

**Theological Praxis: Creative Faith and Doctrinal
Belief in Puritan Congregationalism and a
Corporate Megachurch**

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To my brother Jonathan, my first and dearest friend of the mind.

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I. Theological Praxis: An Introduction

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt presented a distinctive interpretation of Aristotle's praxis in response to metaphysical philosophy. Arendt rejected metaphysical interpretations that esteemed contemplation at the expense of action and defined praxis as action derived from thought. She concluded that truth did not emerge in silence, when action was absent, but in the reciprocal relation of thought and action. Arendt redefined praxis as the speaking and acting of political participation, and theorized that the enactment of one's truth for others was freedom. She wrote,

Traditionally, therefore, the term *vita activa* receives its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; its very restricted dignity is bestowed upon it because it serves the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body... [it serves] a derivative, secondary position. If, therefore the use of the term *vita activa*, as I propose it here, is in manifest contradiction to the tradition, it is because I doubt not the validity of the experience underlying the distinction but rather the hierarchical order inherent in it from its inception.¹

In Arendt's theory of praxis, the speaking and acting of political life is fueled by the desire to emulate the performances of others for public glory. In this thesis, I extend Arendt's praxis, asserting that freedom might exist in creative exchanges of truth outside of the realm of public government. I address the following questions: what organizational and ideological circumstances support praxis, and how might praxis appear informally in cases in which formal structures oppose its enactment? My aim is to identify a particular kind of non-governmental praxis: a theological praxis. I contend that freedom might be experienced when spiritual people bring their lived experiences into reciprocal relation with the symbols of their faith- when theological truth arises within the speaking and

¹ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 16-17.

acting of community life instead of the isolated contemplation of those with religious authority.

I consider praxis and authority within two Protestant Christian communities, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and a contemporary Neo-Calvinist megachurch. These communities faced similar theological conflicts, despite being separated by 400 years. In these contexts, I explore the doctrines and organizational frameworks compatible with my notion of theological praxis. *I define theological praxis as ritual discourse in which actors interpret theological symbols in synthesis with lived experience for the mutual spiritual benefit of those engaged.* As I will explore, theological praxis energizes the search for personal spiritual truth; it does not incite believers to fulfill a higher mission.

The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony- primarily those attending the First Church of Boston between 1630 and 1640- are the subjects of my first analysis. Drawing from primary sources and previous scholarship, I identify the *Puritan profession as a form of theological praxis*. The profession held prominent significance during the mid 1630s. In this ritual practice, congregants articulated their personal spiritual experiences to reassure themselves and encourage the faith of those covenanted to them, emulating one another in presenting theologies that engendered the faith of those in community. The profession was enacted for the mutual benefit of those in covenant: it was not intended to benefit outsiders, nor was it performed for the approval of an external authority. Professors performed using a variety of rhetorical techniques, interpreting so that those receiving might be assured in observing their confidence in the truth of their personal spiritual experience. In these speech-acts, professors freely interpreted their lived experiences, creatively utilizing theological symbols and rhetoric. In this way, thought,

action and speech moved synchronically within their deliberate performances. In employing shared symbols to explain lived experience, professors informally and unintentionally created new theologies. The profession can be distinguished from other Puritan discourses- trial proceedings, synodical debates, and doctrinal correspondences- in ways that clarify its unique character as praxis.

The Puritans sailed for Massachusetts Bay in order to formally enact the mutual covenants that had bound them informally while under the gaze of the Church of England. This geographic separation was to their advantage, allowing them to concentrate their energies on mutual covenanting, as opposed to laboriously ridding themselves of the influence of the English Church. In enacting covenants of mutual consent, the Puritans believed that they would bring about the revelation of a pure interpretation of scripture and initiate the second coming of Christ. As the Puritans faced the proliferation of theological difference, ministerial authorities emerged above the covenanted communities to maintain church unity. During this time, the profession took on a special prominence, strengthening formal covenant bonds while also supporting ministerial authorities- drawing the formal political bodies together in commonality.

I argue that when the profession was taken up as a ministerial tool for colonial and congregational admission, it ceased to operate as praxis, and church trials gained social importance in its place. Following the Antinomian controversy of 1636-1638, doctrine was progressively disconnected from congregational life, protecting the unifying beliefs from the influence of congregational experience. As doctrine and lived experience were progressively separated, and the formal church no longer supported the professional praxis, congregants ceased to enact personal theologies. They struggled to remedy the

disconnect between their everyday actions and their spoken adherence to religious belief. During the later half of the 17th century, the colony succumbed to frequent hypocrisy panics in which they questioned the validity of speech and action in relation to thought.

Secondly, I draw from Mars Hill, a megachurch founded in Seattle, Washington in the mid-1990s.² Previously studied for its militarized culture of self-sacrifice, Mars Hill was established as a countercultural authoritarian community, opposed to post-modernism and critical of other forms of American Christianity.³ The church began when a small group of young adults came together in search of a way to separate themselves from liberal society, which they viewed as a threat their religious convictions. At an early stage, a member named Mark Driscoll halted discourse on organization and doctrine and forcibly established the church according to “how a church should be organized.” The founding members were divided as they faced the decision to follow Driscoll or break association.⁴

The church gained social influence as Driscoll’s charismatic teaching brought thousands of new members into the community. His “corporate” organizational strategy inspired an Evangelical movement known as the Emerging Church.⁵ The church peaked in size at 21,000 weekly attendees and 15 church sites. In November of 2014, the Board of Advisors disbanded the organization after a large number of church leaders accused

² “Mars Hill, Our History.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

Jessica Johnson. "The Citizen-Soldier: Masculinity, War, and Sacrifice at an Emerging Church in Seattle, Washington," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 33.2 (2010): 326-351.

³ Mark Chaves. "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context." *Review of Religious Research* (2006): 329-346.

Anne C., Loveland, and Otis B. Wheeler. *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (University of Missouri Press, 2003).

Conrad Wright. "The Growth of Denominational Bureaucracies: A Neglected Aspect of American Church History." *Harvard theological review* 77.02 (1984): 177-194.

⁴ Mark Driscoll. *On Church Leadership (Book You'll Actually Read)* (Crossway Books, 2008), 1-2.

⁵ Josh Packard and George Sanders. "The Emerging Church as Corporatization's Line of Flight." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28.3 (2013): 437-455.

Driscoll of abusing his authority and demanded that he temporarily step down.⁶ The church was pressured by the public release of controversial church procedures including their issuing of non-disclosure agreements and trial and shunning practices. Driscoll faced widespread criticism for his beliefs about women and sexual minorities, and faced allegations after misusing church funds to promote his best-selling books. He also faced opposition from Evangelical and Mainline Protestant leaders concerned with his aggression and the business mentality of the organization.⁷ After Driscoll's resignation, eleven of Mars Hill's sites became autonomous churches.⁸

I collected documents from church websites, blog posts, forums and news reports, and conducted in-person interviews and observational studies in one of the disbanded church sites. I gained further information on church doctrine from Driscoll's sermons and publications, as well as interviews conducted before the disband. Drawing from these sources, I came to the conclusion that authoritative doctrine and organizational hierarchy inhibited praxis. At Mars Hill, doctrine was dominant, meaning that the actions of the community were understood to be derived from it. Community units were facilitated by formal authorities commissioned to maintain the meaning of the doctrines preached. I hold that in theological praxis, in contrast to this authoritarian environment, participants are empowered to both interpret the spiritual events of their lives and alter the language through which the community's spiritual experiences are signified.

Drawing from both cases, I juxtapose the theological praxis of the profession with discourses in which the action of lived spiritual experience is subject to doctrinal belief. I

⁶ Warren Throckmorton, "Formal Charges," and "Bylaws."

⁷ Molly Worthen. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Molly Worthen "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?" *New York Times*, January 6, 2009.

⁸ "Mars Hill." Website. Accessed November 10, 2014. On file with researcher.

use the term *doctrine* to signify protected religious symbols- concepts, figures or scriptures perceived to hold universal meaning. For my purposes I hold that praxis is distinct from discourses in which doctrine is separated from community life in such a way that it need be *applied* in lived experience. I use the term *applicative* to describe situations in which doctrine and lived experience are separated to the extent that they require an intermediary to reconnect them. For example, in the authoritative context of Mars Hill, members looked to sermons in order to “know how to love one another.” In this case the members understood doctrine to be imparted to them via their pastor. They were to “apply to their lives” the ideas he communicated.⁹ Likewise, in church trials, the Puritans of New England judged the conduct of their fellows according to their ability to apply the teachings of the church into their everyday actions.

As in the metaphysical conclusion that Arendt opposed, in these situations the action of lived experience was understood to be derived from doctrine, and was conformed to its inflexible partner. In these cases, adherents expended their energies maintaining or proving the truth of doctrines, conforming their actions to immutable beliefs. As I will explain, in both cases, fixed doctrine operated in conjunction with authoritative hierarchies, which served to distance ideas from the lived experiences of believers. I contend that when considered in a theological environment, praxis- the speaking and acting of community life- is incompatible with acts of obedient belief; praxis is comprised of acts of creative faith.

⁹ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee, December 13, 2015.

My analysis extends several of Arendt's primary concepts. She distinguished administration, the regulation of populations, from praxis.¹⁰ I extended this distinction to clerical functions in which the sacred is administered to religious adherents, such as the distribution of sacraments and the hearing of confessions. Two administrative duties were especially relevant in my cases: the establishment of doctrine for distribution throughout a pre-existing population of believers, and the separation of the saved from the unsaved through membership procedures. I observed that these administrative actions were also representative: administrators represented the divine on earth for those below them in establishing doctrines and examining spiritual states. At Mars Hill and in the Puritan ministry, leaders functioned in dual representation, representing others before God, and representing God for others. I used Arendt's definition of authority as a resource for my analysis of these functions, in which intermediary leaders facilitated the distribution of a higher doctrine to be obeyed by those below.¹¹ In this way, intermediaries operated in the gap between doctrine and lived experience (or thought and action in Arendt's terms). Through the administration and representation of ministers, community life "received its meaning" and was bestowed with a "very restricted dignity," on account of its relation to doctrine, the source of theological truth.¹²

In Arendt's theory of revolution, she noted the intent of the French revolutionaries to expose hypocrisy, and addressed the significance of their belief that suffering would move those with authority to work for the good of those without.¹³ The issue of hypocrisy and the idea that harmony might arise by suffering were evident in my cases. Under

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt. *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 136.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt. "What is authority?" *Between Past and Future* 91 (1958).

¹² Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 16-17.

¹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*.

pressure to purely apply doctrine to lived experience, the communities in Massachusetts Bay and the members at Mars Hill became preoccupied with the relationship between their actions and their speech. They recognized that their proclaimed beliefs did not align with their lived experiences. In New England, the Puritans tried (and in some cases hung) their fellow congregants, attempting to uncover the issue of human psychology, or the demonic influence, preventing their fellows from properly conforming their lived experiences and speech to the fixed doctrine. Similarly, at Mars Hill, members confessed their hypocrisy and inability to speak while attempting to convert outsiders, blaming their limited capacity to apply doctrine and their inability to communicate in order to preserve the reputation of their universal truths. I found that adherents were disabled from engaging in the theological speech-acts of praxis in cases of fixed doctrine, as in these situations, members were to recite belief in order to express their spirituality, and their actions were separated from these declarations of allegiance. Adherents took the blame for the disharmony of lived experience, declarations of belief, and doctrine. In these situations, they believed human sinfulness was the cause of their inability to match action to doctrine (and therefore the reason for hypocrisy), and that sinfulness was to be remedied as those with authority- administrators and representatives- suffered on behalf of those below.

Arendt's revitalization of praxis influenced many disciplines, prominently impacting theories of education, critical thought, and feminist scholarship. In many religious traditions, praxis is used to refer to any religious action originating from metaphysical truths; in these cases praxis has retained a meaning incoherent with

Arendt's definition.¹⁴ However, Arendt's interpretation was received by religious studies, and in liberation theology and public theology. Theologians have used praxis to signify repetitive ritual activities encompassing moments of thought and action.¹⁵ Praxis has also come to signify theo-political action occurring within communities of faith. Out of these experiences scholars have argued for an actualized theology not bound to future transcendence.

The future in its relation to the present as transcendence, promise, and hope is indeed to be understood as an explicit dimension of theological interpretation, but not at the price of a repression of the past in its own proper relation to the present as memory and tradition. An "actualizing theology" must take into account the fullness of finite historical time, past, present, and future. Finite futurity comes into its own as a part of the continuum of historical time with all the ambiguities which temporality implies. The future may be taken as a sign of transcendence, but it is not transcendence itself.¹⁶

As developed in this quote, praxis has been used in theological contexts to emphasize the sacredness of present community action, engaged in balance with memories of the past and aims for the future. This argument is important to my analysis of eschatology in Puritan covenanting and in the militant mission culture of Mars Hill, in which speaking and acting were not understood to be sacred in themselves, but a means of reaching a future religious end.

Several studies of theological praxis identified the speaking and acting of personal narratives as a doorway to public action. In a 2014 article, Rosemary Carbine labeled

¹⁴ In these cases, praxis simply means "action," and does not indicate the discursive speaking and acting of theo-political covenanting.

¹⁵ Terry A. Veling. *Living in the Margins Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 182.
Thomas Groome. *Sharing faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998).

¹⁶ Dennis P. McCann. "Toward a Theological Understanding of Praxis." *The Journal of Religion* 56.2 (1976): 198–203.

Edward Schillebeeckx. *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx Volume 5: The Understanding of Faith. Interpretation and Criticism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

narrative-telling as a “rhetorical, symbolic and prophetic praxis.”¹⁷ In a 2002 study, Carbine considered the theo-political significance of narratives expressed in the congressional hearings held after Hurricane Katrina. Carbine found that “narrative provided an alternative theologically inspired rhetorical form or mode of political engagement.”¹⁸ Further, she asserted that narrative-telling disrupted existing exclusionary views of public life and of participation in it, and offered a way for marginalized groups to regain access to public discourse. She concluded that theologically, narrative discourses operated as a form of prophetic political participation, a form “of speaking up and acting out on behalf of justice.” Referencing Arendt, she noted that stories have the capacity to build “a bridge between the public and private spheres,” because they allow participants to utilize multiple “genres” of communication in reflecting on central symbols of belief.¹⁹

First, rhetorical practices focus on a variety of aesthetic genres that give voice to and urge solidarity with marginalized peoples often denied political subjectivity and agency. As thematized by one genre, testimony holds much theological potential for reconfiguring common life, especially its tacit shared self-understanding or “narrative identity,” through the gaining of public recognition and justice for multiple voices. [Narratives] reflect on the sociopolitical significance and implications of central religious symbols... Rather than sacralize a borderline theocratic nation-state, justify a certain sociopolitical order, or demand confessional conformity to a Christian theological imaginary (and thereby disregard religious pluralism), public theologies draw on or extend Christianity’s organizing symbols, in order to craft a shared political space of moral discourse and practice about the meaning of human being and the mutual obligations of human beings to one another and to society.²⁰

¹⁷ Rosemary P. Carbine. “Public Theology: A Feminist View of Political Subjectivity and Praxis.” *Questioning the Human: Toward a Theological Anthropology for the Twenty-first Century*. Ed. Lieven Boeve, Yves De Maeseneer, and Ellen Van Stichel. (Fordham University Press, 2014), 148-163.

¹⁸ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Turning to Narrative: Toward a Feminist Theological Interpretation of Political Participation and Personhood." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.2 (2010): 375.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 393-394.

²⁰ Carbine, “Public Theology.” 148–163.

In a study of theology in the public sphere, Rebecca Chopp noted that personal testimonies, “have criticized and reshaped who ‘we’ are, as a social public and as Christianity, by making public the memories of suffering and giving public hearing to new voices, experiences, and expressions of life, while calling into question essentialist and hegemonic definitions of these publics.”²¹ According to Jane Kopas, narrative,

Serves as an alternative theological genre when academic argument is foreclosed to women and so-called “others” deemed incapable of doing intellectual and theological work, or when that work is associated with abstract universal/izing explanations and analyses of doctrines, symbols, texts, etc. which are seemingly disconnected from lived and living faith experiences.²²

Following my analysis of the theological praxis of the profession and the authoritarian context at Mars Hill, I consider how unconventional forms of praxis operate among persons otherwise excluded from the freedom of speaking and acting in community. In doing so, I address the significance of informal discourses in facilitating participation and allowing those with little authority to speak truth to power. I draw from Anne Hutchinson’s preservation of theological praxis in the Antinomian Controversy of 1636-1638, and consider the multivalent quality of the Mars Hill community to explore the movement of praxis between social domains. By this I mean that valuable forms of praxis may be transferred to alternate frameworks and thus preserved in situations in which thought and action are separated, making the formal environment unsuitable for praxis. I suggest that the temporary relocation of praxis, with the intent of reintroduction, may serve as a tool for preserving discourses of praxis valuable to community life.

²¹ Rebecca S. Chopp. “Reimagining Public Discourse.” *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 103 (1999): 55-48.

²² Carbine, “Turning to Narrative.” 375-412.

Jane Kopas. “Something Particular: Women’s Self-Narratives as a Resource for Theology.” In *Themes in Feminist Theology for the New Millennium (I)*. Ed. by Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 2002), 3-4, 23-27, 29-30.

Praxis challenges theology. In many doctrines, God is held far above human knowledge, and great mediation and administrative expertise is required in order for spiritual people to gain even a poor reflection of the face of God. I think praxis challenges conceptions of God in relation to humanity, for, when thought moves reciprocally with action, and individuals similarly share in truth, it follows that God and humanity might also exist closely and mutually. It follows that God may appear as individuals wrestle with theological truths in the speaking and acting of community life. Religious experiences and conceptions of God impact the way in which individuals perceive others, treat those close to them, and relate with outsiders. When a worldview hinges upon doctrines unaffected by human circumstance, followers may reject theological creativity, forgo wrestling with God in relationship with others, and stand firm, even to the point of abandoning kindness, harming themselves, or committing acts of violence.

Theological praxis requires that spiritual people confront doubt in their own agency, think theologically, and wrestle to creatively engage the symbols of their faith with their own experiences. My cases included many situations in which members, working to administer or represent theological truth, sought to empty themselves of agency, and equated creative engagement with religious disobedience. Instead they vigorously labored to apply rubrics determined from above, mistakenly equating this work with spiritual freedom. In theological praxis, the work of application- to which many devote a lifetime of religious energies- is unnecessary, for doctrine and lived experience, and God and humanity, may speak and act face-to-face.

In arguing for a theological praxis, I hold that religious communities have the potential to be spiritually political, not by influencing public government, but by supporting spaces in which people might engage in praxis. More broadly, in extending praxis beyond the creation of public government, I challenge the hierarchy inherent in the assumption that only the select few with governmental authority might experience freedom. Theological speech is one mode of communication among many, and religious communities are one of the many stages in which social thought is exchanged. Further, I challenge the assumption that formal structures must be elevated above the informal discourses that reciprocally legitimize them, that informal discourses are derived from formal ones. I challenge the notion that only the most visible of creative acts might be esteemed in such a way as to motivate human beings to speak and act in truth, and that the social domains through which we order our world- the spheres of government, family, education, religion and the like- must be ordered in value according to the formal legitimacy of the discourses they sustain.

II. The Profession as Praxis

Covenants

Under opposition from the authoritarian Church of England, mutual promising- a concept inspired by Biblical covenanting- emerged among the English Puritans.¹ Lay teaching, lay prophesying, and other non-institutionalized expressions of spirituality emerged in their communities. New England offered the Puritans the opportunity to enact the principles that had intimately bound them in the old world within formal constitutions. As Arendt observed, they attached ultimate significance to this process: the Puritans believed that the formalization of covenants, free from authority, would bring about the revelation of a perfect religious truth and the second coming of Christ.² Thus, they bound formal covenanting to a transcendent end, limiting the extent to which these discourses were purposed for the mutual spiritual benefit of those participating. Covenant frameworks allowed for the future enactment of theological praxis- in the form of a professional discourse.

¹ Religious communities in Tudor, England first used these organizational terms.

Adam B. Seligman. *Innerworldly Individualism: Charismatic Community and its Institutionalization* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

² Avihu Zakai. "Theocracy in New England: The Nature and Meaning of the Holy Experiment in the Wilderness." *Journal of religious history* 14.2 (1986): 133-151.

Edward Johnson. *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Savior in New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Collections, 1867).

George Selement. "The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638-1645." *The William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History and Culture* (1984): 32-48.

James F. Cooper Jr. *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Peter Toon. *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660* (Cambridge: Casemate Publishers, 2002).

Thomas Hooker. *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*. 1648.

Thomas Shepard. *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*. Ed. George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley. (Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections 58).

On arriving in Massachusetts, the Puritans officially bound themselves together in “mutuall love.”³ The founders of the First Church of Boston, “sixty-four men and half as many women,” gathered on July 30, 1630.⁴ They promised,

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in Obedience to His holy will, and Divine Ordinaunce: Wee whose names are hereunder written, being by His most wise, and good Providence brought together into this part of America in the Bay of Massachusetts, and desirous to unite our selves into one Congregation, or Church, under the Lord Jesus Christ our Head, in such sort as becometh all whom He hath Redeemed, and Sanctified to Himselfe, doe hereby solemnly, and religiously (as is His most holy Presence) Promise, and bind our selves, to walke in all our wayes according to the Rule of the Gospell, and in all sincere Conformity to His holy Ordinaunces, and in mutuall love, and respect each to other, so neere as God shall give us grace.⁵

Covenanting involved a lengthy process in which congregants reached agreement on church processes and written doctrines. Congregants not only gave their consent, but formed together the processes that would govern them, and church leaders were chosen through direct election within their respective covenant congregations.⁶ The most detailed record of this process was preserved in the history of the church at Dedham. For months a small number of prospective congregants gathered to discuss the formation of the local church. In these discussions, Reverend John Allin explained at length the foundational principles at play, teaching the gathered covenanters about popular consent and lay participation and ensuring that they agreed on the details of membership requirements, the election of officers, and their teaching and administrative duties. The group came to agreement on basic doctrines, discussing the Biblical arguments for church governance as

³ Dedham Church History.

⁴ Richard Donald Pierce, Ed. *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868*. Vol. 39. (Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1961), 6.

⁵ First Church of Boston History.

⁶ For works on the concomitants of new organization in England, see Seligman, chapter 1.

well as the errors of the sacraments of the Church of England.⁷ Finally, the gathered members gave their consent with a show of hands and written signature.⁸

Congregants engaged in the election of ministers and were active in establishing procedures for the admission of new members following the covenant signing. In 1634, four years after the founding of the First Church of Boston, the Dorchester Church sent a letter to Boston asking for advice on a procedural matter: the admission of the children of baptized yet unconverted parents.⁹ The full congregation at Boston engaged the question before an answer was composed. Their response included their final conclusion, advised cautions, and the counterarguments that had been presented during discussion.¹⁰ The letter concluded,

Wherein nevertheless we desire, so to be understood, not as presuming to judge others, who happily may be of different opinion in this point, or to direct you, who are by the grace of God given to you, able to direct your selves and us also in the Lord.¹¹

The letter evidences congregational participation; it also speaks to inter-congregational deference in the early covenanting period. The early settlers constituted communities in a spacious ideological environment- the great creative advantage of relocating to America. Colonial expansion for resources, attacks and natural disasters divided congregations; they did not divide as a result of doctrinal rivalry. For example, the Second Church of Boston was created when the Charles River froze “and they of

⁷ Reverend William Hubbard from Salem reflected on his church’s covenant, which he stated was drawn by “honest minded men” in 1629. He wrote that the founders “were not precisely fixed upon any particular order or form of government, but like *rasa tabula*, fit to receive any impression,” that “could be delineated out of the word of God.” Cooper, 18.

⁸ Dedham Church History and Cooper, 7.

⁹ This issue was left to the discretion of individual churches until the Half-Way Covenant of the Synod of 1662.

¹⁰ Cotton, John. *The Correspondence of John Cotton*. UNC Press Books, 2001. 189-191.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 189-191.

Charlton could not come to the sermon till the afternoon at high water.”¹² As settlers created new towns, church members set out from their previous communities to form their own. Thus, the legitimacy of Puritan communities was centered in covenanting acts, and the communities were eased from basing their identities in the “turning upside down” of a previous ideology.¹³ In other words, divided by geography and distanced from English ideology, the early settlers were free to organize without developing countercultural identities- identities negatively bound to their ideological opponents.¹⁴ Nor were community discourses concerned with proselytizing- persuading other congregations or new colonists to adopt the beliefs agreed upon in a particular covenant over another. In a full sense, participants covenanted for their mutual spiritual benefit: they did not perform for outsiders.¹⁵

Puritan covenanting resembles theological praxis, as I will define in detail in the following section. Covenanting was constitutionally creative, involving formal agreements on doctrine, and was enacted for the direct benefit of participants. Covenanting involved the speaking and acting of members in competitive, deliberative performance. Arendt described the colonial experience as the inadvertent discovery of the “few elementary truths” of human power- mutual promises and covenants.¹⁶ She also

¹² Winthrop, John. *Winthrop Papers I* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1628), 47.

¹³ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 17.

¹⁴ Relevant to the forthcoming analysis, the communities in Boston were non-separatist churches. In contrast, Roger Williams and the separatist Puritans held a hardline stance against the Church of England, constructing communities in direct opposition to its government and practice.

The first ideological conflicts in Massachusetts occurred against the Magisterial Court. Notably, the Watertown conflict of 1631.

John Winthrop. *The Journal of John Winthrop: 1630-1649*. Ed. Richard S. Dunn (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Children were included under the authority of their parents, and in some cases women were represented by their husbands. Also, trained clergy defended Congregationalism in correspondences to England on behalf of the settlers. Their administrative duties began with the induction of the second wave of settlers.

¹⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 165.

concluded that covenant communities were created for the mutual benefit of those participating, out of the material necessity for protection in new territory.¹⁷

However, on account of eschatology, Arendt concluded that Puritan covenanting was apolitical. Though their covenants involved the secular need for protection, they were also acts of obedience, purposed for future benefit in the world after. In her assessment, the settlers did not experience praxis; however, their mutual agreements paved the way for the moment of power in which the founders of the United States would constitute in political freedom.¹⁸ Thomas Hooker wrote,

For these are the times drawing on, wherein Prophecies are to attain their performances: and it's a received rule and I suppose most sane, when Prophecies are fulfilled they are best interpreted, the accomplishment of them is the best commentary... these are the times, when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters the Sea: and these waters of the Sanctuary shall increase from the ankles unto the knees, thence unto the loins, and thence become a river that cannot be passed.¹⁹

As Hooker's theology and other Congregationalist writings affirm, the Puritan settlers believed that their scriptures contained a perfect, pure system of government, founded upon acts of mutual consent.²⁰ This belief sacralized covenanting, placing expectations of order and permanency on these agreements. This limited the extent to which agreements might be replaced or altered.²¹

¹⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 164.

¹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 191, 230.

¹⁹ Seligman, 61.

Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*.

²⁰ Colony leaders were concerned with English opinion. English politicians made many attempts to revoke the charter, and Congregationalist ministers faced the critique of English clergy, who disapproved of their faith in laypeople. Under these conditions, the leaders of Massachusetts remained determined that Congregationalism would succeed in creating a unified society: they did not expect a diversity of doctrinal opinions and became anxious when a pluralism of scriptural interpretations emerged.

Cooper, 19.

²¹ *Ibid.* 19.

Therefore, although covenanting was comprised of mutual agreements on church governance and doctrine, reflective of praxis, I agree that the pull of pre-existing ideals altered the nature of these agreements. Participants were motivated by the desire to achieve pre-existing religious ideals; they were limited in their exchange of theological truths, created out of the synthesis of lived experience and theological symbols, because of their obligation to fulfill these ideals. However, their history of mutual covenanting laid a framework in which the profession, a discourse more closely resembling praxis, emerged.

This is a juncture essential to my definition of theological praxis and it confirms the special theo-political value the profession, which I will discuss in depth. The profession was an immanent discourse. By this I mean that unlike covenanting, it was performed for the confrontation of present doubt, so that those participating would be spiritually assured in hardship. Participants were encouraged to interpret their personal narratives, professing them in order to assure the faith of those covenanted to them. Congregants were motivated to emulate previously performed theologies, *desiring the honor of assuring the present faith of those covenanted to them*. The profession did not incite belief for the sake of a future state or transcendent end. Covenants however, were laden with these expectations.

While I am hesitant to classify or dismiss covenanting as praxis, it is certain that these agreements held special significance in Puritan history. Covenants were legal agreements and therefore held a special permanency (especially due to their sacredness). The founders were privileged to participate in constituting formal bonds that had lasting effects on future members. Formal covenanting was uncommon among the subsequent

waves of settlers, as members were grafted into communities via previously established procedures.²² In 1674, the Puritan reverend Samuel Torrey composed a jeremiad, calling the next generation of colonists to return to the religious passion of their parents and grandparents. Torrey's sermon pointed to a special "spiritual power" that had appeared among the first generation. In their jeremiads, Torrey and his contemporaries wrestled with the question of the continuity of participation; that is, how creative discourse might live beyond moments of formal enactment. Torrey acknowledged,

And you who are of the Rising Generation... You cannot many of you remember the works which God wrought for your forefathers- You have never seen the Churches in their first Beauty and Glory, nor Worship and Ordinances of God in their first Spiritual Power and Purity...²³

It is my interpretation that the jeremiads memorialized the passion of theological constitution, while also celebrating a time in which the church was empowered by the creative fervor of formal constitution. While influential, covenanting was not the congregants' only participatory experience, nor was it the most powerful or engaging discourse in their history. As the following section elaborates, my notion of theological praxis extends Arendt's theory by suggesting that constituted frameworks might be understood both as influential acts in themselves, and as hardware for other discourses of praxis. While informal and less permanent, these discourses ought not to be subordinated as bearing a secondary theological posture, for covenants are as indebted to their informal legitimacy as are the discourses that depended on their stability.

²² Later members were added via spoken allegiance to the covenant and an expression of personal faith.

²³ Samuel Torrey. "Exhortation unto Reformation." (Cambridge: Marmaduke Johnson, 1674), 2.

The Profession

The Puritan profession was a faith-engendering practice in which members emulated their covenant fellows in performing acts of faith that strengthened their religious and social bonds. In John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity*, written in 1630, he communicated their intent to support one another. This value was reflected in the profession.

This sensibleness and sympathy of each other's conditions will necessarily infuse into each part a native desire and endeavor to strengthen, defend, preserve, and comfort the other... Thus it is between the members of Christ, each discerns by the work of the Spirit his own image and resemblance in another, and therefore cannot but love him as he loves himself... Nothing yields more pleasure and content to the soul than when it finds that which it may love fervently, for to love and live beloved is the Soul's paradise, both here and in Heaven. In the state of wedlock there be many comforts to bear out the troubles of that condition, but let such as have tried the most say if there be any sweetness in that condition comparable to the exercise of mutual Love...²⁴

The profession did not directly confront a false doctrine, nor did it confront a poor system of church administration. Rather, the profession directly confronted doubt: persons reworked the symbols in question, altering their thought in conjunction with the realities of the new world. The profession was about the sharing of assurance. It addressed the question of whether their congregational experience of theological power was worth the hardship. It addressed their uncertain faith in mutual bonds, at the time when their covenanting fervor was fading.

Professors delivered their speeches before their respective congregations and were affirmed by vote.²⁵ This continuity allowed congregants to engage in the speaking and acting of praxis free of the transcendent pull of eschatology, and those who had not

²⁴ John Winthrop. *The Journal of John Winthrop: 1630-1649*, 5-7.

²⁵ Votes were taken through a show of hands, and unanimous approval was required. Patricia Caldwell. *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 46.

participated in covenanting were given the opportunity to experience theo-political empowerment. It also promoted an expansive participatory creativity uniquely inductive to a variety of personal spiritual actions, stimulating a creative theological emulation new to the Puritan experience.²⁶ Participants were encouraged to interpret their personal narratives, professing them in order to assure the faith those covenanted to them.

My analysis draws heavily upon Patricia Caldwell's book, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*. Caldwell traced the development of Puritan narratives, contrasting English rhetorical forms from those that emerged in New England. My analysis follows a similar chronology in order to trace the routinization of the profession, and explore the effects of administration and representation upon theological praxis. As Caldwell argued, I hold that the New England profession was far less expressive than the narratives performed among the English Puritans, and narratives from New England were progressively formalized in structure and content. I hold that this was likely due to American covenanting experience and their access to formal procedures. In contrast to Caldwell, I examine this narrative chronology in order to follow the exchange of theological information within the speaking and acting of community life. I assess narrative form and content in order to examine how theologies were produced and the organizational contexts that supported the profession as praxis.

²⁶ Weber's theory of charisma, as a social source unconstrained by legal institution, is relevant to the significance of the a-legal nature of the profession. Weber and his successors associated charisma with religious authority, specifically authority invested in special individuals occupying a direct access to the community's shared normative world, free of legal constraint. Discussion of group charisma, in which a community occupies direct, non-legalized access to the normative, has been explored in Adam Seligman's book on the routinization of Puritanism.

A noteworthy study of group charisma was conducted by Cheryl Hyde. Cheryl Hyde. "Max Weber Meets Feminism: A Reconsideration of Charisma." (Program on the Comparative Study of Social Transformations: University of Michigan, 1989).

The profession emerged in England as a highly informal practice. In a 1616 account from London, founding members performed spiritual narratives prior to formally covenanting themselves. New members consented to the covenant and then enacted their own professions.²⁷ As Caldwell argued, such accounts suggest a history of narrative performances enacted for edification that pre-dated formal covenanting and were detached from admission procedures.

This Duty of communion of Saints, doth not consist in giving an account of their Graces in that set way... as when they were first admitted...but by way of conference... there is not in this case any Autorative Act; for non have power to call for an account. But the Duty incumbent on the Person, is, to consider whether the Declaration of his Experiences may be fore the edifying and comforting of others, and what good fruits may arise out of such a Manifestation, and accordingly to do it.²⁸

The profession strengthened social bonds in England and supported ties in the new world.

For example, in a covenant from 1637, thirty founding families gathered from,

Se'rall pts of England: few of them knowne to one an other before [and they decided] it is requisite that p'fessours being strangers to one an other before, meeting fr' many parts should be well acquainted.²⁹

As the Church at Salem exemplifies, the earliest New England professions were an essential part of the covenanting process and were voluntarily offered to new members in their grafting in, as one of a variety of admission rituals. In 1665, the first church in Salem's founding covenant was published under the name *A Direction for A Publick Profession In the Church Assembly, after private Examination by the Elders... Being the same for Substance which was propounded to, and agreed upon by the Church of Salem*

²⁷ Edmund Sears Morgan. *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea Vol. 41* (New York: Cornell University Press 1965), 78.

²⁸ Caldwell, 77.

Thomas Goodwin, *Of the Constitution, Right, Order and Government of the Churches of Christ* (London: Goodwin, 1696).

²⁹ Caldwell, 112. Dedham Church Records, 1-3.

*at their beginning... 1629.*³⁰ In this founding, participants constituted a shared written profession and contract. The publisher noted that after the founding act, the “Confession of Faith and Covenant” was understood to be,

Direction pointing unto that Faith and Covenant contained in the holy Scripture, and therefore no man was confined unto that form of words, but onely to the Substance... and for the Circumstantial manner of joyning to the Church, it was ordered according to the wisdom and faithfulness of the Elders, together with the liberty and ability of any person... some were admitted by expressing their Consent to that written... others did answer to questions publickly... some did present their Confessions in writing, which was read for them.. [some] did make their Confessions in their own words and way.³¹

It is my interpretation that the founders extended new members the opportunity to speak publically in an effort to perpetuate covenanting: new members contributed by adding their experience to the community agreement, though their accounts were not added in writing. Likely, for the speaker and receivers, the profession referred back to the theological power of covenanting. Theologically, the addition of new experiences to the community covenant brought the Puritans closer to the unifying spiritual truth and perfect community they expected. Also, as Caldwell noted, the Salem historical account marks the earliest New England professions, or “protoconversion narratives” as *voluntary* acts of “occasional delivery.”³² New congregants joined via the procedure of their choice.

As argued by sociologist Adam Seligman, I hold in asserting that the profession took on central social importance in New England in the mid-1630s.³³ In his book on the

³⁰ Caldwell, 62.

Richard Donald Pierce, Ed. *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts, 1629-1736. Vol. 39* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1971).

³¹ Caldwell, 63.

³² Caldwell, 64.

³³ David D. Hall Ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 15.

Public narratives occurred before the spiritual depression of 1635-1636: in John Cotton’s first sermon at Boston, in 1633, he addressed the impropriety of public speech for women.

John Winthrop. *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009),

routinization of the Puritan religion, Seligman articulated that by 1636, the profession was the central ritual of collective membership in which “spheres of community, authority and collective meaning came together.”³⁴ Congregations struggled with the second wave of settlers: the First Church of Boston excitedly accepted sixty-three new church members in 1633, but faced complications integrating the new members into the church culture. They experienced a “spiritual depression,” that lasted through 1636.³⁵ The colony leaders faced ridicule of the English clergy, who doubted that churches might exist without traditional church authority, and were challenged by multiple political attempts to revoke the Massachusetts Bay charter.³⁶ Those in New England were well aware of the escalating turmoil in England, while facing the escalation of armed hostilities with Native Americans culminating in the Pequot War of 1636-1637.³⁷ John Winthrop’s journal notes the loss of many colonists (many of them children) due to natural disasters, accidents and raids. He recorded some of the terrifying results of the communal anxiety:

A woman of Boston congregation, having been in much trouble of mind about her spiritual estate, at length grew into utter depression, and could not endure to hear of any comfort etc., so as one day she took her little infant and threw it into a well, and then came into the house and said, now she was sure she should be damned, for she had drowned her child.

56.

Lay prophesying and preaching occurred in many churches during the covenanting period. Congregants took turns delivering sermons, and responded to the teachings of their ministers with spiritual insights. Cotton Mather. *Magnalia Christi Americana, Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England: From Its First Planting in the Year 1620. Unto the Year... 1698. In Seven Books... Vol. 2* (Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), 91.

³⁴ Seligman, 86.

³⁵ Seligman, 76.

³⁶ John Winthrop. *The Winthrop Papers: Robert Stansby, April 1637, 398-403*.

John Cotton. *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2001), xvi.

Samuel Eliot Morison. *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 344-346.

³⁷ Seligman, 86.

A man of Weymouth (but not of the church) fell into some trouble of mind, and in the night cried out, “Art thou come, Lord Jesus?” and with that leaped out of his bed in his shirt, and, breaking from his wife, leaped out at a high window into the snow, and ran about seven miles off, and being traced in the snow, was found dead.³⁸

When the covenanted communities were on the verge of collapse, the professional discourse came to occupy central importance above other congregational activities.³⁹

Cotton Mather’s history of New England recounted an event in which a congregant overheard the clerical examination of a new member and was deeply moved by the experience, spreading word of the exchange to his community. On hearing the story, the congregants asked the clergy to allow them to “gratify this useful Curiosity.” The Puritan congregants re-introduced faith narratives to the public realm, and covenanted members came to affirm professors by unanimous vote through a show of hands.⁴⁰

The first churches of New England began only with a Profession of Assent and Consent unto the Confession of Faith and the Covenant of Communion. Afterwards, they that sought for the Communion, were but privately examined about a Work of Grace in their Souls, by the Elders... one of the Brethren having leave to hear the Examinations of the Elders, magnified so much the advantage of being present at such an Exercise, that many others desired and obtained the like leave to be present at it; until at length, to gratify this useful Curiosity, the whole Church always expected the Liberty of being thus particularly acquainted with the Religious Dispositions of those with whom they were afterwards to sit and the Table of the Lord; and that Church which began this way was quickly imitated by most of the rest.⁴¹

The profession assured the speaker of their “living experience of the heart.”

Congregations rendered a “judgment of charity,” affirming them and joyfully receiving

³⁸ Seligman, 87.

³⁹ Hall, 14-16.

⁴⁰ Caldwell, 46.

⁴¹ Mather, 43.

“living stones” for the “visible church”; in other words, professors were given the benefit of the doubt as to their salvation.⁴²

Parting with previous scholarship, I interpret the profession as a theological praxis. In expression, the speaker was assured of the truth of their spiritual experience, and in observing their performance, those listening were assured themselves, and were compelled to put forth their own truth. The receiving congregants were concerned with authentic belief- not as to discover the inner condition of the speaker, but because in observing a creative and engaging expression, the listeners were able to share in the faith communicated. Theologies communicated poorly, or lacking persuasive delivery, failed to generate mutual assurance of a comparable magnitude.⁴³

The performance was affirmed if it was believed to be *true*: if the speaker believed it to be true, in such a way as to evidently energize their faith and so indicate the spiritual power inherent in the community. And as they emulated one another in assuring themselves of the truth of their power, the Puritans created it. In her book on the Puritan conversion narrative Patricia Caldwell wrote,

The reader almost forgets that the confession of experience is supposed to have been a crucial ‘test’ of the candidate’s own spiritual qualifications... it clearly had a much broader meaning for the audience itself.⁴⁴

⁴² Caldwell, 109.

Mather, 69.

⁴³ Despite the use of disclaimers, some oratory skill was necessary in order to assure others. The pressure to be persuasive intensified as the profession was taken up as an administrative test. In 1639, a candidate for admission at the Dedham church was “fearful and not able to speak in public but just fainting away,” and the Roxbury church reported that prospective members “stood out from the church for years,” instead of facing the administrative profession. The profession, as theological praxis, supported a wide variety of rhetorical strategies, allowing participants to speak comfortably. With formalization, participants were required to speak in the language of those examining them.

Cooper, 35.

⁴⁴ Caldwell, 73-74.

Performances were rarely rejected. The churches were intimate: congregants were aware of the everyday activities and past spiritual experiences of their fellows. In this way, they pre-determined their “judgment.”⁴⁵ As Caldwell advanced and I confirm, persons unknown or likely to be rejected opted out of the public performance, and the clergy played a role in advising prospective professors. In Thomas Shepard’s *Confessions*, a late source dating from 1637 to 1646, fifty-one conversion narratives were recorded with all but four entries confirmed. The rejected entries (all women) were scratched out. It is likely that the ministers were uncertain of their capability to profess and examined the women in private or advised them to abstain, uncertain that they would be positively received (women were often examined privately).⁴⁶

Was it common for congregants to abstain from public appearance? English Puritan leaders found the New England professions unreasonable, calling it a burdensome obligation.⁴⁷ In their correspondences, English leaders painted public appearance as an impossible task for common laypersons, and argued that the New England ministers should use creedal recitation, which would make public speech easier for their flocks. In defense, the New England ministers argued that the assurance of the individual was evidence enough of salvation, making creedal recitation unnecessary, and that in performance, those listening observed the speaker’s external appearance only. John Cotton distinguished the “judgment of charity” from the “truth of sincerity,” clarifying

⁴⁵ Caldwell, 73-74.

⁴⁶ Thomas Shepard. *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*. Ed. George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley. (Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections 58). Michael Wigglesworth. *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657: The Conscience of a Puritan. Vol. 1228*. (New York City: Harper & Row, 1965).

⁴⁷ Baird Tipson. “Invisible Saints: The ‘Judgment of Charity’ in the Early New England Churches.” *Church History* 44.04 (1975): 460-471.

the difference between assuring a speaker and judging their internal state.⁴⁸ In “judgements of charity” observers encouraged and esteemed a speaker for deliberately and sincerely taking responsibility for their spiritual state. In contrast, judging the “truth of sincerity” meant examining and evaluating a speaker’s inner spiritual state on their behalf. The New England ministers instructed “charity and tenderness... as the weakest Christian, if sincere, may not be excluded nor discouraged,” and described the concept of “rational charity,” stating that affirmation was warranted even in the case of the weakest rational basis.⁴⁹

A mention of the profession was preserved in the memoir of Captain Roger Clap, dating from before 1636. This account is important because it confirms the early observation of the profession as an assuring “judgment of charity.” Clap’s examination of his life and his search for spiritual truth was considerable, and his decision to profess was based on his self-assessment. My interpretation holds that Puritan congregants were cognizant of the preparation and intentionality of others, and had this additional knowledge to incorporate into their assuring judgments. In this account the Captain recalled how he had reflected on his personal spiritual experience, but did not feel himself capable of presenting a profession:

Many joined unto the several Churches where they lived, confessing their Faith publicly, and shewing before all the Assembly their Experiences of the Workings of God’s Spirit in their Hearts to bring them to Christ: which many Hearers found very much Good by, to help them to try their own Hearts, and to consider how it was with them... I was admitted into the Church Fellowship at our first beginning in Dorchester... many in their Relations spake of their great Terrors and deep Sense of their los Condition, and I could not so find as others did, the Time when God wrought the Work of Conversion in my Soul, nor in

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ John Norton. *The Answer to the Whole Set of Questions of the Celebrated Mr. William Appolonius* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 39-40.
Williston Walker. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Scribner, 1893), 205-222.

many respects the Manner thereof; it caused in me such Sadness of Heart and Doubtings how it was with me, Whether the Work of Grace were ever savingly wrought in my heart or no?⁵⁰

The profession granted each individual access to shared religious symbols in constructing their personal experience of sanctification. Therefore, out of the profession, congregants created new theologies. In John Winthrop's profession, he used the figure of Christ to articulate the agony of doubt and to express the joy of spiritual assurance. He described the figure of Christ as an intimate friend that loved, spoke, breathed, laid and awoke with him, and gave him support and courage. Winthrop drew from his experience to articulate "closing with Christ," and depicted his struggle to accept God's mercy while understanding himself as a "vile wretch."⁵¹ He drew the lengthy and meticulous narrative to conclusion in the following passage:

I was now growne familiar with the Lord Jesus Christ hee would oft tell mee he loved mee. I did not doubt to believe him; If I went abroad hee went with me, when I returned hee came home with mee. I talked with him upon the way, hee lay down with me, and usually I did awake with him. Now I could goe into any company and not lose him: and so sweet was his love to me, as I desired nothing but him in heaven or earth... Since this time I have gone under continuall conflicts between the flesh and the spirit, and sometimes with Satan himself (which I have more discerned of late then I did formerly) many falls I have had, and have lyen long under some, yet never quite forsaken of the Lord. But still when I have been put to it by any suddaine danger or fearfull Temptation, the good spirit of the Lord hath not fayled to beare witness to mee, giving mee Comfort, and Courage in the very pinch, when of my self I have been very fearefull, and dismayed. My usual falls have been through dead heartednesse, and presumptuousnesse, by which Satan hath taken advantage to wind mee into other sinnes. When the flesh prevayles the spirit withdrawes, and is sometimes so greived as he seemes not to acknowledge his owne work. Yet in my worst times hee hath been pleased to stirre, when hee would not speak, and would yet support mee that my fayth hath not fayled utterly. The Doctrine of free justification lately

⁵⁰ Caldwell, 70.

Clap, Roger. *Memoirs of Roger Clap* (Boston: D. Clapp, Jr., 1844), 21.

See Caldwell's note on the ambiguity surrounding the dating of *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay from 1623 to 1636* (Boston, 1846).

Clap, 24.

⁵¹ Winthrop included a lengthy narrative in his history of the colony.

John Winthrop, *History of New England Vol. 1* (New York: Scribner, 1908).

taught here took me in as drowsy a condition, as I had been in, (to my remembrance) these twenty yeares, and brought mee as low (in my owne apprehension) as if the whole work had been to begin anew. But when the voice of peace came I knew it to bee the same that I had been acquainted with before. . . . That of Justification in undervaluing the riches of the Lord Jesus Christ and his free grace, and setting up Idolls in myne owne heart, some of them made of his Sylver, and of his gold and that other garment of sanctification by many foule spotts which Gods people might take notice of, and yet the inward spotts were fouler than those. The Lord Jesus who (of his own free grace) hath washed my soul in the blood of the everlasting Covenant, wash away all those spotts also in his good time. Amen, even so doe Lord Jesus.⁵²

It is my conclusion that the profession did not involve the *application* of a higher doctrine. Theological symbols, such as the figure of Christ, and lived experience, such as Winthrop's upbringing, were synthesized within the performance. Winthrop might have recited a doctrine regarding the divinity of Christ, or explained a theory of atonement in comparison with other doctrines he found less convincing. However, he did not base his assurance on his association with a rubric of doctrine, to which he intended to model his life. He was assured of his salvation in the exercise of theological creativity: he realized his faith as he wrestled to find spiritual meaning in his lived experience. There is no indication that listeners were concerned with the correctness or accuracy of an interpretation. Such evidence would indicate an inflexible doctrine, to which speakers measured their lived experiences. I found that doctrine and lived experience were both altered in the speaking and acting of the profession.

As evidenced by the exchange of theological content, as I will show, listeners drew from the theologies described by their fellows as they saw fit. A professed theology, like Winthrop's Christology, was not judged according to how accurately it described each individual's perception of the community's collective will, but according to the

⁵² John Winthrop, *History of New England Vol. 1* (New York: Scribner, 1908).

receiver's ability to follow and appreciate the connection between lived experience and theological symbolism. This conclusion is affirmed by the purposed function of the practice. In the early years of settlement, the intent of the profession was the theological encouragement of the community, and the speaker's motivation their own assurance, as well as the honor and reputation gained in public performance. Professors did not compete to articulate the best theology to implement as a formal doctrine binding to non-participants, nor did they suggest a process or doctrine that best advanced the community toward a final event. Further, as evidenced in the following accounts, the function of the profession as theological praxis- to generate faith- required an intimate community in which the connection between theological symbolism and lived experience might be appreciated.

The prevalence of particular narrative themes demonstrates the exchange of symbolism and interpretation within and among congregations. John Winthrop was not alone in constructing an intimate, personal Christ: as Caldwell articulated, the Puritans were quite fond of "conflating different forms of love." When he was married, John Cotton exclaimed, "God made it a day of double marriage to me!" for he gained a "comfortable assurance of God's love to his soul."⁵³ Another New England professor described his relationship to Christ and "the abundance of the sweetness of Himself."⁵⁴ The majority of intimate Christologies were created by men. There is a record of one woman, professing in the 1650s, who spoke about how "Christ would be better than an earthly husband."⁵⁵

⁵³ Caldwell, 10.

⁵⁴ Shepard, 63.

⁵⁵ Caldwell, 170.

In 1669, Mrs. Elizabeth White, a Puritan of Buckingham, died in childbirth, leaving behind a diary including her spiritual biography. Historians have argued that its contents were likely a revised edition of a public profession given in England. Her reason for writing was twofold: her experiences were “sweet Supports to me in a Time of Darkness” and she was “often called upon to see that my Principles be right, and to make sure my Evidences for Heaven.”⁵⁶ White was English, and her story was set twenty years after the Antinomian Controversy, during which the profession was displaced as a central ritual in colonial life. However, White’s descriptive narrative is a valuable example of the personal synthesis of lived experience and theological symbolism that emerged in Congregationalism. Caldwell included White’s biography as a highly thematic yet structured example of English narrative:

Though it is more detailed and to some degree more introspective than most publicly delivered relations, it is not, like a confessional diary, a free-form, running chart of the writer’s spiritual temperature. Nor is it like some more elaborate and didactic spiritual autobiographies, a demonstration of God’s Providence at work in history or experimental evidence of the truth of the writer’s teachings. It is, or purports to be, a straightforward attempt to testify to the personal experience of conversion as precisely and persuasively as possible.⁵⁷

The pinnacle of Winthrop’s profession was his realization of “closing with Christ.” White’s story is about deliverance and re-birth. In her narrative White recorded her anguish at being unable to obey her father, her unfulfilled hope for spiritual growth after marriage, and finally, a lengthy period of inner turmoil in which she considered her “sinful self” in darkness, and “labored what I could to encourage my self in the LORD my God.”⁵⁸ White’s narrative uses scriptures with “begetting” imagery, and pinpoints the birth of her first child as her defining moment of assurance. She described that in her

⁵⁶ Caldwell, 5, 20. *The Experiences of God’s gracious Dealing with Mrs. Elizabeth White* (Boston, 1741).

⁵⁷ Caldwell, 6.

⁵⁸ Caldwell, 11.

moment of conversion, she was birthed into assurance, and her soul was weaned as she weaned her child.

Psalm. 50.15. Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorifie me, and in the time of my extremity this word was set home upon my heart again, and my good God made me to experience the truth of it in a wonderful manner, for I had speedy deliverance beyond my expectation, which filled my heart and mouth with praises to the Lord.

White concluded her narrative by describing a dream in which she was assured of her re-birth and her access to the “sacred beyond,” that brought her comfort. She expected to die in childbirth.⁵⁹

Birth allegories were popular in English professions. John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, written in 1666, includes a detailed account of a dream in which he was descriptively birthed into the church.⁶⁰ In an extraordinary profession given in London in 1652, a professor synthesized the imagery of the Apocalypse of John with the suffering he experienced in the Civil War. The young apprentice related a dream in which he protected a newborn child from the reach of a devouring dragon, only for the child to be taken from him into another world. He was troubled before God, “for in this world, beauty must be destroyed.”⁶¹

The majority of New England professions related spiritual deliverance with the dangerous journey to America, drawing on the birthing imagery of the Hebrew Exodus.⁶² John Winthrop and other New Englanders utilized the phrases “weaned child” and “begotten of God,” in describing their experiences.⁶³ While deliverance narratives were

⁵⁹ Caldwell, 14.

⁶⁰ John Bunyan. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London: Penguin UK, 2006).

⁶¹ Caldwell, 18.

Vavasor Powell. *Spirituell Experiences, Of Sundry Believers* (Robert Ibbitson, 1653).

⁶² Shepard, *Confessions*.

Caldwell, 186.

⁶³ Caldwell, 159.

performed on both sides of the Atlantic, the American profession developed a particular form. Scriptural passages were used to structure narratives: professions moved “through the Bible, almost as through a physical space.”⁶⁴ The New England narratives contrasted the darkness of “Old England” with the new life of “New England.”⁶⁵

The exchange of content and themes among professions adds to the importance of close relationships for the flourishing of this form of theological praxis: spiritual creativity was enabled because those participating knew each other intimately. They held knowledge of the past experiences of the speaker. They shared memories from the English Civil War or the journey to America, and likely interpreted recent events together. In another example, a congregant wrote to England in 1637 to share the profession of Sidrach Simpson, a preacher, who professed on arrival. Simpson excited the gathered congregants, who resonated with the performance.

Two things were required of him, a profession of his faith, and a confession of his experience of the grace of God wrought in him... thus with flowing eyes [did] speak to the people: ‘For my part though I have reason to lay my hand upon my mouth, and cry, I am unclean, I am unclean, and deserve to be weighted in the small balance, and to look for such a fann, as men might slight me who have so much dross, yet I beseech you do the work of an ordinance upon me... I believe the day is coming, when sin shall not domineer, nor Satan overcome, nor that I do is with incredible weakness. I go, but I stagger; I walk but I faint; I look up to him, but mine eyes fail; I am dead, but am come to you to quicken me; I am empty, but am come to you who are Christ’s fullness to fill me!’⁶⁶

A significant characteristic of the professional discourse is its unrestrained rhetoric: specifically, the diversity of persuasive strategies employed. Caldwell noted that in some test accounts, such as the test of Mary Barker, professors made wide use of

⁶⁴ Caldwell, 31.

⁶⁵ Caldwell, 31.

⁶⁶ Caldwell, 73.

“inability disclaimers.”⁶⁷ Barker began her test, “I have great experiences of God, though at present I am unable to express them...”⁶⁸ In these cases the speaker deliberately chose dramatic expression over the communication of spiritual experience via fact, strategizing that this sort of call to the truth of spiritual experience would be effectively persuasive, according to their comfort in utilizing the genre and its suitability to their story. The “inability disclaimer” does not suggest that expressiveness was the goal of professional acts- as Caldwell noted the drama of the profession was meticulously rehearsed. The disclaimer is important because it grants that other deliberate forms of communication were accepted alongside methodological treatises (such as John Winthrop’s, which made use of doctrinal terminology, utilized few Biblical narratives, and was organized to reveal the chronological progression of his conversion by date and context).

In my analysis of content, form and exchange, I determined the following central characteristics of the professional discourse:

- 1) The profession was a ritual discourse in which thought, speech and action were engaged in close proximity. Participants synthesized shared theological symbols with lived experience for the immanent assurance of faith. The profession was not intended to initiate the coming of a new world, nor did the discourse pertain to a transcendent mission. It was purposed for the present mutual benefit of those engaged.
- 2) Participants created theology; they held direct interpretive access to theological symbols but did not establish permanent doctrines. Nor was their intention to discover an absolute doctrinal truth. The profession was creative in that participants were able to alter the meaning of the symbols of their faith in interpreting their spiritual experiences.
- 3) Professors engaged in deliberate, rehearsed rhetorical performances in order to persuade their observers of their own assurance. Though participants were free to employ a wide genre of rhetorical forms, the profession was neither arbitrary nor impulsive.

⁶⁷ Caldwell, 139.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

- 4) The discourse was a-legal: the profession was free of a formal structure. Observers incorporated the symbols and meanings used in previously impactful professions and gleaned successful performance techniques from previous events. They adopted content and form suitable for their own experiences and this enabled them to borrow from and emulate the assuring performances of their companions.

As clerical authorities constituted doctrine, symbols became insulated from creative use: doctrinal pronouncements resulted in the protection of symbols. Symbols of high doctrine were unlikely to be synthesized with lived experience, as they were perceived to be unquestionable. These symbols were either recited or their derivative action was explained; they were not involved in synthesis.

In an extension of Adam Seligman's theory, it is my interpretation that when the profession began to be employed for administrative purposes around 1636, its form and content were rapidly codified. The discourse was drawn away from lived experience and oriented toward the approval of authority: members were expected to adhere to and profess highly formalized doctrines, and to speak in the manner that the ministry recognized as legitimate.⁶⁹ Members included the content that would satisfy the visiting clergy, and subsequently the profession lost the emulation fueling its performance and its function in relation to lived experience. As Caldwell noted, codification narrowed the acceptable means of communication:

If American conversion narratives did start out in this mode of prophesying, they quickly turned into something else and soon lost the impulse of freewheeling, dramatic and joyous evangelism- assuming that it ever had it.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Church membership steadily declined after the profession was taken up as a test for new colonists, who preferred isolation from church to undergoing the admissions procedures.

⁷⁰ Caldwell, 73-74.

As Caldwell developed, in comparison with American practices, English professions were not used as “testing instruments” because religious practices were already formalized. She concluded,

In England the conversion narrative can only blossom after the Civil War, when the gathered churches are free to depart from the parochial system of general membership; but even then, under Cromwell’s loose religious settlement, such churches have neither unity nor power, and the relation of religious experience is less a testing instrument in the working out of a polity than it is a vehicle for evangelical comfort and encouragement.⁷¹

Comparatively, English professions were mystical in expression: dreams, visions, voices and all sorts of personal spiritual experiences were described. American expressions were progressively intellectualized. In New England, the mysticism of English expressions came to “be seen as an insidious means to uphold the authority of the self over both civil and ecclesiastical restraints, and even over the objective revelation of the Bible.”⁷² Many of the late admission professions performed for administrative authorities contained lengthy recitations of scriptural passages with little commentary. The church at Cambridge exemplified what Caldwell labeled, “strictures that may have been as much self-imposed as imposed by the ministers.”⁷³ As Edmund Morgan described, they followed a rhetorical formula: awakening, backsliding, disappointments and disasters, legal fear, hopelessness in condition, and the conviction to see Christ as the only hope.⁷⁴ Giles Firmin, a deacon at the First Church of Boston, recalled the church’s struggle:

⁷¹ Caldwell, 35.

⁷² Caldwell, 17.

Christopher Hill. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1972).

⁷³ Caldwell, 167-168.

⁷⁴ Morgan, 91.

What Rules they would go by in admission of members... will you go by narration of the work of God upon them in Conversion? Or will you look at the frame wherewith they make their narration? One saith he, comes and makes his narration with many tears; another he tells you plainly... but he cannot shed as many tears, but yet proves the better Christian?⁷⁵

Following the Antinomian Controversy, the congregations faced a shift in leadership. Clergy were circulated between churches after being indoctrinated at Harvard, and this distanced them from congregational life.⁷⁶ I found that the entrance of foreign authority figures re-oriented the profession: it was transformed from a faith-act intended for those in covenant, to a confirmation of doctrinal belief extended toward a spiritual expert. In the early covenanting period, qualified members had been elected to official duties: in many covenant drawings at least one participant was a trained teacher or minister, meaning that congregations did not need to recruit an outsider.

With codification and the re-orientation toward external authority figures, shared themes were transformed. In Shepard's collection of late admission narratives from the 1650s, the speakers commonly confessed childhood disobedience, and expressed their fear that they might not join their holy parents in heaven. These professors used antagonistic Biblical characters, like Judas, Esau and Jonah, to describe themselves.⁷⁷ In a majority of the recorded cases, spread over a period of years, speakers drew upon John

⁷⁵ Caldwell, 167.

Giles Firmin. *The Real Christian, Or a Treatise of Effectual Calling...* (Rogers & Fowle, 1742).

⁷⁶ The congregants continued to hold some control over their representatives. Although the congregations were allowed lay ordination under the *Cambridge Platform*, the practice quickly became obsolete. In the years following, a ministerial economy emerged, and clergy were interviewed and selected by seeking churches following their indoctrination at Harvard. In the years after the *Platform* was installed, churches frequently petitioned for new ministers, finding theirs inadequate, or asked the magistrates for interim pastors to administer the sacraments in vacancy.

Cambridge Synod. *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline...1648*. (Perkins & Whipple, 1850), 49, 109.

Many of the manuscripts held in the Massachusetts State Archives from the period are complaints and petitions for replacement clergy.

⁷⁷ Caldwell, 192-195.

13, the story of Judas' betrayal, to express their state. Older allegories faded: only two mentioned Abraham, and none referred to the Exodus.⁷⁸

In 1653, a young man named John Collins gave a profession shortly after the death of the Reverend Thomas Shepard. In this account, Collins developed a theology quite contrary to the early themes- spiritual deliverance and the intimate Christ. Collins described his previous "Christless condition." Collins referred to his minister as the image of Christ to him, pinpointing his assurance in the "great pains as God stirred up Mister Shepard to take for me and with me who came and prayed with me and wrestled with God for my life."⁷⁹ Another congregant intertwined the image of Christ as mediator with the image of minister as mediator.

What a blessed thing it is to have this mediator, the man Christ Jesus to go unto, when I have no friend that I can fully speak to... I think, were Mr. Shepard now alive, I would go and intreat his counsel, and help, and prayer.⁸⁰

Despite evident patterns of formalization, the profession did not involve inclusion and exclusion until it was bureaucratized. It was employed by the ministry as a test for new churches, and in 1636, the magistrates enacted a statute requiring immigrants to pass a profession. The law read,

All persons are to take notice that this Court doeth not, nor will hereafter, approve of any such companys of men as shall henceforth *joyne in any pretended way of church fellowship*, without they shall first acquainte the magistrates and the elders of the greater parte of the churches in this jurisdiction, with their intencions and have their approbacion herein.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Shepard, *Confessions*.

⁷⁹ Caldwell, 193. Cotton Mather compiled the "Life of the Collins's."

⁸⁰ Caldwell, 195.

⁸¹ Morgan, 101.

Seligman, *Innerwordly Individualism*, 89.

Thomas Shepard, *Winthrop Journal I*, 215.

Sadrach Simpson, for example, professed immediately after arriving in the new world. “Judgments of charity” were transformed, as the test came to consist of impersonal deliveries and impersonal judgments.⁸² New members unfamiliar with administrative language were deemed illegitimate. Later in 1636, Thomas Shepard blocked the covenanting of a new Church in Dorchester, deciding that the public testimonies of their members were unsatisfactory to prove their doctrinal belief.

The reason was for most of them (Mr. Mather and one more excepted) had builded their comfort of salvation upon unsound grounds, viz., some upon dreams and ravishes of spirit by fits; others upon the reformation of their lives; others upon duties and performances etc., wherein they discovered three special errors: 1. That they had not come to hate sin, because it was filthy, but only left it, because it was hurtful, 2. That, by reason of this they had never truly closed with Christ, (or rather Christ with them,) but had made use of him only to helpe the imperfection of their sanctification and duties, and not made him their sanctification, wisdom etc. 3. They expected to believe by some power of their own, and not only and wholly from Christ.⁸³

There is no record of personal narratives given apart from boundary procedures following the banishment of Anne Hutchinson in 1638.⁸⁴ The bureaucratization of the profession was swiftly destructive to the practice, due to the intimacy it required. If the speaker was well known, the judging congregation entered into public activity knowing their verdict, and analyzed the performance for their own edification. With the extension of the profession to new immigrants, congregations judged without knowledge of the daily actions, relationships or attitudes of those performing, nor were they familiar with the natural form of expression unique to the speaker.

In 1638, Richard Mather defended the public admissions test to an English critic, arguing that it was similar to the English “questions of the catechisme” that were recited

⁸² Caldwell, 73-74.

⁸³ Seligman, 89.

⁸⁴ Caldwell, 79.

publically.⁸⁵ Mather's comment steers my discussion of the profession back to the definition of theological praxis. The bureaucratization of the profession occurred with the separation of doctrine from lived action and stimulated the emergence of an intense, colony-wide preoccupation with hypocrisy. Instead of synthesizing lived experience with shared symbols, participants demonstrated their conversion by processing lived experiences through a new grid of legitimate doctrines determined by authority. Congregants recognized an *applicative disconnect* in those with whom they understood and shared lived experience: the lived experiences they observed were awkwardly separated from the belief-acts they observed their friends performing.

The emerging congregational obsession with unmasking truth- their fear of false professions- developed after the official establishment of church authority following Antinomian controversy.⁸⁶ The profession was dislocated from central importance and replaced by the church trial, in which the Puritans labored to determine the issue of human psychology causing the misalignment of doctrine from action. In the 1660s, they resorted to executing witches to expiate guilt and relieve their communities of hypocritical anxiety.

⁸⁵ Caldwell, 49. *Mather Family Papers*.

⁸⁶ John Fiske's notebook contained eight trials conducted at the Salem church in 1637, which occurred amidst the Antinomian controversy. This record shows the shift away from intimate practices in autonomous churches to the separated doctrinal discourses of the synod. The Salem trials were facilitated by the clergy, while the congregation observed their performance, paralleling the form of Anne Hutchinson's trial in 1638.

Cooper, 38.

William F. Poole, Justin Winsor and Paul Royster. "The Case of Ann Hibbins, Executed for Witchcraft at Boston in 1656," (2005).

Clarence F. Jewett. *The Memorial History of Boston: Including Suffolk County, Massachusetts, 1630-1880*. Ed. Justin Winsor Vol. 4. (James R. Osgood, 1883).

Hypocrisy and Trial

The profession co-existed with both covenant discourses and clerical discourses. Professional discourse was distinct from clerical debate in rhetoric and argument, and since it did not promote a formal doctrine in competition with their work, the profession was well received by the ministers. They too were encouraged by the generation of assurance and the passion that returned to the covenant communities. The clergy were so approving that they suggested that “second relations” ought to be shared when a member switched congregations, “for the increase of their owne joy... for the increase of their love to those that joyne with them.”⁸⁷

The professions did not challenge or critically engage the concepts occupying clerical thought- the doctrines sanctification and justification. The profession was by nature a narrative of sanctification. Winthrop’s profession mentioned that the doctrine of justification “lately taught” had strengthened his faith in the figure of Christ.⁸⁸ In this way, faith-acts revered clerical work, while creatively utilizing the symbols not preoccupying clerical scholarship- like the personhood of Christ.⁸⁹ Thus they strategically positioned their theologies in relation to the expanding doctrinal canon.

While the congregants engaged in theological praxis, the clergy engaged in scholarly discourse. As I will show, doctrinal debate was not a form of theological praxis, as it was disconnected from the lived actions of those theorizing.⁹⁰ Along with the

⁸⁷ Caldwell, 76.

⁸⁸ From the John Winthrop Papers,

https://archive.org/stream/winthroppapersv3wint/winthroppapersv3wint_djvu.txt

⁸⁹ The spiritual deliverance theme corresponds closely with justification and sanctification. Deliverance may have conflicted with important doctrines after the “Exodus” to the new world. This interpretation has fascinating implications for the Antinomian controversy.

⁹⁰ Many clerical publications and correspondences in this period were written to defend Congregationalism. See Cotton, John. *The Correspondence of John Cotton*. UNC Press Books, 2001. Winthrop Papers, I, 398-

dislocation from from experience, debate was exclusive to a small number of highly educated men, who came together from across covenanted communities. Further, debates were enacted in defense of Congregationalism and the results were intended for universal application in these churches.

As an example of doctrinal debate, I chose the correspondences of Reverend John Cotton. From 1635 to 1637, tensions rose between Cotton and other orthodox ministers- prominently Thomas Shepard and Peter Bulkeley- who were disturbed by the “point of sanctification” in Cotton’s preaching.⁹¹ To make an attempt at “clearing up of the truth,” on “particulars,” the orthodox ministers wrote to Cotton for answers.⁹² Their goal was to determine the philosophical relationship between the abstract concepts of “justification,” or the moment of election, and “sanctification” the visible spiritual advancement or purification of the elect. In his first letter, Peter Bulkeley introduced the “cause of justification” with Aristotle’s four causes, an argument which Cotton rejected. In October of 1636, the ministers held a conference in private. The meeting ended well, for “they all did hold that sanctification did help to evidence justification.”⁹³ But when Cotton’s controversial preaching continued, the ministers sent him another document entitled “Sixteene Questions of Serious and Necessary Consequence,” a treatise thoroughly challenging his stance.⁹⁴ Cotton responded with his own treatise, answering each question in high doctrinal terminology. His famous response was dispersed about the colony and found its way to England.⁹⁵ The ministers marked the wrongs in each of his statements,

403, Robert Stansby to John Winthrop, April 1637.

https://archive.org/stream/winthroppersv3wint/winthroppersv3wint_djvu.txt

⁹¹ Hall, 34-43.

⁹² Hall, 24.

⁹³ Hall, 6.

⁹⁴ Hall, 6.

⁹⁵ Hall, 44.

being especially disappointed in his lack of clarity, and expressed their disapproval that he had not distinguished justification. They were concerned that he meant “all at once by it,” writing,

You cannot be ignorant which way the stream of most Divines, both of our own Country and others runs. From whose steps if any turn aside, they had need bring sound proof from the scripture, or else fear they tread awry in so doing. Now Dear Sir, we leave these things with you, hoping that the Lord will honour you, with making you a happy instrument of calming these storms and cooling these hot contentions and paroxysms that have begun to swell and burn in these poor churches.⁹⁶

This exchange occurred amidst the “paroxysms” of lay questioning and mistrust that culminated in the Antinomian controversy. Cotton was highly respected in the colony and supportive of the Antinomians. This particular discourse aimed to define belief on behalf of all in the covenanted community, regardless of their participation. It aimed to form a universal belief regarding justification and sanctification in order to contain the diverse spread of theologies and symbolic interpretations in the colony. In the years to follow, the ministers took responsibility for the Antinomian controversy, which nearly incited revolt in Boston, concluding their doctrinal inconsistency was to blame.⁹⁷

Following the controversy, synod gatherings emerged as the space within which church law was established. In the synod, indoctrinated clergy established the *Cambridge Platform* of 1648, in which church government and church doctrines were standardized, and the *Half-Way Covenant*, which addressed church membership, in 1662.⁹⁸ Doctrinal agreements were intended to “calm hot contentions and paroxysms” for continued

⁹⁶ Hall, *The Elders Reply*, 61.

⁹⁷ Emery John Battis. *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962).
Cooper, *Tenacious*.

⁹⁸ Cambridge Synod. *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline...1648* (Perkins & Whipple, 1850).
Seligman, 104, 128-131.

congregational wellbeing.⁹⁹ After the controversy, the ministry faced little opposition from the laity, and extended their authority through synods. Synod gatherings were administrative gatherings intended for unification and ordering, they did not involve theological praxis.

Like doctrinal debate, synodical discourse was removed from lived experience. While a minister's doctrinal defenses reflected his individual reasoning to some extent, his presence at synod was supposed to align with the beliefs of his community to some degree.¹⁰⁰ This observation raises an important question: might theological praxis arise within a representative body? The discourse engaged in a representative body, such as the synod, can be distinguished from praxis, because it fails to concern the spiritual edification of those participating- the representatives themselves. Synodical discourses were relationally uncreative, for those engaged acted for reasons other than their personal benefit- they acted in matters of administration, like population stability, and for the good of their church populations en masse. Synod decisions certainly reflected the theologies created in congregations. However, representative duties performed on behalf of covenanted communities were *intermediary*: they compensated for the division of doctrine and lived experience that progressed as the organizational hierarchy expanded, serving to connect symbolic thought with community life. The properties of representation counter-active to praxis and the consequences of speaking and acting on

⁹⁹ Hall, *The Elders Reply*. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Synod records suggest that the ministers gathered under the conviction that constituting a formal doctrine would not supersede the founding church covenants. The synod discussion revolved around this issue, and their intent is reflected in both the stipulations of representatives to the regular synod and the reservation of powers to the churches. Many of the original ideas of the founding settlers were upheld: the text states, that synods are to include ministers and "other church members." Synod were "[not] to exercise Church-censures in a way of discipline nor any other act of church authority or jurisdiction," that might overstep the primary authority of the covenant church.

For discussion of the *Cambridge Platform*, see Cooper, 86, 132.

behalf of others will be outworked in my analysis of Mars Hill, a case in which extreme representation, for the sake of self-sacrifice, was supported by an immutable Christology. In extreme cases, representative action is harmful to participants, who expend their energies in dissociative facilitation isolating and destructive to their ability to act for their own spiritual benefit.

In many strains of Christianity, clergy are understood to transport doctrine or sacraments to those acting in practice below: they are sacerdotal representatives that operate as remedial carriers, whose bridging work compensates for the vast separation of doctrine from the lived experience of believers.¹⁰¹ In the later half of the 17th century, the Puritan clergy assumed this role. In the synod, ministers met in order to “clear from the word holy directions for the holy worship of God, and good government of the church,” sourcing doctrine from in abstract debate; their appointed communities had long before ceased to produce theologies.¹⁰² Covenant communities continued to send ministers and elders to synod, even though the concept of congregational representation ceased to carry weight as the ministerial authority solidified.¹⁰³ Thus, as the ministry grew, the source to be represented reversed, and ministers came to work on behalf of higher authorities, representing God to their congregations by administering sacraments.¹⁰⁴ This shift was evident in the late professions I previously described, in which ministers were associated

¹⁰¹ According the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement (or vicarious atonement) reflected in Puritan doctrine, Christ suffered unto death on behalf of the elect, that they might be represented blameless before God. In this doctrine, Christ is understood to undergo total isolation while suffering on their behalf. Salvation is possible due to the connection of heaven and earth enabled by vicarious atonement.

¹⁰² Cambridge Synod.

¹⁰³ In 1641, a number of ministers met in private to discuss the state of the church, reflecting on the shift in church leadership sparked by the Antinomian controversy. The ministers discussed the central issue, “that the assembly of elders have power over particular churches.” Cooper, 169.

¹⁰⁴ The *Cambridge Platform* held that congregations ought to oppose clergy in cases of *mal-administration*. Congregations won cases in which they proved their minister’s failure to properly transfer memberships or facilitate sacraments.

with the mediation of Christ. Interaction with congregants impacted clerical thought minimally- making ordinary lived experience indirectly and unsubstantially related to doctrine.

As representation developed, ministerial administration infringed upon covenant bonds, overwriting community boundaries. The synod mandated *Half-Way Covenant* dissolved the boundaries of the covenanted communities, replacing covenant warranted induction practices with a colony-wide admissions processes. The authority dictated that the baptized but unconfirmed might enter after reciting a doctrinal creed. John Wilson, the longtime pastor and one of the central covenant founders of the First Church of Boston rebuked the congregation for refusing to accept the *Half-Way Covenant*:

When people rise up as Corah against their ministers, as if they took too much upon them, when indeed they do but rule for Christ, and according to Christ; yet it is nothing for a brother to stand up and oppose, without scripture or reason, the word of an elder saying [I am not satisfied!] and hence if he does not like the administration, he will turn his back upon God and his ordinances, and go away... Another sin I take to be the making light of, and not subjecting to the authority of Synods, without which the churches cannot long subsist.¹⁰⁵

By the late 1600s, the clergy ruled “for Christ and according to Christ,” and doctrinal content was guarded from the influence of congregational life.¹⁰⁶ In this context, trial discourses emerged within covenant communities, revealing the dissonance that accompanied the dissolution of praxis. The ultimate goal of the trial was administrative: to determine the association of a particular member by measuring their actions according to doctrinal standards. The trials involved congregational participation, however, participants were disempowered: they were confined to participate through either the articulation of doctrine or the recollection of their applied action. There was a division in

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, 99.

¹⁰⁶ Cambridge Synod, 49, 109.

speech: ministers and church leaders reiterated doctrines, while the accused and the uneducated responded with the details of applied action. In this way the trial itself, like intermediary representation, was an attempt to align doctrine and lived experience, now divorced concepts.

In a vibrant trial account, the First Church of Boston examined a tailor named Richard Waight in 1639. Waight was found to have “purloyned out of buckskyn leather brought unto him, so much thereof as would make 3 mens gloves.”¹⁰⁷ After refusing to confess, he was excommunicated. Following a period of exclusion, he presented his repentance to the congregation in a public confession. Waight included great detail about his lived experience: he recounted the methods he considered for suicide, and elaborately described the conversion he experienced in his state of depression. The elders and ministers applauded the confession, praising his “humble Carriage ever since his Casting owt.”¹⁰⁸ Following the speech, Reverend John Cotton addressed Waight with “three parts of repentance,” which Waight sufficiently explained. With the doctrinal test passed, Cotton happily addressed the congregation,

The time is Late therefor if yow Conseave that his repentance, and confession is Satisfactory and Such as is Sownd, and if you thinke he have any Sight or Sence of Gods Love, and that yow have not ought to Say, then we will pronounce him to be a Leaper no Longer, but that the church may pardon him, and reseave him as a returning Prodigall...¹⁰⁹

In a shocking turn of events, the First Church congregation stood to oppose Cotton’s decision, blocking his readmission. Brother Lyle, a barber surgeon, and John Millan, a cooper, voiced their opinions about Waight’s “keeping Company with Lewde

¹⁰⁷ Helle M. Alpert. “Robert Keayne’s Notes of Sermons by John Cotton and Proceedings of the First Church of Boston from 23 November 1639 to 1 June 1640,” (PhD diss, Tufts University, 1974), 298.

¹⁰⁸ Helle, 304.

¹⁰⁹ Helle, 304-305.

and wicked persons.”¹¹⁰ Waight tried to apologize, explaining that these issues had been “qwite owt of my minde,” and promptly confessed his guilt. Two other men brought forth personal issues with Waight over the dealing of silk. Waight pleaded that those issues had been privately resolved. William Ting, a Court representative, disliked the performance. He stated,

Although I shall not deny, but that thear maybe Repentance with owt teares, and thear may be teares with owt repentance, yet I desire to know whear thear was not a more showe of teares.¹¹¹

Pastor John Wilson interjected,

The question is whether he doth stand clear in yor continence, and that his Repentance is Sincere... and yet you desire mor and mor to See his Repentance... That which hath moved us to bringe him forth to the Congregation, hath bine the information we have had of his dejection of spirit, and divers Temptations that he hath lyen under in soe much that he hath bine ready to be overwhelmed and to Sinke... to be swallowed up with greife.¹¹²

The prominent leaders in attendance were exasperated by the disgruntled members, failing to understand the congregation’s reluctance. Wilson’s comment sparked a discussion of, “by what rule we may Sumbitt to thease Brenthren that Say they are not Satisfied?” John Winthrop asked that the congregation readmit Waight saying,

For my part I know not what Rule any man hath to Judge of mens hartes, and of thear Estates, for my owne part I have herd soe much of his Repentance...¹¹³

The members watched Waight for a number of weeks. They demanded a second meeting, in which they exposed him for “making a showe of repentance,” and accused him of a “grosse dissembling before God and the Church.” The congregation insisted that Waight had purposely omitted his “manifold inordinate drinkings,” at his previous

¹¹⁰ Helle, 305.

¹¹¹ Helle, 307.

Cooper, 38.

¹¹² Helle, 320.

¹¹³ Helle, 321.

hearing and shamed him for “forsaking the lecture for it.” He was excommunicated a final time for hypocrisy. He refused to repent, protesting that “his Conscience did not in the lest accuse him” of being a hypocrite.¹¹⁴

In stark contrast to theological praxis, as with Waight, the trial concerned inner motives. As the profession faded, the Puritans became obsessed with hypocrisy, becoming fixated on the relationship between action and speech. The speaking and acting of community life suddenly appeared disingenuous. Having known the creative speaking and acting of praxis, the Boston congregation recognized that there was something wrong with Waight’s “showe of teares,” and that his proclaimed beliefs did not align with his actions.¹¹⁵ They began to fear the speech of their fellow congregants, and sought to determine if those covenanted to them were truly saved. Concerns regarding hypocritical speech arose as congregants lost the power to influence the religious symbols governing their spiritual lives.

In contrast to the profession, in which community discourse existed alongside covenant promises and authoritative doctrines, trial discourses involved either direct resistance to clerical authority, or quiet submission to clerical authority. Waight’s trial exemplifies direct congregational resistance. In this trial, the congregation attempted to replace the authority of doctrine with the authority of common moral law. The clergy held that Waight ought to be judged according the “condition of his soul,” according to his submission to established doctrine. Waight’s speech, which included lines taken verbatim from John Cotton’s sermons, was expressed in the terms of the administration,

¹¹⁴ Cooper, 38, 62-63.

¹¹⁵ Helle, 307.

in submission to the new authority.¹¹⁶ This did not satisfy the Boston congregation. They resisted the new authority by demanding that he be judged by an alternate measure, one in which they held authority. In judging Waight according to his social wrongs, the congregation won the battle against their clergy.¹¹⁷ However, they were unsuccessful in lessening the reach of authority, as in their resistance they replaced one type of authority with another.

The Boston congregation's preoccupation with Waight's hypocrisy clarifies my assertion that theological praxis may not involve application. In trials, congregations evaluated the spiritual state of those accused, measuring their ability to apply doctrine to their everyday actions. Congregations evaluated whether those accused were willing and competent in deriving action from doctrine. The congregation decided that Waight did not have the capacity or willingness to properly mediate the distance between thought and action, as his speech and actions were also misaligned. In the profession, the exchange of practical spiritual disciplines was the indirect effect of theological praxis, meaning that everyday practice was not mandated according to a permanent doctrine. Individual listeners took up the practices and disciplines described in other narratives as compelled. In Winthrop's theology of an intimate Christ, he confessed his faults, named his destructive acts, and those receiving were compelled to adjust their understanding of the figure of Christ *or* their own spiritual practices to the extent to which his story resonated with them. This is the creativity of praxis: in speaking and acting, participants were free to alter theological symbols and to use them as tools for guiding their own lives.

¹¹⁶ Helle, 298.

¹¹⁷ Helle, 298.

III. Authority in a Corporate Church

In this chapter I explore the organizational and theological environment of the Mars Hill community, considering the characteristics that rendered it an unsuitable ground for theological praxis. With limited access to the community I was unable to identify a form of theological praxis. I gathered information on community discourses from online records, blogs, books, observational studies and interviews. Mars Hill was organized in a “corporate” hierarchy, oriented toward producing disciples, that granted the church social influence and the ability to expand rapidly. As I will discuss, the community’s mission to expand the hierarchy rewarded members that rejected theological creativity in order to maintain the ideology. Mars Hill afforded the opportunity to contrast theological praxis with evangelical discourses. In conjunction with their primary doctrine, a Christology, the community valued acts of selflessness made on behalf of others, and discouraged acts of mutuality, which they perceived to be selfish and ungodly. The community believed that selfless authority and submission to authority would end social conflict and bring about an orderly world, a “city within a city.”¹

The community’s belief system was built upon the doctrine of vicarious atonement. This central doctrine is essential to understanding the ideology and motivation of the community. It holds that Christ represented the divine on earth and suffered and died, experiencing total isolation in separation from the world, God the father, and all goodness. As a representative at work in the world, Christ suffered the penalty of human

¹ *Joyful Exiles*, “Ask Anything.” City within a city was a popular expression. The wide variety of meanings associated with the phrase is evident in forum discussion.

sin in order to present humanity blameless before divine judgment. *In the view of the believers at Mars Hill, a godly life consisted of the imitation of Christ.* A Christian should expect a life of suffering while striving for selflessness and obedience. The imitation of this Christ- an isolated representative, bearing the mission of God and obeying the duty to suffer for others- required that believers deny spiritually beneficial participation, and therefore, in the terms of this thesis, deny spiritual power.

The Mars Hill case is interesting in light of the distinction Arendt drew between economic action and political action: in liberal society the institutions that most prominently employ hierarchies, in which actors give up power for future reward, are businesses and corporations seeking strategic efficiency. Arendt wrote,

The modern age, in its early concern with tangible products and demonstrable profits or its later obsession with smooth functioning and sociability, was not the first to denounce the idle uselessness of action and speech in particular and of politics in general. Exasperation with the threefold frustration of action- the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of the process, and the anonymity of its authors- is almost as old as recorded history... Generally speaking, [efforts] always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end.²

The goal of this authoritative proselytizing church was twofold: to make order through obedience, and to efficiently expand the hierarchy to include a greater number of disciples. The membership accepted that for efficiency, a single individual was to lead the church, guide the mission, and define belief.³ Arendt defined authoritarianism in these apposite terms:

A governmental structure whose source of authority lies outside itself, but whose seat of power is located at the top, from which authority and power is filtered down to the base in such a way that each success possesses some authority, but

² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220.

³ Given the the Congregationalist roots of American religious culture, it has been thoroughly studied as a market economy. For a relevant study of religious economy, see Chaves.

less than the one above it, and where, precisely because of this careful filtering process, all layers from top to bottom are not only firmly integrated into the whole but are interrelated like converging rays whose common focal point is the top of the pyramid as well as the transcending source of authority above it. This image, it is true, can be used only for the Christian type of authoritarian rule as it developed through and under the constant influence of the Church during the Middle Ages, when the focal point above and beyond the earthly pyramid provided the necessary point of reference for the Christian type of equality, the strictly hierarchical structure of life on earth notwithstanding.⁴

Hierarchy

A small group of young adults disillusioned by the “traditional church” and desiring to rediscover the “countercultural nature of the gospel” founded Mars Hill in Seattle, Washington in the mid 1990s.⁵ The community was highly successful in fulfilling their mission to “make disciples,” for in less than two decades, the church grew from a small Bible study to an influential church of 15,000 members.⁶ In the beginning, the small group held weekly bible studies at a local church where they volunteered. As the church website described in 1999,

These men and their wives and children became like family and together we began dreaming about the possibility of planning an urban church for an emerging postmodern generation... we began praying, studying the scriptures, reading a great deal on postmodernity, and dialoguing together to formulate a philosophy of ministry appropriate for our context...⁷

The group grew with the financial support of their local church, and became an independent community in October of 1996.⁸ Moving locations, they held small groups

⁴ Hannah Arendt. "What is authority?" *Between Past and Future* 91 (1958).

⁵ Mark Driscoll. *The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out Without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 52.

⁶ “Mars Hill.” Website. Accessed November 10, 2014. On file with author.

Mars Hill Archive, 2013, 2012, 2011 annual reports. Mars Hill attendance peaked at 21,000 attendees during their 2013 Easter service. Accessed August 29, 2015. On file with author.

See also, <https://vimeo.com/33254397>.

⁷ “Mars Hill, Our History.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

⁸ “Mars Hill, Our History.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015. Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 2.

and shared meals. A real estate broker partnered with the community, and they purchased communal homes.⁹ One member recalled,

We started attending regularly, heard a number of the pastors preach (because in those days they took turns preaching), listened carefully to what was said and mostly delighted in what we experienced.¹⁰

As the group expanded, conflict arose over matters of church organization and doctrine. Amidst the exchange of opinions, one of the original members, Mark Driscoll, figured out “how a church should be organized” and implemented his model.¹¹ Driscoll’s act of personal force divided the community, establishing “spiritual authority.” He described the event in his first book:

In the first few years our church experienced a great number of tensions. Many of them were about conflicting theological beliefs on everything from the Bible to Jesus, hell, women in ministry, mode of baptism, and the return of Jesus... at the root of all of our troubles was the issue of authority. [In our] struggling little church of anarchy and dissent, it was at that time when I realized that I needed to install qualified leaders and empower them with the authority to help lead the church by disciplining some people, kicking others out, training the teachable, encouraging the broken, empowering other leaders, and reaching the lost before the lunatics completely overtook the asylum/church plant. The obvious need for biblically based, formal, and qualified leadership led me on a lengthy study of how a church should be organized. In the end, I arrived at what I believed was a model of church government that was both biblically sound and practically effective. I taught our little church on these matters, and before long we had implemented the kind of church government that I was convicted was most faithful. Immediately, our church began to grow in both health and size. On the other hand, many of the people who attended Sunday services with us in the early days left the church because they were unwilling to submit to any spiritual authority. Many do not attend church anywhere, and some have even stopped claiming to be Christians. Others have matured in their faith and returned to our church, where they respect respectable authority and have been a blessing because of their humility and teachable disposition.¹²

⁹ Johnson, 339.

¹⁰ *Joyful Exiles*, blog. “Jonna’s Story.”

¹¹ Mark Driscoll. *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 82-83.

¹² Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*, 7-9.

Driscoll's personal force presented the others with an ultimatum: submission or separation. Subsequently, Driscoll's silencing act established authority as the proper solution to theological pluralism. Moving forward, silencing acts maintained order at Mars Hill, and discussions of church organization arising from mutual compromise threatened the legitimacy of the community.

The Puritans believed that religious truth would be revealed through the formation of covenants of mutual consent. The mutual creation of laws brought about their new world. Mars Hill's establishment was void of membership agreements or the constitution of formal processes for church governance.¹³ As I will detail throughout this chapter, at Mars Hill, it was believed that submission to self-sacrificing authority would bring about harmony and the revelation of religious truth. Through the lens of the community's doctrine, the establishment of authority was ultimately intended for spiritual benefit, as worldly suffering and the denial of will were believed to mark the lives of the elect. Mutual benefit was incompatible with this ideology, because it empowered individuals to speak and act in creative will and generated worldly happiness. As Driscoll preached, members were supposed to reject happiness and instead "take up their cross" in opposing

¹³ "The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which the authorities derive their 'authority,' that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked." Hannah Arendt. "Authority in the twentieth century." *The Review of Politics*. 18.04 (1956): 5.

"Charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint. The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent...Charisma is irrational."

Max Weber. *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 20.

post-modernity.¹⁴ In this way the community's doctrine disabled them from recognizing the legitimacy of mutual action.¹⁵

In the beginning years, the membership interacted through online discussion. Online forums served many purposes over the life of the church, first providing a space for the discussion of doctrine, church government and morality.¹⁶ The website described the online community in these terms:

Learning is conducted in conversational community, with disagreement and penetrating challenge directed at both student and teacher in an effort to discover the truth together.¹⁷

Despite the intent to discover the truth together, the heated online forum discussions often concluded with Driscoll's word, particularly on topics of church organization such as women in leadership, or of doctrinal centrality like the supremacy of Christ. In some instances Driscoll out-argued the others by demonstrating a superior knowledge of Biblical facts, historical theologies, or organizational theories. In others, his comment was acknowledged with reverence on account of his position as community leader.¹⁸ In this way, the forums reveal the early development of authoritarianism in the community. When authority was not exerted in forum discussion, participants were often unable to come to agreement on doctrinal issues: they engaged in long and angry debates, often failing to reach a consensus and eventually moving on to another topic.¹⁹ For example, in

¹⁴ Mark Driscoll. "What did Jesus Accomplish on the Cross?" Sermon. October 22, 2006.

¹⁵ Formalities were established later, when the authority, previously established, employed contracts and bylaws for the organization of the large membership. Website archives indicate that church members signed "membership covenants," in 1998; the first bylaws were constituted in 2004.

"Mars Hill, Covenant." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), "Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship 2004." Accessed August 29, 2015.

¹⁶ "Mars Hill, Forum 1." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

¹⁷ "Mars Hill, Midrash." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

¹⁸ "Mars Hill, Forum 3." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

"Mars Hill, Forum 4." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

¹⁹ In one instance, Driscoll's advice to reject an unrepentant friend met direct opposition.

a forum thread entitled “was Adam destined to sin or choose sin,” Mars Hill members thoroughly debated the notion of predestination, without reference to their lives. These discourses resemble synodical Puritan exchanges, in which ministers debated issues out of conjunction with lived faith experiences.²⁰

When the community was small, members used the online forums to ask Driscoll’s advice- forum discussion was a means for members to receive knowledge from the source of authority. As the church expanded, Driscoll was distanced from church dialogues, and decisions were filtered through the hierarchy.²¹ An example of this development occurred in 2007, when church elders held an online forum to answer questions after the controversial firing and excommunication of two leaders. Due to the size of the community (the church averaged 4,000 weekly attendees in 2007), only appointed elders were allowed to respond to inquisitions and reserved the right to answer selectively.²²

The church grew rapidly under Driscoll’s organizational strategy. In October of 1997, he spoke at a national conference for the Leadership Network, a non-profit group dedicated to optimizing church growth through organizational planning.²³ His talk on church organization in post-modernism launched a national platform, “propelling Mars Hill into the national spotlight.”²⁴ Following widespread publicity, the church began to organize a governance of elders, pastors and deacons to shepherd members. Driscoll

“Mars Hill, Forum 1.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

“Mars Hill, Forum 2.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

²⁰ “Mars Hill, Forum 4.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

²¹ “Mars Hill, Midrash.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

Matthew Paul Turner. *MatthewPaulTurner* (blog), June 20, 2012. Accessed August 1, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship 2004.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Driscoll’s Memo.” Accessed August 29, 2015. 3.

²² *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Ask Anything.” Accessed August 29, 2015. 1.

²³ “Leadership Network.” Website. Accessed July 17, 2015.

²⁴ “Mars Hill, Our History.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

wrote in 1999, “This step was an attempt to identify the core and heart of our church by distinguishing those committed to us as a family,” and “helped to organize and stabilize our chaos.”²⁵ Male community members were inducted into a variety of leadership positions, with many serving a dual role as spiritual leaders and staff members, occupying specialized pastoral functions. The community utilized the term “first among equals” to describe those appointed, communicating their obligation to act as servants, sacrificing themselves for those under their care.²⁶

As the church expanded, Driscoll instituted a “corporate” organizational strategy. The church government was divided into two central eldership bodies that made decisions in full unanimity, and a board of advisors appointed by Driscoll and his executive elders. In this case, unanimity was efficient in maintaining loyalty. Due to Driscoll’s personal charisma, the eldership councils followed his guidance and the cultural emphasis on unity meant that conflicts within the decision-making process were viewed negatively. The hierarchy ensured that a formal leader presided over each community unit from the board of advisors, to the executive eldership, to eldership teams, to individual churches, community groups, and families.²⁷ Driscoll argued against “flat elder councils,” advocating for efficient disciple-making over deliberation.²⁸ The church bylaws established processes for church discipline, which allowed leaders to easily remove problematic members that might complicate the execution of the mission.²⁹ The bylaws stated that members were “not guaranteed confidentiality... may be dismissed

²⁵ “Mars Hill, Our History.” *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

²⁶ Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*. 1.

Mars Hill Refuge (blog), “Sophia’s Story.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

²⁷ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Ask Anything.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

²⁸ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship 2004.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

²⁹ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Ask Anything.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

from church activities by the agreement of two elders,” and “may not appeal to any court because of a discipline process.”³⁰ As the church grew, the bylaws were altered to grant greater power to the central authority.³¹

The church expanded via a multi-site model, purchasing buildings in diverse locations and streaming Driscoll’s preaching into these sites. The central eldership appointed a lead pastor over each site and maintained strict guidance over their actions. The church grew to 15 sites by 2013, boasting \$32 million in assets. Driscoll’s model gained popularity among Evangelicals, with many new churches adopting the design in the 2000s and early 2010s.³²

In Puritanism, covenant frameworks supported face-to-face religious activities shared by those bound in promise. Their familiarity allowed them to share in assurance without interrogating the correctness of the theologies created, or associating legitimacy with the method in which it was delivered. At Mars Hill, members formed intimate bonds in the community groups to which they were allocated. Members were disciplined and engaged in service activities within their community units of 8-15 members. Many described their group as a family.

What factors disabled these intimate units from engaging in theological praxis? The rigid hierarchy and the size of the organization restricted the openness of theological discussion. In the hierarchy, leaders relayed information to their higher-ups regarding the

³⁰ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship 2004.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Driscoll’s Memo.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

³¹ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship 2007,” “Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship 2011,” “Bylaws of Mars Hill Fellowship, 2012.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

³² Many leaders credit Driscoll with the initiation of the “Emerging Church,” and the “Neo-Calvinism” movements, prominent trends in American Evangelicalism.

Oppenheimer, Mark. “A Calvinist Revival for Evangelicals.” *New York Times*. January 3, 2014.

Craig Baker. *We Love Mars Hill* (blog), Accessed August 29, 2015.

Ron Wheeler. “I am not Anonymous.” *Ronwheelerjr* (blog), Accessed August 29, 2015.

discipline of their members, and delivered doctrine and mission to members from above.

The church website described,

One of the primary functions of community groups within the church is pastoral care (counseling, discipleship, etc.). Our structure has been designed to ensure that every active member of the church is being shepherded by a leader, coach, or pastor.³³

Pastors held little leeway to alter procedures, as they worked under the close surveillance of their overseers and regularly consulted with higher-ups regarding the lives of their sheep.³⁴ Additionally, leaders took on great spiritual responsibility, which pressured them to strictly monitor the applied action of the members. Leaders would “answer before God” if they failed to do their duty.³⁵

As observed in the development of forum discourse, the legitimate source of doctrine and mission was progressively distanced from the everyday lives of the members: as new levels of formal authority were established, expansion limited Driscoll’s ability to represent the spiritual experiences of the community, and likewise, the membership’s ability to influence his ideas was minimized. The dedicated membership perceived Driscoll’s doctrine to be fixed, directing their religious energies toward applying his charismatic sermons and teachings to their everyday actions. Their belief in his infallibility correlated with their declining influence: the impact of their actions upon the definition of doctrine was greatly obscured, disguising the doctrine with a pretense of immutability. Thus, Driscoll’s doctrine developed in conjunction with the

³³ *Mars Hill Archive*. “Mars Hill 2013 Annual Report,” “Mars Hill 2012 Annual Report,” “Mars Hill 2011 Annual Report.” Accessed August 29, 2015. On file with researcher.

³⁴ Tertin, Ben. “Painful Lessons of Mars Hill.” *Christianity Today*. December 2014. Accessed September 17, 2015.

³⁵ Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*.

hierarchical structure of the church, providing a central grid of fixed doctrines that symbiotically legitimized the authoritarian structure of the community.

Driscoll was labeled the “primary preaching and teaching pastor” because detailed the community’s beliefs through sermons and books, and the “CEO,” as he determined the organizational vision.³⁶ The doctrinal grid progressively expanded. Overtime, Driscoll came to define a greater canon of “non-negotiable” doctrines, and with expansion he supported unity of belief by offering increasingly explicit descriptions of these unquestionable principles. Driscoll composed the doctrine out of his interpretation of Calvinism and Biblical texts, his opinions on social issues, and personal narratives from his life.³⁷ Following the formation of the organizational hierarchy and the institution of the first bylaws, Driscoll outlined the mission of the community and distinguished primary “non-negotiable” doctrines from secondary doctrines. In a few recorded instances, leaders accused members of heresy (disbelief in a primary doctrine).³⁸ In 2004, Driscoll wrote that the church mission required that “God’s people to filter all the cultures they encounter... through a biblical and theological grid in order to cling to that which is good and reject that which is evil.”³⁹

Christ the Representative

Formal mutual bonds were not established at Mars Hill. Authority worked to insulate doctrine from lived action: the intimate spaces suitable for theological praxis

³⁶ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Formal Charges, Kraft.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

³⁷ Driscoll placed Calvinist doctrines and scriptures alongside personal examples from his life. For an example, see the upcoming discussion of his confessional discourse.

³⁸ One instance involved Driscoll’s personal assistant. He accused her of heresy and directed the church to shun her in 2003. For the purpose of discipline, the elders initiated other instances of trials and shunning. The most significant trial involved the excommunication of dissenting elders Paul Petry and Bent Meyer. Karen Schaeffer. *We Love Mars Hill* (blog), Accessed August 29, 2015.

³⁹ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 126.

were regulated within the formal hierarchy, blocking opportunity for discussion among equals, at least in regards to formal matters of religion.

The organizational hierarchy aligned with the community's doctrine in forming an environment averse to creative faith acts. In the following section, I explore the relationship between doctrinal content and hierarchy at Mars Hill, analyzing the church's Christology, its primary doctrine. As I will show, the Christology reinforced the divine significance of doctrine above lived experience, opposing speaking and acting in which the two might function in mutuality. The community believed that doctrine and action, Christ and church, God and humanity and men and women were irreconcilably discrete apart from the self-sacrificial domination of one over the other. The community presented authoritative self-sacrifice and selfless submission as the godly solution to otherwise oppositional relationships, denying mutual action and opposing two-way exchanges of truth. Driscoll communicated that selflessness and obedience made opposing actors *one body*, as the superior actor denied their own benefit, and the submissive actor gave up their personhood, taking on the identity of the superior. In being selfless, the superior would determine the benefit of the lesser, and act on their behalf, eliminating the decision-making power of their passive partner. By definition, in a mutual act, actors are cognizant of the legitimate agency of their partner: in accepting self-sacrifice as the solution to the human condition, the community rejected mutual spiritual benefit as rebellion against God.

By this logic, community members were "powerless" until they surrendered their will to Christ: in surrender, they vicariously assumed Christ's *self-sustaining* "power."

Arendt made a pertinent distinction that expounds the capacity for authoritarianism (and the vicarious, representative action it requires) to inhibit the speaking and acting of praxis: she asserted that power exists in mutual agreements and that it may not exist in isolated singularity.

If power were more than this potentiality in being together, if it could be possessed like strength or applied like force instead of being dependent upon the unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions, omnipotence would be a concrete human possibility... to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.⁴⁰

In systems of total hierarchy, in which equality of participation is denied in every organizational unit, persons forsake power for the sake of order. In this case, one individual must determine God's truth in isolation. Theologically, this idea can be reflected in doctrines that characterize God as an immutable, omnipotent being, not requiring interaction with humanity, but relating to humans out of self-sacrificial love. At Mars Hill, the Christ figure signified perfect selflessness and perfect submission to God the father. Christ was also the perfect representation of God on earth. Arendt wrote, "to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act," and in representing God on earth and humanity before God, Christ faced total isolation. Members sought to imitate Christ in ridding their spiritual lives of praxis.

The Christ symbol was further understood in conjunction with the collective church: the church was made holy through association with Christ and was commissioned to act as a representation of God within liberal society.⁴¹ Members described representation as *missional* activity: they represented God's will in the external society,

⁴⁰ Ibid. 188, 201.

⁴¹ Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*.

Driscoll, Mark. *On Who is God? (Book You'll Actually Read)*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008.

Driscoll, Mark. *A Call to Resurgence: Will Christianity Have a Funeral or a Future?* Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013.

subsequently manifesting Christ's will within their church, making it one with God.

Articulating the church vision in 2008, Driscoll wrote,

What does it mean to be Spirit empowered? It means to be like Jesus... it is not about you at all. It's about Jesus. It's all about Jesus' mission. That's what it means to be Spirit empowered- saved by Jesus and sent on mission empowered by the Spirit.⁴²

Church leaders acted according to Christ's *selfless authority*. Congruent with his view of traditional Calvinism, Driscoll stated that Christ's death was vicarious, solely for the benefit of the church and without benefit for himself.⁴³ The church's hierarchy guaranteed the appointed leaders many opportunities to act vicariously, as they guided many subordinates on whose behalf they might act. In a book on church government, Driscoll wrote,

Jesus Christ is the Senior Pastor in the church. We have established that the other leaders and members are to follow and emulate Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Apostle who plants a church. Jesus is the leader who builds the church. Jesus is the Senior Pastor and Chief Shepherd who rules the church. And it is ultimately Jesus who closes churches down when they have become faithless... Church leadership begins with the centrality and preeminence of Jesus, sadly, many churches omit him from their organizational charts altogether.⁴⁴

Those with the least authority- women, children and new members- lacked subordinates in the community on whose behalf they might give of their self-interest: yet, even the lowliest members might sacrifice on behalf of those outside- the unsaved. For this reason, the community's countercultural, separationist identity was crucial to its operation. Because the boundary between worlds was rigid, it required that members imitated Christ in guiding the unsaved into the community.

⁴² Ibid. 158, 162.

⁴³ Driscoll, Mark. *On Who is God? (Book You'll Actually Read)*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008. 58.

⁴⁴ Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*, 12-13.

The cultures that surround you are filled with lost people who cannot find Jesus unless you give them directions with signposts to guide them...the gospel compels us to participate with God in the culture we live in.⁴⁵

The formal church goal, to make disciples, meant inducting new members: Driscoll held that salvation did not occur in a moment, but was evidenced by participation in the mission.⁴⁶ In *On Revolution*, Arendt contrasted political action with management and administration- activities “dictated by the necessities which underlie all economic processes.”⁴⁷ Arendt wrote,

John Adams’ passion for ‘emulation’ his *spectemur agendo*- ‘let us be seen in action,’ let us have a space where we are seen and can act - came into conflict with ruthless and fundamentally anti-political desires to be rid of all public cares and duties; to establish a mechanism of government administration through which men could control their rulers and still enjoy the advantages of monarchical government, to be ‘ruled without their own agency’ ... so that ‘their attention may be exclusively on their own interests’.⁴⁸

Participation at Mars Hill meant participation in a bureaucracy. Allowing oneself to be ruled without agency was an expression of spiritual obedience. The administration of new members was selfless duty that required members to sacrifice their time and energy and for the cause of the mission.

Throughout his life we see Jesus constantly speaking of his submission to the authority of God the Father; Jesus continually states that the Father sent him to earth on his mission and that he was doing what the Father told him to do and saying what the Father told him to say.⁴⁹

How were believers to obey? Driscoll encouraged members to “pull into town and say something controversial and offensive,” to get a reaction out of the unsaved.⁵⁰

Understandably, members feared rejection and rationalized their actions, equating social

⁴⁵ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 60.

⁴⁶ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 69.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 272.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 136.

⁴⁹ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 8.

⁵⁰ Mark Driscoll (blog), “Riot Evangelism.” Accessed February 12, 2016.

rejection with persecution (or godly suffering) that would result in spiritual reward.⁵¹ It was their religious duty to represent Christ by suffering outside of the comfort of their religious social circles. In addition to the likelihood of social rejection, members faced the issue of unsuccessful conversion attempts. Some of their friends simply disagreed. If representatives truly were messengers of Christ, speaking truth, then why were their attempts unpersuasive? Driscoll taught,

But as we work among cultures, we must never proclaim Jesus as God merely from our limited and biased perspective...the view from his throne is not simply one of the many equally valid perspectives but truth. If we fail in this... postmodern Christians will reject any singular interpretation of Scripture, arguing that it is just your perspective and that there are other perspectives, none of which are true, so we should be tolerant of all. They will reject any leadership and shun what they call “organized religion” and [demand] that self-discovery be promoted over obedience to God... and [the mission] will cease.⁵²

Since the community’s success- organizationally and missionally- hinged on the legitimacy of their doctrine, it could not be questioned. Instead, as in the Puritan trial, they rationalized that their faulty speech and sinful actions were to blame for failed evangelism. According to Driscoll, failed attempts to represent Christ in the outside world were caused by two kinds of sins: their incapacity to communicate the truth clearly, and their inability to apply the truth in action (their poor behavior). In short, since God the father’s truth was perfect, the “little Christs” were at fault.⁵³ In his final book, Driscoll eased some of the burden of this hypocritical guilt by defining primary and secondary doctrines, separating out the topics upon which all true Christians must agree, and those of which they might legitimately disagree. After reading the book, one blogger

⁵¹ During interviews conducted in December of 2015, several members mentioned a recent sermon of great spiritual value. The pastor had instructed them to “trust God” instead of feeling burdened by the task of propagating the religion. One member said he was released from anxiety and guilt. This sermon was preached in the wake of the disband, when members faced “godly suffering” through media criticism.

⁵² Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 176.

⁵³ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*.

interpreted, “I think the limits of Christian orthodoxy are like a national border, whereas your denominational tribe is like a state.”⁵⁴ Evangelists were absolved of the blame for discrepancies in “state” law.

Members sought to preach in “word and deed,” focusing their energies on practicing (as in applying) the perfect truth they preached. In Arendt’s terms, they struggled to connect contemplation with routine action via speech while simultaneously preserving the sovereignty of thought. They struggled to make a sort of manufactured praxis emerge under authoritative conditions. In this way, a life of *representative religion*- a life of evangelism- consisted of a hopeless battle to make religious authority and theological power, like Christ and the church, one and the same. To support the church’s efforts, Driscoll developed a confessional discourse aimed at relieving some of the stress involved in selflessly and obediently representing Christ. He instructed his followers to regularly confess their sin in the presence of outsiders, so that their listeners might understand the reason for their hypocrisy- the reason for the disconnect between the doctrine they preached, their poor speech, and their applied action.

Christians and their churches must move forward on their knees, continually confessing their addictions to morality and the appearance of godliness... [they] must be comfortable and truthful around lost sinners... unrepentant self-righteousness also permits us to justify our sin by viewing ourselves as “clean” and others as “dirty,” which then causes us to avoid others in an effort to remain untainted... It is imperative that Christians develop a habit of confessing and repenting of their self-righteousness, which prohibits this natural progress of the gospel through culture. In saying this I recognize that I may sound self-righteous and hypocritically judgmental, and so I will illustrate this point through one of my own sinful experiences...⁵⁵

In his first book, Driscoll shared an experience in which he felt afraid while visiting a bar with a friend. He was too embarrassed to reveal his vocation when his

⁵⁴ *Think Theology* (blog), Accessed February 12, 2016.

⁵⁵ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*. 35, 74, 48.

acquaintances asked about his life. Driscoll linked his failed evangelism to a Biblical passage, the story of Jesus in Samaria, and wrote about human depravity, sharing his theology with the community:

Rules, regulations and the pursuit of outward morality are ultimately incapable of preventing sin... Jesus' love for us and our love for him are, frankly, the only tethers that will keep us from abusing our freedom, yet they will enable us to venture as far into the culture and into relationships with lost people and Jesus did, because we go with him.⁵⁶

In effect, the evangelists assessed their own actions against the perfect doctrine in order to convince the unsaved of its legitimacy, only to then deny their ability to communicate truth at all apart from divine intervention. In this way, the confessional discourse protected the legitimacy of God's authority, the organizational structure, the mission, and the Christ figure. It reflected their belief that the truth of doctrine preceded and existed apart from human action. Driscoll wrote,

God who is infinite, cannot be uncovered by those of us who are part of his finite creation unless he reveals himself to us.⁵⁷

The community believed that during their evangelical speech-acts, God terminated human ability in order to impart truth. In successful evangelism, a speaker emptied themselves of intent or opinion, denying their will in order that God might act through them to save an outsider. Driscoll articulated:

The Bible claims to be a revelation from God that can be understood only by God's bypassing our resistance and renewing our hearts and minds to both know and love him and his truth.⁵⁸

To protect God's immutability, the evangelists attempted to rid themselves of selfishness: selfishness enveloped all actions that did not benefit the mission, including creative

⁵⁶ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 31-40.

⁵⁷ Driscoll, *On Who Is God*, 22.

⁵⁸ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 174.

speaking and acting that involved personal perspective. Paralleling Driscoll's founding, which unified the church through the silencing of differing opinions, successful evangelism occurred when God silenced the speaker. God was to overcome the will of the evangelist in order to vicariously perform through them. The goal of the evangelist was *pure representation*.

Mars Hill's confessional evangelism is fascinating because, externally, it resembles theological praxis: to the listener, the evangelist appeared to be performing a creative act. The evangelist evaluated their intended audience, and carefully tailored a combination of theological symbol and their lived experiences (or lived mistakes), in order to persuade another of their truth.⁵⁹ However, the representative's understanding of the process and their intent in performing the discourse was quite the opposite. In attempting to maintain their doctrine, the representatives enacted a sort of *virtual praxis*, a persuasive attempt to present a fixed system of belief under the guise of being a spiritual, generative faith in which theology stemmed from the synthesis of doctrine and lived experience. I think the preoccupations with hypocrisy evident in Puritanism and at Mars Hill were the effect of the psychological dissonance involved in representation: the repression of agency on behalf of others inhibited persons from expressing the truth of their lived experience, while their participation required that they sell a distant belief as persuasively and passionately as if it were their own creation.

For the evangelist-representative, participation in the confessional discourse was an experience entirely unlike theological praxis. The representative conveyed their lived experiences in order to reveal their guilt, not their assurance. The confession concluded with an articulation of doubt, for the speaker perceived their performance to be an

⁵⁹ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 58-61.

inadequate articulation of theological symbols. The profession was a selfish faith-act, stemming from the desire for faith; quite the opposite, the evangelistic confession required the total denial of spiritual need. The profession creatively confronted doubt in the movement of symbols and lived experience, while the confession involved unquestioning recitation, and denied the existence of faith apart from belief.

When compared with my definition of theological praxis, the dissimilarity is clear:

- 1) The evangelical discourse was a ritual discourse in which participants revealed their inadequate application of doctrine for the cause of a mission. The confessional discourse reinforced belief in doctrine, and was purposed for the indoctrination of outsiders.
- 2) Participants confessed the inadequacy of their lived experiences in order to protect the legitimacy of the doctrine recited. Evangelists worked to prevent themselves from influencing the meaning of symbols, in order to maintain them. Symbols of high doctrine were likely to be used, as they were highly defined, making it easier to describe them uncreatively.
- 3) Evangelists labored to communicate doctrines simply and clearly, so that their speech might not cloud their statements of belief.
- 4) The discourse was intended to be perfectly legal- evangelists aimed to clearly and unwaveringly recite prescribed beliefs.

Doctrine Applied

At Mars Hill, the establishment of doctrine over action was reflected in many facets of church life. Driscoll's books described a string of dichotomies, set up in resemblance of the discrete relationship between God and humanity. He discussed, among others, the separation of good from evil, truth from heresy, saved from unsaved, religion from earth, and men from women.⁶⁰ As in the church hierarchy, to make harmony, the

⁶⁰ These were the primary binary categories established in Driscoll's *Radical Reformation*. The list of discrete categories became progressively extensive in his subsequent works.

strong actor was to practice self-sacrifice on behalf of the weaker. The weaker partner would react to the selfless act of the stronger by trusting their authority and choosing to obey, abandoning their own agency and becoming one with the stronger. Driscoll wrote that the true method for establishing harmony amidst difference was for all parties to submit to the mission of Christ- through submission they would be reconciled.

The finger-pointing both in the church and culture between blacks and whites, young and old, rich and poor, ugly and beautiful, smart and dumb, urban and rural, Republicans and Democrats, male and female... can be explained because we all have our own list and are just haggling over the details. The more we understand the concept of [the mission], the more we realize that everyone is unlovely, Jesus loves everyone and it is his love alone that makes us lovely.⁶¹

Driscoll described the figure of Jesus with the scripturally backed terms “father, author, judge, master, husband,” and warned, “we should not give him other names.”⁶² The giving of new names- the interpretative synthesis of lived experience and symbols - was equated with the sinful projection of human ideas upon a perfect God. This dualistic, authoritarian worldview could not accept theological praxis without compromising itself. The reciprocal power of action- its power to realize and influence the meaning of doctrines- was hidden, and likewise, the reciprocal power of subordinated partners was denied legitimacy. Driscoll’s books associate reciprocal action with the “false doctrines” of liberals and feminists, who “teach that God and man are not separate.”⁶³ Driscoll taught,

[There are] two competing worldviews: the truth, what is often referred to as “two-ism” and the lie, or “one-ism.” Two-ism is the biblical doctrine that Creator and creation are separate- like two separate circles- and that creation is subject to the Creator. One-ism removes the line between Creator and creation, as if the two coexist within a single circle.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 77.

⁶² Driscoll, *On Who Is God*, 41, 44.

⁶³ Driscoll, *A Call to Resurgence*, 23.

⁶⁴ Driscoll, *A Call to Resurgence*, 39.

Many church policies- such as their exclusively male eldership- and their conservative social views were anchored in this central philosophy. Driscoll adamantly opposed gender non-conformity and all non-hetero sexualities, calling them “oneisms” that undermined the authoritative relationship he believed to naturally exist between men and women. In his first book, after explaining the mission and doctrine of Christ, he explained,

Theologically, a postmodern church addicted to egalitarianism is also marked by a confusion over gender issues, such as masculinity and femininity, and sexual issues, such as homosexuality and bisexuality, as well as by a peculiar commitment to making sure that everyone’s voice is equally heard and everyone’s input is equally considered as if the church were one big internet chat room. This pursuit of a flat culture of bland sameness and silly equality has resulted in postmodern theologies that are seeking to diminish even God in an effort to make him equal with us and more like us. As we work among cultures that despise hierarchy, we must remember the kingdom values of children honoring their parents, wives respecting their husbands, Christians following the leadership of their pastors, and churches submitting to Jesus, because the governments of home and church belong to God and not the culture.⁶⁵

In 2013 Molly Worthen came to a similar conclusion, writing that Evangelism’s crisis of authority stemmed from their struggle with dual legitimacy. She wrote,

The central source of anti-intellectualism in evangelical life is the antithesis of “authoritarianism.” It is evangelicals’ ongoing crisis of authority- their struggle to reconcile reason with revelation, heart with head, and private piety with the public square – that best explains their anxiety and their animosity toward intellectual life. Thinkers in the democratic West celebrate their freedom of thought but practice a certain kind of unwavering obedience – bowing to the Enlightenment before all other gods- that allows modern intellectual life to function. Evangelicals, by contrast, are torn between sovereign powers that each claim supremacy.⁶⁶

I gathered information from church records, online interviews and blogs to understand how the membership received Driscoll’s doctrine and *applied* it in community

⁶⁵ Ibid. 169, 172-174.

⁶⁶ Worthen, Molly. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

life. Many members were attracted to the “authenticity” of his message more so than the doctrinal content. Jessica Johnson spent two years conducting ethnographic research in the community, concluding that the cultural shift following the September 11 attacks fueled the growth of the church, making the church’s militaristic discourses appealing to many. For a 2009 *New York Times* article, members explained their attraction to the doctrine. One of the young interviewees joined the church because he was drawn to their all-powerful God:

There are plenty of comfortable people who can say, “God’s on my side.” But they couldn’t turn around and say, “God gave me cancer.”⁶⁷

This young Calvinist found Mars Hill’s authoritarian God appealing because it was the source of both comfort and pain. He found resolve in the certainty of ultimate divine control: a God that caused cancer for a greater end was preferable to a God that abandoned followers, allowing them to be inflicted. A women’s counselor from Mars Hill applied the doctrine to her clients, stating, “Christian self-help doesn’t work,” and concluding that people cannot escape destructive behaviors without God’s intervention. In her opinion “self-help” took away from God’s control over the world. She explained of her clients,

They worship the trauma, or the anorexia, and that’s not what they’re designed to worship... Christian self-help doesn’t work. We can’t do anything. It’s all the work of Christ.⁶⁸

Some members blogged about their church experiences, commenting on the discourse of community groups. In community group units of 8-10, members worked together to apply their beliefs to their everyday lives. I took particular interest in these groups because they were intimate communities in which the membership spent a

⁶⁷ Worthen, Molly. “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?” *New York Times*, January 6, 2009.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

majority of their church activity. Many members considered their community group “family.”⁶⁹ According to Mars Hill’s policy, members were to meet twice a week for discussions of doctrine under an appointed leader; Driscoll described community groups as a place for members “to discuss sermons.”⁷⁰ Following the disband, one member blogged about her experience:

My community group leader showed irritation when I spoke up at group or challenged him on things he said. I was often dismissed as making excuses or wanting an emotional experience. The prayer time, separated by gender, was spent mostly talking about how we could please our husbands... as women, we were not allowed input as to what would be the first bible study we did. At the community group meetings, there was a lot of debate about doctrine, review of Mark’s teaching, and not a whole lot of bible teaching. My husband and I participated as much as possible. We often went home very frustrated... it came time for the community group to split into two groups, and the person who was chosen from our group to lead the new group was someone my husband and I felt was the least qualified in terms of having the integrity of someone who would be leading people. He was, however, very similar in personality to the original leader and very enthusiastic about Mars Hill... it was later revealed to us by other group members that our original community group leader was actually the “keeper of the gate.” He would report back to [our pastor] and another pastor about the people in the group and whether or not he thought they were fit for leadership. Over time it seemed that being involved with Mars Hill took over our lives. I found myself with the women of my community group up to 4 days per week. We knew that if we did not become members, we would be limited in what we could do as far as service. We asked some friends about the membership process as they had already completed it. They informed us that you did the “Doctrine” series and then you did a membership interview. In that interview they talked with you, I was told you made a giving pledge, and you had to confess a sin that you still struggle with. At some point we were told that your community group leader would “hold you accountable,” if you were not meeting your pledge.

In this case, when the couple opted out of the membership process, the others refused their friendship.

The silence from the leadership and the people I considered friends was deafening. I was crushed. This was my only group of friends in this town and I felt like I was getting everything taken from me and having to start all over... As I reflect on my experience I see that in comparison to many others, I was fortunate.

⁶⁹ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Ask Anything.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁷⁰ Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*.

I left quickly, and managed to avoid church discipline (because we refused to meet with leaders).⁷¹

Another former member recalled, “I spoke up too much. I wasn’t, according to them, ‘obedient.’ I had opinions.”⁷²

The communities adamantly defended one another from outside influence: some members admitted to monitoring one another’s phone conversations.⁷³ In several reports, community group leaders and pastors intervened in the personal lives of members after hearing their confessions. In one published narrative, a member

Had a disagreement with one of his pastors over a building-safety issue during a church party...the pastor said [he] was being overcautious, [he] disagreed, and the disagreement metastasized into a weeks-long debate - not about the safety issue, per se, but about whether [he] was being “insubordinate” and refusing to properly “submit.”

As a result, the pastor demanded that the man end a long-distance romantic relationship that he had previously shared as a potential spiritual issue. When he resisted, the pastor intervened, phoning the woman’s father to tell him that the group member posed a threat. When the member confronted the pastor about the intrusion, he stated, “I’m the authority over you... you agreed when you became a member that I am your authority, and you have to obey us.”⁷⁴

This extreme boundary-making aligned with the church’s doctrine: according to the organizational and doctrinal hierarchy, those in leadership were entitled to act on behalf of their members, having a better understanding of the mission given their closer proximity to the source of doctrine (and Jesus, the transcendent source situated “at the top

⁷¹ *Mars Hill Refuge* (blog), “Sophia’s Story.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁷² Matthew Paul Turner. *MatthewPaulTurner* (blog), June 20, 2012. Accessed August 1, 2015.

⁷³ *Wartburg Watch* (blog). “Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll Under Scrutiny While Another Painful Story Emerges.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁷⁴ “Church or Cult?” *The Stranger*. Accessed September 18, 2015.

of the organizational chart”). Theoretically, leaders acted for the benefit of their members in protecting them. They were right to align their followers to the mission, and discipline them when their actions reflected poorly on the church and the Christ figure. Members acted in proper self-sacrifice by allowing their leaders to direct and protect them. It was imperative that authority was *good*:

The answer to abusive authority is not a lack of authority; it is righteous authority that rules under the authority of Scripture and Jesus.⁷⁵

Followed to the end, the legitimacy of authority rested on whether or not the obedient could discern the inner workings of their leaders. Since alignment with the mission was understood to restore harmony, and authorities were understood to have a superior knowledge, it was possible for any authoritative action to be selfless and lead to spiritual benefit. It was impossible for the church to know the difference between sinful acts and self-sacrificing acts (both of which might be disguised under the covering of mission, and of which even their enactors could not know). The church continued to grow despite shunning practices, excommunications, and the separation of young members from their parents.⁷⁶

In 2007, the Mars Hill leadership performed church trials in order to resolve community tensions, as the distance between Driscoll and the membership expanded. In a pivotal event, two well-respected elders were tried for challenging a bylaw change.⁷⁷ The Seattle Times reported,

⁷⁵ Driscoll, *On Who Is God*, 64, 7, 8.

⁷⁶ *Wartburg Watch* (blog), “Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll Under Scrutiny While Another Painful Story Emerges.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁷⁷ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Recommendation for Munson.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Petry’s Revision.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Meyer Letter.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “The Elders’ Response.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Email to Elders.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

A recent firing of two pastors is causing turmoil at Mars Hill Church. Leaders said in forum postings that one fired pastor was removed, in part, for ‘displaying an unhealthy distrust in the senior leadership.’ They [Mars Hill leaders] say the other was removed for ‘disregarding the accepted elder protocol for the bylaw deliberation period’ and ‘verbally attacking the lead pastor,’ charges the fired pastors deny.⁷⁸

The elders dissented in acts of conscience, out of their belief that they would “be held accountable to almighty God.”⁷⁹ Their dissent provoked extreme measures because it challenged the basis of the sacred hierarchy and doctrine of the church. The elders believed that the new bylaws failed to hold Driscoll accountable, and that the leadership environment was dangerous. They told the executive elders to “look in the mirror,” questioning their motivations.⁸⁰ They questioned whether the church leadership was acting abusively or in self-sacrifice, though they could not get “close enough to see and verify.”⁸¹ After their disobedience was announced, one elder accepted the discipline and remained. The other left, refusing to be tried, and his family was shunned.⁸² The unresolved event resurfaced during the collapse of the organization in 2014.⁸³ Driscoll

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Email from Munson.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Preaching Edits.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Termination Letter.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Scott Thomas Letter.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Confession Request.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Brad House.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Withdrawn Membership.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Meyer Letter to Elders.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “Document Set.” Accessed August 29, 2015. 12.

⁷⁸ “Firing of Pastors Roils Mars Hill Church.” *Seattle Times*. Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁷⁹ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Recommendation for Munson.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), “The Elders’ Response.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁸⁰ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Recommendation for Munson.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁸¹ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Meyer Letter.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁸² *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Meyer Letter to Elders.” Accessed August 29, 2015.

Repentant Pastor (blog), Accessed August 1, 2015.

⁸³ Brendan Kiley. “Why the Mars Hill Faithful Have Started to Question Mark.” *The Stranger*. July 30, 2014. Accessed July 17, 2015.

“Not Anonymous.” <https://www.facebook.com/marshillnotanonymous>.

“Mars Hill Support.” <https://www.facebook.com/groups/266599816842988/>.

Musings from Under the Bus (blog), Accessed July 30, 2015.

wrote the following in a publication soon after the excommunication, explaining the threat of their dissent in philosophical terms:

At the root of all sin is the pagan confusion, or inversion, of Creator and creation. Indeed, if God is not worshiped, then something/someone invariably rises, seeking to sit in his seat of glory... the answer to abusive authority is not a lack of authority; it is righteous authority that rules under the authority of Scripture and Jesus.⁸⁴

Doctrine Defended

The membership continued to grow until 2014, when Driscoll fell under intense media scrutiny for plagiarism, misuse of church funds, and the authorship of offensive documents that many readers deemed homophobic and misogynistic. Disgruntled members divulged stories of trials, shunning practices, and non-disclosure agreements to the public; other members picketed the church demanding new leadership and exoneration for excommunicates.⁸⁵ In November of 2014, twenty-one elders questioned Driscoll for violating the “biblical qualifications of an elder by domineering others,” and collected evidence of verbal abuse, sexual harassment and reports of psychological trauma from staff members.⁸⁶ In their charges, the elders ordered Driscoll to step down, while defending the infallible doctrine.

We love the people of Mars Hill Church, and we are grateful for how Pastor Mark’s ministry has impacted our lives in positive ways. *He has taught us sound doctrine.* We feel responsible to submit these charges for the sake of the gospel,

⁸⁴ Driscoll, *On Who Is God*, 7, 8, 64.

⁸⁵ Merrit, Jonathan. “Mark Driscoll Accused of Plagiarism by Radio Host.” *Religion News Service*. November 22, 2013.

“Driscoll Steps Down from the Gospel Coalition Council.” *The Gospel Coalition*. Accessed August 29, 2015.

Dominic Holden. *Slog* (blog), “Mars Hill Church Pastor Quits.” *The Stranger*. Accessed July 17, 2015.

Locus and Honey (blog), <http://www.locusthoney.com/?p=1148>.

Murashko, Alex. “No Vision Shift After Mark Driscoll Leaves Acts29 Leadership.” *Christian Post*. April 11, 2012.

Mars Hill Refuge (blog), “Sophia’s Story.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁸⁶ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Formal Charges.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Formal Charges, Kraft.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

our own consciences and the future well-being of Mars Hill Church. In addition, we believe that Mars Hill Church, and each and every Christian church worldwide, belongs to Jesus, not to any one leader, or group of leaders. The reputation of Jesus in our communities and around the world, and the noble office of elder is to be upheld and respected, no matter how gifted the leader [emphasis added].⁸⁷

After Driscoll's resignation, former members, staff, Evangelical leaders, and liberal critics struggled to pinpoint the reason for the collapse. I was unable to find a response that gave critical consideration to the community's primary theological beliefs. Evangelical leaders blamed Driscoll and the eldership for taking on responsibility while "spiritually immature," suggesting that the organizational model lacked a process of rigid Biblical training. Prominent Evangelical John Piper defended the doctrine, grieving that Driscoll's exegesis was sound and concluding that the collapse was a "Satanic victory" in which "God allowed a tactical defeat."⁸⁸ Some leaders accused the "corporate model," concluding that the emphasis on "quantity over quality" caused the members to be "brainwashed by the mission." Resilient members defended Mars Hill, blaming media criticism for the destruction of the church.⁸⁹

Like Evangelical leaders, liberal critics pointed out the personal flaws in the psychology of those in authority. Many critics condemned the church's social views. Focusing on Driscoll, the media speculated about his extraordinary teaching, identifying

⁸⁷ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), "Formal Charges." Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁸⁸ Paulson, Michael. "Mark Driscoll is Being Urged to Leave." *New York Times*. August 22, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Yhn_4mmowU&app=desktop

⁸⁹ Lee, Morgan. "Former Mars Hill Church Leaders Apologize..." *Christian Post*. April 2, 2014. Accessed September 17, 2015. "

Mars Hill Church Bellevue." <http://www.yelp.com/biz/mars-hill-church-bellevue>

Matthew Paul Turner. *MatthewPaulTurner* (blog), June 20, 2012. Accessed August 1, 2015.

Moon, Ruth. "The Faults in Our Stars: What Can We Learn from the Downfall of Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church?" *Relevant Magazine*. March, 2015. Accessed July 25, 2015.

Tertin, Ben. "Painful Lessons of Mars Hill." *Christianity Today*. December 2014. Accessed September 17, 2015.

Wartburg Watch (blog). "Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll Under Scrutiny While Another Painful Story Emerges." Accessed August 29, 2015.

We Love Mars Hill (blog), Accessed August 29, 2015.

the personality traits that had drawn so many into the “cult-like” community. Some proposed that Driscoll’s poor mental health was the cause of the collapse, suggesting that he suffered from a narcissistic disorder.⁹⁰ Driscoll wept in a 2016 interview, concurring with the media that he had “no one to blame but himself.”⁹¹

Certainly each of these speculations holds a measure of truth. It is revealing that amidst the turmoil, Driscoll practiced as he preached, sacrificing his reputation in order to save the figure of Christ from suffering on account of his sinfulness. The sacrifice of the legitimate source of doctrinal truth, on behalf of the doctrine he instituted, is its most perfect application and an exemplary performance in the imitation of the Christ figure.

Arendt’s analysis of suffering and selfishness lends itself to my interpretation of Driscoll’s final act- the assumption of blame in protection of Christ. Her interpretation of Rousseau incorporated the prominent elements of the Mars Hill worldview: the goodness of God, the depravity of humanity, the elevation of doctrine above action, the “thought [that] selfishness and hypocrisy were the epitome of wickedness,” and the belief that selflessness was the answer to the problem of suffering.⁹²

It is as though Rousseau, in his rebellion against reason, had put a soul, torn in two, into the place of the two-in-one that manifests itself in the silent dialogue of the mind with itself which we call thinking. And since the two-in-one of the soul is a conflict and not a dialogue, it engenders passion in its twofold sense of intense suffering and of intense passionateness. It was this capacity for suffering that Rousseau had pitted against the selfishness of society on one side, against the undisturbed solitude of the mind, engaged in a dialogue with itself, on the other. And it was to this emphasis on suffering more than to any other part of his teachings, that he owed the enormous, predominant influence over the minds of the men who were to make the [French] Revolution... What counted here, in this

⁹⁰ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Driscoll on the Attack.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

Soli, Stacey. “Inside Mars Hill’s Big Meltdown.” *Crosscut*. July 16, 2014.

Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Formal Charges.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

Repentant Pastor (blog), Accessed August 1, 2015.

⁹¹ “Pastor Brian Houston Interviews Mark and Grace Driscoll.” *Pastor Brian Houston* (blog), Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁹² This is Arendt’s interpretation of Rousseau. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 72.

great effort of a general human solidarization, was selflessness, the capacity to lose oneself in the sufferings of others, rather than active goodness, and what appeared most odious and even most dangerous was selfishness rather than wickedness... Where passion, the capacity for suffering, and compassion, the capacity for suffering with others, ended, vice began. It was perhaps unavoidable that the problem of good and evil, of their impact upon the course of human destinies, in its stark, unsophisticated simplicity should have haunted the minds of men at the very moment when they were asserting or reasserting human dignity without any resort to institutionalized religion... [not daring] to undo the haloed transformation of Jesus of Nazareth into Christ, to make him return to the world of men.⁹³

Following the collapse a longtime member recalled an event in which Driscoll demanded that church marketing strategies be tailored to fit his reputation, yelling, “I am the brand!”⁹⁴ His correct assessment alarmed those in attendance, causing them to question if he was acting in self-sacrificing authority or selfish authority. Was Driscoll being selfish, or supporting the mission? The community was unconcerned with virtue, only the goodness of their brand. In the end, it did not matter if the doctrine was perfectly good or perfectly evil, for it no longer bound the community together. Arendt wrote,

Virtue – which perhaps is less than goodness but still alone is capable ‘of embodiment in lasting institutions’ – must prevail at the expense of the good man as well... the tragedy is that the law is made for men, and neither for angels nor for devils. Laws and all ‘lasting institutions’ break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil, but under the impact of absolute innocence as well.⁹⁵

Virtue exists only when actors meet one another in creative, mutual exchange, in the sharing of opinions and personal truths. As Arendt would contend, to replace one’s will with the will of another, is to exchange one authority for another. I assert that in displacing selfishness, in suffering to determine and act upon the selfish desires and benefit of others, those at Mars Hill reinforced the superiority of thinking over speech and action, and did nothing to reward virtuous action. Of course, thinking alone cannot be

⁹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 70-71.

⁹⁴ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), “Evacuation.” Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁹⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 84.

shared: in devoting their mental energies to determining what was best for others, they further removed themselves, not only from relationship with their fellows but from their own spiritual needs.

In December of 2015 I visited one of the former Mars Hill sites, now an autonomous church composed of 120 adults and 40 children. Like Mars Hill, the community valued teaching. The majority of their service was allocated to the sermon. The members I interviewed defended Driscoll, saying that his mistakes were made “a long time ago.” The men I interviewed were drawn to the church because they appreciated Driscoll’s podcasts. Their wives decided to attend in order to support them.⁹⁶ The pastor expressed anxiety about his ability to preach, and was concerned with disciplining the men to be mature leaders. I learned that the pastor relied on a local theology professor for organizational guidance. This professor was promoting a “historical church model” that emphasized intense discipline procedures and extremely tightly knit “countercultural” communities.⁹⁷

During in-person interviews, members shared that their community groups were a place where they discussed “how to apply teachings to their lives.”⁹⁸ I strived to understand how the members conceived of the connection between their relational activity and the doctrinal teaching. I asked the following question:

I understand that they go hand in hand, but if on a given week you could only attend one activity, which would you choose, a church service or a community group meeting?

Interviewees were reluctant to answer. Most concluded that hearing a sermon was more important than attending community group, as they “needed to be fed” by the teaching.

⁹⁶ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee, December 13, 2015.

⁹⁷ Sittser, Gerald. "The History of Disciple-Making." 12 Dec. 2015. Lecture.

⁹⁸ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee, December 13, 2015.

As one participant articulated, “we need the teaching to learn how to love each other.”⁹⁹

Another stated that she would choose her community group “if it was a good [group], like the first community group we were in,” laughing that her choice “probably wasn’t the right answer.”¹⁰⁰ The church pastor was intrigued to consider how the pulpit related to community groups, stating, “[the question] is good... because I need to think about these things... teaching is certainly central, it is the source.”¹⁰¹

In my short stay, I was unable to find a discourse that might qualify as theological praxis. Though it was not realized, the community’s influence upon the pastor’s teaching was apparent. As we discussed in an interview, he incorporated his knowledge of the lives of the members into his sermons, interpreting their experiences in order to match them to the doctrine.¹⁰² Due to the size of the community, the pastor was able to interpret their experiences and represent “relevant” matters in the teaching. Because the church pastor was close to the members, teaching occupied a nearer proximity to applied action than at Mars Hill. It was easier to detect the reciprocal power of community action in realizing the doctrine. The distance between established authority and community was certainly less extreme.

In their theological praxis, Puritan communities directly confronted individual doubt, performing as to stimulate the mutual generation of faith. I was unable to discover a discourse in which the members at Mars Hill might address personal doubt or faith following Driscoll’s founding act of silencing. Neither did I find expressions of personal spirituality: the community held that salvation was evidenced by active participation in

⁹⁹ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee, December 13, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee, December 13, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee, December 14, 2015.

¹⁰² The pastor wrote application questions for community group discussions. In my interview he referenced particular members from his community group in describing his vision.

the evangelical mission and belief in doctrine. In the mission, members also bypassed concern for faith, busying themselves in the application of doctrines within the organizational hierarchy.

IV. Resistance and Praxis

Just as the old concept of liberty, because of the attempted restoration, came to exert a strong influence on the interpretation of the new experience of freedom, so the old understanding of power and authority, even if their former representatives were most violently denounced, almost automatically led the new experience of power to be channeled into concepts which had just been vacated. This is the phenomenon of automatic influences which indeed entitles historians to state: ‘the nation stepped into the shoes of the Prince... but not before the Prince had stepped into the pontifical shoes of Pope and Bishop’ – and then to conclude that this was the reason why ‘the modern Absolute State, even without a Prince, was able to make claims like a Church’.¹

In my studies, doctrine was separated from lived experience as authority expanded: the ministerial authority in Massachusetts Bay took up the profession as a means for examining immigrants and judging prospective churches, and at Mars Hill, beliefs were further removed from community life with the extension of the hierarchy. In both scenarios, in crises of authority, groups responded with a variety of reflexive acts, responses that- as Arendt described- sought to “turn-over” authority. In the quote above, Arendt described the recycling of concepts in the establishment of new authority through revolution. In situations in which submission is unbearable, actors may seek to replace a threatening authority with preferred authority, or separate and compete with authority in the formation of a new community.

Richard Waight’s trial is an example of the replacement of doctrinal authority with the authority of common law. The Boston congregation did not attempt to reinstate theological praxis, or move praxis outside of the church, instead the congregation attempted to take authority for themselves. Though the congregation was successful in gaining the right to judge salvation, their action did nothing to better their situation, or

¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 146.

strengthen their agency: they accepted that their spiritual states were to be judged by outsiders. After the disband of Mars Hill, discussion fixated on Driscoll's leadership and personality. Those in community gave no consideration to their organizational and theological environment, instead they concluded that the church would have been successful had their authority behaved well. They not only dismissed the destructiveness of their social environment, but neglected to recognize that Driscoll, with dedicated selflessness, had become the leader their ideology required. They did not recognize that the extreme authoritarianism of their community was destructive to all involved, not only those without status (of course, those without status faced the greatest opposition). In this response, the community concluded that replacing one leader with another would end their conflict, and they glorified authority, failing to recognize that Driscoll's position was one of loneliness and psychological harm.²

I use the term *reflexive action* to describe scenarios in which a received authority displaced another, reinforcing the superiority of thought and authority. Reflexive action accepts authoritative terms: it suffices to believe that the dysfunctional relationship of doctrine and lived experience might only end through the destruction of those with authority. It "creates" through destruction and replacement, not by mutual exchange. A reflexive response identifies a poor doctrine (or a poor theory), and seeks association with a superior model in order to invalidate the thought deemed inadequate. It does not accept the challenge of praxis, the challenge to wrestle with an existing model by connecting it with lived experience.

² Compare the poetry Driscoll composed celebrating his early community with the troublingly hostile views he expressed around the time of the disband.

"Mars Hill, Our History." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015.

How might communities move away from acts that are temporarily rewarding, yet essentially disempowering- acts that set aside the wrestling of compromise in favor of hostility? Denying reflexive action for mutual benefit involves creative separation. It requires that communities withstand the impulse to take on defensive ideologies dependent on the negative definition of an opponent. This chapter draws from the Antinomian Controversy to consider creative separation in a case of imposing authority. The separation exemplified by the Antinomians is challenging, foremost because it requires participants to temporarily give up the security of the formal environments with which they are familiar, or that they formerly participated in creating, in dedication to praxis.

Non-Separatism and the Antinomians

As I previously discussed, the Puritans of New England experienced the great advantage of ideological space: the covenant churches of Massachusetts Bay were non-separatist and free from competition. This enabled them to form covenants without concern for differentiating themselves from the Church of England. With the proliferation of theological difference a ministerial authority formed, and the profession was removed from intimate relations. It no longer constituted theological praxis, and was employed for administration. In the same year that the profession was taken up by the Court, Anne Hutchinson and her supporters from First Church gained popular force in Boston. According to the orthodox, they propounded a radical doctrine in which law and authority were to be rejected. Their opponents named them “Antinomians.”³

³ Adam Seligman argued that the Antinomian crisis was a rejection of the institutionalization of ties of shared grace- a rejection of the transformation of a shared charisma into legal authority.

Hutchinson and her followers believed that the administrative profession lacked any real spiritual power. Hutchinson preached that it was impossible to determine inner salvation, for “sanctification was no evidence of justification.” If sanctification was no evidence, it was impossible to tell whether a speaker was acting out of genuine salvation or hypocrisy. She held that for those chosen by God, knowledge of salvation was “cleared up to them by the immediate witness of the Spirit,” and this meant that individuals could be assured of their faith apart from an examination of belief.⁴ She contested that a “covenant of works,” or the “rule of man,” had replaced the “covenant of grace,” or “divine rule.” In saying that a “law of works” had infiltrated the society, Hutchinson addressed the powerlessness inherent in the separation of doctrine from lived experience. Hutchinson argued that the ministerial doctrine was “being created”: it was unnatural because it was established in a manner disconnected from the immanent revelations and covenants of its adherents.⁵ Her claim cut at the legitimacy of the doctrines unifying the colony, and further, she accused the ministers of pronouncing the salvation of others on faulty grounds, “because they see some worke of Sanctification in them.”⁶

In confronting the doctrine, Hutchinson stepped into ministerial territory, advocating for the lived experience of the colonists, who had previously performed their own spiritual narratives. Why now were the lay people deemed unable to assure themselves? To advocate, she ventured into ministerial philosophy, pinpointing the doctrine upon which the ministry based their authority to judge. The question of “whether a man may know his salvation” was hardly new to clerical thought: truth and appearance were their greatest concern. In the early profession, as Winthrop exemplified, the

⁴ Hall, *Documentary History*, 263.

⁵ Seligman, *Innerwordly Individualism*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.* 83.

congregants accepted the current teachings: the profession was a means of expressing their lived sanctification. But when the profession was employed administratively, the professor spoke to evoke the judgment of authority, in order to be assured of their inner state. The Antinomians had a few supporters among the ministers and magistrates: they gathered under the approval of Cotton, who held great fame in the colonies. A prominent magistrate, Sir Henry Vane, was an Antinomian, and the Reverend John Wheelwright, Hutchinson's brother-in-law, sailed from England to join their community.⁷

Theological praxis faded from the covenant communities that had benefited from its enactment. How were the congregants to resist this transformation? The existence of the administrative profession blocked them from enacting a parallel discourse for themselves within covenanted churches. Since a formal profession was still at play, an informal profession enacted within the church would compromise its administrative legitimacy, instigating a direct conflict with authority. As congregational profession was routinized, Hutchinson began holding gatherings in her home. John Winthrop recorded that Hutchinson dared to "set forth her own stuffe."⁸ In 1635, she began twice-weekly meetings in which her group- originally composed of women, but also including craftsmen and merchants- shared "prophesyings," discussions of John Cotton's sermons, and scriptural interpretations.⁹ The orthodox ministers were alarmed by her gatherings:

⁷ Seligman, *Innerwordly Individualism*, 90-91.

⁸ John Winthrop, *A Short Story of the Rise, Reign and Ruin of the Antinomians* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1692). Sourced from David D. Hall. Ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

⁹ Many historians, including Eve LaPlante and Amy Lang, have studied Hutchinson's life and trial through the lens of gender conflict. In 1637 the magistrates ordered, "That though women might meet (some few together) to pray and edify one another; yet such a set assembly, (as was then in practice in Boston,) where sixty or more did meet every week, and one woman (in a prophetic way, by resolving questions of doctrine, and expounding scripture) took upon her the whole exercise, was agreed to be disorderly and without rule." Seligman, 92.

the meetings mirrored those popular among English Puritans unable to formally present themselves against the Church of England. Hutchinson's opponents recognized their significance, as they had likely attended such meetings as dissenters in England.¹⁰

The Antinomians had neither a rebellious nor heretical identity.¹¹ Rather, Hutchinson traveled with Cotton to ask questions of the orthodox ministers.¹² The group did not separate themselves from their covenant community, nor did they make an effort to form a new covenant, splitting the First Church population. Hutchinson and the other women protested the doctrine of sanctification by walking out of John Wilson's sermons. Women were allowed to leave due to "feminine infirmities." The male Antinomians grilled Wilson after his sermon.¹³ Many laypersons in Boston sympathized with their questions: in 1637 the First Church congregation censored Wilson for opposing Hutchinson, prompting one of Wilson's disturbed colleagues to write England, "Now the faithful ministers [are] legal preachers, Baal priests, Popish Factors, Scribes, Pharisees and Opposers of Christ Himself."¹⁴

Through their questions, the Antinomians pressed authority in an attempt to preserve the orientation of the church. Previously oriented inwardly, for the mutual and spiritual benefit of only those in participation, the source of truth was shifting as they performed for higher authorities. While the congregation pushed back against

Winthrop, *A History Vol 1*, 286.

¹⁰ By 1636 Hutchinson had a core group of 38 supporters and a looser support group of 58, the majority dwelling in Boston. Battis, *Saints and Sectaries*, gives a demographic overview of the conflict.

¹¹ James Cooper has written in depth on the Antinomian's non-heretical identity. Cooper, 48-49.

¹² In October of 1636, the ministers held a "conference in privat" with John Cotton, Anne Hutchinson and John Wheelwright. The first meeting ended well, as "they all did hold that sanctification did help to evidence justification." In a second meeting, Cotton stood by his theology of sanctification, and of Hutchinson Salem minister Hugh Peter wrote, "she did conceive that we were not able ministers of the gospel." Hall, 10.

¹³ Eve LaPlante. *American Jezebel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 9.

¹⁴ LaPlante, 9.
Cooper, 48-49.

examinations, Hutchinson's house meetings sustained profession-like activities. In her home, congregants continued to question doctrine. The continuation of praxis was important to their group identity as it provided a source of legitimacy independent from authority. The group ideology remained grounded in their continued speaking and acting. Continuing to engage in praxis empowered them to resist reflexively instituting a rival authority to the ministerial administration. The creative separation was successful. Participants continued to connect doctrine to lived experience in a temporary space through discussion, teaching and scriptural interpretation. Antinomians won over the congregation of First Church without constituting a rival church or rival doctrine.¹⁵

Now, the early profession had been compatible with ministerial authorities and covenant communities. These frameworks benefitted from praxis: the covenant spaces were strengthened, the colony was unified, and the ministry used the fervor to defend the legitimacy of Congregationalism. Although the administration had no desire to destroy the profession, they had to maintain order in the colony. News of the English Civil War, and of tradesmen spreading "libellous books," pressured the magistrates to act against rebellion.¹⁶

On December 7, 1636, the magistrates concluded, "God's judgment is come upon us for these differences and dissensions." The attendees argued about the source of the conflict, concluding the session by scheduling a day of repentance for the colony. Either by chance, or in an attempt to get the Antinomians to repent, John Wheelwright,

¹⁵ Emery John Battis. *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

¹⁶ John Winthrop. *The Winthrop Papers: Robert Stansby, April 1637*. Accessed September 10, 2015. John Cotton. *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2001), 211-215. Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Builders of the Bay Colony*. Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1958. 344-346.

Hutchinson's brother-in-law, was asked to speak at First Church. His fast day sermon is the most confrontational expression of Antinomian belief recorded.¹⁷ Wheelwright's sermon called the church to take courage in "divers expressions" and to hold firm against the "enemies of Christ."¹⁸ Wheelwright preached,

The more holy they are, the greater enemies they are to Christ... It maketh no matter how seemingly holy men be according to the Law...the day shall come that shall burne like an oven and all that do wickedly shall be stubble... so Christ putteth into his people a loving spirit; therefore let us have a care, [that] we do not alientate our harts one from another, because of divers kind of expressions, but let us keepe the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace...¹⁹

Following the sermon, the ministry agreed to break apart the First Church congregation in order to preserve order in the colony. However, they could not blatantly undermine the foundational congregational principles of mutual consent, election and church autonomy. The orthodox ministers agreed with this decision on account that the Antinomians threatened the doctrine of sanctification, knowing that the Puritan experiment to initiate the revelation of a pure scriptural truth and the second coming depended upon their ability to determine salvation from appearance.²⁰ In order to impose authority without overwriting the First Church covenant, the authorities isolated the Antinomians, denying that their covenant bonds warranted their action. Thus, in response to the Antinomian's effort to maintain relationship, the authorities banished Hutchinson, forcing her complete separation, and disarming her followers.

¹⁷ Hall, *Documentary History*, 7.

Winthrop rallied the orthodox majority to overthrow the previous governor, Sir Henry Vane, a Hutchinson supporter, in 1637. Winthrop immediately enacted legislation blocking the immigration of tradespeople and banning Antinomians from the Court. Winthrop presided over Hutchinson's trial.

¹⁸ Seligman, *Innerwordly Individualism*, 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 92.

Hall, *Documentary History*, 164-168.

²⁰ Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 19.

Hutchison's adaption creatively transferred theological praxis out of the formal legitimacy of the covenant congregation, protecting it from the reach of administration in moving it to a suitably intimate environment. She replanted theological discourse into context conducive to the mutual synthesis of shared symbols and action. Formal bonds did not warrant this a-legal strategy, but it was faithful to the covenant promises of First Church. In advocating that they hold to their faith in the possible co-existence of "divers kind of expressions," Wheelwright's sermon was the closest the group ventured to calling for an overturn of authority.²¹

Hutchinson faced two trials, one for each of the formal frameworks she was thought to oppose. In the first, for the magisterial authorities, the Court denied her theological agency. In the second, for the First Church congregation, the ministers described the dangers inherent in the application of her "false doctrine," imagining the actions that might be derived if she were given authority. Despite these accusations, on the magisterial stand, Hutchinson spoke against adherence to doctrine as a means for spiritual assurance, calling it "human invention."²² She spoke,

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham...

She asserted that congregants might be assured of their salvation without external approval, that doctrine was nothing without personal faith, and that trial by doctrine only

²¹ Hall, *Documentary History*, 152.

John Wheelwright and John Cotton were engaged in debate with the doctrinal orthodoxy for weeks after Wheelwright's trial. The ministers refuted 90 of their faulty doctrines, but the men refused to concede on "if a man may know his salvation." Hall, *Documentary History*, 8.

²² Ibid. 311-348. Hutchinson's trials were transcribed by David D. Hall, sourced from *Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown*, in Thomas Hutchinson's history, 1767.

served to falsely identify the “descendants of Abraham.” In her trial against doctrine, Hutchinson confirmed her faith in *non-separatism and self-assurance*, and incorporated her lived experiences into the debate. I have included a few lines, including her pronounced conviction of an “immediate revelation” for which she was banished as an enemy of the colony and a “woman not fit for society.”

Mrs. H. If you please to give me leave I shall give you the ground of what I know to be true. Being much troubled to see the falseness of the constitution of the church of England, I had like to have turned separatist...this I considered of and in considering found that the papists did not deny him to be come in the flesh nor we did not deny him -- who then was antichrist? The Lord knows that I could not open scripture; he must by his prophetic office open it unto me...I bless the Lord, he hath let me see which was the clear ministry and which the wrong. Since that time I confess I have been more choice and he hath let me to distinguish between the voice of my beloved and the voice of Moses, the voice of John Baptist and the voice of antichrist, for all those voices are spoken of in scripture. Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord.

Mr. Nowell. How do you know that that was the spirit?

Mrs. H. How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?

Dep. Gov. By an immediate voice.

Mrs. H. So to me by an immediate revelation.

Dep. Gov. How, an immediate revelation!

Mrs. H. By the voice of his own spirit to my soul. I will give you another scripture, Jer. 46. 27, 28 - out of which the Lord shewed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants. But after he was pleased to reveal himself to me I did presently like Abraham run to Hagar. And after that he did let me see the atheism of my own heart, for which I begged of the lord that it might not remain in my heart, and being thus, he did shew me this (a twelvemonth after) which I told you of before. Ever since that time I have been confident of what he hath revealed unto me...

In March of 1638, she was tried before the First Church of Boston. The prosecuting ministers accused her of heresy for opposing the union of marriage. There is

no indication that Hutchinson preached against marriage; in fact, her husband supported her in her teaching, her trial, and after the banishment of their family. Why would the ministers accuse her of such a specific and seemingly irrelevant crime? Her accusers found their way to this conclusion through one of her teachings: that the power of the resurrection was immanent in the action of the community. In this trial, the ministers terrified the congregation by arguing that belief in the immanent dwelling of God on earth- according to a teaching of Christ that none will be married following the resurrection- would cause women to resist their husbands, destroying authority in the family.²³ Authorities interpreted Hutchinson's informal theological praxis, enacted in her home, as a general rejection of authority, as existing in covenants, government and family. They interpreted her transfer of praxis outside of the formal church as a breach of cooperation, instead of an effort to preserve the previous mutuality of the speaking and acting of community life, ministerial authority, and covenant bonds. In Governor Winthrop's narrative of the crisis, she is recorded as stating:

Here is a great stirre about graces and looking into hearts, but give mee Christ, seeke not for graces, but for Christ, I seeke not for promises, but for Christ, I seek not for sanctification, but for Christ, tell not mee of mediation and duties, but tell mee of Christ.²⁴

A formal, representative church administration emerged after Hutchinson's banishment.²⁵ In likeness to Mars Hill, Reverend Peter Bulkely preached that faith did not alleviate law, but brought about a new perspective on God's "cords and bonds"; the authority would be good authority, so good as to cause followers believe that bondage was "holy and just and good." Authorities operating on behalf of God were better than

²³ Ibid. 362.

²⁴ Ibid. 276. John Winthrop, *A Short Story*. 19.

²⁵ The ministers blamed their actions for the turmoil, concluding that their inability to reach doctrinal unity caused the conflict. The formal establishment of the synod enabled such a unity. Cooper, 53.

“other Lords,” who might not have their best interests in mind. He wrote in 1651 that a saint with true belief,

Lays down all weapons of defiance and submits to love.. making these subjects happy that are free in his Kingdom... [grace] makes the soul lament its bondage unto other Lords... and... see the blessing of the Lord’s government, the Laws of God which were before counted as cords and bonds, fitter for bondslaves than for freeman, are now esteemed holy and just and good...but in the covenant of grace there is a mediator coming between, to unite God and man together, to make them one... God undertakes for us, to keep us through faith... revealed by a supernaturall light from above. See the blessings of the Lord’s government, the Laws of God...²⁶

As it was at Mars Hill, Bulkely idealized a “free Kingdom,” not the freedom of praxis. The Antinomian’s tie to theological praxis grounded their action and supported a response that did not overturn authority nor bind their community to separatistic definition. But their attempt to remain loyal to their promises was met with silence. The forced separation of Hutchinson was an ecclesiastical tragedy: with this move, authority escorted praxis- or rather, visible, legitimate praxis- out of the church. I suspect that the rejection of self-evident truths in the church spurred the emergence of praxis in other spheres of society. Specifically, there were great advancements in education in the following decades. Prominent future enactments of praxis were suspicious of theology, which was monopolized by the institutionalized church. The ministry’s inability to let go of the second wave of settlers- sheparding them away from the creation of theology as they had experienced in the profession- reduced the social importance of church communities. Although the churches and their ministers continued to hold social influence, the Antinomian controversy left the religion dead to *formally legitimate* expressions of theological praxis.

²⁶ Seligman, *Innerwordly Individualism*, 80-81.

Separatism and the *Experience Economy*

Mars Hill was a metropolis of social activity. The community housed traditionally non-religious discourses, in a situation not unlike the theologically inactive Puritan congregations, in which theological praxis might only have existed underground. Mars Hill presented its members with the opportunity to be relationally productive, providing that their interactions did not result in the creation of theology or disrupt the mission of the church. Participation that strengthened relational ties was productive in tightening community boundaries. The Antinomians imported theological praxis from the church; the members at Mars Hill performed informal non-theological discourses *within their church*.

Mars Hill's was open to discourses not involving church doctrine, and encouraged members to utilize church spaces for social bonding, because tight-knit relationships insulated the separatist community.²⁷ Over-active participants sustained boundaries. From the beginning, Driscoll communicated the need to identify those willing to participate and to clear the community of others.²⁸ Following the 2007 excommunications, Driscoll purged the membership to rid the organization of members that might burden the community by opposing the doctrine:

So, when our attendance was at about six thousand people a few years ago, we did something unprecedented. We canceled out the membership of everyone in our church and I preached the *Doctrine* series for thirteen weeks. Each sermon was well over an hour and included me answering text-messaged questions from our people. Those who made it through the entire series were interviewed, and those who evidenced true faith in Christ and signed our membership covenant were installed as new members.²⁹

²⁷ "Church or Cult?" *The Stranger*. Accessed September 18, 2015.

Joyful Exiles (blog), "Ask Anything." Accessed August 29, 2015.

²⁸ "Mars Hill, Our History." *Internet Archive*. Accessed July 30, 2015. 9.

²⁹ The purge was radically successful in solidifying community boundaries. The weekly attendance increased to 15,000 in a number of months.

Mars Hill facilitated most of the social engagement of its members. As several members commented, “Mars Hill is my life.”³⁰ According to community belief, the actions of members were to align with doctrine as they were exposed to the truth, meaning that authorities concentrated on doctrine. The church authority’s lack of interest in other communications further protected doctrine: the social investment made speaking in resistance, or leaving the community in protest, relationally expensive.

Mars Hill was designed for social experiences. Driscoll applied his business school knowledge to religion in order to efficiently make disciples, commodifying the doctrine. According to Driscoll’s plan, the church needed to compete in an experience economy. (Driscoll was inspired by *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* by Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore).³¹ He wrote,

Evangelism patterned after the example of Jesus, is particularly appropriate for our current economy, in which people live much of their lives pursuing experiences.³²

Driscoll was inspired by coffee shops that were successful in manicuring their environment in order to add value to their product, offering consumers the feeling of being at home. Driscoll believed that the value of the doctrine could be increased if it was

Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog) and *WenatcheetheHatchet* (blog), “Mars Hill Annual Reports,” 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014. Accessed August 29, 2015

Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*, 58.

“The Making of Mars Hill.” <https://vimeo.com/33254397>.

“An Interview with Mark Driscoll.” *The Gospel Coalition*. Accessed 29, 2015.

³⁰ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), “Ask Anything.” Accessed August 29, 2015. 47.

³¹ Joseph B. Pine, and James H. Gilmore. *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1999).

³² Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation*, 70.

presented alongside other desirable experiences typically foreign to church life.³³ He wrote,

Churches must continually examine and adjust their musical styles, websites, aesthetics, acoustics, programming and just about everything but their Bible.³⁴

Visitors to Mars Hill recalled that they did not feel like they were in church until a few minutes before the service, when the members socializing filed into a hall and Driscoll's image appeared on a screen.³⁵

The "experience economy" had implications far beyond building aesthetics. Mars Hill was a discursively spacious community conducive to activity traditionally housed in social structures in which members desired to participate but faced limited access. As shown in blogs and forums, the church was multivalent: it was a family for many, a business environment for entrepreneurs, an artistic community for creatives, and many young veterans were drawn to the militant culture.³⁶ Others treated the church as if it were a political entity, responding to conflict by picketing and rallying other members to be politically (in regards to church government) informed. As Hutchinson exported theological praxis in order to preserve it without separating from its formal context, members creatively imported discourses into Mars Hill because it provided a space for them to engage in discourses *regarding matters from which they were formally excluded*.

³³ Driscoll's outlined a number of appropriate experiences that leaders might create for their members. For example, members ought to be free to create art during church services, rather than simply sitting and participating in "someone else's experience."

Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation*, 73.

³⁴ Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation*, 100.

³⁵ Worthen, Molly. "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?" *New York Times*, January 6, 2009.

³⁶ Many members attended because it served as an alternative to traditional churches. "I could be myself; the bass guitar playing, poem writing, passionate young woman I was and not be overwhelmed by plastic smiles and fake hellos at the door. The preaching was great and the pastor was funny... after going to a slew of cookie cutter churches and feeling like I had to be somebody I wasn't, Mars Hill Church was the answer and I felt right at home very quickly."

Autumn Brown. *We Love Mars Hill* (blog), Accessed August 29, 2015.

Since Mars Hill's authoritarianism protected of a particular sacred mode of thought from the influence of action, the formal structure was undisturbed by informal participatory discourses regarding seemingly unsacred topics.

During the 2007 elder crisis, a wide range of ideas about the identity and purpose of the community were expressed. For the many members in formal leadership, the church was a workspace, and their job security depended on success in evangelism and the marketing of publications and leadership resources. For many of the elders, their church position was their first salaried job.³⁷ As supported by Johnson's ethnographic research, many veterans were employed.³⁸ Driscoll was not shy in reminding the membership that the formal organizational structure was "not a democracy." Evidencing the conflicting identities of church and corporation, the executive eldership (in eerie similarity to Hutchinson's proceedings), examined the dissenters twice: first terminating their employment, and then initiating a trial procedure to determine their membership. This caused great confusion: some members were concerned that they receive severance, others were disturbed by the eldership's order to shun the people they considered family. One member wrote,

[We] treasure both the meyers and petries and owe so much of the wisdom we've learned over the years to these great families... enough of "elders and bylaws."³⁹

Another wrote,

The last month has been one of the most troubling times for us in our time at

³⁷ *Repentant Pastor* (blog), Accessed August 1, 2015.

³⁸ Jessica Johnson, *Citizen-Soldier*, 339.

Driscoll wrote that Mars Hill offered a real battle "for all the young guys who spend most of their time watching television, eating chips, and playing video games."

Driscoll, *A Call to Resurgence*, 149.

There was little effort to separate work life from church life. One staff member voiced a specific concern related to Mark Driscoll's character, which resulted in his salary being docked.

Joyful Exiles (blog), "Document Set." Accessed August 29, 2015.

³⁹ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), "Ask Anything." Accessed August 29, 2015. 24.

Mars Hill. The church is not a democracy nor is it a corporation - it is a family. And when something is broken we need to talk about it.⁴⁰

Mars Hill may have facilitated creative engagement in other domains. It is conceivable that members synthesized art, political philosophy, or organizational strategy with lived experiences inside the church. Which genre of theoretical knowledge is most likely to have existed informally within Mars Hill? Mars Hill's doctrine depended upon the "government of the home," meaning that male authority over family life was of importance to those enforcing doctrine. While family-like discourses were cited frequently in the sources I researched, it is likely that these discourses faced the dislocation of thought and action: family structure was a part of the fixed doctrine. Neither were militant missional discourses dissimilar enough to escape the pull of doctrine. Business or corporate discourses were the most directly connected to the sacred hierarchy. Artists and musicians were not considered central to the mission, yet they were utilized for marketing purposes: music was distributed online and art was used to solidify "the brand."⁴¹ While these discourses were less guarded than theological discourse, they were bound to doctrine to some extent. I think that in the case of Mars Hill discourses from the political (as in governmental) domain, had the greatest potential to exist creatively. Driscoll preached that Christians should not focus on influencing American politics, but instead ought to influence others by advocating for separatism- by advertising a new world in which to be political.⁴² In this context, community group discussion of the political principles of representative government would have signified spiritual immaturity in preoccupation with outside things, and may have distracted from

⁴⁰ Ibid. 17, 40.

⁴¹ Warren Throckmorton. *Patheos* (blog), "Evacuation." Accessed July 17, 2015.

⁴² Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation*.
Driscoll, *A Call to Resurgence*.

the mission, however, this discursive currency, like the form and vernacular of the profession alongside doctrinal debate, would not have posed a threat to the authoritative doctrine. Informal political speaking and acting was the least threatening, as it was irrelevant to the formal community.

Due to their cultural approval of withdrawal from government, it is likely that political ideas discussed among those in community were not reintroduced into the realm of public government. Unlike the Antinomians, instead of applying the discourse back into a connected formal sphere, members attempted to unsuccessfully apply ideas within Mars Hill, which might have served their need for temporary space, but was not a place in which their action might be recognized.⁴³ The Antinomians continued to express the conclusions of their theological praxis in First Church- they did not make Hutchinson's home a rival church. At Mars Hill, members did not re-introduce ideas into secular politics, but treated Mars Hill *as if it were a formal government*. The political discourse at Mars Hill remained within Mars Hill, and amidst conflict, informally generated political ideas were directed at the organizational structure, against which they held no weight.

During the 2007 elder crisis, many members responded with questions of "rights and responsibilities." Members demanded "due process procedures" and fair trials, commenting that they ought to do their duty as members and participate in the church government.⁴⁴ Three members asked why the case against the excommunicated elders had not been presented to them. One noted, "I would have liked to attend even if there

⁴³ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), "Ask Anything." Accessed August 29, 2015.

⁴⁴ *Joyful Exiles* (blog), "Ask Anything." Accessed August 29, 2015.

was only standing room.”⁴⁵ Despite having no formal say in the authoritative organization, another stated,

Understanding our rights and responsibilities is part of engaged membership and something I’ve not pursued enough in the past... when I recently asked for a copy of the bylaws, [a pastor] said it couldn’t be all that important to me since I hadn’t had it for my four or so years of membership – that was a good word of warning to me.⁴⁶

Following the crisis and purge, Driscoll composed a pamphlet reiterating the importance of the church hierarchy for those re-admitted, making certain that they understood that rights would cause harm by slowing the production of disciples and that the population was too great for members to have say in operations except through their direct superior.⁴⁷ Despite the reiteration, prior to the disband of the organization, members and former members picketed the church demanding that Driscoll resign, exonerate the excommunicated members, and reveal the church budget.⁴⁸

The great weakness of my research was that I was unable to thoroughly access informal church discourses. I would have liked to collect information about non-theological discourses, and theological discourses enacted out of the sight of church authorities, with the potential to meet my criteria for praxis. I did, however, gather useful information on the formal state of the disbanded church. During my visit, I interviewed

⁴⁵ Ibid. 18, 21, 46.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 38.

⁴⁷ Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*.

⁴⁸ Brendan Kiley. “Why the Mars Hill Faithful Have Started to Question Mark.” *The Stranger*. July 30, 2014. Accessed July 17, 2015.

Janet I. Tu. “Firing of Pastors Roils Mars Hill Church.” November 18, 2007. *Seattle Times*. Accessed July 17, 2015.

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Meeks, Gina. “Former Mars Hill Members Protest Mark Driscoll Outside Church.” *CharismaNews*. August 5, 2014.

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Paulson, Michael. “Mark Driscoll is Being Urged to Leave.” *New York Times*. August 22, 2014.

group leaders overseeing weekly gatherings of about 10 members. They answered that the hardest part about their position was keeping the group “on track.” Some weeks they made it through the sermon questions in minutes, and used the remaining hours to discuss children, sports, politics, and work life. Small group members were often close friends, meeting informally outside of the designated time for other purposes. The group leaders were troubled, perceiving the discursive wandering to indicate a lack of passion for the things of God, a sign of “spiritual immaturity.”⁴⁹ Given the generative quality of praxis and the motivation of emulation, it is plausible that the closer the proximity of doctrinal thought to the experiences of the community- in this case the closer the relationship between the pastor and the community- the greater the motivation will be for the members to thoughtfully engage with the symbols of their faith. Since small groups were open for the consideration of thought from other domains in conjunction with lived experience, it is understandable that discussion of doctrinal obedience was bypassed in favor of creative discourses.

Mars Hill was highly saturated with discursive activity. This concentration was deceiving. Busy members, free to participate in non-theological discourses were less likely to realize the extremity of their authoritarian doctrine, or realize their lack of theological freedom. If theological praxis did occur at Mars Hill, it must have involved such a degree of informality as to be hidden from authority. The isolation of the community was also incredibly destructive to creative speaking and acting. Because the community was defined reactively, against liberal society, those participating within the space were forced to sever their connections to other discursive spaces. This made it extremely difficult for members to take up theological creativity somewhere else, and

⁴⁹ Jessica Hasper. Personal Interview. Anonymous Interviewee. December 13, 2015.

even if they had, they would have faced great difficulty in returning to Mars Hill with their theologies.

V. Theological Praxis: A Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined communities of faith that wrestled with the “elementary problems of human living-together.”¹ I extended Arendt’s theory, affirming that

Wherever people gather together, [power] is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever... Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”²

I identified theological praxis in the form of intimate, mutual acts in which participants, like Abraham, met the LORD “face to face,” and exchanged promises of covenant faithfulness.³ I considered the Antinomian effort to preserve the profession, a special form of praxis. I described the sharing of Puritan theologies of intimacy and re-birth. I addressed the special benefit of informal creative exchanges, due to the sacred weight and permanency of some religious frameworks, and the advantage of inclusivity of modes of expression in maintaining creative theological discourse.

I did the same with theological authority, examining its conditions in later Puritanism and at Mars Hill, in which, as with Moses, the people could not hear, see or

¹ Hannah Arendt. “What is Authority?” *Between Past and Future* 91 (1958).

² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199-200.

³ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2007. Genesis 12. See Arendt’s discussion of Abraham, and her interpretation of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. “For Jesus, faith was closely related to [praxis].”

Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8, 238-247.

Also see *On Revolution*, 172.

Daniel J Elazar. “The Political Theory of Covenant: Biblical Origins and Modern Developments.” *Publius* 10.4 (1980): 3-30.

Michael Walzer. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

speak with God, and so answered, “everything the LORD has spoken we will do.”⁴ I considered trials and the struggle with hypocrisy that emerged as speech and action misaligned in compensation for the immutability of doctrine. I examined the imitation of Christ at Mars Hill, in which godliness was equated with representative action and selfless evangelism. I considered how Mars Hill’s ideal representation involved total isolation from theological power, mirroring Christ’s cry: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”⁵ I considered the potential for praxis in this environment, noting the many informal discourses engaged at Mars Hill. I suggested that amidst the leadership’s intense protection of doctrine, the members with the least authority utilized the community as a space for unregulated non-theological discourses.

I argued that praxis might concern theology when spiritual people bring their lived experiences into conjunction with the symbols of their faith, acting creatively. In Genesis 32, Jacob left the security of the home he had created and ventured into the wilderness, in order to reconcile himself with his brother Esau, whom he had deceived. En route to his brother, God met Jacob in the isolation of the wilderness, and made a covenant with him:

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face.”⁶

⁴ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2007. Exodus 19: 7-8.

⁵ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2007. Mark 15:34.

⁶ Genesis 32:24-30.

In reaching Esau, Jacob expected violence, on account of the injustice he had done. But “Esau ran to meet him and embraced him,” and Jacob responded, “I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.”⁷ If theological praxis is wrestling with God in the confrontation of doubt, it is fueled by the desire to gloriously and selfishly know God, in the freedom of appearing face-to-face. But the knowledge of God is gloriously and selfishly undertaken in the struggle and embrace of other human beings, not in isolation, but in the sharing of theology.

I think that faith communities can facilitate such power. Spiritual people can be theologically political: not by influencing partisan ideologies or government policies for religious ends, but by appearing in spaces in which they might wrestle with previous applications of truth, exchange theological power for mutual spiritual benefit, and engage in creative acts, sharing their lived experiences in the wilderness and in community. As the English Puritans recognized, theological praxis requires that spiritual people have the courage to speak, to exert themselves in deliberation, engage in creative questioning, and break from the labor of application in order to learn in action.

⁷ Genesis 33:4 and 10.

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