


Providence and Puritan Deceit: John Davenport's Forgery Revisited

Christy Wang* 
The University of Tokyo

Many scholars have told the story of how John Davenport (bap. 1597, d. 1670), a prominent Congregationalist minister in New England, was fatally discredited as a fraudster when a letter he had forged was exposed in 1669. However, no one has analyzed how this extraordinary scandal fits into the larger narrative of puritan providentialism and its disenchantment. Focusing on the manipulation of providential language, this article shows that intra-Congregationalist conflicts over church polity could often be more political than theological. God-talk, or 'providential pragmatism', empowered New Englanders to navigate the ecclesiological ambiguities inherent in the Congregationalist system in a way that most benefited themselves. Davenport's scandal, precisely because it was the most blatant form of such pragmatism, offers a case study of a pattern of self-contradiction and double standard already observable in similar cases of schisms over church membership and infant baptism in late seventeenth-century New England.

On 24 September 1667, John Davenport, the seventy-year-old pastor of the New Haven church, received an invitation from the First Church in Boston to become their new teaching officer.¹ In order to secure the offer from the First Church, once led by the famous John Cotton from 1633 to 1652, Davenport repeatedly lied to the First Church by asserting that New Haven had agreed to release him from office, so that he was free to go to Boston. In reality, New Haven refused to let him go and, according to New England's mainstream Congregationalist practice, which Davenport had tirelessly advocated for decades, he was covenantally bound to New Haven until his church dismissed him. The established procedure and expectation were that the New Haven church would send a

* E-mail: wang.yi.jye@gmail.com.

¹ Richard D. Pierce, ed., *The Records of the First Church of Boston, 1630–1868*, 3 vols, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 39–41 (Boston, MA, 1961), 1: 62.

formal dismissal letter to the First Church before Davenport could be called to office elsewhere.

In order to be installed successfully in Boston, Davenport; his son, John Jr; James Penn, Davenport's most loyal supporter and the ruling elder in the First Church; and James Allen, another candidate for ordination to the First Church, together decided to change significantly the content of a letter the New Haven church had sent them.² The original letter had explicitly refused to dismiss Davenport, but the forgery made it sound like the direct opposite. However, rumours that Davenport had never actually been dismissed by New Haven continued to spread after his ordination in Boston, and they eventually led to the full exposure of his fraudulent dealing. The First Church congregation finally realized that they had been deceived by their leaders, Penn, Davenport and Allen. After extensive debates and even conflict with neighbouring churches and leaders, who rose together to publicly condemn Davenport and his close associates, the First Church decided to retain Davenport and endorse his claim that his Boston ordination had been providential.

Several scholars have presented an overview of this scandal, most notably Francis Bremer, who helpfully delineates the fierce debates over church polity that paved the way to the divisions over Davenport's appointment to the First Church of Boston.³

² It was common practice in New England for ministers to be ordained, not simply installed, as they began to pastor a congregation, regardless of whether they had been ordained before. This was based on key ecclesiological differences between Congregationalism on the one side, and Presbyterianism and Episcopalianism on the other. Congregationalists questioned the existence of a visible catholic or universal Church and instead saw individual congregations as the most fundamental representation of the Church. They believed that a minister's office was derived from congregational assent and was therefore ultimately bound up with individual churches. See Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640–1660* (Oxford, 1957), 88–91; David Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1972), 102–3; Francis Bremer, *Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism* (Basingstoke, 2015), 96–7. As Davenport, the protagonist of this case study, argued, ministers were 'limited to the Church': 'take away the relation [between the congregation and its officer], the office (and so the work) ceaseth.' John Davenport, *An Answer of the Elders of the Several Churches in New England unto Nine Positions Sent Over to Them* (London, 1643), 66.

³ Francis Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 254–350; James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York, 1999), 88–114; Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge, MA, 1994),

However, Bremer's account, like the majority of those on which it draws, narrates the scandal without demonstrating how it illuminates the ways in which New England Congregationalists navigated competing orthodoxies and practices. This article argues that this controversy is of much greater significance, because it shows that intra-Congregationalist conflicts over church polity in the localities, centring on the Half-Way Covenant – a measure to expand church membership – could often be more political than theological.⁴ Divine ends might justify some rather less than creditable means. By focusing on a case of forgery, this study goes beyond current scholarly attention on the theological diversity within New England Congregationalism to explore the discrepancies between belief and practice. How theologically and morally flexible could puritans be in order to win the cut-throat battle for New England orthodoxy? The answer is very.

By the second half of the seventeenth century, New Englanders had discovered, to their disappointment, that their Congregationalist ideals could not be neatly implemented. Escalating conflict over church membership and restrictions on infant baptism created even more uncertainties about how a church should be governed. Should a congregation abide by the advice of a council? Should church elders impose the will of the majority upon the dissenting minority if the latter were significant in number? Was a formal dismissal absolutely necessary whenever a minister or layperson left a church for another? This article argues that, time after time, puritans could adopt a providentialist rhetoric to get the answers they wanted. God-talk, or 'providential

189–97; Michael G. Hall, *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather, 1639–1723* (Middletown, CT, 1988), 55–60, 78–82.

⁴ 'Half-Way Covenant' was originally a term of disparagement, coined only in the mid-eighteenth century. It refers to the practice, endorsed by the Boston synod of 1662, of allowing baptized adults to present their children for baptism, regardless of whether or not the parents were fully covenanted members of the church. Since the term 'Half-Way Covenant' is widely used in current scholarship, this article applies it when discussing that practice. See Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ, 1969), 7–8; Katharine Gerbner, 'Beyond the "Halfway Covenant": Church Membership, Extended Baptism, and Outreach in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1656–1667', *The New England Quarterly* 85 (2012), 281–301, at 286–7; Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven, CT, 2018), 192.

pragmatism', empowered many Congregationalists to navigate the ecclesiological ambiguity in a way that most benefited themselves. By situating Davenport's forgery within the larger, regional crisis over the Half-Way Covenant, this article offers an illuminating example of a pattern of self-contradiction and double standard already observable in similar cases of schisms over church polity, precisely because it was the most blatant form of such pragmatism. This case study also demonstrates that puritans were well aware that hypocrisy existed among them and were inclined to believe that God's providence exposed sins with a vengeance. Providentialism proved a double-edged sword, sometimes perpetuating abuses of power through politicized interpretations of God's will, and at other times challenging such abuse and restraining puritans from a purely pragmatic, self-serving use of the doctrine of providence.

There exist ample scholarly discussions of puritan providentialism, characterized by an 'existential terror' and obsession with hypocrisy as a prevalent sin.⁵ Alexandra Walsham speaks of a paradoxical hybrid of confidence and fear among the self-titled godly. Puritans found comfort in their own status as the elect and yet constantly dreaded God's displeasure, understanding that both could be observed from God's providential interactions with creation.⁶ Andrew Dorsey, in his analysis of the fear of divine wrath among New England Congregationalists, emphasizes the centrality of hypocrisy as a notion in puritans' incessant questioning of their own faith and godliness: 'how do I know I'm not a hypocrite?'⁷ Ethan Shagan likewise notes the 'plague of subjective atheism and hypocrisy' experienced by Calvinists as a consequence of their predestinarian doctrine.⁸

⁵ Ethan Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, 2019), 140.

⁶ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 19. Walsham also draws attention to Robert T. Kendall's similar observation in his analysis of puritans' 'experimental predestinarianism' in his *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1979), 79–138. Other early discussions of puritan providentialism include Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1954); Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge, 1982), 116–68; and Barbara Donagan's many writings, such as 'Providence, Chance and Explanation: Some Paradoxical Aspects of Puritan Views of Causation', *JRH* 11 (1981), 385–403.

⁷ Andrew Dorsey, 'A Rhetoric of American Experience: Thomas Shepard's Cambridge Confessions and the Discourse of Spiritual Hypocrisy', *Early American Literature* 49 (2014), 629–62, at 633.

⁸ Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief*, 140.

Scholars have also uncovered internal tensions and contradictions within the puritan rhetoric of piety and providence. Alexandra Walsham, for instance, points out puritans' ability to justify both good and evil as God's blessings and signs of their spiritual superiority as the godly. This way of thinking fed on a heightened sense of God's active involvement in believers' lives, winning puritans notoriety for hypocrisy.⁹ David Hall likewise suggests that puritans could utilize providential language, such as the use of wonder stories, for political gain.¹⁰ This article builds on the work of these (and other) scholars to delineate a particular form of spiritual abuse within puritanism. Puritan providentialism, with its accompanying language of godly waiting and submission, a clean conscience, and divine sovereignty, could be weaponized to deceive the public, suppress opposition and pursue private profit. This distinctively puritan hypocrisy was especially useful to ecclesiastical authorities who were most familiar with providentialist tropes and most empowered to take advantage of them to sustain their dominance over ecclesiastical affairs. While a full investigation of puritan providentialism and deceit exceeds the scope of this article, this case study serves as an initial step of inquiry, demonstrating how puritan colonists maximized this 'providential pragmatism' in the area of ecclesiological ambiguity.

DAVENPORT AGAINST HYPOCRISY

It was clear from the very beginning, when John Davenport received the invitation from the First Church in Boston to be their new teaching officer, that the New Haven minister and his congregants were of different minds. Two weeks after he received the invitation, on 8 October 1667, Davenport wrote to the First Church to express his 'strong inclynation' to accept the call.¹¹ The minister highlighted his own 'nothingness' and 'unworthiness', but in reality, he was desperate to leave New Haven for the flagship church in New England.¹² Both Davenport and the First Church in Boston were aware that this

⁹ Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, 17.

¹⁰ David Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), 71–116.

¹¹ John Davenport to the First Church Boston, 8 October 1667, in *Letters of John Davenport, Puritan Divine*, ed. Isabel M. Calder (New Haven, CT, 1937), 270.

¹² *Ibid.*

invitation marked a crucial attempt at a robust comeback of the old way – in their eyes, the only biblical way – of Congregationalism. For many in the First Church, one of their previous pastors John Norton (d. 1663) had already damaged his own reputation when he promoted reconciliation with the crown as early as 1661, and failed to secure sufficient economic liberty in the negotiations with London in 1662.¹³ They also shared Davenport's suspicions of 'Presbyterian' leanings among many New England ministers, including Norton and John Wilson, their recently deceased minister, both of whom had been staunch advocates for a more inclusive church membership and infant baptism.¹⁴ The overwhelming support for what later became known as the Half-Way Covenant aroused the fears of many, including civil and clerical leaders in New Haven, as well as the majority of the Boston First Church, that New England was turning away from its 'first love'.¹⁵ For them, the church should be a covenanted community of visible saints, and neither a mixture of believers and the visibly relapsed, nor a parish system in which every child, regardless of their parents' faith, was baptized and brought up within a national, all-inclusive church.

The dispute over church membership revealed a common anxiety about hypocrisy among puritans on both sides of the Atlantic. The English Presbyterian luminary William Gouge argued against the religious Independents at the Westminster Assembly that since individual congregations, while being 'a company that professe[d] the truth', could 'all be hypocrites', particular churches must not be the holder of the keys, that is, the ultimate authority over discipline and doctrine.¹⁶ Among the Congregationalists, even those who advocated the strictest terms of church membership, such as Davenport, admitted that churches were inevitably a mixture of true believers and hypocrites.

¹³ Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), 196–202; Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 190–2; Francis Bremer, 'Norton, John (1606–1663)', *ODNB*, online edn (2004), at: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/20348>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

¹⁴ Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 189; Bremer, *Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism*, 166.

¹⁵ Charles J. Hoadly, ed., *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven, from May, 1653, to the Union. Together with New Haven Code of 1656* (Hartford, CT, 1858), 196–8.

¹⁶ William Gouge, *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn, 5 vols (Oxford, 2012), 5: 234.

Even so, congregations must ensure their visible godliness, as Davenport insisted.¹⁷

In fact, active cultivation of visible godliness and rigorous assessment of candidates for church membership were the most dominant themes in Davenport's sermons throughout the 1650s. As minister in New Haven, he repeatedly emphasized that, besides public confession of faith, there must be a proper examination of whether these self-proclaimed believers were actually hypocrites, who 'had the forme of ... [godliness] & yet visibly denie[d] the power of it'.¹⁸ With the increasingly mainstream practice of a broadened church membership in mind, Davenport reminded his flock in November 1656 of the 'stewardly fidelity' (a concept borrowed from John Cotton) required of them to ensure the 'honour & welfare of gods house'.¹⁹ Again, Davenport stressed that this prerequisite 'profession of faith & obedience' for membership was never based on 'judgm[en]t of infallibility' but that of 'charitable discretion'.²⁰

When the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Connecticut Colony endorsed the expansion of infant baptism to the children of baptized, but unconverted, parents in a council in 1657, New Haven officially became a minority in its adherence to the stricter practice. The Boston synod of 1662 further confirmed the mainstream status of the Half-Way Covenant. In October 1662, New Haven received yet another blow: the restored Stuart monarch, Charles II, had

¹⁷ Boston, MA, The Congregational Library & Archives, MS 5374, John Davenport Sermon Book, 1649–52, 347 (15 August 1652). Other Congregational leaders shared this observation: John Cotton, *Of the Holinesse of Church-Members* (London, 1650), 27; Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline* (London, 1648), 28.

¹⁸ The Congregational Library & Archives, MS 5374, John Davenport Sermon Book, 1649–1652, 344, 345, 347 (15 August 1652). Davenport quoted Cotton and Hooker verbatim at times in these notes, and here he was citing Hooker, *Survey*, 32. There is ample secondary literature on admission tests or spiritual assessment as a way for Congregationalists to keep out hypocrites: see, for example, Paul Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 568–81; Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), 31–2, 36–7, 61–2.

¹⁹ New Haven, CT, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, GEN MSS 202, John Davenport Sermons and Writings, 1615–1658, 'Sermons Preached at New Haven, 1656–1658', 71–2 (9 November 1656); John Cotton, *Holinesse*, 107 (mispaginated as 95).

²⁰ Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, GEN MSS 202, John Davenport Sermons and Writings, 1615–1658, 'Sermons Preached at New Haven, 1656–1658', 68 (9 November 1656).

granted Connecticut a new charter that incorporated the entire New Haven Colony. In Davenport's eyes, Connecticut was a nearby, rival colony in worrying spiritual decline, whose leadership and churches were deeply divided over church membership and embroiled in disputes over synodical authority. Samuel Stone's Hartford church and John Warham's Windsor church had long advocated for the Half-Way Covenant, whereas churches in Wethersfield and New London were divided on this question.²¹ Despite repeated objections raised by New Haven authorities, Connecticut immediately initiated the merger, incorporating New Haven towns into their structures. On 13 December 1664, the nearly bankrupt New Haven Colony finally voted to confirm its submission to Connecticut.²² Davenport considered this a fatal blow to the ongoing campaign for his version of the 'New England Way', proclaiming 'Christ's interest in New Haven Colony as miserably lost'.²³ It was in this context of acute disillusionment that the co-founder of the New Haven Colony received the invitation from Boston in 1667.

DAVENPORT, A HYPOCRITE?

Davenport might have regarded moving to Boston as a way to further his influence as the champion of stricter church membership that could better fend off hypocrites. Many in Boston had nevertheless been wary of his potential move to the First Church, even before an invitation was offered, and would repeatedly question the true motives behind his relocation. The First Church congregation had been bitterly divided over many issues, including the treatment of sectarian Protestants and the Half-Way Covenant. Besides Elder James Penn, Davenport enjoyed support from the majority of the church, many of whom desired greater toleration for Baptists and Quakers. These included Edward Hutchinson, whose mother Anne

²¹ Paul R. Lucas, 'Presbyterianism Comes to Connecticut: The Toleration Act of 1669', *Journal of Presbyterian History* 50 (1972), 129–47; idem, *Valley of Discord: Church and Society along the Connecticut River, 1636–1725* (Hanover, NH, 1976), 73–86. John Warham would abandon the Half-Way Covenant in 1664, which further divided the Windsor First Church: *ibid.* 78–9.

²² Bremer, *Davenport*, 301; Isabel M. Calder, *The New Haven Colony*, Yale Historical Publications Miscellany 28 (New Haven, CT, 1934), 249–53.

²³ Davenport, as quoted by Edward E. Atwater, *History of the Colony of New Haven to its Absorption into Connecticut* (Meriden, CT, 1902), 527.

Hutchinson had played a central role in the Antinomian Controversy of 1636–8, and John Leverett, major-general of the Massachusetts militia and future governor of the Bay Colony (1673–9). Other firm supporters of Davenport included Anthony Stoddard, Thomas Clark, Thomas Grubb, and the delegates sent to extend the invitation to New Haven, Edward Tying, James Oliver and Richard Cooke.²⁴ In opposition were John Hull, merchant and diarist, Hezekiah Usher, one of the earliest New England booksellers, and others in the congregation such as Edward Rainsford, Robert Walker, Theodore Atkinson and William Salter, who had been in favour of the expansion of church membership and therefore opposed the appointment of Davenport as John Wilson's successor.²⁵

While Davenport considered himself an advocate for the most biblical polity that could effectively prevent churches from the infiltration of hypocrites, he himself had never been free from accusations of hypocrisy. As early as 1624, while still a curate of St Lawrence Old Jewry in London, the twenty-seven-year-old Davenport had declared his 'hearty detestation' of the 'hypocrisy' of being a puritan, which he carefully defined as 'one, that secretly encourageth men in opposition to the present government'.²⁶ Having been labelled 'puritanically affected', the young preacher ran into problems with his appointment as vicar of St Stephen's, Coleman Street, in London

²⁴ Bremer, *Davenport*, 317–18. Hutchinson, Oliver and Grubb were among those who petitioned the General Court to release imprisoned Baptists in November 1668. While Leverett did not sign the petition, he refused to issue an arrest warrant in the same year and was praised by Baptists for his tolerance: E. Brooks Holifield, 'On Toleration in Massachusetts', *ChH* 38 (1969), 188–200, at 92–3. When the General Court legislated that Quakers should be banished 'upon paine of death' in October 1658, future supporters of Davenport, such as Hutchinson and Clark, dissented from the majority of the court, resisting the heavy-handed approach promoted by their former church leaders Norton and Wilson: John Norton, *The Heart of N-England Rent at the Blasphemies of the Present Generation* (Cambridge, MA, 1659), 48–9; Bremer, *Davenport*, 317; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, 5 vols (Boston, MA, 1853–4), 4/1: 346. For Davenport's own disapproval of the imposition of death penalties upon Quaker missionaries, such as Mary Dyer, see Davenport to John Winthrop Jr, 6 December 1659, in *Letters*, 147–8.

²⁵ Bremer, *Davenport*, 317; idem, 'The New England Way Reconsidered: An Exploration of Church Polity and the Governance of the Region's Churches', in Elliot Vernon and Hunter Powell, eds, *Church Polity and Politics in the British Atlantic World, c.1635–66* (Manchester, 2020), 155–73, at 169.

²⁶ London, TNA (PRO), SP 14/173, fol. 50^r, John Davenport to Sir Edward Conway, Secretary of State, 13 October 1624.

in 1624, and was eager to assert his loyalty before the bishop of London, George Montaigne.²⁷ Davenport emphasized that he had consistently preached obedience to governments both ‘ecclesiastical and civill’ and eventually secured the incumbency.²⁸ Accusations of hypocrisy came from godly allies as well. After fleeing London for Amsterdam in 1633, Davenport complained about the ‘persecucion of the Tongue’, especially from those who ‘profess[ed] religion in an higher strayne then some others’, clearly referring to his conformable friends.²⁹ Accusations raised against the now nonconformist minister included abandonment of his London congregation and misappropriation of funds raised for the Feoffees for Impropriations.³⁰ With noticeable bitterness, Davenport stressed in a letter to his patron Lady Mary Vere that his departure from London was purely a matter of conscience: ‘I did conforme with as much inward peace ... but [now] my light [is] different.’³¹

After a period of relative peace, free from Laudian surveillance across the Atlantic, challenges to Davenport’s assertions of his own piety and political loyalty resurfaced upon the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. Under Davenport’s leadership, New Haven gained notoriety for being a deeply disaffected colony. Not only was New Haven the last among the New England colonies to celebrate the reinstated Crown and proclaim the king, but it systematically sheltered two regicides, Edward Whalley and William Goffe.³² Reports of disloyalty travelled far and fast, and Davenport, together with other New Haven authorities such as Governor William Leete, felt compelled to explain themselves to London, with varying degrees of sincerity.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ John Davenport to Lady Mary Vere, 1633, in *Letters*, 38–9.

³⁰ The Feoffees for Impropriations was an organization established in 1625, and Davenport was one of the clerical feoffees. They solicited funds to buy impropriations and advowsons with the aim of appointing puritan-leaning ministers to strategic places throughout the kingdom, ‘especially in Cities, and Market Towns’, clearly targeted in order to build up godly sympathies in places that sent MPs to the House of Commons: Samuel Clarke, *A Collection of the Lives of Ten Eminent Divines* (London, 1662), 111.

³¹ John Davenport to Lady Mary Vere, 1633, in *Letters*, 39.

³² A recent and thorough account of Whalley and Goffe’s flight to America is Matthew Jenkinson, *Charles I’s Killers in America: The Lives & Afterlives of Edward Whalley & William Goffe* (Oxford, 2019). See also Bremer, *Davenport*, 286; Christopher Durston, *Cromwell’s Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution* (Manchester, 2001), 235–6.

While Leete asked for Richard Baxter's intercession before the court, Davenport's similar request went to Sir William Morice, secretary of state and a former Presbyterian, through Sir Thomas Temple.³³ The New Haven minister's account of how Whalley and Goffe had escaped the search in the colony was deliberately vague. Completely omitting his reception of the regicides into his own home, Davenport depicted a story of miraculous, unpreventable escape by divine intervention that demanded acceptance: 'I believe if his ma[jes]tie Rightly Understood the Curcumstances [*sic*] of this Event he would not be displeased with our majestrates, but to acquiesce in the Providence of the most high.'³⁴

An anonymous informer, well aware of Davenport's track record of problems with the Caroline regime, and taking advantage of the brewing animosity between Davenport and supporters of the Half-Way Covenant in Boston, accused the minister of seditious preaching.³⁵ Richard Nicolls, governor of New York and a committed Royalist who already had his eye on Davenport, started a renewed investigation of these claims in the months leading up to the First Church's official decision to approach Davenport. The minister's long-time friend and governor of Connecticut, John Winthrop Jr, came to his defence. In a letter to Nicolls in July 1667, Winthrop questioned the character of the informer, who must have 'not heard him [Davenport] preach a sermon since Noahs Flood'.³⁶ In reality, Winthrop protested, with not-too-subtle sarcasm, Davenport merely preached 'the true way of worship, or Christs government in the church against the popish, Antichristian, Roman Hierarchy'.³⁷ Nicolls could do little to disrupt Davenport's plans. To defend the polity that he believed could best keep hypocrites away, and also to promote himself, Davenport would go to

³³ TNA (PRO), Colonial State Papers, CO 1/15, nos 80, 81, Sir Thomas Temple to Secretary of State William Morice, 20 August 1661. Jenkinson seems to portray Temple as simply another Royalist authority who distrusted Davenport and genuinely desired to capture the regicides, but Temple would become a hearty supporter of Davenport's ministry and a regular attendee at the First Church of Boston, where Davenport became pastor. Davenport's protection of the regicides and preaching in support of them is discussed in Jenkinson, *Charles I's Killers in America*, 52.

³⁴ John Davenport to Thomas Temple, 19 August 1661, in *Letters*, 193.

³⁵ Boston, MA, Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Winthrop Jr to Richard Nicolls, 15 July 1667.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

extraordinary lengths to secure the most prestigious ministerial position in New England, even if it meant that he would have to violate the principle of congregational covenanting he had relentlessly defended.

PROVIDENTIALLY FREED FROM CONGREGATIONAL COVENANTING

As the first step of the ordination process in New England, a congregation seeking a new church officer had to debate among themselves and discern whether it was the will of God to elect the particular preacher they had in mind.³⁸ In a typically puritan manner, this was the question that everyone in Boston and New Haven dutifully asked: did God want Davenport to be the new pastor of the First Church in Boston? It seemed that Davenport had the answer before everyone else in New Haven, being so overwhelmed by the 'clearnes[s] and strength of the call of Christ' that he had no choice but to accept the invitation.³⁹ However, both New Haven and a minority party in the First Church were unconvinced. In fact, as Davenport reported in another letter to Boston, 'the strong opposition of above 40 Brethren' among the First Church members alerted his own flock in New Haven that the invitation might not be God's will, since Davenport's transition to Boston could cause a 'breaking' of both churches.⁴⁰ Remarkably, disregarding these concerns and the principle of congregational assent, which he had so consistently preached, Davenport reasserted his plan to relocate to Boston 'for a further triall for to finde out the minde of God'.⁴¹ Little did New Haven know that their pastor would never come back.

While New Haven and the minority party in the First Church struggled to accept what Davenport presented as 'the call of Christ', the majority party in Boston was already claiming that it was God who had directed them to Davenport. In the letter of invitation, Elder Penn described how the First Church was

³⁸ For a concise description of the process of ordination among New England Congregationalist churches, see Ralph F. Young, 'Breathing the "Free Aire of the New World": The Influence of the New England Way on the Gathering of Congregational Churches in Old England, 1640–1660', *The New England Quarterly* 83 (2010), 5–46, at 13–14.

³⁹ John Davenport to the First Church Boston, 8 October 1667, in *Letters*, 269–70.

⁴⁰ John Davenport to the First Church Boston, 28 October 1667, in *Letters*, 271.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

‘providentially led’ to seek Davenport as their new pastor, who was also ‘providentially loosened’ from any commitment to New Haven.⁴² Davenport had told an extraordinary story to Elder Penn indeed: during the preliminary discussions, even before the official invitation was sent, Davenport had already alluded to a ‘free pass’, an agreement between himself and the New Haven church ‘in our first begin[n]ing for my being at liberty to follow the call of God’.⁴³ In essence, the Congregationalist Davenport was arguing that, although he had been championing a vision of the Church as a gathering of visible saints, built upon covenant-making and governed through congregational assent, without which none could become a member, access the sacraments or leave for another church, he himself had not been bound by the same rule.

Davenport’s free pass theory was unusual and irregular in seventeenth-century New England, where covenanted members could not easily break from their church without the consent of the majority of the congregation. When obtaining unanimous support was the ideal, leaving without an official dismissal not only left one vulnerable to accusations of being a schismatic, but could create further ecclesiastical rejections from other churches. Even in the case of serious schisms, disaffected members of a congregation would not simply depart for another church, but would still hope to secure proper release, even if it turned out to be a long, torturous or even futile process.⁴⁴ Clergy were expected to abide by the same rule. When the Massachusetts General Court voted to appoint John Norton as one of the colony agents to London in 1662, they engaged in an extensive negotiation with the First Church to seek permission for the minister’s temporary absence.⁴⁵ Church records further suggest that, by 2

⁴² Hamilton Andrews Hill, *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston: 1669–1884*, 2 vols (Boston, MA, 1890), 1: 14–15.

⁴³ Davenport to the First Church Boston, 28 October 1667, in *Letters*, 272.

⁴⁴ In both the First Church controversy over Davenport’s appointment and an earlier schism in Hartford over the selection of Michael Wigglesworth as minister in the late 1650s, the dissenting minority underwent a painful process of requesting a dismissal to no avail: see, below pp. 278–9, 283–5.

⁴⁵ Thomas Hutchinson, *The Hutchinson Papers*, ed. Henry William Whitmore and Williams S. Appleton, 2 vols (Albany, NY, 1865), 2: 65–7. During the negotiation, Massachusetts magistrates were even composing letters to other churches, asking them to provide ‘neighbourly assistance’ to the First Church if Norton were to be sent away. These letters were never sent because the First Church wanted to make their own arrangements.

May 1668, the time of Davenport's relocation to Boston, the First Church had witnessed generations of lay and clerical members admitted and dismissed to other churches, all on the basis of consent from both the sending and receiving congregations.⁴⁶ While on rare occasions, the lack of formal dismissals was tolerated, especially when the departure was blessed by a council, it was extraordinary for a minister in New England to deny outright his obligation to obtain a formal release before leaving his flock, let alone to fake such a confirmation of release.

Davenport's theory of a free pass seemed to satisfy no one except those already in support of his relocation to Boston. The minority party in the First Church rejected Davenport's purported liberty and questioned the motives behind his claim: '[Davenport] looketh at himself as free from the Church but by what doth appeare hath not bin dismissed from them, whose temptation may hereby be heightened to dessert [*sic*] his flock without any cause.'⁴⁷ Not only was the concept of a free pass unheard of, but the fact that Davenport continued to seek a formal dismissal from New Haven must have weakened the force of his argument. To make things worse, Nicholas Street, New Haven's other minister and now spokesman, told Penn outright that the whole New Haven congregation unanimously rejected Davenport's claimed liberty. While seeing 'no cause nor call of God' to dismiss Davenport, Street nevertheless conceded: '[S]uch is our tender respect to him that we have soe declared ourselves to his satisfaction as we hope; As he is able for to give you a more full answer not only of his owne minde but of our also in this weighty matter.'⁴⁸

Here is Street's implicit rebuke of Davenport's wilfulness, rather than a real desire to let Davenport speak for New Haven. Fully aware of a significant faction of dissenters at the First Church of Boston, Street knew perfectly well that if his carefully worded letter were read out, Davenport would never be installed. Street's motives were however unclear: either Davenport's old friend genuinely wanted the minister to remain in New Haven, or Street was refusing

⁴⁶ See *Records of the First Church of Boston, 1630–1868*, 1: 15–62.

⁴⁷ 'Humble Request of the Dissenting Brethren', 30 September 1667, in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 16.

⁴⁸ 'The Church of New Haven Letter in Answer to the Brethrens Letter Returned by Captain Clarke', 28 October 1667, in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 20.

to release the man who had abandoned his own flock. Caught in a terrible impasse, Davenport soon realized that he could only break free by deceit. In the event, Street's letter was withheld by Penn, who seemed to have been determined to bring Davenport to Boston regardless of New Haven's opinion on the matter. On 2 May 1668, Davenport arrived in Boston, as promised. John Hull, one of the dissenters in Boston, recorded that a 'great shower of extraordinary drops of rain fell' as the Davenport family entered the town, perhaps interpreting the downpour as a sign of divine displeasure.⁴⁹

CONSCIENCE AGAINST CONSCIENCE

Davenport's arrival in Boston marked the rapid escalation of conflict between the minister's supporters and his opponents, with providentialist language being used indiscriminately by both groups. As this internal dispute among the First Church congregants grew into a regional affair, it became clear that this high-profile puritan infighting had always been about something much greater than the appointment of a pastor: the schism was between two clashing visions of church polity among New England Congregationalists. Similar conflicts had plagued other churches. Hartford minister Samuel Stone promoted an expanded church membership and a more inclusive infant baptism. He asserted a heightened clerical authority over his own congregation by blocking the selection of Michael Wigglesworth, a young Harvard graduate who had grown up in New Haven, as his colleague after Thomas Hooker died in 1647.⁵⁰ However, the minority faction of the Hartford church, including the ruling elder William Goodwin, saw Stone's behaviour as an infringement of the congregation's authority to elect its own ministers. Leaders from neighbouring New Haven, including Davenport and

⁴⁹ John Hull, 'John Hull's Diary of Public Occurrences', *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 3 (1857), 109–318, at 227; Bremer, *Davenport*, 326. For John Hull's career, theological position, relationship with the First Church, Boston, and interpretation of divine providence, see Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandise: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), 74–110. For Valeri's discussion of Hull's close attention to everyday events, often natural phenomena like storms or cold winters, as signs of God's providence, see *ibid.* 91–2, 105.

⁵⁰ For a detailed account of the Hartford controversy, see Bremer, *Davenport*, 258–67.

Governor Theophilus Eaton, affirmed the dissenters' concerns. Stone, on the other hand, found sympathy and support among ministers in the Bay Colony who shared his views on church membership, such as John Norton. This local dispute escalated into an extraordinary scandal that involved clergy and magistrates from many colonies, with two councils that reached diametrically opposed verdicts. The controversy ended with Stone's triumph after the Hartford church granted a series of his requests, including submission to the minister's teaching 'as inferiors hearken to their superiors'.⁵¹

Another similar, but largely neglected, case was the conflict between Nathaniel Clap (1668/9–1745), minister of the Newport church, and his congregation in 1728. Clap was notoriously strict on the administration of communion and had alienated a significant number of the Newport church by withholding the Lord's Supper from them for around four years. Tensions escalated into open controversy when Clap and his followers refused to appoint a younger and more moderate preacher, John Adams, as Clap's colleague. After arbitration that involved ministers from six other churches, the congregation eventually split into two.⁵²

The subsequent controversy surrounding Davenport's dealings with the First Church demonstrated the same recurring themes in New England ecclesiastical politics: ambiguities in church polity – whether it be the boundary of church membership, clerical power in relation to the congregation, or synodical authority – and, in order to navigate these ambiguities, discernment of God's will and providence, as well as the politicization thereof. Puritans followed a series of steps when they ventured into the realm of spiritual discernment.⁵³ They were to maintain an attitude of godly passivity and subject their conscience to constant scrutiny in order to perceive God's providential ways and obey his will with a pure heart. When they witnessed sin and evil, they must decide whether to right the wrong that might have been providentially exposed, or accept the consequences

⁵¹ Samuel Stone to the church of Hartford, 2 August 1657, in *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society*, ed. James Hammond Trumbull, 31 vols (Hartford, CT, 1870), 2: 75.

⁵² *Records of the First Church of Boston, 1630–1868*, 1: 239–40. For a more detailed analysis of the Newport scandal, see Benjamin Franklin V, *The Other John Adams, 1705–1740* (Madison, NJ, 2003), 27–52.

⁵³ See Barbara Donagan, 'Godly Choice: Puritan Decision-Making in Seventeenth-Century England', *HTbR* 76 (1983), 307–34.

of sin as part of God's sovereign plan to bring good out of evil. A genuine adherence to this way of thinking could create intense anxiety, and yet many could also adopt this language of discernment and providence to repackage questionable behaviour with a pietistic appearance.⁵⁴

In 1675, Ezekiel Fogg, a skinner imprisoned in Boston for failing to honour a bond, told the Court of Assistants that he needed to petition for freedom to attend Sunday services, as a godly response to having been cursed the previous night by John Gifford, his creditor and adversary.⁵⁵ In order for him to 'Experience whilst men Curse God blesse', Fogg boldly suggested that magistrates with a Christian conscience should not deny his request to participate freely in public worship.⁵⁶ Given Fogg's notoriety as a fraudster, it was no surprise that the court denied his request. With casual references to providence, empty words could also be dressed up as credible promises. One such example might be John Dinely, a Boston shipmaster, who guaranteed Cornelius Steenwyck, mayor of New York City, in 1668 that he would pay off his debt if God granted him a safe return from Barbados. Dinely allegedly never repaid Steenwyck, despite arriving back safely.⁵⁷

Davenport was a master of this providential pragmatism. His status as a highly respected Congregationalist leader, theological proficiency, and access to the pulpit ensured that he could effectively broadcast his rhetoric. On his arrival in Boston, the preacher embarked on a series of sermons. Picking up the theme of being 'purely passive' that he had begun to speak of before leaving New Haven, he again stressed his posture of discernment and self-examination against those who questioned the nature of his relocation.⁵⁸ In

⁵⁴ Ibid. 311–12; Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, 17–19.

⁵⁵ Samuel E. Morison, ed., *Records of the Suffolk County Court, 1671–1680*, 2 vols, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 29–30 (Boston, MA, 1933), 1: 546–7, 2: 656–8. Fogg's parents, Ralph, also a skinner, and Susanna, migrated from London to New England in 1633 but returned to England in 1652. Ezekiel Fogg was 'citizen and skinner of London' by 1673, but was spending extensive time in Boston in the 1670s: Susan Hardman Moore, *Abandoning America: Life-Stories from Early New England* (Woodbridge, 2013), 111–12; George Francis Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts*, 9 vols (Salem, MA, 1911–75), 6: 82.

⁵⁶ Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts*, 2: 657.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 1: 169.

⁵⁸ Davenport to the First Church Boston, 28 October 1667, in *Letters*, 271.

one of the sermons he preached in Cambridge in the Bay Colony during this time, Davenport focused on Acts 24: 16: ‘And herein doe I exercise my selfe to have alwayes a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.’⁵⁹ Davenport taught that ‘men should not set their wills above the way of their own understanding’; indeed, speaking directly about himself, the preacher declared: ‘nor doe I exercise myself in Things to[o] high for mee.’⁶⁰ This was precisely what Davenport was doing, however, and his self-deprecation and language of godly submission must have seemed insincere to those who had doubts about his release from New Haven.

Not only did Davenport affirm his honesty before God from the pulpit, but he also condemned his opponents as self-seekers. Before moving to Boston, he had already warned the First Church dissenters in writing against ‘strife and vaine glory’.⁶¹ Seeing that dissenters had persisted in opposition, Davenport decided to challenge them in person on a lecture day on 16 July 1668. According to one of the dissenters, Joshua Scottow, Davenport rebuked them for jeopardizing the unity of the church ‘in the presence of a great part of the Country’ and declared: ‘Satan hath a great hand in it.’⁶² On 10 August 1668, the church voted to call Davenport to office. Since Davenport, now elected, had to be admitted into the First Church before being formally ordained, the congregation sent yet another letter to New Haven to ask for written confirmation that they had indeed released their former pastor.⁶³

Based on what Nicholas Street had written the previous year, it is hard to imagine that Penn and Davenport would be hoping for a

⁵⁹ Here I cite the 1611 King James Version, which the notetaker seemed to use, although, in the sermon notes, the quoted verse appeared to be incomplete and mixed with other scriptural texts, such as Ps. 90: 12. See Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Am 2356, First Church (Cambridge, MA) Sermon Papers, 1665–1837, ‘Notes on Sermons Preached in Cambridge, Feb 1667 to Jul 1668’, 281.

⁶⁰ Bremer, *Davenport*, 327–8; Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Am 2356, First Church (Cambridge, Mass.) Sermon Papers, 1665–1837, ‘Notes on Sermons Preached in Cambridge, Feb 1667 to Jul 1668’, 287 (mispaginated as 288).

⁶¹ Davenport to the First Church Boston, 28 October 1667, in *Letters*, 273.

⁶² For Davenport’s prayer, recorded by Joshua Scottow, see Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 24.

⁶³ The established Congregationalist practice was that, after securing an agreement among themselves over the appointment of a candidate as church officer, the congregation would vote to elect the person, admit the elected candidate into their church and, finally, proceed to the formal ordination service: Young, ‘Breathing the “Free Aire of the New World”’, 13–14.

positive response. A few weeks later, another clear denial of a dismissal arrived. Just as Davenport had resorted to the notion of a clean conscience accountable only to God (and, clearly, not to the congregation), Street declared that New Haven simply could not provide proof of a dismissal that had never existed: 'we can better beare that [human censure] than God's displeasure by wronging of our consciences.'⁶⁴ Two months later, Street sent an even longer letter after repeated demands from both Penn and Davenport. Laid out in the most cold and flawless manner, Street's condemnation should have been devastating to Davenport:

A man can not have the essentials ... of a Church officer put upon him in your Church that is not first a member of your Church soe that your hands are tied up by your own act, It is not for us to dismiss to the Church of Boston one that is all ready called to be a teaching officer to your Church at Boston ... but that which doth most strike with us is matter of conscience though yourselves and our Reverend Pastor are fully satisfied in these motions yet the church of Newhaven is not soe.⁶⁵

Determined to set the seal on Davenport's installation, Elder Penn and James Allen, another minister called to office along with Davenport, decided to draw up an abbreviated version of this letter that only highlighted New Haven's recognition of Davenport's departure as if it indicated a willing dismissal.⁶⁶ The Davenports were intimately involved, with John Jr personally transcribing the edited letter.⁶⁷ After Davenport's admission to the First Church on 1 November 1668, the ordination service was finally held on 9 December, thus finalizing the installation of Davenport as a church officer of the First Church. According to Scottow, Davenport again publicly cited divine endorsement at his own ordination service: 'An outward call could not satisfy mee, if I had not an inward call,' and indeed Christ had 'cleare[d] his will ... to the full satisfaction of my

⁶⁴ 'Copy of a Concealed Letter', New Haven to the First Church Boston, 28 August 1668, in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 30.

⁶⁵ 'The Suppressed Letter', New Haven to the First Church Boston, 12 October 1668, in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 34.

⁶⁶ For a comparison between the edited letter and the actual letter, see Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 33–6.

⁶⁷ Scottow's account in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 33.

conscience'.⁶⁸ While Scottow painted a very negative picture of Davenport from the perspective of a dissenter, John Davenport Jr, anxious to whitewash his father's behaviour, described the 'general satisfaction' among the First Church congregants with his father in a letter to John Winthrop Jr.⁶⁹ Completely silent about his own deceit, Davenport Jr reported 'the passage of divine providence' on the ordination day: 'the season being moderate, & congregacon [*sic*] was full.'⁷⁰

PROVIDENCE AND COMMUNAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE WIDER STORY

From the beginning, the neighbouring churches closely watched the schism unfold and were keen to intervene. Elder Penn first initiated an arbitration as early as August 1668, when he called for a council to consult other churches on the question of whether the dissenters should be censured. While congregational autonomy was a guiding principle in church government, conciliar arbitration was a common and respectable way of mediating conflicts in New England. It could be viewed as careful, collective discernment among seasoned ministers who could suggest a course of action most pleasing to God. However, for Penn and Davenport, this council proved a miscalculation that yielded room for dissenters to solicit support. On 6 August 1668, representatives from Dorchester, Dedham, Roxbury and Cambridge in the Massachusetts Bay Colony gathered to hear both sides of the case. Most delegates were advocates of the Half-Way Covenant, including Richard Mather, Daniel Gookin and John Elliot. Richard Mather's son, Increase Mather of the Second Church, Boston, who had long stood with Davenport against the broadening of church membership, did not attend.⁷¹ The representatives from these neighbouring churches saw nothing punishable in the dissenters' protest. Instead, the council believed that it was a matter of 'mutual grievances' and

⁶⁸ Ibid. 41.

⁶⁹ Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Davenport Jr to John Winthrop Jr, 12 December 1668. Bremer cites this letter as 10 December 1668, possibly because Davenport Jr recorded the date as '12.10.68', but 10 signified the tenth month under the old style of dating, hence giving the date 12 December: cf. Bremer, *Davenport*, 333 n. 73.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ See, for example, Increase Mather's preface to John Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth* (Cambridge, MA, 1663).

advised that dissenters be amicably dismissed to form their own church. The dissenting brethren lauded the verdict as the ‘dispensation of Divine Providence’, whereas the First Church decided to ignore the advice of the council they themselves had called.⁷²

An uncontested ordination service in December 1668 did not put an end to the speculations about Davenport’s departure from New Haven, nor did it frustrate the dissenters’ incessant request for a dismissal from the First Church. In a church meeting on 6 January 1669, Richard Trewsdale, one of the deacons, complained that he had heard of a letter from New Haven that had not been read to the congregation.⁷³ Another dissenter, Thomas Savage, accused Davenport of leaving New Haven ‘for worldly ends’.⁷⁴ The minority party finally secured another council on 13 April 1669. Under the leadership of Richard Mather, the neighbouring churches intervened for the second time to mediate between the First Church and its disaffected members. Fully aware of what this second council intended to do, First Church elders refused to recognize the assembly as ‘an orderly Councill’ and declined to attend.⁷⁵ Davenport Jr indignantly recalled that the council was held ‘contra[ry] to the express mind of the church’, disregarding his own father’s contravention of the will of the New Haven church by leaving his old flock without their consent.⁷⁶

In order to seek an in-person conversation with Davenport’s party, the council delegates visited the First Church on 14 April 1669. However, the church door was locked against them. The delegates waited for so long that one of the dissenters, Peter Oliver, had to bring chairs for them to sit at the door.⁷⁷ On 16 April, the council reconfirmed the advice of the first council that the dissenters should be dismissed, adding that they were free to form their own church

⁷² The council also indicated that given the number of residents, Boston could use a third church anyway. See Scottow’s account in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 25–6, 28.

⁷³ See *ibid.* 1: 42.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 1: 63.

⁷⁵ John Davenport and James Penn to the messengers of the churches, 13 April 1669, in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 60.

⁷⁶ Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Davenport Jr to John Winthrop Jr, 16 April 1669.

⁷⁷ Scottow’s account in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 60. Davenport Jr also recorded the attempt by Mather and other representatives’ to enter the First Church to speak to the First Church leaders in: Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Davenport Jr to Winthrop Jr, 16 April 1669.

even if they could not obtain a dismissal. Davenport's party reacted by condemning the dissenters as schismatics and banning them from communion.⁷⁸ On 12 May, the Third Church of Boston was formally established, despite lacking unanimous support from Massachusetts' magistrates, among whom were First Church members, including Governor Richard Bellingham, John Leverett and Edward Tying.⁷⁹

Rumours about Davenport's dismissal were finally confirmed when Nicholas Street visited Boston in June 1669, and it was more generally realized that there were significant discrepancies between what Street had written and what had been read out to the church. On 17 June 1669, a church meeting was called to respond to these serious charges, which had become impossible to ignore. Davenport agreed to present Street's first letter, written after he had been called to office, and sent his son to fetch it, but when John Jr returned, he claimed that he could no longer find the letter. When Penn declared that whatever was evil in the matter would be his full responsibility, Davenport retorted that he saw 'no appearance of evill' at all.⁸⁰

When Street's second letter, which had been forged into a fake dismissal, was read in its entirety to the congregation, many who had once passionately supported Davenport became 'sorely troubled' that 'a reall injury' had been done to both the First Church and neighbouring churches.⁸¹ Davenport remained unrepentant, insisting that the extract was not a forgery because only 'some superfluities and such things as did not properly belong to it' had been left out.⁸² However, he was anxious to emphasize that he had very little to do with it, again adopting the language of quiet submission to God: 'I neither dissuaded from reading the extract nor perswaded to the reading of

⁷⁸ Scottow's account in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 76.

⁷⁹ Bremer, *Davenport*, 338. Bremer noted that 'Thomas Thatcher prayed 'that this infant church might live to condemn its condemners', but the person who offered the prayer on this occasion was in fact John Oxenbridge, who would succeed Davenport as pastor of the First Church after the latter's death in 1670. See Scottow's account in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 80. The citation Bremer provides is Davenport Jr's letter to John Winthrop Jr, in which Davenport Jr spoke of Thatcher's sermon on 22 December 1669 that marked the completion of the new church building; Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 139; Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Davenport Jr to John Winthrop Jr, 24 December 1669.

⁸⁰ Scottow's account in Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 82.

⁸² *Ibid.*

the Originall script in publique, leaving events to God.’⁸³ Many congregants were obviously torn, since Davenport’s defence was hardly convincing. A Mr Search begged the congregation to stop pressing the elders for an explanation, ‘for Jacob got the blessing in a wrong way’.⁸⁴ In an extraordinary manner, Davenport went along with the comparison, complaining that his church had ‘searched for haltings, with more eagernes[s] than Laban did Jacobs stuff for his Idolls’.⁸⁵ While many believed that they had indeed been deceived, the church finally affirmed their support for the elders, endorsing the conclusion that the ordination of Davenport was the result of divine providence.

Davenport did not find such favour among the neighbouring churches. On 15 July 1669, seventeen ministers who had formed a council to address the controversy issued a public condemnation of the three First Church leaders – Davenport, Penn and Allen – for their ‘fraudulent dealing’ and ‘the great and publique scandall of unfaithfullnes and falshood’.⁸⁶ While the seventeen condemned all three elders, they singled out Davenport because he did the most to ‘justify the fact and himself as having no hand in the writing’.⁸⁷ This time, Increase Mather’s name appeared among the signatories. Davenport’s old friend and fellow opponent of the Half-Way Covenant, whose father Richard Mather had died only eight days after the disgraceful humiliation of being refused entry into Davenport’s church, had now joined others to condemn him.⁸⁸ Increase Mather was not the only one struck by the timing of his father’s death. A leading dissenter, John Hull, contrasted Richard Mather’s death, which he saw as God’s providential reception of the minister into eternal glory and vindication, with the humiliating rejection he had endured at the hands of Davenport’s party: ‘The church of Boston would not let him [Richard Mather] into the

⁸³ Ibid. 83.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 82.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 82.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 84.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 88.

⁸⁸ Richard Mather had been struggling with poor health for years, and was particularly troubled by kidney stones. On 16 April 1669, two days after he and other delegates were denied entry into the First Church, he started to suffer from the ‘a totall stoppage’ of urine. He was brought to Increase Mather’s house in Boston that evening and returned to Dorchester the next morning: see Increase Mather, *The Life and Death of that Reverend Man of God, Mr. Richard Mather, Teacher of the Church in Dorchester in New-England* (Cambridge, MA, 1670), 26.

doors ... but the Lord soon opened his way into the church triumphant.⁸⁹ It is clear that, for Hull, God was very much on the dissenters' side.

Davenport died on 15 March 1670, only eight months after the scandal broke out.⁹⁰ After his death, the First Church leadership would remain opposed to the Half-Way Covenant, and those who shared his ideals of church polity would continue to rely on his writings. One notable exception was Increase Mather, who not only joined others in condemning his old friend, but would soon change his mind about synodical power and the Half-Way Covenant.⁹¹ Richard Mather's death amid the Boston controversy and the revelation of Davenport's forgery were decisive in Increase's change of alliance. Possibly burdened with guilt and regret, Increase recalled his father's last words, in which Richard Mather reaffirmed the Half-Way Covenant: '*I have thought that persons might have Right to Baptism, and yet not to the Lords Supper; and I see no cause to alter my judgement as to that particular.*'⁹² Here, Increase undoubtedly intended to narrate a reconciliation between father and son, as well as to account for his own theological transformation. In 1671, Increase wrote *The First Principles of New-England*, his first public endorsement of the Half-Way Covenant against 'the *Antisynodalian Brethren*'.⁹³

Besides Increase's high-profile change of opinion as a prominent minister, there were others who keenly searched for God's will in this torturous schism and voiced their concerns that real judgment would come if New Englanders continued to politicize providence. Shortly after Davenport died, freemen from Hadley and Northampton, opponents of the Half-Way Covenant, petitioned the Massachusetts General Court in May 1670 for a public enquiry

⁸⁹ Hull, 'Diary', 229.

⁹⁰ Davenport Jr recounted his father's death in detail in a letter to Winthrop Jr: Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Davenport Jr to Winthrop Jr, 28 March 1670. Winthrop Jr would later report it to Nicolls, the Royalist who had once inquired about Davenport's preaching: Massachusetts Historical Society, Winthrop Family Papers, John Winthrop Jr to Richard Nicolls, 24 September 1670.

⁹¹ Mather, *Life*, 27; Hall, *The Last American Puritan*, 80–1, 140–1.

⁹² Mather, *Life*, 27. Italics original.

⁹³ Increase Mather, *The First Principles of New-England* (Cambridge, MA, 1675), preface, unpaginated. Italics original. The preface was dated May 1671, but the work was not published until 1675.

into the cause of God's 'departure' from the country.⁹⁴ The House of Deputies responded by pointing out many signs of divine wrath, including the deaths of many preachers (no doubt Davenport and Richard Mather came to mind), plagues of caterpillars and grasshoppers, and the appearance of comets.⁹⁵ As to the proposed causes, 'innovations threatening the ruin of the Congregational way' and the founding of the Third Church in Boston were the most contentious.⁹⁶ These highly polemical charges rekindled debates among Massachusetts magistrates, deputies, and other lay and clerical leaders, and sparked the outpouring of competing interpretations of God's providence from within the General Court. Francis Willoughby, deputy governor of Massachusetts, who was then ill and confined at home, lamented the whole episode as a 'pretended enquiry into the Cause of Gods anger' and urged his colleagues to cease the infighting before they further provoked God's displeasure.⁹⁷

CONCLUSION

This episode formed an ignominious end to the career of an otherwise esteemed pastor. The Boston controversy that plagued the final years of Davenport's life tells us that seventeenth-century New Englanders were not oblivious to hypocrisies among themselves. In fact, they saw Christian society as a place where saints and hypocrites cohabited, and evaluated themselves and others through the same lens of spiritual dichotomy. Sometimes, puritans' self-scrutiny was a genuine introspection to root out any hint of hypocrisy in order not to become full-fledged unregenerate hypocrites. And yet, there were other times when the rhetoric of providence and discernment was purely a tactic to hide, justify or even glorify questionable motives. Such 'providential pragmatism' could go so far as to affirm God's use of unworthy sinners to accomplish his goals in order to gloss over the most distasteful cases of hypocrisy.

The increasingly obvious ecclesiological ambiguity and accompanying conflicts prompted many colonists to anxiously search for

⁹⁴ Sylvester Judd, *History of Hadley, Including the Early History of Hatfield, South Hadley, Amherst and Granby, Massachusetts* (Northampton, MA, 1863), 85–6.

⁹⁵ Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 97.

⁹⁶ Judd, *History of Hadley*, 86.

⁹⁷ Hill, *History of the Old South Church*, 1: 105.

remedies so as to secure New England's providential status before God. However, competing proposals and interpretations about God's will only threatened further the once rosy image of a unified, godly 'city upon a hill'. Contradictions and thinly veiled agendas in providentialist narratives, coupled with the spread of natural philosophers' scientific findings, set New England on an even speedier course of disenchantment after Davenport's generation died, especially among the learned elite.⁹⁸ Even enthusiasts such as Increase Mather became selective in their reception of wonder stories and stressed the unpredictability of God's providential ways: 'One providence seems to look this way, another providence seems to look that way, quite contrary one to another [T]he works of God sometimes seem to run counter with his word: so that there is dark and amazing intricacie in the ways of providence.'⁹⁹

The First Church scandal was an early sign of such disenchantment and, as David Hall observes, of a consequent discrepancy between elite and popular culture.¹⁰⁰ Taking advantage of the still pervasive belief in providence, Davenport packaged his lies as divine truths and, along with other elders of the First Church, reinforced control over their congregation even after the forgery was exposed. Quite possibly, for some of Davenport's supporters, the language of providence was not entirely a smokescreen for political plays, but, as they were moved to reconcile with their pastor, they were genuinely inclined to believe that Davenport was their Jacob, and the blessing and honour that he had obtained by deceit were blessing and honour providentially bestowed by God after all. From this perspective, one might say that providence, regardless of whether it was merely a social construct or not, did favour Davenport in the end.

⁹⁸ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 106–8.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 94; Increase Mather, *The Doctrine of Divine Providence Opened and Applied* (Boston, MA, 1684), 43.

¹⁰⁰ This discrepancy was not always obvious since seventeenth-century New Englanders enjoyed high literacy and religious proficiency: Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 21–70, esp. 21–43.