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The Relation

Criteria for Church Membership

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CFTS

Introduction

What are the criteria for church membership in a Congregational church? This was a matter for debate in Puritan America. John Cotton was concerned that weak saints not be scared off by too stringent demands (Ryken, 1992). On the other hand, the church was to be “visible saints.” Could a person become a Christian *after* joining the church through partaking of the sacrament as Solomon Stoddard believed? Or was the church only for the converted? The “gathered churches” spent over a hundred years discussing these issues, and hammering out their practices.

The early church in Acts had admitted baptized believers and their families. Church groups met in homes. The few churches there were often got burned to the ground because of persecution. When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he was probably writing to hundreds of households of faith. These households included entire families that converted to Christianity together. When Constantine accepted Christianity, entire countries were converted with a stroke of the emperor’s pen. Villages in Latin America were converted by force. A priest might lean out a carriage window and splash the water of baptism on bystanders, converting them to Christianity. Even after Henry VIII broke with Roman Catholicism, anyone living in England belonged to the Church of England. There were always groups that resisted this form of coercive mass evangelism. Anabaptists and Quakers were examples of groups that resisted conformity. The idea of Independency gained momentum after the Reformation. Independents believed people should choose church membership, rather than be assigned. In an independent church groups of believers gathered together and covenanted with each other. They were called “gathered churches.”

Gathered churches developed their own covenants and creeds. Each also decided its criteria for membership. It should be noted that their goal was not to have a mega-church. Gathered churches were local, extremely communal and family-style. A gathered church might “give birth” to another gathered church in a near-by community. There was camaraderie among churches. Pastors were invited to preach the afternoon sermon in neighboring churches. Ecclesiastical councils, vicinages and synods brought independent churches together. The authority of the local church was upheld, even as churches offered advice and help to each other. Even though each congregation was independent and self-governing, churches worked together. Church hopping was not tolerated.

One of the common areas of discussion among gathered churches was criteria for membership. There were eight issues discussed regarding membership.

Voluntary

All gathered churches agreed that no one should be coerced or required to join. Neither was membership automatic. Joining a church was a matter of choice. Even in New England where being a church member was required of all government officials, the gathered church was composed of people who chose church membership. Attending public worship was required by law but church membership was not.

Covenantal Commitment

Joining the church meant becoming part of the church family, with all the privileges and responsibilities thereof. Owning the covenant meant “walking together,” a community life, and being knit together like a body. By owning the covenant members agreed to take care of each other, help each other grow spiritually, and be part of a working organism that reached out to those in need. There was a strong sense of

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community and communal obligation shown through taking part in corporate worship, organizing and running the church, and caring for those in need. Membership did not just mean having one's name on a membership list or displayed on a certificate. It meant work, sacrificial love, and fellowship in Christ.

The church replaced the tribal system of the children of Israel by being a family of believers who watched out for each other. This obligation was taken so seriously, some churches required that a person get a vote of support from the church before moving to another area. Anyone who changed churches had to bring a testimonial from the previous church stating that there were no unresolved conflicts or debts outstanding. Church hopping violated the covenant. The vows of church membership were taken seriously.

The covenantal community was one of equality. No person was above or over another. All shared equally in the decision-making process, although women were not allowed to vote until the 1800s. No one was excluded from membership due to gender or race.

Baptism

All candidates for membership had been baptized, usually as an infant. The major problem concerned the children and grandchildren of church members.

Congregationalists practiced infant baptism as a replacement for circumcision. Infant baptism had been a civil requirement throughout the Middle Ages, so was a thoroughly entrenched custom. The certificate of baptism signified a legitimate birth. Even today a certificate of baptism has the legal weight of a birth certificate. Infant baptism was so important, Anabaptists were jailed for refusing to baptize their infants.

However Reformers did not believe baptism was salvific, and it did not guarantee conversion. It merely prepared a child to receive grace when older. Even though a child was baptized, raised in the church and nourished by church life, baptism did not make a him or her a church member in the gathered church. Baptism did not signify church membership in a covenantal church, because an infant was incapable of “owning the covenant.” The purpose of baptism was to begin the process of receiving grace, and it was an event where parents publicly declared their commitment to raise the child in the church. Baptized children were under the covenantal protection and nurturance of the church, even though they did not own the covenant or have the responsibilities of a full-fledged member.

Children were expected to make their own choices as adults, and had to experience conversion. Some chose not to join the church because they did not have evidence of their conversion. Because so few people were joining the churches, a Half Way Covenant was devised. Members of the Half Way Covenant had been baptized as infants, they ascribed to the beliefs and doctrine of Christianity, were morally sincere, but were unable to give evidence of their own conversion. This kept them from being full voting members and taking communion, but their children could be baptized.

Eventually the churches decided that any adult member of the church could sponsor the baptism of an infant, as long as there was a commitment to advise the child spiritually.

Doctrinal Beliefs

Each candidate was catechized so as to be able to state basic doctrinal beliefs such as that of the Trinity, heaven and hell, salvation, the sinfulness of humanity, the authority

of the Bible, and the tenets of the church creed when a church had one. Members were expected to be able to explain the basics of orthodox Christianity.

Profession of Faith

Each candidate was expected to recite aloud a confession of faith such as the Apostles' Creed. This was often part of the covenant. Being a professed believer was a part of church membership.

Christian Piety

Anyone joining the church was expected to be a model of moral behavior. This became even more important in the 19th century when moral virtue was more highly valued than conversion. Church members were to be exemplars to the rest of the community. A person might be denied church membership if there was any blot on his or her reputation. For example, Abram Arrington, whose Relation is recorded by Thomas Shepherd, was denied church membership. There was no record as to why, except that he had made a caustic remark about the propriety between boys and girls. Church members had to have sterling reputations. The irony is that they also had to convince the church that they were aware of their own utter sinfulness. It seems this sinfulness must be in the heart only, because if they actually *did* anything wrong, there was no grace for bringing them into the church.

Public Examination

In colonial days all men desiring membership had to go before the congregation in a church meeting and be examined. They recited their Relation (see Conversion), and were then asked questions. Anyone who had a reason to deny them membership spoke at that time. Then a church vote was taken.

Since women were not allowed to speak in church, they wrote their Relations and had them read by the minister. Women were questioned by the elders. The questions and their responses were recorded and read to the church. It must be noted that some women were unable to answer the questions, but were still accepted for membership.

Cotton Mather thought this method was too hard on the timid. Some churches began having candidates examined by the Board of Elders, and eventually the Minister. The practice of examination through the use of a Relation continued through the middle of the 19th century.

Conversion

The church was to be made up only of the converted. What is meant by conversion? *Webster's Dictionary* gives several definitions. One is to "change from one religion to another." *Acts* describes Jews and Gentiles converting to Christianity from other religions. However if someone is raised a Christian, conversion would be unnecessary. Another definition is "a change from indifference, disbelief or antagonism to acceptance, faith or enthusiastic support." A person could "come alive" spiritually, like a tree in Spring. There might be a period of dormancy (winter), but then the sap begin to flow, and new life emerge. In Puritan Relations they described their indifference, antagonism and disbelief, so they may have embraced part of this definition of conversion. However, a child could (and often does) enthusiastically embrace faith at an early age, so would not need this kind of conversion. In fact Horace Bushnell believed that children raised in good families might never need to experience conversion. Another definition of conversion is "a change in character and form." This equates conversion with regeneration or being born again (John 3:1-8; 1 Cor 15:45), the definition most

commonly assumed by modern evangelists. It is the passing from death (dead in trespasses and sins) to life (eternal), the changing from the mortal to immortal.

Since the church was to be composed of the *converted*, what evidence was needed to prove conversion? Each candidate for church membership composed a short testimony or “personal relation,” *relating* evidence of conversion, defined as an “inner awareness of being judged for sin and restored through grace” (p. 95, Ryken, 1992). In the Relation confession of faith was not enough. A candidate had to convince the church that he or she had been under conviction for sin. The Relation had one main focus: the personal awareness of the sinfulness of the candidate. The Puritans believed conversion must be painful. It must include a sense of misery, self-accusation, rebelliousness, purging, and coming under the judgment of God. The one thing held in common by all Relations was a sense of wretchedness.

None of the Relations described a specific sinful act in a specific time or place. For example, none of them said, “Last Saturday I stole a loaf of bread.” A few made vague references to disobeying parents and breaking the Sabbath, but did not state what they had done to disobey or break it. Rather, they described a sinful state, a conviction of sinfulness in the heart. There was a fine line between the sinful state and actually sinning. Anyone who actually sinned could not become a church member. But anyone who lacked a sense of sinfulness could not join either.

Was the conviction of sin self-induced to gain approval? Or was it conditioned through the influence of the pastor and the church? Did Thomas Shepherd coach candidates in what to say? Or was there a conviction from the Holy Spirit? Was it real or did they fake it? Does everyone who is converted go through a period of conviction of

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sin? Probably every human being has experienced a sense of failure, inadequacy, or lack of self worth, an awareness of falling short of ideals, not measuring up to one's own goals, shame and guilt over acts of omission or commission. Did the Puritans use these normal human emotions or did there have to be a period of living under conviction, and feeling the wrath of God? Did Puritans remind each other of their faults so as to cause the feeling of sinfulness? If some were optimistic and hopeful, did that bar them from experiencing conversion?

Thomas Shepherd described two stages of conversion:

Stage 1 Period of Contrition;

State 2 Period of Humiliation.

If a person had not experienced these stages, conversion had not taken place.

For the purpose of this paper, fifteen relations were examined. They were recorded by Thomas Shepard between 1648 – 1649. Seven were by men, eight by women. All but one were admitted into church membership. Each relation was analyzed and correlated with the others. Common traits were tabulated using a frequency count.

There was one trait they all had in common. Each recounted personal sinfulness. Even though no specific sinful act was mentioned, they “saw their heart’s wretchedness” (Gookin), “prayers were abominable” (Gookin), “thought God would not answer [her] prayers (Oakes), “felt under the power of Satan, a curse, and troubled conscience” (Oakes). She became “convinced I could do nothing good.” Even when she had a heart to choose Christ, she knew she was unfit. Elizabeth Dinster described herself as a “child of wrath.” She described her conviction, temptations, having no rest, that she was lost and did not want to be with the godly. Abram Smith had worried that he sinned

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against the Holy Ghost. He described his hardness of heart and unbelief. Sir Mitchell “grew in gracelessness,” vanity and carelessness. He had a conscience of sin, his conviction increased, he suddenly became atheistic, full of evil and enmity, having an intolerable burden of sin, conviction of sin, and a hard heart. Captain Gookin was in a “state of misery,” seeing himself as a wretched sinner. He mentioned hypocrisy, having a filthy nature, warring in his members (Rom 7:7). Robert Browne was in a miserable condition, having innumerable sins, with no hope or mercy. He saw vileness and wretchedness in himself. Abram Arrington was helped by his brother Isaac and Thomas Shepherd to see the sin in his heart. Sir Star saw himself a crazy in hell, God angry with him every day. Mistress Smith became aware of the judgment, that she would be torn in pieces. When she went to church she found out how sinful she was. She mentioned blasphemies, temptation and fears as part of her sinfulness. Goodwife Jackson realized she had a hard and deceitful heart (Jer 29:23; 9:17). She was in a sad condition, others thought ill of her and she worse of herself. John Shepard mentioned being catechized regarding original sin, that all are sinful and if unregenerate, they are going to hell. He mourned for his sinful nature. Goodwife Stevenson said she deserved to die because of her sin. She had disobeyed her parents, and had been discontented over the difficulties and trials in New England. Dorcas Downey said her heart had been cold, that she had dishonored God. Elizabeth Cooke described her heart as dead and unprofitable, that she was in a miserable condition.

If each candidate was as awful as he or she described, why would a covenantal community want them? Or was the Relation merely a ritual? What if someone had been

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raised a Christian and never experienced a conviction of sin? That would keep them from church membership.

Other common themes in the Relations included having someone speak to them, either a parent, friend or pastor, making them aware of their sinfulness (Gookins, Oates, Smith, Arrington, Starr, Shepard). Shepherd probably asked each of them, "How did you become aware of your sinful state?" It makes one wonder what kinds of conversations church members had with non-church members. Was it part of one's duty to speak out to non-church members about their sinful state?

Several mentioned sickness as a vehicle to bring them to repentance (Mistress Gookin, Elizabeth Oates, Elizabeth Dunster, Captain Gookin, Dorcas Downey). Others described narrow escapes from death. Dorcas Downey and Goodwife Stevenson got the plague but were spared. Mistress Smith mentioned the death of her husband, Elizabeth Oaties, the death of her father. It is unclear as to how the death of loved ones brought about their conversion, except that increased sorrow led to repentance.

Each candidate referred to at least one Bible verse. Perhaps Thomas Shepherd asked, "What verse in Scripture helped you?" The Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, were mentioned most often. The Gospels of John and Matthew were also named. There were almost no references to the epistles. Rarely was a verse about salvation given. The theme of the verses was "rest" rather than justification.

Many mentioned that the preaching of a minister contributed to their conversion. Sometimes the preaching was by Shepherd, but other pastors like Thompson and Cotton were also named. Perhaps Thomas Shepherd asked, "From whom at meeting did you hear about your sinfulness?"

Many Relations mentioned parents. For example, Mistress Gookin spoke to her father about her discontented heart, Elizabeth Dunster, her father's family. Abram Smith described the good training by his parents who "kept [him] from evil and taught him not to play on the Sabbath." Sir Mitchell mentioned his godly parents, as did Mistress Smith. John Shepard said he was baptized as a child, and his mother gave him the duty to seek God. Goodwife Stevenson said she had disobeyed her parents. Dorcas Downey said she "forsook relations" in England in order to come to this country.

As part of the examination each candidate was asked at least one question. Here are samples of what was asked:

What is the evil in sin?

Do you fear deceit in your own heart?

What oppressed you and what did you want?

Was it guilt or the power of sin that oppressed you?

By what means did you see your need of Christ?

What need did you have for Christ?

Did you get help or healing for ignorance and rebellion?

What did you see or taste in Christ to make you prize him?

What answer did you get from your humility?

Where is Christ in spirit?

By what scripture were you helped?

When you see your daily sin, what do you do?

Do you find the Lord a refuge?

However, one candidate, Mistress Joseph Cooke, could not answer the questions put to her, and she was accepted into membership. Perhaps ignorance was acceptable in women.

These Relations cause us to examine conversion. Is it primarily conviction of sin as these Relations indicate? The Relations carried no message of hope, justification, salvation, atonement, propitiation, expiation, or regeneration.

Cotton Mather described four stages: 1) a yearning for salvation; 2) the presence of faith; 3) an inner transformation; 4) good works. Notice that none of these stages describes conviction of sinfulness. He saw conversion as entering into a partnership with God through the covenant of grace. He also did not like the use of Relations.

A Comparison of Puritan and Modern Day Relations

Modern testimonies, the equivalent of Relations, usually have three parts: 1) What your life used to be; 2) How you came to Christ; and 3) What your life is like now. There have been people who felt the value of their testimony lay in being able to recount past sins. In fact many testimonies have seemed to glorify sin—worse sin makes a better testimony. However, unlike the Relations of the Puritans, modern testimonies usually describe less of a conviction of sinfulness than specific sins. “One day I did this... another day I did that...” My sinfulness looked like this... and this...” Unfortunately really bad sins lend themselves to exciting testimonies. There can be a sense of the excitement and thrill of sinning. Some testimonies seem to glorify sin. There is almost a sense of competition as to who is the worst sinner, proved through recounting sinful acts.

It is common for people to write or recount their “faith stories” or “personal spiritual journeys.” This autobiographical tool may be written, audio-taped, video-taped,

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mapped with a time-line, made into a scrapbook, or a box with artifacts. People are encourage to share their stories with others. Some use metaphorical methods like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

A Comparison of Puritan Conversion with Modern Evangelists

While Jonathan Edwards described conversion as an escape from hell, in the 1980s Christians began describing salvation in terms of its positive aspects or rewards. Modern evangelists such as Billy Graham, Campus Crusade for Christ and Child Evangelism use the following steps to facilitate conversion.

Child Evangelism:

1. Heaven is a wonderful place. Wouldn't you like to know that someday you will go to heaven to live with the Lord Jesus forever and ever? Let me tell you how you can be sure of getting there.
2. One thing keeps us from going to heaven: sin. (Romans 3:23) "All have sinned." (Rom 3:10) "There is none righteous, no not one." (Ezek 18:4) "The soul that sins shall die." Sin must be punished by death. Anyone who sins cannot go to heaven (Rev 21:27).
3. God loves you. (John 3:16; Rom 5:8) "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us."
4. Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3). The sinless Son of God took our place at the cross so we can go to heaven.
5. God has a gift for you. God wants to give you everlasting life. You can't pay for it or work for or earn it. "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." (Eph 2:8)

6. **Accept the gift. Receive Christ as your personal Savior. (Rev 3:20)** “Behold I stand at the door and knock. “ If you will open your heart’s door by faith in Jesus, Jesus will give you this wonderful gift of life and cleanse your life from the darkness of sin. John 1:12 “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children of God, even to them that believe on his name.”

“Let’s Go Over the Facts,” Billy Graham Crusade

1. **What is God’s Plan? Peace and life.** God intended this world to be peaceful and happy. What has gone wrong?
2. **What has caused the trouble? Sin.** “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way.” (Is 53:6)
3. **What is God’s cure? The cross.** Through his death we are forgiven. John 3:16.
4. **What must we do? Receive Jesus.** (John 1:12) “To all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”
5. **What do I pray?** “Dear God, You have said that I have sinned and need forgiveness. I am sorry for pleasing myself instead of you. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross for me. I receive Jesus now as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

“God’s Plan for Your Life,” Bill Bright, Campus Crusade for Christ

1. God loves us.
2. People are sinful.
3. People are lost.
4. God loves us so much that he gave his Son.

5. Christ died for our sins.
6. Christ rose from the dead.
7. Christ wants to come into every life.
8. We must repent.
9. We must be born again.
10. We must receive Jesus Christ.
11. To as many as receive Jesus, God gives the right to become his children.
12. By grace you have been saved, through faith.

The Four Spiritual Laws

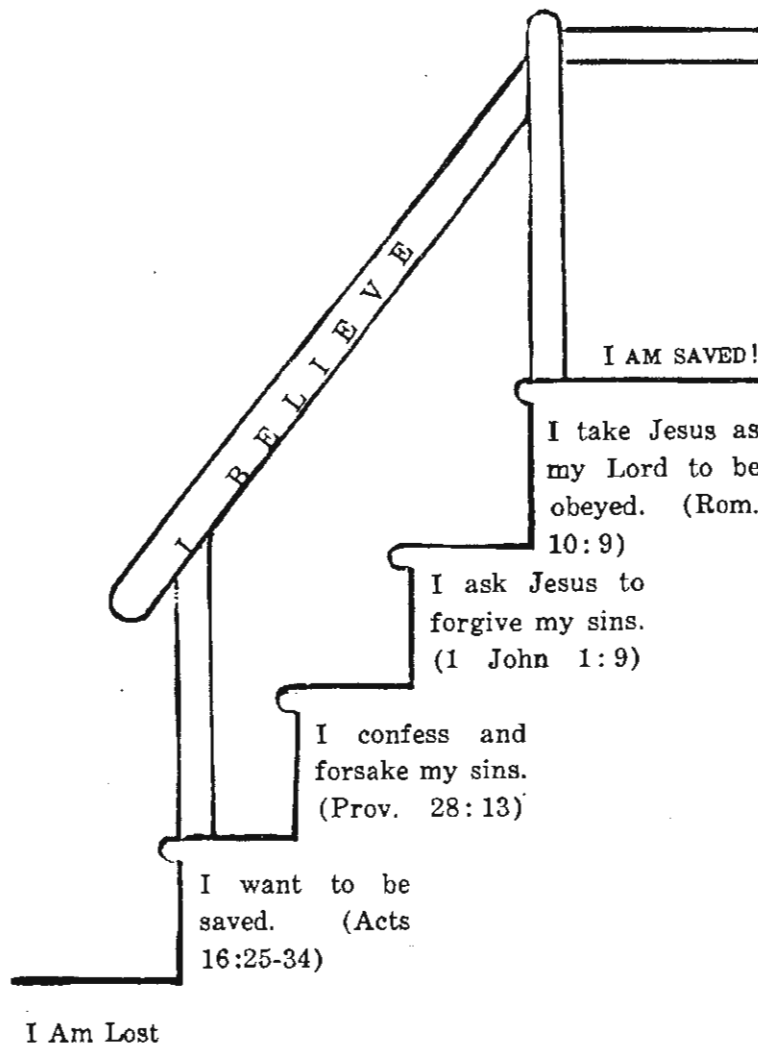
1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life. (John 3:16; John 10:10); “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.” Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life? Because...
2. Each person is sinful and separated from God. Therefore we cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for our lives. (Rom 3:23). We were created to have fellowship with God, but because of our stubborn self-will, we chose to go our own independent way and communion with God was broken. This self-will, characterized by an attitude of active rebellion or passive indifference, is evidence of what the Bible calls sin. (Rom 6:23). Sin separates us from God.
3. Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for human sin. Through Jesus you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life. (Rom 5:8; 1 Cor 15:3-6). Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me (John 14:6).

4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as savior and lord, then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. (John 1:12; Eph 2:8,9; John 3:1-8).

Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive our sins and to make us the kind of people he wants us to be. Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor it is enough to have an emotional experience. We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will.

Here is another example of the salvation plan, called the Salvation Stairway:

THE STAIRWAY TO SALVATION



Bible verses used to explain conversion:

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

2 Cor 5:17 We are new people in Christ. We receive a new spirit (1 Cor 2:12), a new soul (2 Cor 3:18), a new heart (Ezek 36:36), and a new body (Phil 3:21).

Col 2:13,14 He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code with its regulations that was against us. He took it away nailing it to the cross.

Rom 4:7,8 Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against him/her.

Mark 2:7 Who can forgive sins but God alone?

Mark 2:10 that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

Jer 31:34 I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

Hebrews 9:26,28 He appeared once for all to do away with sin. Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.

1 John 3:5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.

1 John 2:1,2 If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense; Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the world.

Modern evangelistic tools for conversion can be summed up as follows:

1. God loves you and wants you to go to heaven. Jesus is preparing a place for you there. Heaven is a wonderful place to be.
2. There is no sin in heaven. Anyone who sins cannot go there. You have sinned, and so has everyone else.
3. Jesus came to earth to bridge the gap, the gulf between sinful humanity and a righteous God. By dying on the cross, he took the penalty for your sins, and removed your sins from you, making it possible for you to go to heaven.
4. Accepting God's plan and receiving Christ is a personal choice that anyone who wants to can make. Accepting Christ guarantees a person's salvation and eternal future.
5. Accepting Jesus' plan means turning one's life over to him as the ruler (boss, lord), and living the way he wants you to.

Slogans like "Smile, God loves you" are the hallmarks of modern evangelism. Enticements giving the message, "find out what God can do for you" (give you peace, hope, faith, joy) have replaced the gloom and doom of conversions in early America.

The critics of modern conversion use terms like cheap grace, slick marketing, minimal commitment, quick fixes, promises that can't be delivered, and hypocrisy. The term "born again" has negative connotations to most Americans.

Conclusion

The gathered church had to determine criteria for membership. Eight issues were discussed: 1) voluntary membership; 2) baptism; 3) owning the covenant; 4) being catechized to know basic doctrine; 5) making a profession of faith; 6) showing Christian piety; 7) a public examination; and 8) evidence of conversion.

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Conversion was easier to prove when people changed another religion to Christianity. For those who grew up in Christian families it was harder to prove. The Puritans asked each candidate for membership to compose a Relation, a short testimony giving evidence of their conversion. The main criterion was that the candidate be able to articulate a conviction of sinfulness. Without naming specific sins, he or she must be able to recount the agonies of being a wretched sinner. These relations held no hope, faith, joy or peace. They did not describe Christ and his redemptive work, or any positive effects of conversion. No transformation of character was mentioned. This is in direct contrast to modern day conversions as orchestrated by Billy Graham, Campus Crusade for Christ, and Child Evangelism, which are positive, optimistic, and reward-oriented.

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Goodwife Stevenson

When the Lord was pleased to convince me of sin, it was by affliction, the plague being in the place; I [was] in the midst of wrath of God,⁵⁶ and some whom I have been in company with, within 24 hours laid in grave, and yet the Lord spared me, and I knew not but I might be next at grave by reason of my sins. And I had sinned against God and disobeyed parents, and hence I thought God would visit me, and I was unfit to live and

[would] die by my sins, and hence prayed God would spare me. The Lord afflicted me among the rest, yet the Lord gave me my life and spared me. And hence I had a greater desire to hear the word. And hence sin no more lest a worse befall thee⁵⁷—that came to me. And a godly man asked me how I walked now, and I told him I desired to know more of God, and he asked me what I thought of my prayers: would they carry me to heaven, and Lord accept of them[?] I said so. And he told me that then every prayer was abomination,⁵⁸ and he might damn me for them, so long as I rested upon anything I did. And I asked him what I should do; if ever he did me good, it must be for his name sake and out of his grace, and hence I saw my own unworthiness more. And hence having way made to New England, I desired God would glorify himself by my coming. And here I met with difficulties and trials and fell to great discontent. And when I heard [on] the Sabbath what God would bring on discontented creatures and how the Israelites did so, and then, though they had their desire, it was with a curse, and this made me fear. And the Lord departed from me, and my sins were so great against such deliverance as I did enjoy. And the Lord brought that scripture, All you that are weary, I will give you rest,⁵⁹ and Though sins as crimson yet Lord would make them as wool.⁶⁰ And I heard Mr. S[hepard] that Christ would come in flaming fire, etc.⁶¹ and hence desired the Lord that I might know him. And hearing Mr. S[hepard] that the Lord would search for secret sins, vain thoughts,⁶² and I desired the Lord to set his fear in my heart. And that place in Scripture, I have chosen you, that they who will not lay down father and life is not worthy,⁶³ I have oft thought whether I should ever do so unless Lord gave me strength. And Mr. S[hepard] showing how ready we were to content ourselves with things of this life.

Asked where Christ was a spirit. At right hand was all righteous.⁶⁴

May 10, 1648.
Eliz[abeth] Oakes, Fan. daughter

After the Lord brought me to this country, my father being taken away, Mr. S[hepard] told me that he had laid up many prayers, and after that, thinking of those words, I thought I had no father to take care for me nor pray for me. But I read, God would be a father to fatherless,⁴¹ after which, the Lord laying affliction and sickness on me, and thinking it was for my sin, I was little affected, yet sought God in private duties, yet thought God would not hear because all wicked prayers are abomination to God.⁴² After which the Lord left me to neglect seeking him, and then I thought God would never give me a heart to seek again. Yet the Lord visiting me with his hand, yet I not sensible. And hearing out of catechise⁴³ (1) the Lord make me see, (2) to be sensible, I thought I fell short. Yet reading catechise, (3) the Lord set upon me upon question, what [were the] beginnings of second death[?]⁴⁴ (1) terror of conscience; (2) Satan's power; (3) curse on all blessings.⁴⁵ And I thought I was troubled in conscience yet under power of Satan, and I a curse. After this I saw my sin but thought I was not humbled. I was troubled but spake to none and could [not] desire to speak. And Mr. S[hepard], coming to my father, said now was acceptable day, if now God gave me a heart to seek him. And he told me God would make the self sensible of it as the greatest evil, and hence I thought whether the Lord ever intended any mercy to me—Hosea 6, They that follow on to know me shall know me⁴⁶—and the Lord gave me a heart to seek him in some measure. And after this, being afflicted and examining myself what would become of me if I was taken away, yet

⁴¹ Ps. 68:5. The Authorized, King James Version has been used to verify the quotations. Except for a few verses that had become proverbial, the King James is closer in language to their usage than the Geneva Bible.

⁴² Prov. 28:9.

⁴³ Elizabeth Oakes is the first of 5 of the 16 confessors (the others are John Shepard, Mrs. Jackson, Abraham Smith, and Mrs. Joseph Cooke) who mention reading or hearing discussions of the catechism. Shepard preached a long series of sermons on the catechism spanning the years 1643 to 1645, but these confessors were almost certainly referring to his *A Short Catechism Familiarly Teaching the Knowledge of God, and of Our Selves: First Composed and Improved for the Private Instruction of the Younger Sort in Cambridge in New-England . . . Together with The Doctrine of Conviction of Sin, and Righteousnes, and Judgment. Delivered in Divers Sermons upon John 16. 8, 9, 10, 17* (Cambridge, Mass., 1654), circulating in manuscript in the congregation and published posthumously.

⁴⁴ Rev. 2:11.

⁴⁵ Shepard, *Short Catechism*. 35–36. This catechism was not listed in the original edition of Evans.

⁴⁶ Hos. 6:3.

hearing that place, They that come to him, he would not cast away,⁴⁷ I having little hope, yet seeing promise not only to faithful but to their seed, I had some hope. After that, hearing out of John 13 that when Peter denied Christ he went out and wept,⁴⁸ and I thought on those words, and I thought I had denied the Lord often, convincing me by his word yet unhumbed, and out of those words, Out of me ye can do nothing,⁴⁹ he [Shepard] showed that the soul could do nothing without Christ, and I saw it then, that of myself I could do nothing good. Mr. S[hepard] preaching out of John 14 of humiliation after soul saw his sin,⁵⁰ I thought the Lord now let me see my sin as greatest evil on [] of consolation, if God let soul saw [sic] sin though not humbled in that measure, but I thought I was not as others were. Hearing Mr. Symmes,⁵¹ he preach[ed] upon Oft as they denied Christ's offer, they had trod under foot Christ's blood,⁵² and I thought I had done so. And Mr. S[hepard] preaching in John, All that were called not elected,⁵³ and how shall I know whether I was elected, and I heard if the Lord gave the soul a heart to choose Christ, Christ had chose[n] Christ [sic] before. And I thought the Lord gave me a heart to choose him above all things here in this world. After the Lord giving me a heart to seek him to enjoy him in all his ordinances,⁵⁴ I thought I was so unfit and unworthy that I was unfit, and I heard that some might not find God because they did not seek him in all his ordinances, and that the Sacrament was a means wherein the Lord would coming [sic] more.

Upon question what she saw in Christ to make her prize Christ. Answer: peace, life, light, all things; for I saw I was dead and darkness, and Christ was peace and life and light.⁵⁵

It pleased God at time to awaken my conscience by Mr. Shepard speaking at baptizing of a child to parents to encourage child to seek God, though [I was] but young, 8 or 9, in private d[evotions?]. And here I saw myself guilty of neglect, and put on to th[e] duty by mother, I sought after God. And keeping the ferr[y] being a fit temptation to forsake God, called away at fit seasons, yet should [have] sought God sooner or later. Yet I took some time, yet conscience would not let me alone. And coming up

from waterside, I answered conscience or had opportunity, yet conscience not quiet. And carrying Mr. Waters⁶⁵ over ferry, he took occasion to bid me seek because others had more labor to take up their time and thoughts. But after this God would not let me alone. Ye ask and have not because ye ask amiss out of fears.⁶⁶ And here I was put to seek God more seriously because I did only to quiet conscience.⁶⁷ And so I thought I had to quiet men, and this might be well enough, and so continued a season. But hearing out of catechize about original sin,⁶⁸ and I never knew the filth of that sin as then the Lord let me see. Answer to question is the contrariety of whole nature of man to law of God, and actual sins of the actions. And here had showed whatever a man did unregenerate was sinful, and plowing was sin, and all what they did perform, and eating and drink and sleep, all was sinful. Now after this, being convinced of original sin and that nothing I could do did displease [sic] God, though in itself lawful, yet as from me sinful, and having some thoughts of wrath to come, I was amazed to think of wrath, what a long time eternity was, and that there was but two ways, and one I might go to.⁶⁹ Yet Lord having awakened my heart, I made this request [that] God would smite his root that the branches might wither.⁷⁰ And the Lord never broke my heart till now, for the Lord made me mourn for this sin of my nature, and hence I set myself against this sin, whereas before it was against actual [sin]. And when Mr. S[hepard] came to open 3 Commandment about preparation,⁷¹ though I sought God, yet I was guilty of neglect of preparation to seek God [] in either for Sabbath or privy duty.⁷² And I saw my inability to prepare for any and unfitness to come to God in it. Now after this, Mr. S[hepard] came to show John 15:16, You have not chosen you [sic].⁷³ Doctrine: Greatness of Christ's love is seen in the freeness of it. At which time, being in great trouble for want of love and fear of God's love, not knowing what would become of me, and I promised him if he would clear up his love, I would cleave to him and walk in his way,⁷⁴ and after my resolution was to continue seeking for mercy. And [I] heard out of 5 Commandment⁷⁵ how inferiors should go to

⁶⁵ He may have been Richard Waters (d. 1676), a layman of Salem, or possibly Thomas Waterhouse, schoolmaster of Dorchester, 1639–1642.

⁶⁶ James 4:3, paraphrase.

⁶⁷ Shepard, *Short Catechism*, 31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁹ Ezek. 21:19–21.

⁷⁰ Mal. 4:1, Ezek. 31:3–14.

⁷¹ Exod. 20:7. "Quest. What is it to serve him [Christ] in holyness and righteousness; Answ. It is to make the whole morall Law or Ten Comandements the rule of Christian obedience, whose first Table sets down duties of holyness towards God, and the second Table duties of righteousness toward man"; Shepard, *Short Catechism*, 23.

⁷² In margin, pointing hand.

⁷³ John 15:16.

superiors, and I went to J. Sill,⁷⁶ and he was glad and did encourage me, and I told him my condition, and telling him of this sermon, how Christ did choose the soul: (1) Christ chose it [before] 1,000s, (2) freely, (3) everlastingly, (4) for this end, to enjoy all fruits of election. And so soul choose[s] Christ. Now the Lord gave me some hopes he had chosen me. But telling him what my fears were, he asked me whether my fears were only for wrath of God, or did I mourn for sin as it grieved God. I told him I could not answer him, and I was under fears God would separate me from him. Then upon a time I went to him again, and after some time of meditation I thought I did mourn for sin as it did grieve God, as well as making separation. And [I asked him] how was my heart when I was not enlarged to seek after God, and he said it was a mercy if my trouble was that I had not a better heart to seek God. And after this I had some hope of love, that he had chosen him [i.e., me]. Yet I purpose to continue praying, hearing no man had the least desire yet should go to God to make it come, and was much encouraged that if the Lord has begun to blow up the spark, he would not quench it,⁷⁷ and Sin shall no dominion over you,⁷⁸ this encouraged [me]. And by that: Come to me and ye shall find rest.⁷⁹ Mr. Norton⁸⁰ [preached on] My iniquities are too heavy for me.⁸¹ Was sin so to me, and intolerable, and I saw it such a burden unless Lord give rest, and that nothing could satisfy conscience but what pacified wrath of God, which was Jesus Christ. And hearing Psalm 119, I shall not be ashamed when [I] have respect to all thy commandments,⁸² and this was to be willing to see every commandment and what was contrary to them, and [to be] humbled when [I] did cross any. And upon examination of my heart I found God had given me great hopes that the Lord had given me such a heart. But the Lord awakening my conscience, I thought there might be some secret sins between me and mercy, and I went to God to take away my secret sins. And that there was no sin hid from God, though from me many. Hearing Mr. Allin of Charlestown⁸³ concerning the rest of the soul, that nothing in world but had its rest, and [he] showed that Father was rest and way to it was by Christ, and [there are] divers false rests, and men go far and fall short of rest: some rest in duties and [so] show no rest. Now upon examination I found God had let me see I did not rest in anything I did but to come to him through Christ, I hope of love because God hath heard my prayers for the subduing of my sin and mortification of sin I have lived in.

⁷⁶ John Sill, a proprietor of Cambridge, bought a house there in 1638 and died before 1658.

⁷⁷ Isa. 1:31.

⁷⁸ Rom. 6:14.

⁷⁹ Matt. 11:28.

⁸⁰ John Norton (1603–1663), minister at Ipswich, 1636–1653, and First Church, Boston, 1656–1663.

⁸¹ Ps. 38:4.

⁸² Ps. 119:6.