

Eighteen Miles of Conscience

How the pastorate of Rev. Samuel Willard changed the face of ministry in America

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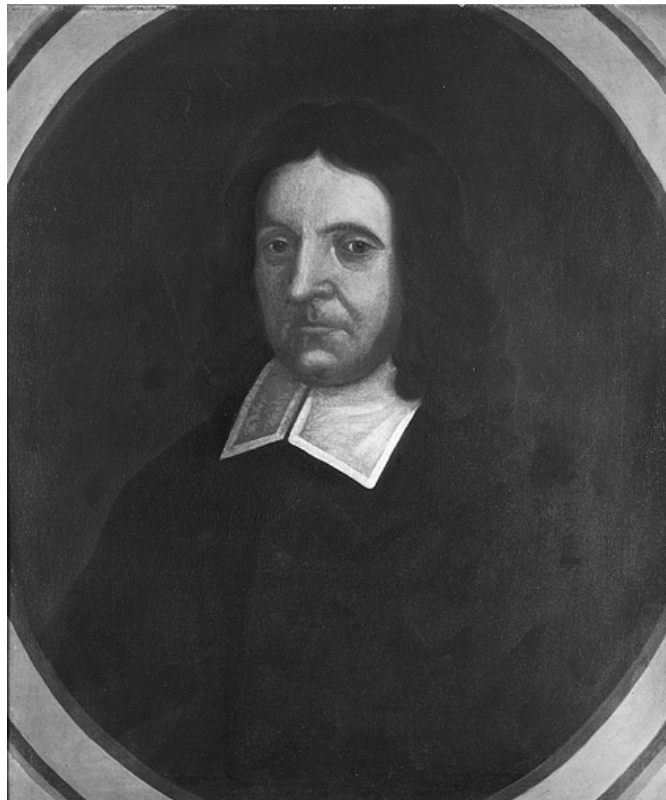
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The Church register of the Old South Church is a mere blank hieroglyph if we come to it without knowledge, without sympathy, without piety, without the gift of historic imagination; but if we come with these faculties the dead live again; we see the Founders at their tasks, manfully performing it, building for us and for all generations that have intervened between them and us. As we behold them, our minds are filled with admiration and reverence. The builded better than they knew; they founded better than they knew; they so founded that what they founded has existed for two hundred and fifty years. And with similar faith, similar love and similar devotion we can help to make the church they founded two hundred and fifty years ago prophetic of a life in the future for a thousand years.

—Rev. George A. Gordon on the occasion of Old South's 250th Anniversary



*Reverend Samuel Willard (1640-1707)
Harvard University Portrait Collection, Gift of Robert Treat Paine to Harvard
College, 1842*

If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. Gospel of Matthew, 12:7

Who then is a faithful and wise Servant whom his Lord hath made Ruler over his Household to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that Servant, whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Gospel of Matthew, 24: 45-46

On the morning of May 9, 1830 members of Old South Church in Boston arrived to celebrate a momentous occasion: the “first Sabbath after the completion of a century from the first occupancy of the present meeting house.”¹ To mark this milestone, Rev. Benjamin Wisner delivered the first of a series of four sermons telling the history of the congregation from its roots as a breakaway fraction of twenty-nine male members and twenty-three female members of First Church Boston to its status as a congregation which had that year accepted thirty-five men and women to be part of its life and ministry.² Wisner’s detailed depiction of nearly two centuries of history focused predominately on the theological issue that gave birth to the dissatisfaction, debate, and deliberation that fueled the faction party that ultimately became Boston’s third church: the half-way covenant. A 1929 history primer published for the benefit of the Old South Church Fund mentions the tumult over this contentious theological tenet: “Free will was the favorite topic of society, and the “Subjects of Baptism” a rock of dissension which estranged the nearest of friends.”³ This “rock of dissension” estranged more than just friends; it served as the wedge that divided a congregation, gave way to a new

¹ Wisner, Benjamin B. *History of the Old South Church in Boston, in Four Sermons*. Boston, Massachusetts: Crocker & Brewster, 1830, 1.

² Members of the Old South Church Boston. *The Confession of Faith and Form of Covenant of the Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts*. Boston, Massachusetts: Press of Crocker and Brewster, 1855.

³ Stanley, Richard B. *Old South Church in Boston: Its History in Outline*. Boston, Massachusetts: Old South Church, 1927, 6.

community of believers, and established Third Church as the “liberal” option in the late seventeenth century Boston.

This half-way covenant debate came at a time of transition for First Church. Hamilton Hill writes in his 1890 authoritative history of Old South that following the deaths of First Church’s beloved Rev. Norton and Rev. Wilson, a double vacancy arose in the leadership of the congregation.⁴ The congregation called a unique and contentious duo to carry on Christ’s work. Rev. James Allen, a thirty-year old Oxford graduate who is said to have secured “a large room in the hearts of the people” and much to the contrary, the Rev. James Davenport, founder of New Haven Colony, upon his seventieth year whose reception into the ministry was not nearly as positive--as there were “objections...which could not be met or satisfied,” were called simultaneously to the ministerial office.⁵ The “objections” Hill alluded to surrounded the question: essentially, what was the membership status of the individual whose parents had had no conversion experience and thus were not full communicant members? Would their participation in the church cast it into a state of worldly mischief? To answer this question two synods were called of Connecticut and Massachusetts Congregational clergy in 1657 and 1662.⁶ The result of the synod affirmed what became known as the “half-way covenant”—a sort of theological compromise where the children of parents who had had no conversion experience could be “partial members” of the church as long as they upheld morally upright Christian lives.

⁴ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

Davenport was in the word's of Cotton Mather, "the greatest of the anti synodists."⁷ He found himself at the helm of the conservative school with the likes of Harvard president Charles Chauncy and Increase Mather. After his instillation as pastor of First Church the majority held fast to Davenport's oppositions; however, a small faction known as the "dissenting brethren" "begged permission to withdraw and to organize another church."⁸ After much argument and conflict the "dissenting brethren" formed Boston's third church at Charlestown on the 12th and 16th of May, 1669.⁹ Mary Norton, the widow of the former pastor to First Church was among the dissenting population.¹⁰ The 1929 history iterates her centrality in the beginnings of Third Church. It chronicles that "she deeded to the use of the new society a portion of her garden, on which to place a meeting-house for the preaching of a broader faith."¹¹ This "broader faith," as the writers of this history articulate it, would prove to play a central role in the future ministry of Third Church Boston. It was this very sort of broad thinking that ultimately led to the congregation's contribution towards changing the face of ministry as a societal institution in America. Furthermore, Wisner's sermons from the mid-nineteenth century emphasized these broad thinking

⁷ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ Members of the Old South Church Boston. *The Confession of Faith and Form of Covenant of the Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts*. Boston, Massachusetts: Press of Crocker and Brewster, 1855, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Stanley, Richard B. *Old South Church in Boston: Its History in Outline*. Boston, Massachusetts: Old South Church, 1927, 6.

founders as those whose strong conviction led to fearlessness in the breaking of covenant to establish a new faith community centered around a new identity.

Thomas Thatcher was called to serve as Third Church's first minister.

Nine years after the theological rift that realigned American Congregationalism, a thirty-eight year old Harvard graduate by the name of Samuel Willard became the minister of Third Church. Serving until his death in 1707 for a period of twenty-nine years and five months, Willard, in the words of a sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Gordon for the occasion of the congregation's 150th anniversary, was "an acknowledged leader throughout New England."¹² Gordon writes, "Samuel Willard was preacher, lecturer, administrator, and in every function uncommon; he was leading citizen as well as leading minister."¹³ This "uncommon man" who was "perhaps the strongest intellectual and moral force in the New England of his time" not only baptized an infant Benjamin Franklin and oversaw the reconciliation of First Church and Third Church but held the pastorate in the peculiar year of 1692.¹⁴ 1692, according to Kathrine Richardson, "was a bleak episode in Massachusetts history...the situation swiftly [growing] into an epidemic of fear and horror that culminated in bitter courtroom trials, the death of twenty-four individuals, and the imprisonment of over 200."¹⁵ What became known as the Salem Witch Trials unfolded only eighteen miles

¹² Gordon, George Angier. *The Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Old South Church in Boston*. Boston, Massachusetts: The Plimpton Press, 1919, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31

¹⁵ Richardson, Katherine. *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*. Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Essex Museum, 1994, 4.

from the pulpit of Samuel Willard. This distance of eighteen miles was a far enough reach that Willard had no obvious obligation to address this conflict in which he was not directly involved; however, this distance was short enough that Willard's basic human conscience as not only an ordained leader in the congregational tradition but more so as a denizen of a world gone seemingly awry compelled him actively yet subtly, forcefully yet gently to reshape the very institution of congregational ministry. Willard's ministry during and after the Salem Witch Trials represents a departure from the Puritan pastoral logic that dominated the ministerial culture of the late seventeenth century. His care included not only his presence in the lives of his parishioners but also those outside his realm of responsibility as an advocate for rational understanding of the plights and afflictions that became a part of the lived human experience in a highly supernatural era. Willard's self-perpetuated role as a confessional for the sinner and advocate for the marginalized serve as an example of a transformation in Congregational pastoral care and in a larger sense the changing face of the ministry as a societal institution. Willard's tenure as minister of Third Church Boston stands as evidence of a marked shift from the definition of pastoral caregiver as "a physician of souls" to an advocate for justice, establishing the demarcation between right and wrong, just and unjust.

Defining and Redefining the Ministry

In order to understand the way in which Willard's pastorate transformed the very peculiar vocation of Puritan spiritual leader we must first examine the way in which the intricacies of the ministerial office were defined by society. Essentially, what was the role of the minister in late seventeenth century New England? E. Brooks Holifield attempts to answer this question in his, *A History of Pastoral Care in America*. In his portrayal of the importance of pastoral care upon ministry in America Holifield writes, "To overhear the pastor as they offer private counsel is to learn something about the history of the ministry as a social institution."¹⁶ He claims that after three centuries of this "pastoral conversation" one can observe what Phillip Rieff calls, "the triumph of the therapeutic."¹⁷ However, what Holifield does not observe is the idea of "public" pastoral care. He defines spiritual care-giver as one who engages with specific parishioners and individuals rather than pastoral care for the greater populous. If a minister has the emotional fortitude to intimately care for individuals then most surely it would seem logical to propose the idea that that same ability can be applied to those groups of people suffering on the peripheries of society—victims of societal injustice much like the innocent lives on the line in Salem.

Holifield does however articulate the construct around which the Puritan pastoral logic was built. He writes that Puritan pastors became, "masters of introspection, cartographers of the inner life, adept at recognizing the sings of

¹⁶ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

salvation.”¹⁸ Their primary obligation to diagnose spiritual ills and deformities of faith placed the ministers in a role as physicians of the soul. Their duty as shepherds and caregivers was more to find the sinner within while pointing to the scriptures as the remedy for spiritual ills rather than acting as touchstones of moral consciousness. He goes on to note that, “Congregationalists wanted their pastors to be experts in the interpretation of inner spiritual experience” so that they might be able to, “map each turn of the soul as it traveled to the heavenly city.”¹⁹ It is important to note that Holified’s assessment of Willard’s approach to this sort of “pastoral logic” falls comfortably within the standard protocol taken by ministers in this era. In fact, he uses Willard’s interactions with a young, spiritually plagued parishioner, Elizabeth Knapp, as a means of offering us a very typical case study of Puritan pastoral care. He writes that Willard “visited the household, exhorting, praying, observing, asking questions, reasoning with her [Elizabeth Knapp] and debating the voice” leading him to utter “bewilderment” ultimately “unable to determine whether she [Elizabeth Knapp] had covenanted with Satan.”²⁰ While Knapp’s spiritual status remained dubious, Willard “called upon the townsfolk to be compassionate.”²¹ In this inquiry into a young woman’s spiritual integrity Holified argues that ,“the pastoral procedure was to combine inquiry and argument”²² and that this defined this sense of pastoral logic that defined the ministry in seventeenth century New England. Ministers, as highly

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 43-44.

²¹ Ibid., 44.

²² Ibid., 44.

educated, esoteric, philosophical, and revered leaders holding immense spiritual authority were essentially “physicians of the soul” –a term Holified introduces in the beginning chapters of his inquiry. The degree of authority with which they were able to make a diagnosis, identify a spiritual malice, or spot the presence of Satan in the hearts of “sheep” positioned the minister in a spot of societal and cultural authority. Furthermore, in order to fully understand this Puritan pastoral logic we must understand the way in which the minister understood the “inward life.” For this, Holified notes, “A good number of seventeenth-century ministers, especially among the Puritan clergy, conceived of the inward life as a violent civil war, provoked by a rebellion of “self.”²³ If Willard’s approach to pastoral care as noted above included both inquiry and argument and he conceptualized the inner spiritual experience as a struggle then it seems logical to conclude that these tenets could be applied to a very unconventional “parishioner.” If a minister like Willard could so readily diagnose the moral ills of the individual then they most certainly could have done the same with their contemporary society. If we think of society as a sort of unconventional parishioner and the minister as a religious leader and “physician of the soul” then it comes as no surprise that under this code of pastoral logic it was only a matter of time before the moral consciousness of the minister--so resolute and his tactics so refined-- that he could diagnose the ills of an entire people, rationalizing the actions of a society, and ultimately tracing divine providence not just in the individual but in the larger society. This “providence,” I argue, translated into a voice of justice and reason. When Willard

²³ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, 57.

sat with the afflicted Knapp he warned her, according to Holifield that, “he would believe only what he had good grounds to accept” and that his “reasoning was an appeal to both logical and empirical evidence” where he “recorded symptoms, drew inferences and sought casual connections.”²⁴ Willard was the minister who introduced this prototype of care thereby establishing a new “pastoral logic” shaped by its era, responsive to the needs of society, and moving the ministerial vocation ever closer to a modern day United Church of Christ-like concern for humanity.

Just as Willard stood “bewildered” before an ailing Elizabeth Knaap, diagnosing the darkness that gave her such anguish, “believ[ing] only what he had good grounds to accept”—he stood yet again before such darkness in 1692 as he attempted to diagnose the ills of a society suspending rational justice in the face of fear, suspicion, and mistrust. In the case of Knapp, Willard was required to care for her as she sat in the pews over which he presided each Sunday--she was a sheep in his flock—however, in the case of the Salem Witch Trials—a comfortable eighteen miles from his pulpit at Third Church—Willard’s pastoral consciousness stretched beyond the pews, connoting a concern for greater societal justice that changed the model of Congregational ministry in America.

Willard’s Pastorate

In the membership records of Third Church Boston it is recorded that on February 12, 1677-8 the congregation accepted Rev. Samuel Willard as a member

²⁴ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, 44.

and as a minister.²⁵ While Rev. Thomas Thatcher was still at the helm at the time Willard was received as a member and associate minister his days were waning. He died on October 15, 1678. Hamilton Hill writes, “Mr. Thatcher did not long survive to enjoy the benefits of the co-pastorate, nor was he permitted to see the completion of the first decade of the church’s history.”²⁶ A 1659 graduate of Harvard College, Willard proved to be wildly popular in his public life as a minister. After preaching a few times at a church gathered in Groton, Massachusetts, Hamilton Hill writes that the town voted, “That Mr. Willard, if he will accept it, shall be their minister as long as he lives, which Mr. Willard accepts, except a manifest Providence of God appeared to take him off.”²⁷ Hill goes on to report that that “manifest Providence of God” did rear its head in the form of an Indian attack on Groton causing the town to disband.²⁸ This led Willard to Boston and ultimately Third Church.

On June 29, 1690, Willard--after having spent a comfortable twelve years getting acquainted with the pastorate of Third Church--entered upon the record the congregation’s renewed covenant.²⁹ According to Hill this renewed covenant was the product of a “Reforming Synod” held in 1679 made up of Congregational clergy expressing concern over the increasing materialism and the increase of

²⁵ Members of the Old South Church Boston. *The Confession of Faith and Form of Covenant of the Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts*. Boston, Massachusetts: Press of Crocker and Brewster, 1855

²⁶ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 229.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

“worldly prosperity” along side a “rapid decline of religious life.”³⁰ As a result of this synod Third Church, years later, with the help of Willard drew up a new covenant. The covenant, reproduced in Hill’s history in its full form reads in part:

First, that we will (Christ helping) endeavor, every one of us, to reforme our heart and life, by seeking to mortifye all our sins, and laboring to walke more closelye with God than every yet we have done: and will continue to worship god, in publick, private, secret, and this without formality or hypocrisye: and more fully and faithfully than heretofore to discharge all Covenant duties one to another in Church Communion.³¹

This foreshadows one of the themes of Willard’s ministry: the idea of worshipping God without hypocrisy in not just a personal, private sense but in a public sense. Drafting this new covenant in conjunction with the congregation was in essence, Willard chartering what would become a theme of his ministry. If one defines “worship God” to include working to create the kingdom of heaven on Earth, then naturally to apply this “worship” to a “publick” setting would include a concern for all of God’s children so that all forms of injustice be banished so that God’s kingdom might be actualized.

If there is one thing the historical record confirms, it is that Samuel Willard was well liked, appreciated, and popular. The Rev Dr. Gordon in his anniversary sermons describes Willard as, “altogether the greatest minister of the church throughout the Colonial period.”³² Holified in his book, *God’s Ambassadors, A History of the Christian Clergy in America*, retells the story of

³⁰ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

³² Gordon, George Angier. *The Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Old South Church in Boston*. Boston, Massachusetts: The Plimpton Press, 1919, 38.

one of Willard's zealous parishioners voting to establish a trust fund for his childrens' college education.³³ Furthermore, Willard, later in his career, wrote up short directions to those who desired to study divinity. In 1735 Samuel Willard's, "*Brief directions to a young scholar designing the ministry for the study of divinity*" was published posthumously. This list includes Willard's recommendations for those looking to take up the mantel of congregational service. What is more interesting in our inquiry is not Willard's actual suggestions—albeit they do offer Willard's personal articulation of the prerequisites for the ministry—but more so, the forward to this pamphlet, written by Willard's pastoral successors, Thomas Prince and Joseph Sewall. They write, "But, whereas our Lord hath appointed an Order of Men to teach this divine Knowledge, how great should be their Concern and Care to be well Instructed to the Kingdom of God themselves, that they may be able to teach others!"³⁴ Prince and Sewall allude in this statement to the influence Willard's pastorate had on their conception of ministry. He was in their estimation, "well Instructed to the Kingdom of God." It is my argument that Willard was not only "well instructed" but rather actively worked to build that kingdom on Earth.

Additionally, Willard brought a comprehensive theology to Third Church. This stood as most appropriate as the congregation was the byproduct of liberal

³³Holifield, E. Brooks. *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007. 56.

³⁴Willard, Samuel, and Joseph Sewall. *Brief Directions to a Young Scholar Designing the Ministry for the Study of Divinity*. Boston, Massachusetts: J. Draper for T. Hancock, 1735, i.

theological ferment from the Halfway Covenant dispute. David Hall in his book, *The Good Shepherd*, notes that Willard was an advocate of comprehensive baptism—and this, in effect altered the theology he espoused in sermons. Hall writes, “Willard aimed his sermons at an audience already started on the road to Christ.”³⁵ Hall’s commentary alludes to the idea that Willard was a visionary with his own outlook on how this “Kingdom” should look manifest on Earth. In a series of sermons from the late 1680s titled, *The Barren Fig Trees Doom*, Hall reports that Willard professes, “that the church on earth should have as members [not] only those who were ‘first-born’” but rather “it comprehended all ‘visible Professors’ of Christ.”³⁶ While this conception of the identity of the church is far from a modern-day Congregational understanding, it was, a marked shift towards the left for the late seventeenth century.

Furthermore, we also must understand that while I argue Willard altered the pastoral logic of his time I do not mean to say he neglected to practice what historians would classify as “typical” Puritan pastoral care. Holifield writes in reference to Willard’s care for Elizabeth Knapp that we visited earlier, “But despite the appearance of overweening self-confidence, the ministers accepted their charge with trembling, knowing that an error in judgment could mean eternal damnation for an unsuspecting soul.”³⁷ However, later in his inquiry he notes that the “soul” as an object of theological discourse had different connotations, “The

³⁵ Hall, David D. *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972, 253.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁷ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, 40.

soul was a ‘spiritual substance’ which derived its identity from a unique divine creative act. It was the gift of the Creator, the handiwork of God, and hence it was good.”³⁸ It can be argued then that Willard employed the pastoral logic of his day to redefine its very scope and purpose. While it was obligatory for the minister to be concerned about the souls of those in his pews, the very Puritan conception of the “soul” a unique part of God’s handiwork, would suggest that Willard’s seemingly radical concern for the souls of those outside his congregation—stands as an example of applying the standard practice of pastoral care in a new context, thereby transforming not only the very practice but the very institution of ministry.

The Peculiar year of 1692

It was in 1692, fourteen years after Willard had taken command of the pulpit of Third Church that Katherine Richardson writes, “experiments...confined at first to a group of several young girls who engaged in superstitious games as a frivolous pastime...developed into highly emotional episodes with all the characteristics of hysteria.”³⁹ These bewildering behaviors were thought to have held spiritual impetus at the hands of Satan. Richardson reports that after much examination, both spiritual and physical, warrants were issued on February 29th “for the arrest of the three women, and during the next few days they were examined by two local magistrates.”⁴⁰ This hysteria, confined not only to Salem,

³⁸ Hall, David D. *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972, 58.

³⁹ Richardson, Katherine. *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*. Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Essex Museum, 1994, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

expanded to neighboring villages and communities. Eighteen miles away in Boston, the plight of the accused and their immanent punishment compelled Willard to write, “*Some Miscellany Observations On our Present Debates respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialogue Between S. & B.*” The “S” and the “B” are thought to have stood for “Salem” and “Boston.” While Willard published this tract anonymously modern scholarship has almost definitively linked it to Willard; additionally, he wrote another anti-witchcraft manifesto years earlier while ministering in Gorton. The discourse published by Willard in 1692 takes the form of an argument between what seem to be two opposing gentlemen debating the merits of the charges brought forth against the “witches.” The character representing Salem begins by addressing the Willard figure, “I understand that you and many others are greatly dissatisfied at the Proceedings among us, in the pursuance of those that have been Accused for Witchcraft, and have accordingly sought to obstruct them; which I am afraid will prove pernicious to the Land.”⁴¹

The anti-witch trial figure begins his case by stating:

Sir, the Peace of a Place is earnestly to be sought, and they that sinfully cause Divisions, will be guilty of all the miserable effects of them but whether this blame will truly fall upon you or us, is to be considered there is an earnest contending for the Truth requisite, and that is not to be parted with for Peace.⁴²

Clearly, Willard, like his late seventeenth century cohorts did believe in the actuality of witches or those possessed by evil; however, as his statement above reflects, such an assessment could not be easily made—“an earnest contending for

⁴¹ Willard, Samuel. "Some Miscellany Observations On our present Debates respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialogue Between S. & B 1692." 2000.Web.

⁴² Ibid.

the Trust requisite.” Furthermore, Willard’s dialogue proves he was concerned with the very idea of justice itself. His first concern is that the innocent may face false accusation, “Taking it for granted that there are Witches in NEW ENGLAND, which no rational man will dare to deny; I ask whether Innocent Persons may not be falsely accused of Witchcraft?..[and] that every suspicion is enough to commit a man to Prison for such a Crime.”⁴³ Finally, Willard brings up the very notion of justice as it relates to the witch trial debate.

This is a dangerous Principle, and contrary to the mind of God, who hath appointed that there shall be good and clear proof against the Criminal: else he is not Providentially delivered into the hands of Justice, to be taken off from the earth. Nor hath God exempted this Case of Witchcraft from the General Rule. Besides, reason tells us, that the more horrid the Crime is, the more Cautious we ought to be in making any guilty of it.⁴⁴

Not only does Willard employ “reason” in his argument against the proceedings in Salem he also mentions “providence” as it relates to justice. Thus, Willard claims that the witch trials represent a very artificial justice contrary to that which would be part of God’s divine providence at work on Earth. The turn of phrase that stands as most noteworthy for this paper is “contrary to the mind of God.” In this statement Willard indicates that there exists an arbiter of justice higher than that of any magistrate. God, as this supreme chief magistrate operates only when there “shall be good and clear proof against the Criminal”—which obviously Willard believes is nonexistent in this case. In Willard’s opinion, the judgments being handed down in Salem are “ungodly” and unjust. They stand “contrary” to the order of God’s universe and in opposition to the kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

⁴³ Willard, Samuel. "Some Miscellany Observations On our present Debates respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialogue Between S. & B 1692." 2000.Web.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

In this discourse, Willard, in essence, diagnoses the spiritual ills of a society wandering through the anxieties of a supernatural world. Applying the classical Puritan pastoral care tenets of inquiry and argument, Willard changes the scope of his focus from the micro (those who sat in the pews) to the macro (all of Creation), appealing to both logical and empirical evidence. Willard's pastoral conscience thus expanded eighteen miles and typical pastoral logic used to modernize the ministry.

While Willard's well-known discourse stands as an important text in attempting to discern the nature of his opposition to the witch trials, his sermons preached from the same time frame can prove to shed more light on his inner meditation on this topic. For this inquiry I surveyed the sermons preached in 1692. While there is no way to definitively say whether or not Willard is explicitly referring to the proceedings in Salem in his sermons, there are many evocative phrases and images that give way to such an argument. Additionally, the sermon most heavily laden with imagery pertinent to the trials was preached on June 12th 1692 over 1 Peter 5:8. Willard begins with a piece of the scripture, "That the Divell is the adversary of mankind this hath been spoke to and we are upon the application."⁴⁵ Willard later goes on to write in his application of the scripture, "By discouraging them at dark provisions 4) by stirring up the rage of persecution agt them. 5) by sowing discord among them between themselves. He not only raises the world upon them & sets wicked men upon them but sets them

⁴⁵ Willard, Samuel. *Sermons, 1691-1692*

at var[ience] one agt another....”⁴⁶ On June 19th it appears as if Willard revisited the previous week’s scripture after giving his standard sermon. In his review of the 1 Peter scripture he adds:

“Lett not gods people wonder if they find Satan’s malice, breaking out more perculiarly against them & that in two ways 1) by horrid & forced temptations 2) by [] & Scandalous asposions. Which he will endeavor to raise & cast upon them to reproach them with all & here he is wont to make use of men but to make them suffer under ill names....”⁴⁷

The most obvious connection to the witch trials in this instance are the “forced temptations” and “Scandalous asposions” forcing upon the sufferer “ill names.” This combined with his previous week’s sermon and his discussion of “dark provisions” and the “rage of persecution” serve to underscore a certain theme that would have been of the utmost timeliness for this sermon—just two days before this sermon was preached from the pulpit of Third Church, Rebecca Nurse, one of the first “witches” found guilty was hanged. Furthermore, Richardson writes that, “The Court of Oyer and Terminer convened on 2 June, and on that day Briget Bishop was sentenced to death by hanging. The court also convened on 29 June with five convictions....”⁴⁸ If there ever was a time for Willard to preach about the presence of the “Divell” in forcing upon “gods people” “ill names” and “persecution” it was June of 1692. Considering Willard’s strong anti-witch trial convictions, culminating in his “*Some Miscellany Observations*” it only would make sense that in the midst of such a crucial time Willard’s sentiments would froth to the surface and spill down the oak of his pulpit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Richardson, Katherine. *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*. Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Essex Museum, 1994, 12.

David Hall, muses on Willard's differing conception of pastoral "success." He notes that Willard worked to "recast" success and goes on to assert, "Willard [was not] able to convince his fellow ministers that success was not measured by conversions."⁴⁹ Instead, Willard held to the idea that "Ministers were merely 'Instruments used by God' ...require[ing] Almighty Power to influence them."⁵⁰ As such an "instrument" it would make sense that he viewed himself as carrying out the will of God, employing the idea of "providence" and "reason" and categorizing those in question as "god's people" thus proving that Willard used the Puritan pastoral logic of his era in a new context and under radically altered circumstances to reshape the very nature of pastoral care and consequently the American pastorate.

After 1692

Aside from Willard's employment of pastoral care methods to diagnose and draw attention to the ills of a morally and spiritually ailing society; his writings indicate that he viewed himself not only as one who advocated for "god's people" who were wrongly accused but also as a confessional for the sinner. In fact in 1701 Willard preached two sermons on the topic of "brotherly love." In the text he articulates the nature of the minister's duty to serve as a respectful repository of others' frailties and faults. He encourages the confessional to honor the dignity of the confessor. He writes, "We cannot therefore likely do them a grater unkindness, or put upon them a bigger affront, than by divulging what they

⁴⁹ Hall, David D. *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972, 266.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

have presumed was safe or if they had kept it locked in their own bosoms.”⁵¹

Willard clearly valued the pastoral experience of harboring the “secrets” and things “burdensome upon...spirits” by pledging to not “betray” them.

Furthermore, this stands as evidence that might be used to postulate Willard’s pastoral demeanor. For he goes on in the same sermon to profess, “There are some such unhappy occasions which fall out among the best of men in this life....”⁵² He couples this with, “All are not alike in their constitutions; some are more apt to entertain suspicions in them, others more ready to vent their passions than is meet;...and there are many things that occasionally stir up our worser part...”⁵³ Willard encourages his listeners to, “considering one another, to provoke love and good works.”⁵⁴ These “things” that “stir up our worser part” were all too familiar for Willard. Aside from his pastoral practices encompassing the larger society as his “unconventional parishioner” nine years before, Willard had in his congregation three arbiters of this sort of artificial justice--contrary to his notions of divine providence and reason--sitting in his pews—sheep in his flock. Hamilton Hill writes that the trials touched Third Church at several points,

⁵¹ Willard, Samuel.

the Christian Exercise by Satan’s Temptations: OR, an Essay to Discover the Methods which this Adversary Useth to Tempt the Children of God; and to Direct them how to Escape the Mischief Thereof. –BEING the Substance of Sveral Sermons Preached on that Subject. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Grren and J. Allen, 1701, 264.

⁵² Willard, Samuel.

the Christian Exercise by Satan’s Temptations: OR, an Essay to Discover the Methods which this Adversary Useth to Tempt the Children of God; and to Direct them how to Escape the Mischief Thereof. –BEING the Substance of Sveral Sermons Preached on that Subject. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Grren and J. Allen, 1701, 268.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

“Three of its members, Wait Winthrop, Samuel Sewall, and Peter Sargeant, were judges of the Special Court appointed to try the witchcraft cases in Eastern Massachusetts.”⁵⁵ Of these three, Samuel Sewall was undoubtedly the most prominent. If one looks at the membership records of Third Church, Sewall’s entry into the congregation can be seen just months before the congregation called Willard to the pastorate. Sewall’s personal diary leaves a very sparse account of the witch trials. The first mention of such involvement comes in an entry on April 11, 1692 where he writes, “Went to Salem, where in the Meeting-house, the persons accused of Witchcraft were examined; was a very great Assembly; ‘twas awfull to see how the afflicted persons were agitated.”⁵⁶

Judge Sewall, according to tradition, was the only witch trial judge to repent of his action and acknowledge the exceedingly horrid nature of his error. Hamilton Hill notes that Sewall is believed to have “observed a day of private prayer annually, as long as he lived, in humble penitential remembrance of his part in the witchcraft trials.”⁵⁷ Despite this, his inward penitence proved to be inadequate; in 1697 he openly acknowledged his confession before the congregation asking “the pardon of his fellowmen.” It was, according to Hill, the 7th verse of Matthew, read to him by his son, that fueled the apology: “If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have

⁵⁵ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 268.

⁵⁶ Thomas, M. Halsey, ed. *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973, 289.

⁵⁷ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 290.

condemned the guiltless.”⁵⁸ The “guiltless” who Willard has considered “god’s people” who were “suffering under ill names” in a June 1692 sermon were in his mind and under his pastoral logic a part of the same “parish” as the very man who was at the helm of their judgment. Thus, if Willard considered those eighteen miles from his pulpit under the auspices of his pastoral logic, then the accused, like Sewall and the other two judges who were a part of Third Church, in Willard’s mind occupied the same metaphorical pew—equal to each other in the eyes of the divine. This was in Willard’s writings an example of a “thing...which stirs up our worser part,” an instance where God’s children bring “Scandalous asposions” against each other.

It was almost as if we can argue that Willard had prepared himself for Sewall’s apology five years before it even took place. I even go as far to say that Willard’s opposition to the proceedings in Salem and his application of Puritan pastoral logic against an unconventional backdrop stood as the very impetus for his role as a confessional with Sewall and his wish to publicly acknowledge his error. Hill writes that, “On the afternoon of the Fast day the judge handed to Mr. Willard as, in gown and bands, he was passing up one of the “alleys” to the pulpit, the... “bill” to be read by him.”⁵⁹ The detail that Willard was wearing his “gown and bands” stands significant in this inquiry. This detail conveys Willard’s pastoral office. In the Congregational tradition robes and bands are meant to give the minister a sort of academic and scholarly immanence as the leader, and

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁵⁹ Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston 1669-1884*. I Vol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1890, 292.

teacher—shepherd of a flock. The fact that Willard was actively “shepherding” at the time Sewall chose to deliver his public confession indicates that he was not influenced to act based on any sort of friendship or personal comfort with Willard outside of church-life, but rather was influenced by Willard the minister. By Willard, the one who took those Sewall handed down judgments “contrary to the mind of God” upon into his flock—and now Willard five years later was caring for the arbiter of such artificial and contrary justice in his flock as a human, faulty, imperfect, frail, and spiritually depleted. Ultimately, this scenario stands as historically poetic. Sewall and those he condemned ultimately exist—via Willard—as sheep grazing the same pastures, sitting in the same pews, albeit one *literally*, the others *metaphorically*, and in the end both received the care and compassion of Willard. Thus, the poeticism lies in a sort of ultimate pastoral justice. In the eyes of God all are equal—grazing the same pastures—and Willard, as the shepherd used Puritan pastoral care to augment this very idea which would become the foundation for our modern understanding of social justice.

Willard’s Pastoral Legacy

Taking Willard’s dual role as an advocate for the concerns of the larger society that were “contrary” to the mind of God coupled with the evidence suggesting his self-perpetuated role as a confessional into account leads to no surprise in the fact that those who came after him deeply admired the nuances he brought to the ministerial office. Willard’s devotion to the pastorate is most obvious in his request that he remain in the pulpit of Third Church if he was to serve as acting-president of Harvard College. When he passed in 1707 his successor, Ebenezer Pemberton, wrote his funeral sermon which

casts light on the influence his methods has on the future of Congregational ministry. The scripture for the sermon, from the Gospel of Matthew captured the very simple question of the discourse: What was Samuel Willard? The scriptural answer: a faithful and wise servant. The verse reads as printed in the funeral sermon, “Who then is a faithful and wise Servant whom his Lord hath made Ruler over his Household to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that Servant, whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing.”⁶⁰ Pemberton, in the sermon, takes liberty to articulate exactly what the purpose of the Congregational minister is. He begins with, “The Work of an Evangelical Minister is to Feed Christ’s Family. Christ’s Flock must be fed, and his Household must have fuitable Provision made for them. And this by Office belongs to Christ’s Servants. . .”⁶¹ Willard, undoubtedly fed his flock abundantly. In fact, he re-defined the very nature of his flock and invited those to eat at the table to whom he had no obligation. The food Willard prepared fed both saint and sinner and the “extravagant welcome” into which his form of pastoral logic and role as a confessional ultimately translated led to Sewall’s public apology and Willard’s acceptance of his concession.

Furthermore, regarding the witch trials, in a direct reference Pemberton writes:

And it ought never to be forgotten, with what Prudence, Courage and Zeal he appeared for the good of this People, In that Dark and Mysterious Season, when we were assaulted form the Invisible World. And how Singularly Instrumental he was in discovering the Cheats and Delusion of Satan, which had stained our Land with Blood, and did threaten to deluge it with all manner of Woes.

⁶⁰ Pemberton, Ebenezer, and Benjamin Colman. *A Funeral Sermon on that Learned and Excellent Divine the Rev. Mr. Samuel Willard*. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Green, 1707, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Willard's actions "for the good of this People" in "discovering the Cheats and Delusion of Satan" indicates that his sentiments and actions resonated to the point where they were considered "singular." His disregard for distance and his newfound mechanism of stretching pastoral consciousness beyond the last pew clearly did not go without mention in a discussion of his pastoral legacy.

Moreover Pemberton directly mentions his means of pastoral care. He writes:

When any Cases of Conscience came under his thought, he was wont to handle them with Wise Caution, and admirable Compassion; He deliberated Maturely on all circumstance, and laid the Whole by the Unerring Rule, and with Great judgment determined agreeably.⁶²

As I discussed earlier, Willard employed inquiry and argument in the case of the ailing and afflicted Knapp and encouraged others to handle such situations with due compassion. Furthermore this sort of "Wise Caution" and "admirable Compassion" underscored his role as a confessional for the sinner. He viewed himself as one who when wearing the "robes and stripes" was called to "betrust...burdensome [things] upon their spirits." Willard's pastoral legacy then rests in a sort of refocusing of the ministerial lens that ultimately moved the office of Congregational minister closer toward the pattern of progressivism that is trademark of the modern day predecessor denomination to Willard's seventeenth century Congregational Puritanism.

Willard's pastoral methods worked to create a sense of divine equality. While he extended his ministerial concern to those beyond the walls of Third

⁶² Pemberton, Ebenezer, and Benjamin Colman. *A Funeral Sermon on that Learned and Excellent Divine the Rev. Mr. Samuel Willard*. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Green, 1707, 10-11

Church and the city limits of Boston he maintained an ardent sense of obligation to those who sat in his pews---even if they were those he felt were carrying on legal proceedings “contrary to the mind of God.” His acceptance of Sewall’s confession and the pastoral care such an action indicates almost stands as an act of justice in itself. Sewall was just as much one of Willard’s parishioners as were those who had “ill names” brought upon them in Salem village, eighteen miles away in 1692. Sewall the judge, sat, in Willard’s mind, in the same pew as those he condemned—equal to each other on this holy journey. Willard’s compassion for all parties and understanding that “former experiences [should be] helpful to us”⁶³ is evidence of Willard’s nuanced personality. He dramatically yet subtly, minutely yet drastically, changed the landscape of ministry. His love not just people in his pews but rather all of humanity coupled with his understanding of the power of the plights, afflictions, and evils that overcome the human soul in a supernatural world punctuated with anxiety and change, and the seriousness with which he approached the pastorate set a model for Congregational ministry that moved beyond simple preacher and teacher to worthy shepherd, leader of the sheep. Leading a flock is no small task and those called to such a high office must according to Willard in his, *Brief directions to a young scholar designing the ministry for the study of divinity*, “Bear in Mind that of the Apostle, James 1. 17. Every good Gift, and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the

⁶³ Willard, Samuel.

the Christian Exercise by Satan’s Temptations: OR, an Essay to Discover the Methods which this Adversary Useth to Tempt the Children of God; and to Direct them how to Escape the Mischief Thereof. –BEING the Substance of Sveral Sermons Preached on that Subject. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Grren and J. Allen, 1701. 268.

Father of Lights.”⁶⁴

Pemberton concludes his long discourse with a statement that defines what Willard was thought to have done for the ministerial office of his time:

I cannot but here observe, That the Younger Ministers always repaired to him, and found him their tender Father, their faithful Counsellor, sure Guide, and Powerful Guardian. These he cherish't under his Wings, and was tender of their Persons and good Names: And often interposed to put by those Thrusts that were made to Wound their Reputation; and they have now lost the Best Friend that Many of them ever had a this side Heaven.⁶⁵

Pemberton's articulation portrays the same Willard that can be observed when examining the historical record. He was above all, “tender Father.” That “tenderness,” that nuance of personality and pastoral care resulted in a minister tender to the weighty experiences indicative of human existence. He approached his office with prudence and caution and subtly created a sense of equality that rectified the evils of the past and brought faith and the Congregational tradition back into concern with both reason and divine Providence. Clearly, Pemberton's funeral sermon stands as a testament to the impact Willard had on the proceeding generations of ministers who learned from he who was such a prudent and faithful shepherd.

Conclusion

In 1692, eighteen miles through the woodlands of eastern Massachusetts was no small distance. Pastoral consciousness had no obligation to extend

⁶⁴ Pemberton, Ebenezer, and Benjamin Colman. *A Funeral Sermon on that Learned and Excellent Divine the Rev. Mr. Samuel Willard*. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Green, 1707, 1.

⁶⁵ Pemberton, Ebenezer, and Benjamin Colman. *A Funeral Sermon on that Learned and Excellent Divine the Rev. Mr. Samuel Willard*. Boston, Massachusetts: B. Green, 1707, 75.

anywhere past the last pew, well within sight of the minister's pulpit. Yet Samuel Willard challenged that convention. His parish included not only those seated comfortably in the pews of Third Church but those outside the perimeters of the church proper. He made those whose identities stood unknown to him, whose stories he had never heard, whose fears, struggles, and faith testimonies he would never hear—part of his parish. They were in essence, “unconventional parishioners.”

He employed the Puritan pastoral care methods of reason and inquiry to diagnose not merely the ailments of an individual but rather of a society. He used conventional practice in a new context and thereby refocused the lens of ministry. When the actions of society were “contrary” to the “mind of God” his consciousness extended eighteen miles to a village called Salem. When five years later one of the arbiters of such false justice—Samuel Sewall---asked for repentance, Willard invited him to sit at the table of forgiveness and to occupy—in the mind of Willard---the same metaphorical pews as those he had so unjustly condemned. Willard's pastoral care methods created a sense of divine justice—where the accused and the accuser, the judge and the judged sat at the same table and drank from the cup of God's grace.

Willard was no divine. Willard was a shepherd appointed by the divine to lead sheep. When those sheep went astray and the society in which they were denizens went morally awry he employed methods of care in a creative context and thus radically changed the way that proceeding generations conceived of the ministry. Willard's primitive concern for social justice at such an early state in the

history of American Congregationalism leads us to observe the beginning of a pattern of progressivism and concern for humanity that those in the modern day ancestor denomination to Willard's Congregationalism, the United Church of Christ, find familiar. This progressivism finds its roots in a Puritan past that was responsive to its time because of Willard's work to make the ministerial office relevant. Thus if there is one thing to be taken away from Willard's pastorate—which ended three hundred five years ago—it is that the ministry must be fluid and responsive to its ecology—and pastoral care methods, when applied to new contexts can work to fundamentally realign the ministerial office and thus reinvent the vocation to sustain continued religious life in the next generation.

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