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Abstract

On December 24, 1699, a small gathering of men and women met "for public Worship in [their] pleasant new-built house," a simple wooden structure in Brattle Close, a section of Boston near the town dock. The newly appointed Reverend Benjamin Colman preached from Chronicles 2, chapter vi, verse 18, "But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven, and the heaven of heavens, cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built." This first public meeting of the Brattle Street Church occurred amidst a heated theological debate among New England Congregational clergymen, which began a year earlier when the foundation of the church had first been conceived. Brattle Street's foundation was in reaction to theological, political, and cultural transformations that affected the whole of New England in the latter half of the seventeenth century, all of which converged in the 1690s. While the foundation of Brattle Street Church did not make any radical departures from contemporary theological consensus, its foundation did represent the first concrete fragmentation of a theretofore unified New England Congregational community. In this sense, the foundation of the Brattle Street Church is representative of a radical development in the evolution of colonial Congregationalism.

Keywords

Boston, Brattle Street Church, colonial congregationalism

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“Their high object was to found a new Christian Congregational church, upon the broad, catholic, but conservative principles of Congregationalism – a church in which a just liberty and privilege should be allowed to all, and nothing imposed on any individual.”¹

On December 24, 1699, a small gathering of men and women met “for public Worship in [their] pleasant new-built house,” a simple wooden structure in Brattle Close, a section of Boston near the town dock.² The newly appointed Reverend

¹ Samuel Kirkland Lothrop, “Sermon One, December 30, 1849,” *A History of the Church in Brattle Street, Boston* (Boston: WM. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1851), 16.

² Benjamin Colman, “Records of the Church in Brattle Square: Dr. Colman’s Ministry, Lord’s day, Decem. 24,” in *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square, Boston: With Lists of Communicants, Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals, 1699-1872*, eds. Ellis Loring Motte, Henry Fitch Jenks, and John Homans II (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 5;

Benjamin Colman preached from Chronicles 2, chapter vi, verse 18, “But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven, and the heaven of heavens, cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built.”³ This first public meeting of the Brattle Street Church occurred amidst a heated theological debate among New England Congregational clergymen, which began a year earlier when the foundation of the church had first been conceived. Brattle Street’s foundation was in reaction to theological, political, and cultural transformations that affected the whole of New England in the latter half of the seventeenth

Samuel Adams Drake, *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873), 122; Thomas Brattle, Benjamin Davis, John Mico, Thomas Cooper, and John Colman to Benjamin Colman, May 10, 1699, in Samuel Kirkland Lothrop, *A History of the Church in Brattle Street, Boston* (Boston: WM. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1851), 45.

³ Colman, “Lord’s day, Decem. 24,” in *Records of the Church in Brattle Square*, 5.

century, all of which converged in the 1690s. While the foundation of Brattle Street Church did not make any radical departures from contemporary theological consensus, its foundation did represent the first concrete fragmentation of a theretofore unified New England Congregational community.⁴ In this sense, the foundation of the Brattle Street Church is representative of a radical development in the evolution of colonial Congregationalism.

Brattle Street Church's foundation was not a random occurrence. There were a number of developments that caused its founders to establish a

⁴ Rick Kennedy, "Thomas Brattle, Mathematician-Architect in the Transition of the New England Mind, 1690-1700," *Winterthur Portfolio* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 237 and 241 suggests that the "liberalism" of the Brattle Street founders, namely the mathematician-merchant Thomas Brattle, has been exaggerated by the historical community. This assertion is correct when viewing the founders from a strictly theological or philosophical perspective. However, it oversimplifies the contemporary contextualization of the church's foundation.

new congregation, beginning with the Congregational Synod of 1662 and the adoption of the “Half-Way” covenant. The decision was made in hopes of reversing flagging church membership and loss of piety characteristic of the 1650s, in which the church saw the Congregational Way – John Winthrop’s original “City upon a Hill” church-state observing the sovereign law of *Sola Scriptura*, or scripture alone, – slipping through their fingers.⁵ As Patricia Bonomi notes, the clergy “ever wary of complacency, were prepared to reform church practices . . . in ways that would command the continuing allegiance of New Englanders to the

⁵ John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 179; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 59.

Congregational Way.”⁶ First suggested by Richard Mather, a prominent Puritan clergyman at this time, the covenant extended “Half-Way” membership to children whose parents were only “outward” church members baptized by the church. These parents had not experienced the conversion moment followed by the “publick relation of experience” of that conversion to the rest of the congregation – the requirement for church members to become full communicants in the Lord’s Supper. The Half-Way covenant stipulated that the children of these baptized yet un-converted men and women could also be baptized, a privilege previously reserved for full members’ children. In return, the parents were to recognize the historical preeminence of the

⁶ Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 68.

church's faith and to promise to live according to God's word.⁷ The theory was that by opening the church doors slightly wider, more people could come to hear God's word and would – inspired by Congregational rhetoric – experience the conversion moment, becoming full church members. The ministry would thus be enabled to continue to occupy its rightful place as spiritual leader and shaper of state affairs.

The theological change generated by the Half-Way covenant was not in itself extreme, but, nevertheless, it spurred a contentious clerical debate. Clergymen first asked whether the alteration would cause a “[dilution of] the purity of gathered churches by introducing unregenerate members.”⁸ Their second question was how wide the newly

⁷ Stout, *The New England Soul*, 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*

cracked church doors should be opened. The first debate was resolved relatively quickly, concluding that the covenant would not dilute the purity of the churches, and most New England churches accepted the new covenant before the end of the seventeenth century.⁹ The second debate continued without a definitive answer into the first decades of the eighteenth century.

In October 1684 a more widely applicable and no less influential change occurred in colonial New England. Edward Randolph, the colonial agent to the British Lords of Trade, recommended that the original Massachusetts Bay Charter be annulled. This recommendation was based upon the premise that New England settlers were acting contrary to England's political and legal system, primarily due

⁹ Stout, *The New England Soul*, 61.

to instances of religious intolerance during which the British believed the colonists were being overly extreme in their persecutions. A new royal charter was formulated, incorporating the various New England colonies into the “Dominion of New England” which was to be ruled by a crown-appointed royal governor. Moreover, New England was to be subject to English common law, including religious toleration stipulated by England’s 1689 Act of Toleration.¹⁰ In its first two years, New Englanders essentially ignored the revocation of the charter, as it did not cause significant societal upheaval. In 1686, however, Sir Edmund Andros replaced Joseph Dudley, a Massachusetts native, as governor. Andros quickly began exercising his powers to their highest extent, demanding the use of

¹⁰ Ibid., 111.

Old South Church in Boston for Anglican purposes, holding vice-admiralty courts to try colonialists' legal grievances, and seizing common lands in and around Boston for his private use.¹¹ It was not long before the inherently independent New Englanders began to chafe at the bonds imposed by their arrogant new governor.

In April 1688, “unconfirmed reports” that James II had been deposed swept through Boston. On April 19, 1688, armed with this knowledge, townspeople assembled to arrest Governor Andros, Edmund Randolph, and Joseph Dudley. An interim government, the “Committees for the Conservation of Peace,” was subsequently established to fill the gubernatorial void.¹² While New England clergymen celebrated along with the rest of the

¹¹ Ibid., 112.

¹² Stout, *The New England Soul*, 115.

colonists, they also recognized that a working relationship with their mother country was necessary to the preservation of their civil and religious liberties.¹³ After the rebellion, Reverend Increase Mather traveled to England to explain the motives behind the colonists' actions in order to forestall any retribution and in hopes of regaining the original charter. The trip was a qualified success. In May of 1692, Increase Mather brought a new royal charter back to Boston that established Massachusetts, which was to encompass Maine and Plymouth, as a royal province. As in the first charter, the head of the government remained a royal governor, but he was to work in tandem with a

¹³ Ibid., 116.

legislative assembly elected by the landowning men of the colony.¹⁴

The revocation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's original charter and the reactionary events it sparked were watershed moments in New England's history. Socially, the colonists had discovered that it was within their abilities to exercise their will and overthrow a governmental body with which they were unhappy. Religiously, once the revocation of the charter was finalized, it symbolized the loss of the original covenant between the New England colonies and God. This covenant was believed to have been bequeathed to the people by virtue of their adherence to *Sola Scriptura* above all other codes of law and the authority of the "visible Saints" – fully converted

¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

church members – within that state. But the new royal charter had not undermined “Pure worship” and deference to God’s Word, and so came forth the revelation that the national covenant was an unnecessary component to the success of the church-state.¹⁵ The belief in the absolute necessity of the national covenant had changed, and certain ministers would soon apply this reorientation to other elements in the covenant-driven Puritan faith. Moreover, the increased closeness between England and her New England colonies would more frequently expose the colonists to Anglican Church practices, for which they would begin to show a higher tolerance.¹⁶ Culturally, this same tightening of bonds between mother country and her New

¹⁵ Stout, *The New England Soul*, 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

England settlement saw the beginning of an era of heightened exchange of ideas and customs.

In November 1680 and December to January 1681, astronomers around the world observed one of the brightest comets of the century streak across the celestial sphere. The astronomers recorded meticulous observations and engaged in conversations and debates regarding their findings. For the most part, this scientific activity occurred in Europe, such as among the London circles of Isaac Newton and John Flamsteed, the royal astronomer. But there was at least one circle in the “wilderness” of the New England colonies that also observed the comet. Thomas Brattle and his colleague John Foster recorded their measurements and asserted the hypothesis that the two comet sightings had been of *one comet* that had passed around the sun and

changed direction. From among the global body of astronomers, only these two rural scientists and John Flamsteed made this correct assumption.¹⁷ For this astute conjecture, “the observer in New England” would receive a nod in Isaac Newton’s *Mathematical Principles*, “the most scientific book of the age.”¹⁸ Thomas Brattle, mathematician, scientist, merchant, Harvard professor, and one of the foremost figures in New England’s Age of Enlightenment, would be among the most instrumental founders of the Brattle Street Church.

With the establishment of the new royal charter, the European Enlightenment, “the cultural force, transforming ideas about nature, design and beauty the age of Newton, Locke, Addison,

¹⁷ Rick Kennedy, “Thomas Brattle and the Scientific Provincialism of New England, 1680-1713,” *The New England Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (Dec., 1990): 587.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 589.

and Tillotson” came to New England. Thomas Brattle had a close relationship with Europe and developed his own mathematical and scientific skills prior to the advent of the new charter and New England’s reception of the Enlightenment.¹⁹ As the age of reason and rationalism gained force in his native land, Thomas Brattle began to allow his logical tendencies to permeate throughout other aspects of his life. When in the small New England community of Salem during the spring of 1692 witchcraft trial judges decreed that controversial “spectral” evidence – evidence based upon visions and dreams – was admissible for trial, thus sending dozens of people to prison and the gallows, Thomas Brattle penned a letter to a local divine in reaction to the events. The letter, written on October 8, 1692,

¹⁹ Stout, *The New England Soul*, 128.

epitomized Brattle's religious rationalism. The letter quoted scripture and was steeped with religious arguments, but it was also infused with Brattle's "cool reason." In admitting the disputed evidence and fueling the hysteria based upon the testimony of a few seemingly troubled young girls, Brattle asserted "that the Justices have thus far given ear to the Devill, I think may be mathematically demonstrated to any man of common sense."²⁰ Moreover, he stated that the new legal precedents, this "Salem Philosophy . . . rather deserves the name of Salem superstition and sorcery, and it is not fitt to be named in a land of such light as New-England is."²¹

²⁰ "Letter of Thomas Brattle, F.R.S. 1692," in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases: 1648-1706*, George Lincoln Burr, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 182.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

Thomas Brattle applied rationality to the Salem trials – a contemporary legal dispute that had a significant religious element. A few short years after he wrote the 1692 letter, Brattle repeated the doctrine of applying reason to religion. In 1698, he and other like-minded men seized upon various adaptations that had occurred in colonial society, such as the Half-Way covenant, the revocation of the charter, and the Enlightenment, to bring reason and religion together in a new church, undertaking the formation of the Brattle Street Church.²² This decision was that of liberal-minded, rational men, attempting to be rational in the choice of their

²² Aside from Thomas Brattle, leading members of the Brattle Street Church movement included Captain Benjamin Davis, the merchant John Mico, Thomas Cooper, and John Colman. These gentlemen wrote the original letter of invitation to Benjamin Colman. Other men, including Thomas Brattle's brother William, pastor at Cambridge, and later Harvard President John Leverett, were also involved in the foundation process. Most of these men were wealthy and well educated. See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 240-241.

church and its practices. At the same time, these men had no desire to be any less pious or theologically secure than their peers. The founders sent a letter of invitation on May 10, 1699 to their prospective pastor, Benjamin Colman, a Boston native who had been studying for four years in England. Colman's background complemented the founders' own sensibilities, making him fit for their needs. Their letter informed Colman that the founders had "no design to depart from the doctrine and order of the Gospel, or from the practice of the churches of Christ in New England."²³ They did request, however, that "[publick] relations should be laid aside, and the Holy Scriptures publicly read in

²³ Thomas Brattle, Benjamin Davis, John Mico, Thomas Cooper, and John Colman to Benjamin Colman, May 10, 1699, in Lothrop, *A History of Brattle Street*, 46.

the church.”²⁴ They also suggested that Colman be ordained “before [he came] over by some Non-conformist ministers in England”²⁵ so as to avoid any controversy his ordination might arouse in Boston.²⁶

Colman received the founders’ invitation in Bath, England on July 19, 1699, along with letters of encouragement from the Reverends Ebenezer Pemberton and William Brattle, and other New England inhabitants. After sending a letter of agreement to the Boston “undertakers,” Colman set out for London, arriving on August 1, 1699.²⁷ Shortly thereafter, he was ordained by a number of men belonging to the London Presbytery. The

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 241.

²⁷ Founders

Reverend Colman then took his leave of England, entering Boston on November 1, 1699.²⁸ On November 2, 1699, “the Undertakers visited [Colman] in a full Meeting at [his] Brothers House.”²⁹ Less than three weeks subsequent to this meeting, on November 17, 1699, “A Manifesto or Declaration, Set forth by the Undertakers of New Church, Now Erected in Boston in New England” was published in Boston.³⁰ The document does not list a specific author, but it is likely that the release of the document was discussed and agreed upon at the November 2 meeting and that Benjamin

²⁸ Colman, “Boston in New England. December 12. 1699. *A Church Book. Containing an Account, designed by the help of GOD, of the Concerns & Votes of the Church, now Erected & Settled in Brattle street, from the present date,*” December 12, 1699, in *Records of the Brattle Street Church*, 3-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “A Manifesto or Declaration, Set forth by the Undertakers of New Church, Now Erected in Boston in New England” (Boston, 1699), 1.

Colman, either solely or aided by the “undertakers,” wrote the Manifesto. The purpose of releasing such a document was “*for preventing all Misapprehensions and Jealousies*” in hopes that publishing the church’s “*Aims and Desires*” would put an end to the debates surrounding the subject of its foundation.³¹

The sixteen-point declaration set forth, step by step, the characteristics and practices of the new church. First, the church stipulated that it adhered to both the “*Confession of Faith* put forth by the Assembly of Divines at *Westminster*” and the “known practice of many of the Churches of the UNITED BRETHREN in *London*, and throughout all *England*.”³² As such, they believed it was “suitable and convenient” to read the Holy Scripture

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

in public worship. The undertakers also asserted that they would “dare not refuse [Baptism] to *any* Child offered to [them] by *any* professed Christian, upon his engagement to see it Educated, if God give life and ability, in the Christian religion” and would allow the pastor to exercise ultimate authority over these matters.³³ The undertakers noted that the pastor’s power to baptize or admit members would extend to the exclusion of those members, and therefore gave the pastor the implicit “consent and concurrence of the Brethren” in matters of “Suspending or Excommunicating an Offender.”³⁴

Regarding the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the undertakers noted that “as the Ordinance is Holy, so the Partakers in it must

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “A Manifesto,” 3.

be persons of visible Sanctity.”³⁵ Thus all who desired to partake in the Supper were to be subject to the pastor’s inquiries regarding their “knowledge and Spiritual State.”³⁶ Yet unlike the rest of the Boston congregations, they would “assume not to [themselves] to impose upon any a Publick Relations of their Experiences.”³⁷ The Brethren, or the full church members, might inquire into potential communicants’ “life and conversation,” but such inquiries were to occur in private. The authors then defined the concept of “a particular Church, as such, is a society of Christians by mutual agreement, usually meeting together for Publick Worship in the same place, and under the same Ministry” in which society “the Law of nature

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

dictates to [them], that there is implied a mutual promise and engagement of being faithful to the relations they bear to each other, whither as private Christians, or as pastor and flock, so long as the Providence of God continues them in those relations.”³⁸ The Manifesto declared that its church “could not confine the right of choosing a Minister to the Male Communicants alone,” stating that the church would instead allow “every Baptized Adult Person who contributes to the Maintenance [of the church and pastor], [to] have a Vote in Electing.”³⁹ The Manifesto concluded by noting “in some of these particulars only, and in no other, do we see cause to depart from what is ordinarily Professed and Practised by the Churches of CHRIST here in

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

New-England.”⁴⁰ Moreover, the founders asserted that despite their departure, they still hoped “to hold Communion with the Churches here, as true Churches.” The authors expected members of Brattle Street to be received at other churches’ communion tables and invited others to their own table.⁴¹ Implications contrary to these statements were “most injurious” to the founders, since they believed that the ways in which their practices departed from the other churches’ did not undermine “Evangelical Purity and Holiness in [their] Communion.”⁴²

The Brattle Street Church departed from traditional New England practices by extending baptism to any child of a proclaimed Christian;

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “A Manifesto,” 3.

⁴² Ibid., 2.

dispensing with public relations of experiences by potential communicants; reading Scripture without interpretation in church services (a traditionally Anglican practice); and bestowing the right of participation to all contributing baptized persons in church affairs, especially the in election of a pastor. These innovations were not drastically different from the system that was in place in the Congregational community at large. Most New England churches had already extended the privilege of baptism to a larger group of children as a result of the 1662 Half-Way covenant. The Brattle Street Church was only pushing those cracked doors all the way open. While the other transformations did not follow as palpable a precedent as the Synod's 1662 decision, neither were they without prior models. In 1677, Solomon Stoddard, the

pastor at Northampton, dispelled with barriers to baptism or the communion table, “identifying the church not with a society of saints but with the town meeting.”⁴³ In 1687, in *The Safety of Appearing at the Day of Judgment*, he argued that the “covenant” was not to be interpreted as a contractual relationship between man and God, but as God’s command without any ability for men to consciously commit to this relationship.⁴⁴ Stoddard’s changes had far-reaching implications, but in the most immediate sense he undermined both the covenant language and challenged exclusion to communion. William Brattle, Thomas Brattle’s brother, was another controversial minister. He preached from his Cambridge pulpit in 1697 “the formal and public relations of candidates

⁴³ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 227.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

might be dispensed with, that an examination by the pastor and elders should suffice, and that the people would signify their assent by silence.”⁴⁵ The Brattle Street Church Manifesto prescribed exactly to William Brattle’s message – as Thomas Brattle’s brother, he was another influential member in its foundation. While there was no contention in the Brattle Street declaration that opened the Communion table to all men, nor that directly undermined the covenant, as Stoddard had done, there were like elements in the Northampton pastor’s and the Brattle Street Manifesto’s differing amendments.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 238-239.

⁴⁶ The Brattle Street Church did not choose to directly associate with Solomon Stoddard, nor would they have listed him among those who had influenced their Manifesto. Stoddard was surrounded by a wealth of controversy; he was locked in a particularly contentious debate with Increase Mather. It was not, therefore, “politic” of Brattle Street to align themselves with the Northampton

What was inherently different between William Brattle and Solomon Stoddard's models and the foundation of the Brattle Street Church was that neither William Brattle nor Solomon Stoddard had established a new church based upon their arguments. Theological debates in themselves had a long-standing tradition in the New England colonies – they fomented change and evolution and were a key component in keeping the clergy alert and ready to defend the faith. But renting the fabric of a New England community by establishing a new and separate church based upon debated disagreements was a new and radical concept. Thus it was a quixotic supposition that the Brattle Street Manifesto would dispel any arguments against the

Pastor. While their theology is not at all the same, the similarities in their final doctrines are undeniable. See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 232-244.

church; if anything, the Manifesto fueled the debates, which only became more caustic in the following months.

On December 30, 1699, Salem Ministers John Higginson and Nicholas Noyes, both revered members of the New England Congregational community, sent a letter “To the Gentlemen, the authors and owners of the Declaration,” the undertakers of the Brattle Street Church.⁴⁷ The letter ungraciously ripped the Manifesto to shreds. Beginning with a niggling jab at the word “Manifesto” itself – the Salem men called it overly imperious – the letter questioned each of the Manifesto’s innovations in a patronizing and

⁴⁷ “John Higginson and Nicholas Noyes To the Gentlemen, the authors and owners of the Declaration, set forth by those who call themselves the Undertakers of the new church now erected in Boston, in New England, November 19th, 1699,” in Lothrop, *A History of Brattle Street*, 28.

mordant tone. Asserting that the Brattle Street undertakers had not shown due deference to their fellow church community leaders, the letter cried “Sirs! How could you forsake the dear churches some of you belonged to, whose breasts you had sucked, and on whose knees you had been dandled, without dropping one tear in your declaration?”⁴⁸ A further claim was that the Brattle Street Manifesto’s omission of any explicit statement as to the necessity of covenanting with God in a “public and personal giving up yourselves in Christ, according to the Covenant of his grace” implied Brattle Street’s belief in its needlessness, to which Higginson and Noyes took great offence.⁴⁹ As to those baptized by the church, Higginson and Noyes

⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 30-31.

sneeringly remarked that soon enough any and all children would be “promiscuously baptized.”⁵⁰

The Salem pastors further pointed out that the Manifesto endowed the Brattle Street Church pastor with entirely too much power as was “meet to be put in any one man living.”⁵¹ The Manifesto had given the Brethren’s implicit consent in all matters of both admission and exclusion of church members and had not mentioned the explicit need for a “consistory of elders.”⁵² This concern was compounded by the neglect of the Brattle Street Church to seek the “right of the fellowship of neighboring churches,” thus implying Brattle Street’s belief in the dispensability of advice from

⁵⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

neighboring pastors or elders.⁵³ Given this, Higginson and Noyes contended that Brattle Streeters had only mentioned their wish to be part of the communion of churches in a desultory and careless manner. When this misstep was added to Brattle Street's definition of a church – which had not included any mention of relative *duties* to God – Higginson and Noyes counseled the Brattle Street founders to refer to “a little book (called ‘Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes, drawn out of the Breasts of both Testaments’)” and to begin with the question “‘What is the church?’”⁵⁴ The Salem pastors also found that the last article of the Manifesto, which had bestowed upon all contributing baptized adults

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ John Higginson and Nicholas Noyes To the Gentlemen, the authors and owners of the Declaration, set forth by those who call themselves the Undertakers of the new church now erected in Boston, in New England, November 19th, 1699,” in Lothrop, *A History of Brattle Street*, 33.

the right to participate in choosing their pastor, to be frankly irresponsible. The Manifesto's language implied that females would vote as well as males, and since "the females are certainly more than the males the choice of ministers is put into their hands."⁵⁵ Even worse, in allowing the baptized adult non-communicants' opinions to weigh with equal measure to the communicants – whom the non-communicants outnumbered – the non-communicants would be in a position to wreak havoc on the entire church system.⁵⁶

Higginson and Noyes' last grievance was unrelated to the content of the Manifesto. Rather, they asked the Brattle Street community why they had not informed the New England Congregational community that there were certain common

⁵⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

practices the founders found in need of reform before choosing to set out alone. The pastors chastised the Brattle Street founders; “If you could have convinced [the other churches] that [the current practices] were evil, they would certainly have [forsaken them], for they do not pretend perfection in knowledge.”⁵⁷ This, then, was the underlying problem that drove all the rest. The theological liberalism of the Brattle Street Church was “offensive” to pastors such as John Higginson and Nicholas Noyes, but what they truly could not sanction was that Brattle Street had acted unilaterally to enact those offensive practices. The foundation of the Brattle Street Church had upset the peace, and this the pastors could not forgive. At the conclusion of their letter, Higginson and Noyes

⁵⁷ Ibid., 35.

beseached the Brattle Street undertakers to either annul the Manifesto or to “explain it to satisfaction, by adjusting matters between yourselves and neighboring elders and churches.”⁵⁸ The most fundamental issue, and the one which demanded the highest degree of gravity, was not the Brattle Street Manifesto itself, but a restoration of peace and unity to the New England Congregational body.

A few weeks before this letter had been sent, at their December 12 meeting, the Brattle Street Brethren voted that “Mr. Colman present the Desires of the Society to the Ministers of the Town to keep a day of Prayer with [them].”⁵⁹ This day of

⁵⁸ John Higginson and Nicholas Noyes To the Gentlemen, the authors and owners of the Declaration, set forth by those who call themselves the Undertakers of the new church now erected in Boston, in New England, November 19th, 1699,” in Lothrop, *A History of Brattle Street*, 37.

⁵⁹ Colman, “Boston in New England. December 12. 1699. *A Church Book. Containing an Account, designed by the help of GOD, of the Concerns & Votes of the Church, now*

prayer would act as the Boston ministry's official recognition of Reverend Colman and the Brattle Street church, finalizing Colman's installation as minister. Reverend Colman sent letters of invitation to the Boston Congregational Ministers shortly after this meeting. "Mr. Colman" – quite a disrespectful way to address an ordained minister – received a reply from Reverends Increase Mather and James Allen on December 28, 1699. The terse note was even less polite than had been the Higginson and Noyes letter. The Salem pastors, at least, both explained their reasoning and gave an alternate option to revoking the Manifesto, albeit in a supercilious tone. Mather and Allen, on the other hand, stated that unless the Brattle Street Church

Erected & Settled in Brattle street, from the present date,"
December 12, 1699, in *Records of the Brattle Street Church*,
5.

were to “lay aside” their Manifesto, the Boston pastors could not join in communion or shared prayer with the society. To do so would be “interpreted as an approbation of those miscarriages, which both before and since the publication of the said Manifesto, it [seemed] to them, [the Brattle Street community] had fallen into.”⁶⁰ For all this bluster, the Boston ministers came to an agreement within a month that “the forms of the Christian fellowship” would be observed; it is likely that Reverends Samuel Sewall and William Stoughton convinced the rest of the local ministry to come to a consensus.⁶¹ Colman’s entry in the Brattle Street Church records for January 31, 1700, reads “Wednesday the 31. of

⁶⁰ “Increase Mather and James Allen to Mr. Colman, December 28, 1699,” in Lothrop, *A History of Brattle Street*, 56.

⁶¹ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 244.

January, was separated by us for public Imploring the Presence of GOD with us, His pardon and Blessing; & accordingly Solemnized.”⁶² Peace was seemingly restored. But the peace was shaky at best, born out of necessity rather than agreement or understanding.

In the spring of 1700, a long-standing debate between Solomon Stoddard, the controversial Northampton minister, and Increase Mather came to a head. Rumor had it that Stoddard planned to send a pamphlet to England in order to publish his doctrine of worship. Mather wanted to publish a sermon to undermine any Stoddard publication, but, given certain parallels between Stoddard’s doctrine and that of the Brattle Street Church, it was likely

⁶² Colman, “Records of the Church in Brattle Square: Dr. Colman’s Ministry, Wednesday the 31. of January,” in *Records of the Brattle Street Church*, 5.

that any sermon against Stoddard would be interpreted as an insult to Colman and the Brattle Street undertakers. In light of the recent peace, this was an unfortunate externality, but Mather could not allow Stoddard to proceed uncontested. In March 1700, he published *The Order of the Gospel*.⁶³ Mather's scripture verses for the sermon were from Jeremiah – "*I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed – why gaddest thou about so much to change thy way?*" and Colossians – "*Joying and beholding your Order, - and the Steadfastness of your Faith.*"⁶⁴ In his introduction, Mather cried, "Is there no one that will stand up for the Churches of Christ? The Good People in them may then well think that their *Watchmen* are all

⁶³ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 244.

⁶⁴ Jer. 2: 21, 36 and Col. 2: 5 in Increase Mather, *The Order of the Gospel* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen, 1700), 1.

either Dead or Asleep.”⁶⁵ Language such as this combined with Mather’s arguments directly against such practices as had been enacted in Brattle Street made a rebuttal by Benjamin Colman inevitable.⁶⁶

In November 1700, “sundry Ministers” in New England released in Boston *Gospel Order Revived, Being an Answer to a Book lately set forth by the Reverend Mr. Increase Mather.*⁶⁷ This sermon, though officially of anonymous authorship, was undeniably Benjamin Colman’s answer to Increase Mather.⁶⁸ Claiming to stand for “Truth, according to God’s Word,” Colman proceeded to pick apart each of Mather’s arguments.⁶⁹ To repudiate Mather’s justifications for the necessity of

⁶⁵ Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-39, 39-47, 54-62, 67-72.

⁶⁷ Sundry Ministers, *Gospel Order Revived, Being an Answer to a Book lately set forth by the Reverend Mr. Increase Mather* (New York, 1700), 1.

⁶⁸ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 246.

⁶⁹ Sundry Ministers, *Gospel Order Revived*, 4.

potential church members' public relation of their moments of conversion, Colman argued that the practice was an institution of man rather than God – it had no scriptural foundation. Moreover, Colman asked, “And with what face can we impose it, when our Fathers fled from the impositions of men?”⁷⁰ Man did not have the authority to “debate the refusal from any Christian [the] privilege [of membership]” and it was therefore peremptory of any church body to require a public relation in order to exclude certain persons from worship.⁷¹ Colman moved on to discuss the benefits of public reading of scripture “without explication or exhortation there-with” in public worship, which Increase

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

Mather had called “*Dumb Reading*.”⁷² While Colman granted that congregants came to church to hear “the Word read with prejudice” as communicated by God to the minister, and thereafter transmitted by the minister in his sermons, scripture was direct inspiration from God. Thus the “reading [of] God’s Word in the great Congregation, is the greatest Reverence and Honour we can [show Him.]”⁷³

The next issue Colman addressed was whether “*Baptism [was] to be administered to all Children, whom any professing Christians shall engage to so see educated in the Christian Religion.*”⁷⁴ Colman first dispelled with any misconceptions that this definition meant to include

⁷² Sundry Ministers, *Gospel Order Revived*, 13; Mather, *Order of the Gospel*, 47.

⁷³ Sundry Ministers, *Gospel Order Revived*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

either “Papists” or any other of the “grossest Hereticks;”⁷⁵ professed Christians, rather, referred to all those who “*profess their Faith in Christ*, and obedience to him.” If, then, papists and other regenerates were not included in this group, Colman professed disbelief that any “conscientious Minister” would not support the education of a child in the Christian religion followed by an embrace of that child into the flock.⁷⁶ Colman then communicated his defense for the participation of both communicants and non-communicants in choosing their pastor. Colman stated that “the administration of the Lord’s Supper is but one [aspect] of a Ministers work, and but a little part, compared with all the rest . . . [so] For some few to

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

appoint who shall be the Preacher to whole
Congregation is as highly irrational.”⁷⁷

Colman was likely most concerned about these four arguments. His new congregation had explicitly and ardently affirmed these four practices as the platform on which they stood and the reasons for which they had founded the Brattle Street Church. These arguments, however, were not the only ones that Colman made in *Gospel Order Revived*. Colman responded to each of the contentions that Increase Mather had presented in *Order of the Gospel*, many of which were not of great concern to the Brattle Street Church. Mather’s plan had backfired. In releasing *Order of the Gospel* as an argument against Solomon Stoddard’s disputed doctrines, he had broken a newly formed

⁷⁷ Ibid., 19.

bond between himself and the Brattle Street minister. In doing so, Mather unwittingly fomented the circumstances by which another argument *in support* of Solomon Stoddard reached Boston audiences. Cotton Mather wrote bitterly that all the recent publications, including Colman's, “do sett the People in a mighty Ferment. All the Adversaries of the Churches lay their Heads together, as if by Blasting of us, they hoped utterly to blow up all.”⁷⁸

Despite the 1700 debates, as the decade gained steam, the dispute lost its heat. The Brattle Street Church continued to be perceived as a liberal Congregation, but the controversy surrounding the supposed “radicalism” of its practices faded into the background as time marched on. Benjamin Colman, while perhaps never as well respected as his

⁷⁸ Cotton Mather in Miller, *The New England Mind*, 246.

ministerial contemporaries, had been officially sanctioned. He and his flock were safe and stable. Over the course of the decade, Colman participated as an active member of the Boston Congregational community. He preached multiple occasion-day sermons, including one on the occasion of the election of officers to the “Honourable Artillery” in 1702 and various sermons presented to the General Court and the Governor at Boston Lectures.⁷⁹ And in 1711, when the Old South Church meeting-house was destroyed in the Great Fire of Boston, it was with Brattle Street Church that they gathered for

⁷⁹ Benjamin Colman, *Faith Victorious as It was Represented in a SERMON Preached to the Honourable Artillery Company in Boston, on the day of their ELECTION of Officers* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen, 1702); Benjamin Colman, *Imprecation Against the Enemies of GOD Lawful and a Duty* (Boston: B. Green, 1707); Benjamin Colman, *The Piety and Duty of Rulers To Comfort and Encourage the Ministry of Christ* (Boston: B. Green, 1708).

worship until May 1713.⁸⁰ Peace, shaky at the outset, had solidified, and unity had been restored. But the fragmentation of the Congregational body that the foundation of the Brattle Street Church represented was not an isolated incident. Within just a few decades, the Great Awakening, a period of religious revival that occurred throughout the American colonies from the 1730s to the 1760s, would flood New England with passions, enthusiasm, resentment, debates, and Old Light versus New Light splits that would cause the Brattle Street Church controversy to pale in comparison. It cannot be said that the foundation of the Brattle Street Church had any direct bearing in *causing* the events of the Great Awakening to unfold.

⁸⁰ Colman, “Records of the Church in Brattle Square: Dr. Colman’s Ministry, October the 12th 1711 and May the 4th 1713” in *Records of the Brattle Street Church*, 12.

Simultaneously, the foundation of the Brattle Street Church was the first instance when a Congregational Church would take it upon itself to break away from the established community of churches and found a new house of worship based upon contested ideas and practices. Moreover, both in the societal transformations that inspired it and the foundation itself, the church stood as one of the first examples of New England's original "City upon a Hill" conception cracking. The church was born in an era of theological debate and dissent that the founders radicalized. The Brattle Street Church founders reacted to their transforming society in such a way as had not ever occurred before, but that would be repeated many times thereafter.