

John Cotton Jr.: Puritan Declension Model or Radical Missionary? 1657-1699

John E. Case

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At first glance the accomplishments of John Cotton Jr. appear to be an auspicious underachievement. Compared to his father Cotton's affect on Puritan ecclesiastical polity was slight at best and detrimental at worst.

For John Cotton Jr. expectations could not have been greater when he graduated from Harvard¹ in 1657 at the age of seventeen. Cotton's father was John Cotton (1585-1652) the "Patriarch of New England" and the founder of Boston's First Church; Cotton's father had made his mark on New England Puritanism through his contribution to the Antinomian controversy and his quarrel with Roger Williams.² No doubt young John Cotton hoped to have a similar effect on the state of Puritanism; he surely dreamed of gaining a prestigious appointment to one of Boston's Puritan churches.³

Cotton began his ministerial career in Hartford Connecticut; there he studied under the Reverend Samuel Stone. Stone served as a mentor for Cotton for two years, after which Cotton received an appointment to the pastorate of nearby Wethersfield with Stone's referral.⁴ Following his appointment Cotton married Joanna Rossiter from nearby Guilford thereby becoming a freeman of the colony. While many young men waited until their mid to late twenties to marry, Cotton married at the age of twenty. He was also given the task of overseeing the holdings of recently deceased governor Thomas Wells; apparently Cotton was well thought of and trusted by some well placed individuals in Connecticut.⁵ This would have certainly

¹ Harvard was founded in 1636 to train ministers; it produced the vast majority until the founding of Yale in 1701.

² John Cotton also produced numerous sermons and a catechism that was later incorporated into the New England Primer in 1701.

³ Len Travers, ed. *The Missionary Journal of John Cotton Jr., 1666-1678*. Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Vol 109. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998. 52. Sheila McIntyre, "John Cotton Jr.: Wayward Puritan Minister?," in *The Human Tradition in Colonial America*, ed. Ian K. Steele and Nancy L. Rhoden (Wilmington, Del., 1999), 120.

⁴ Cotton's older brother, Seaborn Cotton, had preached at Wethersfield before him.

⁵ Sheila McIntyre and Len Travers, ed. *The Correspondence of John Cotton Junior*. Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2009. 20. Travers, 52. McIntyre, 120.

engendered a sense of confidence in Cotton who was undeniably well placed at this point in his career.

The two years following Cotton's marriage and appointment to the Wethersfield pastorate were quite eventful for the young minister and his family. By 1662 Cotton had fathered his first son and had been accused of inappropriate relations with several women in Wethersfield. Cotton's once promising career began to look bleak in the wake of an investigation ordered by the General Court of the Connecticut Colony. Several charges were leveled against during this hearing with varying degrees of seriousness. Cotton's familiarity with the chamber of Miss Chittendens was denounced by the committee as a "foolish curiosity"; Cotton had visited her chamber under the auspices of viewing the furniture. More serious was the charge of "sinful striving" brought against Cotton by Miss Wells for which the committee did not find sufficient evidence to convict Cotton. In his rebuttal Cotton accused Miss Wells of inappropriate sexual misconduct herself but the committee rejected this charge saying Cotton said this only to "vex" Miss Wells and that there was no evidence to support this claim.⁶ Perhaps most concerning to the committee was Cotton's conduct during the hearing. His behavior was judged to be "sinful, rash, and unpeaceable" and certainly damaged his reputation.⁷ Whether the committee members thought Cotton was capable of adultery is unclear but what is clear from the report is that they felt Cotton's conduct was reprehensible and unbecoming of a minister. The question was not whether Cotton had performed the acts he was accused of but that he had been accused in the first place.

Cotton's career as a minister was in serious doubt; with few remaining prospects he returned to his wife's hometown of Guilford, Connecticut. Cotton and his young family likely

⁶ This Miss Wells was Elizabeth Deming Foote Wells the second wife of Governor Thomas Wells.

⁷ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 44.

moved in with Joanna's father Bryan who was a local doctor. During this hard time Cotton received a letter from his father's friend John Davenport. In his letter Davenport urged Cotton to humbly come to terms with his sins and accept wise counsel neither of which Cotton had done at that time. Davenport was also concerned that Cotton would "hold forth the virtues of Christ" because he "bore both his father's names".⁸ This letter from Davenport was an indication of what the wider ministerial community probably thought of Cotton. When Cotton was called before the First Church of Boston to account for the events in Wethersfield he was unapologetic. He did not heed the counsel of John Davenport and was excommunicated from the Boston First Church for sexual misconduct and then lying to cover it up. Cotton realized that excommunication was not conducive to success in his profession, so after an apology he was reinstated to membership five weeks later.⁹

While a steady ministerial job with a New England congregation was now out of the question for Cotton there were still opportunities open to him. It may have been John Eliot (1604-1690) who informed Cotton of the missionary opportunity on Martha's Vineyard. The island was just off the coast and was populated with Wampanoag Indians. The Wampanoags on Martha's Vineyard had been without a trained minister since 1657 when Thomas Mayhew Jr. (1621-1657) had died at sea. Mayhew's father, Thomas Mayhew Sr. (1593-1682), served as the settlement's proprietor and magistrate. Since the younger Mayhew's death Mayhew Sr. had been trying to continue his son's ministry but he lacked his son's ministerial training and experience. Mayhew Jr. had been a dedicated missionary; he had learned the Wampanoag language and had tried to analogize Christian teaching with Wampanoag religious beliefs. The elder Mayhew had

⁸ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 47.

⁹ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 20. For more information on adultery in Puritan New England see Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649-1699*. Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

neither the time nor the ability to do all his son did. Mayhew Sr. must have certainly welcomed Cotton being as he was so willing to undertake the task.¹⁰

Perhaps Cotton was discouraged on his voyage to Martha's Vineyard. The prospect of preaching to Wampanoags on a peripheral island could not have sounded promising to a Harvard trained minister. But if Cotton had these misgivings his actions do not reflect them. Cotton immediately set about preparing himself to minister to the Wampanoags. Initially Cotton hired a Wampanoag tutor to teach him the language. Cotton paid him in advance for fifty days work, but the tutor quit after just twenty. Cotton made enough progress in the first three weeks that he taught himself the remainder of the language. After a little more than a year he attempted his first sermon in the Wampanoag language on March 6, 1666.¹¹

Cotton quickly found that it would not be easy to replace the deceased Mayhew. After his first sermon he was asked many questions such as, "How conscience came to be asleep or silent in a man at any time", "Whether Judas was saved or damned", and "Whether John the Baptist sprinkled Christ's face with water or plunged him under water when he did baptize him".¹² If Cotton had any doubts about the Indians Christian education they received from Mayhew Jr. they were surely erased following his first few encounters with them. These Wampanoags were well schooled in biblical teaching and theology. But doctrinal questions were not the only challenge Cotton faced on Martha's Vineyard. Cotton also had an ongoing conflict with the island's proprietor Thomas Mayhew. Cotton did not record any specific interchanges with Mayhew in his journal but he did record some of the effects their feud had on his ministry. Mayhew not only contradicted some of Cotton's teaching but also told some of the Wampanoags that Cotton had

¹⁰ *Missionary Journal of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 53.

¹¹ David Silverman, "Indians, Missionaries, and Religious Translation: Creating Wampanoag Christianity in Seventeenth Century Martha's Vineyard". *William and Mary Quarterly*. Vol. 62, No. 2 (April 2005), 1. *Missionary Journal of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 54.

¹² *Missionary Journal of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 59.

said they “stunk” when he originally arrived. Mayhew also warned the Wampanoags if they went to Cotton for council he would no longer welcome them at his home.¹³ Relations between Cotton and Mayhew were so tense the Commissioners of the United Colonies censured them for their conduct. Soon after this Cotton received an invitation to fill the pulpit vacancy at the First Church of Plymouth. After thinking it over Cotton left Martha’s Vineyard for Plymouth in November of 1667.¹⁴

When Cotton arrived in Plymouth in 1667 the church was in a poor state. There had not been an ordained minister in Plymouth for twelve years. The congregation was understandably pleased to have their first Harvard graduate in the pulpit. The Plymouth church was a unique challenge; the community was peripheral to the Puritan cultural center in Massachusetts. In addition to this the founders of the colony had a separatist background which meant they were used to being on the periphery. Because of their separatist background and long periods without ordained clergy the laity dominated church proceedings. This caused an introspective disposition among the church members which made their community closed to outsiders.¹⁵

As soon as Cotton arrived in Plymouth he set about his work which included administering the sacraments that the Plymouth church had been notably devoid of for many years. Cotton also endeavored to build relationships with other ministers in Plymouth colony. Early on in his ministry in Plymouth he exchanged letters with several ministers including the Baptist ministers Noah Newman and John Miles. The topic of conversation between the ministers included doctrinal issues regarding baptism and former church members of Cotton’s church who had become Baptists. Cotton also performed various housekeeping duties such as

¹³ *Missionary Journal of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 60-61.

¹⁴ *Missionary Journal of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 55-56. McIntyre 125.

¹⁵ Mark A. Peterson, “The Plymouth Church and the Evolution of Puritan Religious Culture,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Dec. 1993), p 576.

giving members who had left the church letters of release from their membership. But Cotton's most vigorous efforts were directed toward adding members to his congregation. In his first year he added twenty-seven new members to full communion. The records of the Plymouth church display the astonishment at Cotton's success saying, "the work of God seemed in those days to have a considerable reviving."¹⁶

In addition to the new members, Cotton baptized forty-eight children as a part of the guidelines of the Halfway Covenant. The halfway covenant was designed to offer baptism to a larger group and that along with Cotton's regular delivery of the sacraments helped him to attract a large number of new members. In fact Cotton more than doubled church membership in his first three years and baptized more than one hundred people. His conversion rate during this time was certainly prodigious. Cotton brought cadence and regularity to the Plymouth church for the first time in over a decade. The Lord's Supper was being given to members on a regular basis, it was offered eight times in 1670 and ten times in 1671. Cotton also recorded specific membership requirements, before this membership requirements had not been specifically written down. To encourage more casual attendees to become full members Cotton organized regular testimony by his members who had recently come to faith.¹⁷ To foster church unity Cotton began to have catechisms for the children of the congregation and monthly meetings for church members. In Cotton the Plymouth church had found just what they needed, a minister who was a catalyst for growth.

Cotton's spirited ministry would have come as no surprise to those who knew him best. Cotton's son Josiah described his father as strong and healthy with a natural predilection for ministerial work. Josiah also said Cotton had a "vast and strong memory" and that he was "a

¹⁶ Albert Matthews ed., *Plymouth Church Records, 1620-1859 Part 1*. Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1920. p 144.

¹⁷ *Plymouth Church Records*, p. 146-148.

living index to the Bible.”¹⁸ Because of Cotton’s talents he was able to change the culture of the Plymouth church. Cotton encouraged wider participation in church activities and the community responded in an unprecedented way. Cotton underlined the value of the sacraments, especially that of Communion, to his parishioners and encouraged those who had been baptized under the Halfway Covenant to become full members. Since the start of Cotton’s ministry he had baptized one-hundred and seventy-four children and these young believers were his focus. In a series of sermons in 1676 Cotton exhorted his members to “stirre up themselves” for the “blessing of the covenant.” He also reminded them that they “stood at a distance from the son of God” while they put off receiving full Communion.¹⁹

A further example of Cotton’s influence on Plymouth church polity was his contribution to a debate over how the Psalms were to be presented in worship. Cotton wanted the Psalms read and explained before they were sung to enhance the meaning church members would receive from them. Cotton had done this to good effect with the Wampanoag Christians on Martha’s Vineyard and he hoped to do it in Plymouth as well. While some favored the traditional way without the reading and explanation before hand, Cotton convinced the church and its elders of the importance of this practice with a sermon preached from Colossians 3:16. Cotton wanted his congregation to be educated and derive meaning from their worship.²⁰

These were positive times for John Cotton and his family; by any account his ministry in Plymouth was an ongoing success. Cotton was well liked by his congregation; his evangelistic efforts were bearing fruit and all of his sons had begun to follow in his footsteps by attending Harvard with the intent on becoming ordained ministers. The letters Cotton exchanged with his sons during this time show how he relished fatherhood. Cotton was particularly close to his son

¹⁸ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 22-23.

¹⁹ *Plymouth Church Records*, p. 148-152. Peterson, p. 587.

²⁰ *Plymouth Church Records*, p. 157. Peterson, p. 588-589.

Rowland with whom he exchanged numerous letters from 1694 to 1696. In one particularly joyous letter Cotton recounted his visit to Boston where he had been invited to preach; during his sermon several from the audience had professed their desire to be saved. Cotton's past sins and conflict with the Boston church appeared to have been forgotten.²¹

The coming year, however, would be hard for Cotton and his family; in 1697 he once again became involved in an adultery scandal. Cotton was accused of certain "miscarriages" by a church member Rebecca Morton. The church report of the hearing indicated that while Cotton vindicated himself of most of the charges he did confess to one of Ms. Morton's accusations. The church report conflicted with Cotton Mather's report of the incident in which John Cotton denied all of the accusations. Despite his apparent confession the church did not wish to end Cotton's tenure in the pulpit.²² But Cotton did vacate the Plymouth pulpit several months later; whether Cotton was truly guilty of adultery was disputed even at the time. Cotton's defenders, and Cotton himself, believed the charges were politically motivated because Cotton supported the movement to incorporate Plymouth into the Massachusetts Bay colony. Other notable voices in the record such as Increase Mather and Samuel Sewall did believe Cotton to be guilty of adultery and accepted that as the reason for his removal from Plymouth.²³

Cotton and his wife Joanna were now forced to move in with their children in Yarmouth and Sandwich. For reasons unknown Joanna and Cotton were separated during this time; while Cotton looked for another ministerial position Joanna lived with their son Rowland in Sandwich. Cotton did eventually manage to procure a pulpit but not in his native Massachusetts. A small group of Congregationalists in Charlestown, South Carolina desired Cotton's services as a minister. Cotton travelled alone to Charlestown in late 1698; Joanna did not accompany her

²¹ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 524-525.

²² *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 540-541.

²³ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 564-565. Peterson, p. 590.

husband to South Carolina possibly because she planned to join him when he was firmly established. The correspondence between the two was strained during this time and it is clear Joanna was conflicted about whether to join Cotton in South Carolina. This did not, however, stop Cotton from enthusiastically beginning his work as minister with his Charlestown brethren. Cotton's son Josiah recorded that he was "abundant and successful in his labors" with his latest church. In just a few months Cotton was able to form a church and set up a regular meeting schedule whereby he "edified many saints and converted many sinners." Cotton also ministered to those suffering from a yellow fever epidemic which took his own life in 1699.²⁴

About a month after John Cotton's death, Cotton Mather informed Joanna Cotton of her husband's death. In a heartfelt letter Mather offered a retrospective on Cotton's life calling him a "precious pastor" and saying he had "not many friends on earth like him." While Cotton's life certainly had some tumultuous times his legacy must be those he converted to Christian faith. To relegate Cotton to the realm of second generation Puritan declension is to leave out the largest and best part of his life's work. Cotton was a natural missionary; ironically his scandals put him in position to utilize his talents. It is doubtful the Wampanoag Christians in Martha's Vineyard, the beleaguered separatists in Plymouth, or the Congregationalists in Charlestown would have benefited from his talents had he followed the path he intended as a youth. But if Cotton had unrealized dreams he did not dwell on them; he was singularly devoted to evangelism no matter the audience. Cotton Mather wrote of his uncle upon hearing of his death that he "had a peculiar satisfaction in the Lord's accepting my uncle to die with honor in the service of the gospel and kingdom" and that is certainly what John Cotton intended.²⁵

²⁴ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 581.

²⁵ *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, p. 599.

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