveness about excommunication’s meaning gelled in discussions at the synod. With his change of mind, Cotton could have accepted the synod’s alterations to his draft on excommunication, especially since the platform nowhere defines “excommunication,” and everyone could now agree to disagree about the first subject of the power of the keys, as they may have done in the platform’s chapter five, since significant differences in church practice no longer hinged on that issue. Besides closing the gap, for all practical purposes, between him and his synodical brethren about the platform, Cotton’s change of mind would constitute a powerful reaffirmation of Congregationalism’s essential unity and his participation in it in the face of widespread puritan concern about the fissiparous potential of this new movement. He could in good conscience tell a hostile Presbyterian critic in 1652, “What ever the Different Judgments of men of our way may be, touching the first subject of the Power of the Keyes, . . . we all Agree with one Accord, that the Church (even the Body of Churchmembers) have power to choose their officers, to Admit members, and to censure offenders.”¹¹⁶

V. New England Legacies

After Cotton’s innovations had been adjusted to fit within the synod’s adjusted consensus about the boundaries of Congregationalism, the centrality of those adjusted innovations to the Cambridge Platform was frequently noted. Urian Oakes reminded his

¹¹⁴Mather, “Answer,” 40–41; Bush, ed., *Correspondence*, 64–68.

¹¹⁵Cotton, *Defence*, 16, 33, 40–41, 43.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 19–20.

audience at the 1673 Massachusetts election sermon about the intention of “our late departed Worthies” to strike “a *middle course* between *Rigid Presbyterianism* and *Levelling Brownism*,” by preserving the “Privilege of the Brethren without any infringement of the Rule and Authority of the *Presbytery*,” through the use of joint consent. For James Allen in 1679, the writers of the platform expressed the “substance” of “the reign and government of Christ in his Church” by “asserting the Authoritative Rule of the Elders with the liberty of the Brethren.”¹¹⁷

Acknowledgment was sometimes made of *Keyes* being the original inspiration for this “middle course,” most notably in a lengthy passage in Cotton Mather’s biography of John Cotton extravagantly calling *Keyes* “the Substance of our *Church Discipline*.”¹¹⁸ The elderly Cambridge synod attendees John Higginson and William Hubbard reprinted Mather’s passage in 1701 as a “testimony to the old principles of New-England.” John Wise, in his early eighteenth-century campaign for the preservation of Congregational purity, reprinted their reprint in his own contribution to the struggle, *A Vindication of the Government of New-England Churches* (1717), itself reprinted twice.¹¹⁹ The same claim made its way into Cotton Mather’s ecclesiastical history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Mather’s claim and its circulation seem to have cemented the reputation of *Keyes* as central to New England Congregationalism down through the nineteenth century.¹²⁰

Not all New England Congregationalists, however, agreed that Cotton’s middle way, even as toned down by the synod, was the newly clarified substance of Christ’s government. For some, it was its retrograde deformation. “Presbyterianism” was the charge hurled repeatedly against the Cambridge Platform. Fourteen of the Massachusetts General Court’s forty deputies voted against approving the General Court’s 1651 resolution that the Cambridge Platform “for the substance thereof it is that we have practiced & doe beleeve.”¹²¹ John Davenport mostly embraced the platform, but his growing alarm over its claim that synods could bind exacerbated the fierce controversy over a 1662 Massachusetts synod’s call for a relaxation of churches’ internal baptismal practices. On the other hand, given that the coercion feared by the 1662 synod’s opponents never transpired, recognition may have slowly dawned that unenforceable binding synodical declarations were for all practical purposes no different than advice. That recognition, in turn, may have accounted for what appears to have been the much more tepid response to a 1679 Massachusetts synod’s declaration that ministers could baptize the

¹¹⁷Oakes, *New England*, 46; James Allin, *New-Englands Choicest Blessing* (Boston, 1679), 10. Oakes illustrated his claim with an example from John Owen. For an account of the relationship between Cotton, *Keyes*, and Owen’s ecclesiology, see Ryan Thomas Kelly, “Reformed and Reforming: John Owen on the Kingdom of Christ” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2015), chap. 4.

¹¹⁸Cotton Mather, *Johannes in Eremo* (Boston, 1695), 2nd pag., 33–33; Daniel Denison, *Irenicon, or a Salve for New-England’s Sore* (Boston, 1684), 180–181.

¹¹⁹John Higginson and William Hubbard, *A Testimony, to the Order of the Gospel, in the Churches of New-England* (Boston, 1701), 12–15; John Wise, *A Vindication of the Government of New-England Churches* (Boston, 1717), 2nd pag., 9.

¹²⁰Mather, *Magnalia*, 2: 208–209; Henry Martyn Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, as Seen in Its Literature*, 2 vols. (New York, 1880), 2: 433–434.

¹²¹Thomas Shepard, Jr., *Eye-Salve* (Cambridge, MA, 1673), 22; Oakes, *New England*, 46; Denison, *Irenicon*, 180–181; Bush, ed., *Correspondence*, 527; Walker, *Creeds*, 188.

children of nonmembers. After 1679, no more Congregationalist synods were held, making the issue moot.¹²²

After a hesitant beginning, ministerial use of what had come to be generally called the negative voice picked up in the eighteenth century, now sometimes treated as a straightforward veto and often accompanied by controversy.¹²³ In 1713, Increase Mather published his father's 1645 advocacy of the negative voice to refute the ongoing accusation that "such an Assertion is a deviation from the Principles of the Congregational-way, & of the Churches of New-England in their Primitive Constitution." Yet such was the complexity of *Keyes's* relationship to Congregational norms that three years later Mather lamented how proponents of introducing a ministerial negative voice into ecclesiastical councils were giving "great weight" to *Keyes's* claim about ministers bringing their office authority into synods, despite that claim "not well suit[ing] with *Congregational Principles*." The negative voice died out in the first half of the nineteenth century, smothered under a new consensus that Congregational church government was no middle way but a straightforward democracy.¹²⁴

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¹²²Davenport, "Third Essay," 155; John Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: 1663), 52–53, 62; Churches of Massachusetts, *A Confession of Faith* (Boston, 1680), 54.

¹²³Walker, *Creeds*, 489, 505; Cooper, *Tenacious*, 150, 254n69; Hall, *Faithful Shepherd*, 212; Edwin Adams, *An Historical Discourse in Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Formation of the First Congregational Church in Templeton, Massachusetts* (Boston, 1857), 32–34; Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1901), 3 vols., i, 148–149, 412, 499.

¹²⁴Mather, *Answer*, sig. A2r; Increase Mather, *A Disquisition Concerning Ecclesiastical Councils* (Boston, 1716), 25; Mather, "Plea," 4th pag., 75–86; Dexter, *Congregationalism*, 2: 504–508, 603n272.

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