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## A Minister in All But Name: The Letters of Martha Gerrish (1689-1736)

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A MINISTER IN ALL BUT NAME  
THE LETTERS OF MARTHA GERRISH (1689-1736)

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A Thesis

Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by  
Jessica Bayliss Philyaw

1990

APPROVAL SHEET

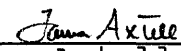
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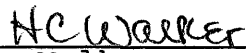
Master of Arts

  
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DEDICATION

To the memory of Martha Gerrish

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	v
ABSTRACT . . . . .	vi
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	2
CHAPTER I. IMAGES OF WOMEN IN PURITAN PREACHING . . . . .	4
CHAPTER II. THE LETTERS OF MARTHA GERRISH . . . . .	25
CHAPTER III. THE GERRISH LETTERS AS A MIRROR OF CLERICAL SACERDOTALISM . . . . .	53
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	74

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## ABSTRACT

This study of the place of women in New England Puritan thought in the early eighteenth century begins with an analysis of the preaching of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Colman. Some images in their sermons characterized women as meek and subservient to their male superiors, while others depicted them as temptresses who could corrupt men. The author argues that these ministers also expressed attitudes that revealed women as capable of intellectual and spiritual development equal, if not superior, to that of men.

The letters of Martha Gerrish, who died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1736, are taken as a case study of one woman's thoughts about Puritan womanhood as well as a wide range of other theological issues. Her views on the strength, worth, and dignity of women complement the attitudes ministers expressed in their sermons.

This thesis also uses Gerrish's letters, which portray her as a minister in all but name, as a vantage point from which to examine the strained relationship between the laity and the clergy, which had developed a sense of itself as a profession distinct from and essentially superior to the laity.

A MINISTER IN ALL BUT NAME



## INTRODUCTION

Where did women fit in the world of New England Puritanism? The question is complex, and women themselves left behind few writings on their ideas about their social or theological status. Ministers, on the other hand, were the most prolific writers of their day, and one way to begin to assess women's place in Puritan thought is to examine the attitudes toward, and images of, women that appear in sermons.

Ministers, eager to emphasize the universal truths of Christianity, rarely addressed themselves to gender-specific issues. That is, they preferred to speak to God's children rather than to His sons or His daughters exclusively. Occasionally, however, ministers did focus their attention on the status and character of women. These sermons, and the images found in them, offer an important glimpse of ministerial attitudes about the nature and status of women.

This approach to the question of women's experience of New England Puritanism, valuable as it is, nevertheless is one sided: the clergy's remarks necessarily present a picture of women's piety through the words (and eyes) of men. The letters of Martha Gerrish, published soon after she died in Cambridge in 1736, make an important contribution to this analysis; they reveal a woman's perspective on the meaning and character of Puritan

womanhood and develop the picture of Puritan attitudes that emerges from the writings of ministers.

Indeed, Gerrish was a kind of lay theologian, and her letters offer a rare opportunity to hear a Puritan woman's interpretations of the theology of her church. But despite the markedly clerical bent of her thinking, she was nevertheless a lay member of the church community; her uncommon position as a minister in all but name provides an unusual perspective from which to examine the changes taking place within the church in the early eighteenth century, specifically the strained relationship that was developing between the clergy and the laity. Moreover, Gerrish's writings, and the issue of women's place within Puritan society and theology, reach beyond gender history and speak to the course and character of Puritan intellectual and spiritual life.

## CHAPTER I

### IMAGES OF WOMEN IN PURITAN PREACHING

The sermons preached in New England's churches from the last years of the seventeenth century to 1730 are a window through which we can see how ministers conceptualized the roles, capabilities, and nature of women. While ministers rarely preached on exclusively female (or male) issues, images of women do appear in the clerical literature, particularly in the sermons of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Colman, whose record of printed sermons reveals a special attention to issues relating to women. The pictures that emerge from these writings represent two contrasting views: one conceives of women as dangerous temptresses, and the other sees them as meek, deferential wives and mothers who embody dignity and deserve respect. Complementing these traditional images is a conception of women as competent, capable, and independent in thought and action. Only within the framework of the established church and a supreme devotion to God, however, could women, according to Colman and Mather, legitimately and virtuously express these characteristics.

One of the most traditional images of the virtuous woman centered on her humility and tenderness. In a sermon delivered at the funeral of Mrs. Abeil Goodwin, Cotton

Mather praised her for having been "Courteous, Affable, and full of Benignity, Ready to do Good Offices for all about her: Accompanied and Advantaged with a Discretion which, was an agreeable Varnish upon all."<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Colman shared these sentiments and remarked, "[Women] are warned and exhorted, Not to be false Accusers, nor given to much wine; But to be sober, discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, tender, faithful and affectionate in their domestick Relations."<sup>2</sup> Colman used his funeral sermon for Elizabeth Hirst to elaborate this list of attributes when he admonished her husband to praise her for her "Modesty and Charity, Humility, and Meekness, Prudence and Wisdom, Sweet Temper and good Nature, Diligence and Frugality, Piety and Devotion toward God, Care of her Family and wise Education of her Children."<sup>3</sup> Because this sermon was addressed to the whole congregation and was not simply a personal eulogy, Colman held up Hirst's life and behavior as an example to other women; a praiseworthy and virtuous woman embodied these characteristics. Mather, discussing virtuous womanhood, drew the connection between his description of an ideal and the real world of women: "I hope I have in this Discourse represented, not only, what all Women should be, but also, what very many of them Are."<sup>4</sup>

Many of these virtuous characteristics were common to men as well as women. Colman pointed to the "meekness and Gentleness of Christ" as a model for human, not just female, behavior.<sup>5</sup> In his sermon on manners he referred to both

genders when he said, "We must teach Transgressors with Meekness and love, Affection and Entreaty."<sup>6</sup> In this example, gentleness and submission were not the private domain of women. Similarly, ministers warned both men and women to avoid certain strong or aggressive personality traits. In The Duty and Honour of Aged Women, Colman used the occasion of the funeral of Abigail Foster to warn the whole community: "There are the Peculiar Infirmities and common Dishonours of Old Age, which must be strictly watcht against. Such are discontent and forwardness, severity and censoriousness."<sup>7</sup> These undesirable qualities could be found in men as well as women.

Mixed dancing was another dishonor to which both sexes could fall victim, but references to it centered somewhat more specifically on women than on men. In 1692 Cotton Mather warned against mixed dancing in a discourse on "The Character and Happiness of a Vertuous Woman."<sup>8</sup> Several years before, Increase Mather devoted an entire sermon to "Profane and Promiscuous Dancing." He declared that "the very motion of the Body which is used in Dancing, giveth Testimony enough of evil." It was, he said, the "Devil's Pomp." He went on to affirm that "mixed Dancing is a Recreation fitter for Pagans and whores and Drunkards than for Christians."<sup>9</sup> This condemnation applied to both sexes.

The image of woman as temptress was clearest in Cotton Mather's appeal that women wear simple, modest apparel and avoid vanity. "Fear of God," he declared, not "Deceitful

Favour, or a Vain Beauty," was the most laudable goal for a woman of virtue. Deception and physical appearance were almost inextricably linked for Mather, who affirmed, speaking of a virtuous woman, "Careful She likewise is, lest hereby [as a result of "Favour"] She Deceive Unwary men, into those Amours which bewitching looks and smiles do often betray." No doubt the man in this scenario could have been castigated for his unwariness, but Mather blamed the woman, who not only deceived but also bewitched, leaving the man little room for escape. Men, however, were not the only victims of women's charms. "A Vertuous woman," said Mather, "takes heed of becoming so Deceitful and Vain, as many Women are Tempted by their Favour and Beauty, to become." In this case, a woman's natural good looks could lead her to vanity just as she herself led "unwary men' to "Amours."<sup>10</sup>

Inappropriate dress reflected not simply poor taste but a boldfaced insult to proper behavior. "For a Woman to Wear what is not evidently Consistent with Modesty, Gravity, and Sobriety, is to Wear not an Ornament, but a Defilement," declared Mather.<sup>11</sup> Excessively ornate or revealing clothing symbolically affronted and even inverted the imagery of female virtue and decorum. For example, the anonymous, non-clerical author of a tirade against hoop skirts echoed and elaborated on Mather's point of view and judged: "Is that an Ornament which is contrary to Modesty, Humility, Gravity, and Sobriety, which are required in Women professing Godliness? but alas! How has Pride and Impudence usurped

the Place of Humility and Modesty, since Women are almost naked, and not at all ashamed, for instead of being ashamed of their Pride, they are proud of their Shame."<sup>12</sup> Mather and Colman instructed older women to accept their age and not try to look or act younger, and Mather articulated the logic behind the directive: "For an old Woman to fla[u]nt it in a Youthful Dress, is altogether as prodigious a Disorder, as for the Flowers of May to appear among the Snows of December."<sup>13</sup> The displacement of the natural order of things impressed him more than the vanity itself.

The lay author of a satirical piece entitled The Origin of the Whale bone-petticoat took a similar tack: "Shou'd all this fail," he mused, "[and] if you Wretches/Won't be perswaded to contract your Stiches/Your next Extravagance will be our Breeches/With this, perhaps, you think to keep you warm/and laugh at us and every north east Storm."<sup>14</sup> In this humorous account, if women persisted in flouting the acceptable standards of dress, they might next appropriate masculine fashion. Consistent with their image as potential temptresses, women, in the hyperbolic estimate of the satirist, could in some symbolic sense threaten men and the order of society simply by dressing unconventionally.

Not all women, however, posed such a threat. A woman who took Christ's example as her model for marriage fulfilled one of the primary duties of her gender. A good marriage was for the Puritans the basis of a stable family and a stable society; the state was "the family writ

large."<sup>15</sup> Because marriage was so important, ministers spoke on it at length and found descriptive examples to illustrate for their congregations the characteristics of a good union. The most vivid example available to them was the metaphorical marriage of Christ to his bride, the church.<sup>16</sup> While this conception called for absolute obedience from the woman (symbolizing the church), it also brought women into the heart of the religious life of the community; the marriage relationship and woman's place in it explained the relationship between God and his people. The church itself was thus feminized; Cotton Mather, in a sermon entitled The Mystical Marriage, voiced joy at the "Marvellous Felicity [of] Our Marriage with a Redeemer that is Raised from the Dead."<sup>17</sup> The church as a whole was Christ's bride and must act as a proper wife. If women were a component of such a powerful and centrally important explanatory model, they exercised a certain degree of power in society's collective imagination.

This divine marriage metaphor recurred frequently in Mather's sermons as a guide to proper wifely behavior. For example, in A Glorious Espousal he directed summarily that "the most comprehensive prescription that can be given, for the Duties of the Married State, is this One Word: Conform to what passes between the Blessed Jesus and His Espoused People."<sup>18</sup> In The Mystical Marriage he specified how to go about this conformity: "Do as all that are truly Espoused unto their Saviour, will easily do; and practice on the



Golden Maxim, Do as you would be done unto. . . . I hope, I need say no more."<sup>19</sup> However, he did go on to add some specifics: "Let the Husband often think How wondrously does by Saviour love his Church and show compassion to it, and make provision for it? Let the Wife often think, How does the Church study to Gratify her Saviour, and give Him cause to call her Hephzibah, and say, my Delight is in her."<sup>20</sup> He wanted women to behave toward their husbands with a desire to please, just as the church strove to please God. Women occupied a position of importance in part because of this male nature of the church itself, but this imagery nevertheless portrayed women as restricted to an ultimately subservient role that required strict obedience to a male figure.

Ministers did not always discuss marriage in purely metaphorical terms. Often, they instructed women in the particular duties and manners that were required of them. In this picture, a good wife deferred to her husband. "She is a Dove," intoned Mather, "that will sooner Dy than leave her Mate."<sup>21</sup> A woman was to be close at hand for her husband. "She will not therefore be too much from Home," Mather directed, "upon Concerns, that perhaps to him are Unaccountable: but if the angels to Enquire, where she is, her Husband may Reply, as once Abraham did, My wife is in the Tent."<sup>22</sup> Mather does not necessarily advise here that a woman always remain at home but that she venture out only on errands on behalf of, or approved by, her mate.

One reason she was so needed at home was to attend to the moral education of her children. "O how concerned she is," intoned Mather, "that [the children] may be Brought up in the Nurture and Admonition of the Lord. . . . Wherefore she becomes a Martha, that is, a Teacher, to them all."<sup>23</sup> In this role she became significant as an educator of the next generation.

A good wife also had to meet certain standards of temperament. Emotional calm and support of her husband were the key: "She will have no such Passions towards her Husband as may make her worthy to be called A Fury, but if he be himself in a Passion, she strives with the Soft Answer of M\_\_\_\_\_ to Mollify it first, and so to Overcome: She is a true Rachel, that is to say, A Sheep under the greatest Exasperations."<sup>24</sup> Mather here implied a double standard: if a woman was in a passion, her husband or anyone else could criticize her, labeling her a virago. On the other hand, if a man displayed anger, he could expect his wife to soothe rather than chastise him. In this circumstance the woman did take action to influence her husband when she tried to "overcome" his anger, but her method remained reserved and passive; she was like a sheep who resorted only to appeasement through "soft answers."

In her relationship with her husband a woman ought to exhibit "her Antipathy to all contention unless it be That of Provoking one another to Love and Good Works," wrote Mather.<sup>25</sup> Even in this moral domain, however, women's

influence was limited. Benjamin Colman was apparently ambivalent. In The Duty and Honour of Aged Women he declared: "It must be confess'd to the Great Honour of Your Sex, that more of the Life and Power of Religion is with You, than with Us."<sup>26</sup> Five years later, however, he seemed to have forgotten this superiority when he directed: "Relatives should teach one another God's ways: Parents their children, Husbands their Wives, Masters their Servants."<sup>27</sup> If women were holier, why were their husbands teaching them God's ways? The juxtaposition of husbands and wives with masters and servants only reinforced women's subservient status in the ideology. Women might provoke godliness in men but could not presume to have the superiority necessary to teach men.

In return for properly executing her domestic role, a woman deserved respect from her family. Freedom from abuse was fundamental to this respect. Mather stated simply that men must not beat their wives.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not this ideology of humane treatment always matched actual practice, it was nevertheless part of the way of ideal thinking about women and their place in society. Colman, too, remarked that "an Excellent Wife deserves a singular Respect, and the most Honourable Treatment in the World."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in telling his listeners to honor their parents, he specifically mentioned mothers as well as fathers: "Be we grown up, and grown up, and grown Great, yet we are never too big to rise up and bow down to our Parents. And not

only . . . unto our Fathers, if they are yet alive, but also to our Aged Mothers."<sup>30</sup>

A dutiful wife was not weak, and she deserved praise for her accomplishments: "'Strength and Honor are her Cloathing,'" attested Colman, quoting Proverbs, "'and she shall rejoyce in time to come. . . . Her Children rise up and call her Blessed, her Husband also and he praiseth her.'"<sup>31</sup> The duties demanded of a virtuous wife were not simply required as a matter of course and therefore taken for granted (in the ideology, if not in practice); a woman who successfully managed her family responsibilities deserved recognition and reward for her efforts.

But what if a woman failed to live up to the ideal of Christian femininity? Was she necessarily more degenerate than a man who behaved poorly? For Colman, the answer depended upon a vision of traditional gender roles and gender-specific characteristics. He declared that "the things that do not become Holiness, or that are contrary thereunto, are doubly dishonourable and guilty in [women], by the Estimation of the World." By things unbecoming to Holiness, he singled out "sensual lusts, wantonness and impurity, boldness and rudeness, . . . drinking [and] profaneness." These improprieties, he said, were "more Scandalous, tho' not more Guilt before God, than in Men." He went on to modify that statement, however, and argued that not all violations of mores followed that model: "Vanities of Apparel, pride, impotent Envies,

Censoriousness, talkativeness, gadding, backbitings, or the like Evils . . . look yet meaner and viler in Men than in Women, and so seem an Exception to the Rule before laid down."<sup>32</sup> There were, then, traditionally male improprieties (like drunkenness) and traditionally female ones (like vanities of apparel and talkativeness). Falling victim to the vices of the other gender brought even more dishonor than succumbing to the weaknesses of one's own sex.

But beyond such unseemly "improprieties," crime or serious transgression on the part of either sex represented a threat to Puritan social order. Women's crimes were not in this way "worse" than those of men. Although Mary Beth Norton contends that in the seventeenth century, women's crimes posed a greater threat to society than the same behavior in men,<sup>33</sup> ministers tended to subordinate the issue of gender in favor of generalizing a lesson for the whole community. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich identifies this "reluctance of the ministers to stress 'feminine' or 'masculine' themes over a common Christianity."<sup>34</sup> Any offender was an example of the evil threatening the Puritan community, and the ministerial literature made little of the gender distinction. Even infanticide, perhaps the most heinous crime a woman as mother can commit, was generalized in this way and was not considered a specifically woman's issue. According to Peter Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull, "infanticide did not shock the leaders of New England because of its violence or the youth of its victims. . .

It was a reminder of the sinfulness and frailty of humanity."<sup>35</sup> The Reverend Samuel Willard's funeral sermon for Sarah Smith, convicted in 1698 of murdering two of her own babies, was not a diatribe against a depraved Smith but a call to all people, male and female, to avoid sin of any kind.<sup>36</sup> New England men may have been unconscious of what Norton believes to be their greater fear of crime committed by women and therefore did not raise a gender-based hue and cry. As a result, the fear, if it existed, did not influence the images of women as expressed in the clerical literature. Indeed, Norton remarks that "by the middle of the eighteenth century, women's crimes were no longer viewed as more threatening to communal order than men's."<sup>37</sup> This shift had apparently already taken place, in the ministers' discourse at least, before 1730.

Many images of women that emerge from the literature refer to the assumed passivity, dependency, and inferiority of women but also advocate or acknowledge their empowerment. For example, Mather urged women to participate as much as possible in religious activities, but only within that framework that excluded them by forbidding them to speak in the church: "Although She sometimes counts herself as a Dog, yet like that Syrophenician Woman, she will ask for some Crumbs from the Table of the Lord. . . . She is Desirous to Eat and to Drink where she may not speak; and having been Baptized, She is not satisfied until she come Eat among the Friends, to Drink among the Beloved, of the Lord Jesus

Christ."<sup>38</sup> She was entitled to the Eucharist and was to speak up for that right, but Mather did nothing to argue against the image of a woman as a dog begging for crumbs from its human superiors. Mather also encouraged women to read the Bible for themselves and to take heart from the fact that they had played an important role Christ's life. He explained his directive, however, by remarking that women ought to concentrate on the Bible "rather than to mispend their hours, and infect their hearts by the revolving of such Romances, as commonly leave a sensible Taint upon the minds of their unwary readers."<sup>39</sup> Mather here conceived of women as vulnerable to improper ideas that appealed to their emotions.

His discussions of marriage also intertwined submissive images with more "enlightened" ideas about women's roles. In an oft-quoted judgment Mather affirmed: "For a Woman to be Praised, is for her to be Married."<sup>40</sup> He went on, however, to qualify the statement by contending that a woman was not by any means a failure if she did not have a husband; "'tis too absurdly counted a Great Curse to be an Old Maid."<sup>41</sup> In likening marriage to a man to divine marriage of the soul to Christ, Mather judged that a woman must not refuse a proposal from the Lord;<sup>42</sup> she could and should, however, refuse one from an unworthy earthly suitor because marriage entered into solely for the sake of convention was worse for a woman than remaining single: "But yet instead of using any Hasty Method to get into the

Married Row, and instead of taking a Bad Husband meerly to avoid the little Reproach for having None, she do's by her Gravity and Holiness, convince all the World, that her present circumstances are of Choice rather than Force; and the Longer she is in them, the more she do's Consecrate her self unto the Lord."<sup>43</sup> Thus in Mather's view, a woman had the right to decide for herself whether she wanted to be married. But the only legitimate justification for choosing not to marry was the higher calling of devoting herself to God.

Mather's sermon upon the death of Mrs. Abiel Goodwin is a good example of the combined images of strength and weakness. He used the opportunity to "obtain from Young People, An Early and Hearty Submission to the Yoke of their Saviour" and noted, with some irony, "finally, Abiel Goodwin shall without any Disorder now Speak in the church!" Only in death could she raise her voice without causing a disturbance. Mather, however, directed the community to take note of the fact that she had overcome the usual female frailty: "Now, to see the Female Sex, which is usually the more Fearful Sex, in the approaches of Death, not Afraid with any Amazement; yea, to see a Damsel short of Twenty Years of Age, deliberately and magnanimously Looking this Enemy in the face. . . . Surely this is the Lord's doing, and it may be marvellous in our Eyes." Her courage in her open confrontation of death was exemplary. Mather was taken by her strength of character and personality when he



ministered to her on her deathbed. He recalled, "in these Months, the First Thing that I take notice of is, the Zeal, and Flame, and Ardour, wherewith she addressed her lively Exhortations, unto those that visited her; To make Haste upon their Saviour." But while she may have been ardent, she was not unacceptably aggressive: "As a wise winner of Souls, how sweetly did she Invite them." Mather granted her wisdom, but countered her "Flame of exhortation" with traditionally feminine sweetness.<sup>44</sup>

Not all of Mather's attitudes about women reflected these images of tender, subservient dependence; he used Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion as a forum for many of his more liberating views. He began his sermon by assuring women that they had made up for their role in Original Sin: "As a Woman had the Disgrace to Go first in that horrid and Woful Transgression of our first parents, which has become the Parent of all our misery; so a woman had the Glory of bringing into the World the Second Adam, who is the Father, of all our Happiness." Because of Mary's example, Mather assured his listeners, "we may safely account the Female Sex herein more than a little Dignify'd"; he did not want women to condemn themselves by looking only at the actions of Eve.<sup>45</sup>

Mather saw no cause for shame among women. "Indeed," he declared, "there are more Women than Men in the Church and the more Vertuous they prove, the more Worthy will the Church be." Not only were women an important part of the

church numerically, but they were also quite capable of possessing the virtue Mather discussed. "I confess," he reasoned, "Vertue it self, and the Names of all Particular Vertues, are Gramatically of the Female Gender, and that the Things may Theologically abound in that Gender, is what we may thence take Occasion to be wishing for." Apparently, Mather would not have ruled out Colman's interpretation that "more of the Life and Power of Religion is with [women], than with Us," and he believed that women deserved praise, dignity, and (self) respect for their role in history and their ability to lead godly lives.<sup>46</sup>

He was quick and explicit in his defense of women's intelligence and abilities when he advised: "But behold; how you may Recover your Impaired Reputation! The fear of God will soon make it evident that you are among The Excellent in the Earth. If any men are so wicked (and some Sects of men have been so) as to deny your being Rational Creatures, the best mean to confute them, will be by proving your selves Religious ones."<sup>47</sup> Devotion to God proved excellence and defended against charges of irrationality. Another way women could counter such derogations was to hone their conversational skills. The substance of their discourse was the key. Mather directed "that your Mouth may be a Well of Life, and your Tongue may be Health, an Hour with you, before they may have cause to say of you, Her Discourse has been Meat, Drink, and Physick for my Soul."<sup>48</sup> The aim was not the facility of idle, entertaining small talk but

thoughtful conversation that would nourish her listeners.

Mather encouraged women to express themselves in writing as well as in conversation. He saw writing on religious issues as the logical outgrowth of women's role in scripture. Explaining the precedent, he remarked, "as one woman was the Mother of Him who is the Essential word of God, so diverse women have been the writers of His Declarative word." Writing that praised God was a respectable way for women to express their devotion; "they to whom the common use of Swords is neither Decent nor Lawful, have made a most Laudable use of Pens," observed Mather approvingly. He went on to cite some examples: "We have not only seen Women doing service for the Tabernacle by such Ingenious Writings as we find mentioned in the Catalogues of Beverovicus, Holtinger, and Voetius." New England women, he noted enthusiastically, had made their own contribution to this "library."<sup>49</sup> This contribution was no doubt small, as most women were looking after husband and children rather than writing works of theology or religious meditation. Nevertheless, Mather wanted to draw women's attention to the existence of their own literary tradition. In sum, the way for a woman to achieve the degree of independence Mather advocated was through religious devotion.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich argues that after 1730, with the special help of Cotton Mather, women found a "new visibility" in the ministerial literature of New England.<sup>50</sup>

They were, however, significantly visible even before that date. The ministers' concern for a "common Christianity" made reference to women, as opposed to the church community as a whole, scarce; the images of women discussed here were gleaned from the remarks of relatively few preachers but are not less intriguing as a result. Mather in particular took the lead in espousing "progressive" ideas about women and their abilities, championing their freedom of self-expression as a complement to their religious devotion. More traditional imagery of women as either deceitful temptresses or (more commonly) dependent helpmates, however, created the background of the picture that emerged. Indeed, the complex and mixed images in these sermons reveal that in clerical thought, there was not a simple, consistent, or one-dimensional view of the female sex.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Cotton Mather, Juga Jucunda: A Brief Essay to Obtain from Young People, An Early and Hearty Submission to the Yoke of their Saviour. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1728), 26.

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Colman, The Duty and Honour of Aged Women, Deliver'd . . . After the Funeral of the Excellent Mrs. Abigail Foster (Boston, Mass., 1711), 14.

<sup>3</sup>Colman, The Honour and Happiness of the Vertuous Woman. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1716), 31.

<sup>4</sup>Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion: Or The Character and Happiness of a Vertuous Woman. . . . (Cambridge, Mass., 1692). The folio numbers of this document are illegible.

<sup>5</sup>Colman, A Sermon for the Reformation of Manners. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1716), 14.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>7</sup>Colman, Duty and Honour, 7.

<sup>8</sup>Mather, A Glorious Espousal. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1719), 14.

<sup>9</sup>Increase Mather, An Arrow against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1684), 14, 16, 24.

<sup>10</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Anonymous, Hoop-Petticoats Arraigned and Condemned by the Light of Nature, and Law of God (Boston, Mass., 1722), 3.

<sup>13</sup>Colman, Duty and Honour, 22-23; Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>14</sup>Anonymous, The Origin of the Whale bone-Petticoat: A Satyr (Boston, Mass., 1714), 7.

<sup>15</sup>Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," American Historical Review,

LXXXIX (1984), 610.

<sup>16</sup>See Margaret Masson, "The Typology of the Female as a Model for the Regenerate in Puritan Preaching, 1690-1730," Signs, II (1975-1976), 309. She explains the female nature of the church, which "was to behave as the ideal wife in relation to the husband: she was to avoid anything that would mean Christ's anger, observe his rules, keep his covenant, and be loyal and pure in marriage." (quote from p. 309.)

<sup>17</sup>Cotton Mather, The Mystical Marriage. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1728), 3.

<sup>18</sup>Cotton Mather, Glorious Espousal, 42.

<sup>19</sup>Cotton Mather, Mystical Marriage, 16.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Colman, Duty and Honour, ii.

<sup>27</sup>Colman, Reformation of Manners, 11.

<sup>28</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>29</sup>Colman, Honour and Happiness, 26.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>31</sup>Colan, Duty and Honour, 14.

<sup>32</sup>Colman, Duty and Honour, 12.

<sup>33</sup>See Norton, "Evolution of White Women's Experience," 610: "Women's misdeeds were potentially more disruptive than men's for two reasons: first, such misbehavior by women automatically involved insubordination to male superiors (be they husbands or fathers) and therefore in itself changed the status heirarchy; and, second, since as mothers women were responsible for the transmission of culture to the next generation, misdeeds on their part raised the possibility of continuing reverberations in the social order."

<sup>34</sup>Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Woman Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," American Quarterly, XXVIII (1976), 30.

<sup>35</sup>Peter Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull, Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England, 1588-1803 (New York, 1981), 33.

<sup>36</sup>Samuel Willard, Impenitent Sinners Warned of their Misery and Summoned to Judgment. . . . (Boston, Mass., 1698).

<sup>37</sup>Norton, "Evolution of White Women's Experience," 612.

<sup>38</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Cotton Mather, Glorious Espousal, 35.

<sup>43</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>44</sup>Cotton Mather, Juga Jucunda, 24, 25, 28.

<sup>45</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.; Colman, Duty and Honour, ii.

<sup>47</sup>Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid. Mather did not record who these women were.

<sup>50</sup>Ulrich, "Vertuous Woman Found," 30.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LETTERS OF MARTHA GERRISH

Bedridden by gout and other illnesses, Martha Gerrish died on April 14, 1736, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the age of forty-eight. Her funeral sermon, preached by Nathaniel Appleton and published the same year, included, as an appendix, a one-hundred-page collection of her personal correspondence from the last years of her life. The letters are significant for what they reveal about how one woman articulated her thoughts on theology and church doctrine as well as her sense of her role as a woman and a pious Christian. Moreover, Appleton's eulogy held up Gerrish's life and letters as an exemplary contribution to her community.

Gerrish was born to Francis and Elizabeth Danforth Foxcroft in Cambridge on March 26, 1689. Sister of the Reverend Thomas Foxcroft, she received an education in theology and the classics superior to that of most women and many men of her day, according to Appleton.<sup>1</sup> At the age of twenty-seven she married Benjamin Gerrish, a Boston merchant. Most details of her life remain unknown, except that her health was delicate since childhood. Little, too, can be learned about her husband. Born in 1681, he was the son of John and Elizabeth Waldron Gerrish of Dover, New



Hampshire, and grandson of Captain William Gerrish, who settled in Newbury, Massachusetts, after leaving Bristol in 1639. His father was appointed assistant justice of the Superior Court in 1699 but was also employed as a merchant and farmer. Benjamin settled in Boston and in 1716 married Martha.<sup>2</sup>

Nathaniel Appleton used the occasion of Martha's funeral to detail her virtuous character. "She was," he affirmed, "a Person of superior Accomplishments by Nature improved by Education, and refin'd and brightned by divine Grace."<sup>3</sup> He commended her love of learning: "Having a natural Ingenuity and a great deal of acquired Knowledge (even to an uncommon Degree, for one of her Sex), . . . she was wont to entertain her company in the most edifying Manner."<sup>4</sup> Although Appleton considered the extent of her learning unusual for a woman, he did not find it unbecoming; he believed that each of his listeners could learn something from Gerrish: "I scarce know with whom an Hour could be spent with more Advantage, than in Conversation with her."<sup>5</sup>

In Appleton's portrayal, Gerrish's example lay not in academic attainment but in her piety and acceptance of God's will. She represented the best of Christianity. Appleton exclaimed, "How enlarged was her Soul, in running the Way of God's Commandments! And she became so reconciled to her Afflictions, and was able (frequently) so to triumph over them, as made us more ready to Envy, than to Pity her."<sup>6</sup> Such forbearance had become rare, according to Appleton, and

was more characteristic of early Christianity: "To glory in Tribulations, to triumph over Afflictions, is what only an Apostle, a primitive Christian, and some few Instances (in whom God is still magnifying his Grace, and by whom he is shewing the Power of it) can pretend unto. . . .

Possess[ing] her soul in Patience" while suffering the pain of her illnesses, Gerrish was a model Christian.<sup>7</sup> Appleton ended his sermon by encouraging the congregation to be guided by her experience. "And now what remains as to us, but that we be followers of her and of all those that by faith and Patience inherit the Promises."<sup>8</sup> Like the apostles, Gerrish showed the path to salvation.

Appleton's memorial to Gerrish was aided by the fact that she had left her legacy in the form of a written record, one that Appleton's parishioners could consult for themselves. The collection of personal letters appended to the funeral sermon provided inspiration to, and an example of, a godly life. The writings are generally devotional and theological in character; they are not "newsy" and contain little information on the daily [doings] habits and activities of Gerrish or her correspondents, whose names were deleted from the published record to honor Gerrish's deathbed request.<sup>9</sup> All of the letters address matters of moral or spiritual importance. While she usually began on a personal note, inquiring about the health and family of her correspondents, Gerrish always turned to an issue of moral value that she discussed using religious imagery and

language. Moreover, her letters often read like carefully reasoned and argued essays. Appleton admired the correspondence, "in which Composures it is hard to say whether the Ingenuity, or the Piety out-did, or by whom they were out-done in either."<sup>10</sup>

The Reverend Thomas Foxcroft published selections from his sister's letters immediately after her death. His preface explained his editorial method: "These [letters] are selected and given to the Public with a particular Aim to illustrate her Character as an improv'd Christian; to diffuse the Knowledge and embalm the Memory of so uncommon a Virtue, so truly extraordinary an Experience; and to excite Survivers, by a Principle of laudable Emulation, to copy after that exalted Piety." By printing the letters that he considered "very useful and instructive," he sought to preserve Gerrish's accomplishment and see that others (including women) benefited from her efforts. Indeed, he hoped Gerrish's words "might be of great Use, in particular to female Readers." He began his preface by calling Gerrish "a shining Example to her Sex" and ended it with the wish that "the lovely Exemplar here bro't into the publick Light, meet with a just Reception and some happy Imitations; particularly among the Daughters of Zion."<sup>11</sup>

That the letters of a sickly woman should receive such emphatic attention from the clergy is unexpected, even though she was born into a minister's family. Her family's prominent position could explain the initial and prompt

consideration given to her life and writings, but the letters' significance, judged by their contents, is unquestionably both genuine and remarkable. Gerrish wrote not only of her ideas about theology but also about the place of women within that theology and in society as well; she was a female theologian writing in part about the status of women. These were some of the ideas that Thomas Foxcroft and Nathaniel Appleton sought to preserve.

Foxcroft began the collection (which is not organized chronologically) with what he called "a proper Introduction to the whole," that is, a letter that emphatically affirms women's capacity for religious virtue and value to God. Women must read the Bible for themselves and educate themselves about spiritual matters just as men must do. "We are too careless of furnishing our capacious Souls with Knowledge, especially Divine," wrote Gerrish. "We are self-diffident; and don't consider, that to Her (as well as to Him) that shall improve her Talent well, another shall be added."<sup>12</sup>

While thus promoting women, she carefully framed her recommendations with attention to traditional gender roles. "I know, we are inferior to the Men," she observed, "yet we may be helpful to them, as the Left Hand is to the Right." Women had to learn for themselves so that they could be helpful by establishing and voicing their own ideas. An intellectually passive woman could easily fall victim to her husband's errors in doctrine or spirit and therefore could

offer no guidance to him: "Tho' we are to learn of our Husbands, still we must look into the Scripture for ourselves, and take Heed that They don't misguide us: For we are Heirs together of the Grace of Life: in That there's no Inferiority."<sup>13</sup> This assertive tone is characteristic of Gerrish's frequent discussions of the rights and roles of women.

The next letter elaborates on these ideas about the relationships of God, men, and women. Like Cotton Mather, Gerrish reminded her female readers of their integral place in God's creation. Reassuring them that the logic used to disparage them could also be used to elevate them to equal status in the eyes of God, she declared that "for as the Woman is of the Man, even so is the Man also by the woman." Specifically, the birth of Christ to a woman countered the shame of Eve's sin. She rejoiced that "our glorious Lord has honour'd the Despised of Men. He was incarnate of a Woman, and dwelt among us, and his closest constant and most lasting Attendants were Women." After the resurrection, Gerrish wrote, Jesus showed himself first to a woman and made her his messenger to the men who had already denied him and would disbelieve what they were told. Unlike the apostles, women never deserted Christ, asserted Gerrish, and for this deserve respect both from themselves and from their fathers, husbands, and sons.<sup>14</sup>

The interaction between a husband and wife inspired a carefully reasoned and eloquent letter. She wrote to a

"Kinsman's Wife" on the subject of her (the kinswoman's) husband's habitual drunken and shameful behavior. Gerrish's advice began with a caution that would seem to relegate women to a position of enforced and dutiful submission, even to an undeserving husband. "Remember the Command of God, who has made the Man Head over the Woman, and has order'd that She submit to him, and reverence her Husband. Be they good or bad, rich or poor, it is our Duty to honour them, and be faithful and loyal to their Bed." Within these restrictions however, a wife could rightly find self-respect. The relationship between the head and the crown was the key, and Gerrish used the analogy to illustrate her point. "If we are virtuous Women, we are the Crown of our Husbands: the Crown is an Ornament on the Head, and sometimes is more valued than the Person that wears it; and it often hides an uncomely Head." Here Gerrish took an image that traditionally subjugated women and translated it for her kinswoman into a subtle but significant sense of superiority.<sup>15</sup>

This superior status carried responsibilities, as Gerrish was quick to note. For example, Christ required women to correct their misbehaving husbands while at the same time honoring and obeying them: "As much as in you lies, hide his Failings, and yet secretly and modestly rebuke him for them. But be sure to let him see, that it is your Duty, as a Christian, which puts you upon that difficult Work, and not a haughty Spirit. . . . Persuade and

intreat him to turn from the error of his Ways."<sup>16</sup> By treating her husband this way, a woman exercised her influence while respecting the conventions of the marriage relationship.

Gerrish did not hesitate to discuss issues of gender. Not only did she express her ideas about women, as in her discourse on the role of women in the Bible, but she specifically advised female correspondents to take note of their status, roles, and attributes. Indeed, the editor of her letters chose, by his ordering of the documents and his introductory comments, to emphasize this point of view. Moreover, Gerrish's statements were constructed within a framework that was acceptable to ministers like Foxcroft and Colman--religious devotion and piety. Taken together, her argument for the spiritual worth of women and her admonition that a wife never betray her husband but privately correct his ungodly behavior are consistent with the "enlightened" clerical view of women. The object was not to overturn traditional gender roles but to grant women a sense of their own dignity before God.

Gerrish did not propose that women challenge men in any way other than to stimulate spiritual growth in them by superior example or humble but persistent admonition. This kind of competition did not conflict with the ministers' program of continuous religious renewal and self-examination for their parishioners. In fact, Gerrish's life and letters confirmed the clerical conception of women's special

capacity for piety. The inspirational character of her intellect made her views not only acceptable but also important to her male ministerial audience.

This affinity of thought extended far beyond ideas about women. Indeed, Martha Gerrish bears a striking resemblance to the picture of a minister exercising the responsibilities that constituted his office. Her goals in composing the letters were similar to those of a cleric. She sought a pious life, in all its various aspects, for both herself and her correspondents. She and New England ministers shared a common cause.

Ministers, like Gerrish, emphasized the importance of piety. In his biography of Increase Mather, Michael Hall remarks that Mather's "greatest ambition was to bring people to Christ, to save souls."<sup>17</sup> To the same end, his son Cotton strove to bring piety into the daily lives and routines of his parishioners. Cotton believed that the things and events of everyday life should incite reflection on God's mysteries. He hoped these common objects and occurrences would become "engines of piety," and a stimulus for prayer.<sup>18</sup> For example, upon "emptying the Cistern of Nature" at a wall and noticing a dog doing the same, Mather plunged into a meditation upon humanity's base condition and unworthiness in God's eyes.<sup>19</sup> In this way, he wanted pious souls to find in mundane activities their cue to contemplate spiritual matters.



This "plebeian typology," as Perry Miller calls it,<sup>20</sup> exists also in Gerrish's letters, as she chose to write about God's omnipresence in her own life. In particular, she saw God in her daily sufferings and used those many occasions to praise his mercy. Of her afflictions she wrote, "I heartily thank God for them all, as far as they have been profitable to me; when they are sanctify'd, they are turned into Mercies."<sup>21</sup> She welcomed her troubles as a sign of God's confidence in her strength to overcome them.<sup>22</sup> In her eyes, God's punishment for the sins of her lifetime was itself an indication of love:

Notwithstanding I have been these 15 years (which is more than a third of my Life) under acute Pains of the Gout, and a Year confin'd to my Bed or Chair (besides a Variety of other Troubles) I have gone on rejoicing in the Lord. . . . And since He hath sanctify'd his Providences to me, I no more call them Afflictions, but Mercies. . . . God strikes me not in Anger, and I humbly receive the Rod, looking at Him who hath appointed it. I see one Hand upholding, while the other is correcting of me.<sup>23</sup>

Gerrish was constantly aware of God's hand in her life, as Cotton Mather would have advised, just as her physical pain was an ever-present reminder of her illness. This daily consciousness drew her closer to God: "I thankfully accept of this Sickness as a Warning and Call to Repentance."<sup>24</sup> She explained, "I hope sound Experience has catechis'd my Heart and made me know God and my Savior, otherwise than in Words."<sup>25</sup> Her hard life, she hoped, had brought her a knowledge of God beyond (or at least complementing) what she read in the Bible and heard in preachers' sermons.

Even those not suffering as sorely as Gerrish would

benefit by focusing on God frequently. To these people Gerrish advised daily confession, petition, and thanksgiving, which she labeled the "Duties of a true disciplin'd Christian."<sup>26</sup> Like Cotton Mather, she urged the faithful to see God's work in all the activities of their lives and use the occasion to give thanks and glorify Him. "Daily life was an act of worship" in the ideal world of both Gerrish and the clergy.<sup>27</sup>

Gerrish's piety was sophisticated and vibrant; it was alternately evangelical, moralistic (emphasizing proper conduct), and, to some extent, even mystical. Throughout her letters, she sought to introduce (or re-introduce) her correspondents to God. "Look up to God," she said in one letter, "in whom we live, and move, and have our Being."<sup>28</sup> Of a cousin she asked, "Begin now your Alleluia. Praise our God: begin and never Cease."<sup>29</sup> To this end, she repeatedly encouraged her daughter to see to her "indispensable duty" by making a confession of faith and joining the church.<sup>30</sup>

The emotional side of Gerrish's piety expressed itself in her desire for an intensely personal experience of God. She wanted to know her redeemer, not simply acknowledge him, and she sensed God's presence in her: "I feel in my Heart the Divine Operation of his Spirit, witnessing to the Truths that I read [in the Bible], and enlightening my dark Understanding, to apprehend what is my Duty, towards God, my Neighbor and my self."<sup>31</sup>

Other letters address right and wrong behavior toward

one's neighbors in a mood of moralistic piety. Joseph Haroutunian argues that Puritan piety was being overtaken by this moralism in the eighteenth century, but the case is not borne out in Gerrish's writing. While she emphasized the importance of good conduct, she did so with none of what Haroutunian calls "the incipient legalism of Calvinism."<sup>32</sup> Moral behavior for Gerrish was not part of a formula to ensure salvation. Rather, it had a deeper meaning as one's duty to God, establishing a relationship with Him.

In Gerrish's thinking, "Every Offence, knowingly committed against Him, is a Thorn and a Nail to wound Him afresh; and a Crucifier under the Light of the blessed Gospel, hath a more awful Account to give, than those under the Law."<sup>33</sup> Thus immorality was sin, which brought not only a heavy judgment, but, more important, was an affront to God. For Gerrish, then, the reverse was also true: the central importance of moral actions was the intimacy with God that it could produce; proper conduct was above all an expression of love for God.

While Haroutunian finds that "the Puritan conception of the Church as the proper means of salvation was being forgotten by an increasing number of people,"<sup>34</sup> the church and the Sabbath remained essential elements of Gerrish's experience of God. She missed Sabbath services only when she was too sick to make the trip to the meeting house, and she saw church membership as a necessary emblem and announcement that "the Lord [is] your God, and not in name only, but in Act

shown your self a Christian, by attending the Lord's Supper."<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, what Gerrish wanted for herself and for her correspondents was a spiritual connection with God, not a simple avoidance of damnation. Private devotions, in combination with the communal fellowship of the church, played an important role in establishing this connection: "Most of my Time is employed in the three great christian Duties, viz Confession, Petition and Thanksgiving: and these Duties a true disciplin'd Christian will live in the daily Practice of, as long as his present Life lasts."<sup>36</sup> Constant devotion (and moral uprightness, for that matter) characterized her piety because salvation was an ongoing process. The moment of conversion was only the beginning. Indeed, she said that through her affliction and resulting meditation, "I am grown spiritually wiser."<sup>37</sup> Through meditation and thanksgiving, her relationship with God developed and became stronger.

Gerrish's conception of the progress of a pious life was by no means unique. A century before, John Cotton voiced similar convictions; in 1630 he told members of his parish who were leaving for New England: "You must labour to finde [God] in his Ordinances, in prayer and in Christian communion. . . . And if you knew him before, seeke him yet more."<sup>38</sup> Cotton was "not legalistically concerned with correct forms . . . [but] preached of personal devotion within the godly community," writes Charles Hambrick-Stowe.<sup>39</sup> So, too, did Gerrish seek to find and know God in both obedience and prayer.

An appreciation of God's presence was the first step in establishing a personal relationship with God, and Gerrish hoped that everyone could make that start. That she shared this desire with the ministry is not remarkable, but the similarity in the ways each approached this task is striking. For this comparison, J. William T. Youngs's model of clerical roles is useful. In his analysis, a minister could not hope by simply preaching to be a successful shepherd: he had to validate "his sermons with four kinds of pastoral instruction: setting a good example, catechizing, giving counsel, and reprimanding."<sup>40</sup> The letters of Martha Gerrish explicitly fulfill each of these roles.

Throughout the letters she presented herself as an example to her readers. She had maintained and even strengthened her faith in the face of both sin and unusual hardship. In one letter she confessed, "I don't know how it is with You; but for my own part I have always a War within my self, Good and Evil continually by Turns possessing my Mind. . . and it is God that strengthens me to the Battle."<sup>41</sup> While not immune to temptations and distress, she never lost hope in defeating them. That she continued to write when in such discomfort (she often mentioned her painful hands that were barely able to hold a pen) would have been an inspiration to all her correspondents, particularly those who were ill or dying.

As though composing a catechistic lesson, Gerrish took it upon herself to educate her readers about church doctrine and

offer her opinions about it. One ten-page letter to a "friend in England" is a long discussion of doctrinal matters. She began with a condemnation of Arianism, the belief that Christ was created by God as his agent on earth and was therefore not of the same substance as the Father and had not existed eternally on an equal footing with Him. She asserted her confidence in the Nicene Creed, which refuted this doctrine, and she provided a history and explanation of the conflict. Quoting heavily from Scripture, she set out her belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Christ and solicited her friend's opinion about what she had written. A proper understanding of theology was important for Gerrish, and she asked "that I may be preserv'd from Ignorance, Error, and Superstition."<sup>42</sup>

Gerrish expanded her discussion of doctrine in the next letter, which is a methodical defense of revealed religion and the primacy of Scripture. "That glorious Book stands alone-- there never was nor ever will be any Book in the World so admirable, so sacred, so full of Majesty, Authority, and Force, as the Bible," she told her friend. Her purpose here was to denounce the deists, who, she said, "call the Bible a Romance, viz. That there's no Witness of the Truths contain'd in it, but what is taken out of that same Book, etc." She countered this charge with a detailed argument demonstrating the historical and spiritual validity of Scripture.<sup>43</sup>

This essay is not only an explanation of Gerrish's thoughts about theology; it was also meant to be instructive. She clarified this point at the end of the letter: "I have

not written unto you because you know not the Truth, but because you do know it, and to put you in Remembrance, that there be many Deceivers entered into the World. Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the Doctrine of Christ, hath not God."<sup>44</sup> Like a minister delivering a sermon, Gerrish wanted to elucidate Truth for her readers so that their devotions would not be misguided.

Giving counsel and reprimanding complete Youngs's list of a minister's pastoral duties; Gerrish devoted time and ink to both. Counsel to the ill or dying constitutes one theme of her letters. To one suffering relative, she stressed God's comfort: "Faint not, but with Patience wait and confidently trust in Him. . . . Be easy and chearful; He will supply all your Need. . . . You us'd to speak encouragingly to Me: Remember your own Words, and apply them to your self."<sup>45</sup> To a dying friend she again proposed steadfast faith and recalled the promise of salvation and joy in heaven. Including herself as one in similar distress, she reflected: "An everlasting Crown is the Prize we are running for. Let us strengthen ourselves in God. . . . He will speak comfortably to us, when we have done speaking to one another."<sup>46</sup>

This counseling also included advice about proper (and dutiful) behavior. In a letter to her cousins she took it upon herself to "recommend to all Persons Diligence as a Preservation against Discontent."<sup>47</sup> This gentle suggestion gave way to a more forceful encouragement to a woman whose husband was a drunkard: "Be you admonished," declared Gerrish,

"to take great Care of your own Conduct; let not [your husband's] Indiscretion lessen your Affection and Duty to him. . . . Suffer not his faults to occasion any in you." However, according to Gerrish's instructions, the woman should also rebuke her husband for his faults and make every attempt to correct his behavior.<sup>48</sup> In giving this counsel, Gerrish suggested in the strongest terms a course of action for her friend. Her language embodied the firm voice of authority.

The same advisory spirit characterized a letter Gerrish wrote to a young nephew preparing to move to England. She meant to instruct him how he should best begin his new life abroad. Of new friends she wrote, "I advise you, not to associate with many; seek not a vast but a virtuous Society. Select out for your Familiars, the Wise, the Senior, and the Superior." How her reader responded to this letter, or whether he took it to heart, is unknown, but Gerrish considered it important: "Be careful of this letter and sometimes read it: when you are older, you will better discern the Weight of my Counsels and Cautions, and may find them of Service to you."<sup>49</sup>

Her instructions often took on a more strident tone, as when she reprimanded a correspondent for unbecoming behavior. She once explained to a father how she had scolded his son for his "unhappy Progress in Wickedness." She explained that she had asked to speak with the son about his conduct; when he arrived, she chastised him for causing his parents grief while they still mourned the death of their infant. The adult son



had offended God, too, reminded Gerrish. Without recording the nature of his misdeeds, Gerrish advised him to make a written and sincere apology. "Let me desire you to write a full true Confession, and humble your self to [your parents] in as expressive strong Words as you can, promising future Amendment; and be sure let all flow from a genuine Repentence, or it will be worse for you than if you were silent." This language of confession and repentance rings true to a minister's rebuke, but it came from a bedridden and dying woman.<sup>50</sup>

Gerrish saved her most explicit reprimand for a relative who drank heavily. Although they did not know each other ("we are Strangers one to the other") she believed the bond of kinship called her to action. Her tone was serious and urgent: "[I am] about to write of a weighty Affair that will not allow of trifling, on my side, nor yours."<sup>51</sup> She then came to the purpose of her letter: "Doubtless this Preface has open'd to you the Intention of my writing, which you may discern is a Letter of Rebuke; and your Conscience by this Time informs you of the Sin, that I am going to reprove you for: and I do it in the Name and Fear of God."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, her goal was not simply to criticize but to bring this man's soul to God while there was still hope for him. She warned him that on Judgment Day, not only would he be called to account for his life, but she and others would be asked to give their assessment of his actions. "The God of infinite Mercy reform you, lest these Letters be recorded in Heaven as a Testimony

against you," she concluded.<sup>53</sup> The reproof was part of her effort both to uphold her Christian responsibility to promote Truth and Virtue and to direct souls along the path to God.

Gerrish's letters illustrate each of the four pastoral duties Youngs ascribes to a minister of that day. She set herself and her conduct as an example to the community (her correspondents first, then the public who read her letters after her death), gave counsel (with special attention to the sick), educated, and rebuked. Her resemblance to a minister extends as well to the methods and language she employed to accomplish her goals; like the clergy, she valued logic and learning and used both to frame arguments and write persuasively.

According to Perry Miller, "though Puritanism was a piety, it was at the same time an intellectual system highly elaborated and meticulously worked out."<sup>54</sup> Gerrish's subject was always in large part personal (for her or her reader) and spiritual, but she applied a theologian's logic to her discussion of doctrine. The combination was not unusual; Youngs confirms that "the ideal sermon would appeal to both the heart and the intellect of the auditor."<sup>55</sup> Gerrish accomplished this blending of feeling, faith, and intellect in her writing.

For example, in a diatribe against deists she professed her faith in the literal truth of the Bible and supported her position with a logical analysis of the Bible as a text. She felt entirely comfortable combining empirical knowledge and

feeling to characterize her belief. "For, as in all visible created Things I see with my Eyes the Work of an omnipotent God, so by reading the Scriptures I feel in my heart the Divine operation of his Spirit, witnessing to the Truths that I read, and enlightening my dark Understanding."<sup>56</sup> She noted first that the Bible had stood the test of time unlike any other single book because people read it regularly throughout their lives. "We are unwearied in the searching after the Truths contained in it, and are not dispos'd to lay That aside upon once or twice reading, as we do by all other Books," she declared.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, part of the Bible's magic, for Gerrish, was that it conveyed a sacred mystery but at the same time contained understandable truths: "The Precepts of the Lord are pure and spiritual, . . . Useful and instructive, beyond the most labour'd Systems of Philosophy."<sup>58</sup> Moreover, she would probably have agreed with Miller's characterization of the Puritan outlook: "Even on the points about which no ultimate reason can be discovered believers do not give over the use of their minds. If explanation is unattainable, there is always knowledge to be had."<sup>59</sup> For Gerrish, God ultimately remained a mystery, but she was confident that she had some capacity for discovery: "The Doctrine of the Trinity, and that of the Decrees, are unfathomable as the Ocean, deep as Eternity, past finding out:--and many Persons have perish'd by diving to[o] far into them. . . . But I will not venture past my Depth to find out the End of it."<sup>60</sup> Thus she would not pursue God's

truth beyond her depth, but she implied that she would test the waters and go as far as her ability allowed her.

Gerrish began her explication of Scripture by bringing to bear her knowledge of classical learning and history; this knowledge enabled her to propose that the historical truth of much of what is depicted in the Bible precluded the dismissal of Scripture as fantasy. She referred skeptics to the "Heathen History" documenting the existence (and destruction, by the Romans) of Jerusalem and cited Suetonius on the history of Christianity through the third century.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the uniformity of the Gospel stories refuted any notion that their writers conspired to fool the world. She explained that because the gospels tell the same story but were written by a variety of writers in different places, that story must be a universal truth.<sup>62</sup> Introducing a more emotional appeal against deism, she mocked, "Who ever laid down his Life in Defense of natural Religion? I never heard of any but Socrates, who was a Martyr of that kind."<sup>63</sup> Even with this jibe she displayed her empirical and classical-minded style.

In defense of biblical revelation Gerrish constructed an integrated, organized, and analytical argument that contradicted the deists. Her techniques were similar to those described by Miller in his description of the tools a minister used to begin formulating a sermon on a Bible passage: "Generally the analysis of a text required the help of the whole trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric."<sup>64</sup> For grammar, Gerrish's letter substituted familiarity with the

history and writing of classical Greece and Rome, but the analytical technique is the same.

Gerrish demonstrated a writing style that preachers valued. She was straightforward but neither simple nor unsophisticated. Increase Mather approved of this kind of delicate balance and believed that a simple preaching style had the greatest effect on listeners. But for him, as for Gerrish, "plain . . . did not mean unlearned or narrow-minded. Nor did plain style mean a simple rhetoric."<sup>65</sup> Neither was Gerrish's rhetoric unlearned, but her writing style remained accessible. A good example of these talents, her defense of revealed religion, was complex and based on a many-layered argument, but she carefully and easily carried the reader from one point to the next.

The presentation of an argument interested Gerrish only insofar as it could build a solid case; she believed that purely ornamental rhetorical devices were superfluous and therefore undesirable. In a note to his preface, Foxcroft explained Gerrish's opinion on the matter by quoting from a letter that does not appear in the collection: "Read her Contempt of rhetorical Flowers, in that Passage to a Friend: 'I take Notice, You say that I have beautifully and feelingly express'd my self, etc. As to the Beautifulnes, I care not a Pin: but it's certain, it was feelingly express'd.'" Foxcroft praised her "handsome Pen; . . . agreeable Expression, as well as dignity of Sentiment."<sup>66</sup> Most other ministers of the day would have agreed in this favorable assessment, if Youngs is

correct in noting that "if the minister was not expected to indulge in complex rhetorical flourishes, neither was he expected to preach without dignity."<sup>67</sup> Like such a minister, Gerrish wrote in an accomplished rhetorical style that was at the same time free from flowery ornamentation.

Martha Gerrish resembled a minister in both the style and the content of her writing. Composed by a laywoman for a private rather than public audience, her letters are nevertheless strikingly like sermons. Many of them address humanity's relationship to God, instill comfort or shame, or recommend certain behaviors. Like a minister, she was a teacher for whom religion was inspiration as well as her frame of reference.

Some New England ministers' ideas about "the fairer sex" showed in their sermons; in this collection we discover opinions on the same subject expressed by a woman. She was a devout Puritan who objected to the disparagement of women. As discussed in her writings, wives were subordinate to their husbands but were, as Cotton Mather and Benjamin Colman also argued, equally valued by God. Indeed, these letters provide a rare glimpse of what a woman of that time and place thought about the status and worth of her sex. Her writings are also an invaluable source for studying a lay person's theology. They allow us to hear in her own words what a mainstream Puritan woman thought, felt, and believed about her religious life. Her voice is that of both a member of the laity and a woman, and it speaks to the concerns of each. In the end,

Gerrish's eloquent response to her sufferings and her intelligent commentaries make her letters historically important as a window on the culture of her time and place.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Nathaniel Appleton, The Christian glorying in Tribulation, from a Sense of his happy Fruits. A Discourse Occasion'd by the Death of That pious and Afflicted Gentlewoman Mrs. Martha Gerrish. . . . To which are annexed some of Mrs. Gerrish's Letters (Boston, 1736), 34. Appleton does not discuss the specifics or circumstances of this education. Gerrish's program of study is lost to us, except to the extent that her letters are a reflection of her learning.

<sup>2</sup>Lucius R. Paige, The History of Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1630-1877. With a Genealogical Register (Cambridge, Mass., 1877), 548-549; John J. Gerrish, A Genealogical Record of the Compiler's Branch of the Gerrish Family (Portland, Me., 1901), 3-6.

<sup>3</sup>Appleton, Christian glorying in Tribulation, 34.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>9</sup>For an explanation of the deletions, see Thomas Foxcroft, preface to [Martha Gerrish], Some of Mrs. Gerrish's Letters, Etc., ed. T[homas] F[oxcroft], in Appleton, Chrishian glorying in Tribulation, 2. The letters are paginated but the preface is not.

<sup>10</sup>Appleton, Christian glorying in Tribulation, 34.

<sup>11</sup>All quotations are from Foxcroft, preface to [Gerrish], Letters.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.; [Gerrish], Letters, 2.

<sup>13</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 2.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 60.



<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>17</sup>Michael G. Hall, The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather, 1639-1723 (Middletown, Conn., 1988), 181.

<sup>18</sup>Perry Miller, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (Boston, Mass., 1953), 405.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 404-405.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 405.

<sup>21</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 6.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>27</sup>J. William T. Youngs, Jr., God's Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700-1750 (Baltimore, Md., 1976), 3.

<sup>28</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 53.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>32</sup>Joseph Haroutunian, Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology (New York, 1932), 94.

<sup>33</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 46.

<sup>34</sup>Haroutunian, Piety Versus Moralism, 3.

<sup>35</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 64.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>38</sup>John Cotton, God's Promise to the Plantations . . . (London, 1634 [orig. publ. 1630]), in Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England (Chapel Hill, N.C.,

1982), 24.

<sup>39</sup>Hambrick-Stowe, Practice of Piety, 24.

<sup>40</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 43.

<sup>41</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 30.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 11, 21.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 59, 59n. Foxcroft inserted a footnote explaining that Gerrish was referring to a second letter that she had enclosed with this one but that was not included in the published edition.

<sup>54</sup>Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), 67.

<sup>55</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 61.

<sup>56</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 22.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>59</sup>Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century, 67.

<sup>60</sup>[Gerrish], Letters, 17.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 22, 24.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>64</sup>Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century, 341.

<sup>65</sup>Michael Hall, Last American Puritan, 138.

<sup>66</sup>Foxcroft, preface to [Gerrish], Letters.

<sup>67</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 57.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE GERRISH LETTERS AS A MIRROR OF CLERICAL SACERDOTALISM

Martha Gerrish's letters are an eloquent testament to both her intellect and her piety. She crafted them like sermons and shared with ministers a devotion to spreading God's message. Where do these writings fit within the larger context of change and development in the New England church community? Several historians have argued that by the time of Martha's death, the Puritan clergy conceived of itself as an elite professional class. According to this historiography of sacerdotalism, the ministry had by the late seventeenth century developed a sense of itself as a profession distinct from and essentially superior to the laity. Indeed, salvation granted by God depended upon the ministers' role as intermediaries. At the same time, the laity's discontent with ministers was on the rise, and Martha's letters could indeed have fit in with the religious culture of the laity. We can speculate that in the church community described by this model, Martha's writings may have been a bridge between professionally self-conscious ministers and their congregations, who resisted their preachers' increasing elitism. While the letters reveal Martha as, essentially, a minister in all but name, they nevertheless provide a window that offers a view on both the

lay and the clerical sides of New England church relations.

David D. Hall remarks that men who became ministers in New England after 1690 believed that they shared a unique status as "Christ's ambassadors"; in this capacity their preaching of the gospel "was ordained by God as the necessary means to grace."<sup>1</sup> This assumption represented a retreat from the earlier ideal of a "priesthood of all believers," asserts J. William T. Youngs, Jr. Ministers' exclusive status led them to be "aloof" from their congregations, who were necessarily inferior in dignity.<sup>2</sup>

This superiority brought ministers a tremendous responsibility for their charges--the laity. Delivering William Brattle's ordination sermon in the First Church in Cambridge in 1696, Increase Mather referred to the clergy as shepherds: "We charge . . . that you feed all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you an overseer. . . . that you be an example of [sic] the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in faith, in purity."<sup>3</sup> God, in the person of the Holy Ghost, had given the clergyman this special role not only as pastoral guide and leader but also as provider and protector in spiritual matters.

Even before he took charge of a congregation, a minister's education assigned him a unique status in any New England community. A college education, with its associated social standing, and the possession of what Youngs calls "intellectual talents" were distinguishing marks of the clergy.<sup>4</sup> Ninety-five percent of the clergy were college

graduates, and the majority enjoyed three additional years of post-graduate study.<sup>5</sup> Formal education was a virtual prerequisite for a pastorate. For example, in 1653 Boston's town magistrates rejected the North Church congregation's nomination of one of their members to be their minister because the man was unlearned.<sup>6</sup> Even though the church had had no minister for several years, the congregation's choice was unacceptable because he lacked a formal education.

Academic credentials were not the only thing that separated members of the clergy from the majority of church members. Ministers intentionally set themselves apart by forming professional associations. Michael G. Hall argues that by 1705, ordained ministers saw themselves as more than pastors of individual churches; they believed that their role in society was an especially important one. He writes that "this tendency among ministers toward a professional understanding of their status had been growing for fifty years."<sup>7</sup> Some ministers were even inclined to deny members of their congregations admission to decision-making bodies. For example, churches sent only ordained ministers to a 1679 synod to discuss the renewal of church covenants. Increase Mather objected to this exclusivity and won his point with his colleagues; laymen were present a week later when the synod reconvened.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, according to Hall, Mather did not reject his special status: "Despite his staunch defense of the rights of the brethren, he did not think of

himself as one among equals."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Hall observes that "in recent years the ministers had begun acting more and more apart from the brethren who had ordained them."<sup>10</sup>

This trend expressed itself again in 1704 when a meeting of ministers in Boston suggested that pastors form local organizations such as the Cambridge Association, which dated to 1690. The next year, Benjamin Colman proposed that standing councils be established. Ministers would have an "equal voice" with the laity, so as not to be overruled by them because, in Colman's words, ministers "may be modestly supposed to be the superiors in knowledge and grace."<sup>11</sup>

Increase Mather missed both these meetings because of illness. However, he was present later that year when representatives of five ministerial associations from eastern Massachusetts convened in Boston. Colman again proposed a standing council of ministers belonging to the regional associations together with lay members from those churches. A majority of the clerical members would be needed to carry any vote, and they would have veto power within the council. This attempt to secure for the ordained members greater control over church practice prompted objections from Mather, who contended that under those conditions, ministers would "consult, contrive and determine how to make themselves such lords in their churches that no brother should dare to wag his tongue against anything."<sup>12</sup> Hall argues that Mather did not object to ministerial associations per se but only to what he saw as their

Presbyterian organization.<sup>13</sup>

Emphasis on associations was the result of changing concerns about authority within the church community, and the issue shaped developments in the clergy's relationship with parishioners as early as the first generation of settlement. Puritan ministers in England had been ordained by Anglican bishops and believed themselves "endowed with a special spiritual authority by virtue of [it]."<sup>14</sup> The laity was suspicious of this tradition of arrogance, and, according to Michael Hall, there was "an underlying opposition . . . throughout the first century in New England between the lay members and their ministers."<sup>15</sup> The Cambridge Platform, which was adopted in 1649, addressed these concerns and asserted the power and authority of congregations to govern themselves in the matter of admitting persons to membership and choosing their own officers.<sup>16</sup> The Platform asserted that "there may be the essence and being of a church without any officers."<sup>17</sup> A church did not depend upon its minister for its definition but upon the fellowship of its members.

Originally, New England ministers were selected by a congregation before being ordained; people formed their church and then chose a minister.<sup>18</sup> The principle was that a minister had authority only within the particular church that had selected him. Regardless of his training, he was a minister only within that community and had no clerical authority outside it. After agreeing to the contract set



out by the church members, he took on his duties as pastor.<sup>19</sup> Thus, even though a minister might already have been ordained by a bishop in England, his spiritual authority in New England came directly from church members.<sup>20</sup>

By the eighteenth century, however, this relationship was beginning to change, and ministers often had spiritual authority outside their own churches. They could, for example, baptize children in neighboring communities.<sup>21</sup> More important, a congregation could no longer form itself into a church without a minister being ordained for it at the same time.<sup>22</sup> This expanding authority reflected a greater emphasis on ordination. Perhaps as an indication of the special status conveyed by the ceremony, a minister no longer preached the sermon at his own ordination; an older minister did so, raising a new colleague to membership.<sup>23</sup> The ritual took on a special "professional significance," writes Youngs, and by "preaching themselves" ministers came to emphasize their own importance above that of other Christians.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, more clergymen were ordained "at large"; their position no longer depended upon their selection by a particular congregation.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the clergy now wished to exercise some influence in a congregation's selection of a minister.<sup>26</sup> According to David Hall, Benjamin Colman and the liberals believed that "ordination was the key constituting act of the minister, a

principle that released them from the congregational system and some its limitations on their authority."<sup>27</sup> Ministers clung to the authority their status conferred. Michael Hall reports that Increase Mather objected to adult baptism not solely on doctrinal grounds but in large part because "Baptists . . . had persisted in rejecting ministerial authority."<sup>28</sup>

Ministers may have envisioned themselves as members of an elite professional class, but it was difficult for them in their daily lives to maintain an air of grandeur. In Youngs's analysis, "the minister's formal status was established in his education and ordination. But his day-to-day effectiveness depended upon his ability to maintain a sympathetic and understanding relationship with his people."<sup>29</sup> For example, farm life dictated that a minister would at various times need the help of his neighbors to harvest crops, cut or haul firewood, and do other chores too difficult for a part-time farmer to do by himself.<sup>30</sup> A minister depended on his congregation, who provided his salary along with this kind of occasional extra farm labor, even though the members were not generally of the same social or educational class.<sup>31</sup>

This combination of separation and dependence was difficult to balance; it raises for Youngs the question of whether a minister was "a sovereign religious leader or . . . a humble pastoral guide."<sup>32</sup> A preacher may well have appeared more a pastoral guide when working with his

neighbors in his field than he did when attending a professional meeting of his fellow pastors. How could a man ordained by God as an intermediary between God's children and their salvation nevertheless remain dependent on the cooperation of this lay community for many basic needs such as food and shelter? While ministers may have enjoyed a professional elitism, this exclusivity was difficult to extend beyond the pulpit.

The paradox was not an easy one to resolve, and it was in many ways a characteristic of the New England churches. David Hall points out that in England, Puritan ministers and their flocks separated themselves from the world and society at large. In New England, Puritan society was no longer an enclave of an embattled minority. Therefore, in New England, ministers were for the first time "entangled within [society]. . . . The meaning of freedom and purity began to change once persecution ceased and prophets of the word had to take responsibility for the care of everyone."<sup>33</sup> In England, Puritans formed a religious society; in New England, distinctions between civil life and religious life blurred. Furthermore, as Darrett B. Rutman points out, any differences in opinion and temperament among Puritans (or, presumably, between ministers and laity) were tempered by the Puritans' status as a persecuted minority striving for a common cause; in New England, such disagreements no longer had to be downplayed in favor of a united front against a common enemy.<sup>34</sup>

Clergy in the eighteenth century may have felt that they were having difficulty meeting their responsibilities to God's children. According to Youngs, they believed that New England was failing as a "holy community," as church membership, which was no longer required by law declined amid "pressing worldliness."<sup>35</sup> Harry Stout contends that attendance at weekday lecture sermons had also declined and third-generation ministers had to remind and cajole people to fulfill their duty to God by attending services."<sup>36</sup> New Englanders were to be God's chosen people and live according to his word. When they strayed from this path, "ministers perceived themselves as an embattled remnant" and lamented the decline in the respect the community accorded them.<sup>37</sup> It was the clergy's responsibility to guide God's children, but the brood would not always behave.

The emphasis on their own special status colored the ministers' attitude toward the church generally. In Youngs's analysis, "the result of applying the jeremiad, the covenant, and the idea of New England's historical mission to themselves was that the ministers began to equate the life of their professional class with the religious life of the whole community."<sup>38</sup> Their frustrations and discomforts became the failings of God's community.

In preaching God's word to the brethren, ministers believed themselves to be His most audible voice on earth. Moreover, Stout contends that "the status of the clergy

depended on the monopoly of speech they enjoyed."<sup>39</sup> But this monopoly, represented by the clergy's exclusive authority to preach sermons, was always vulnerable; a congregation could withdraw its support and dismiss the minister for "heresy or immorality." The sermon, and the minister's privilege to deliver it, became even more important as both the clergy and the laity "infused the sermon with the power to create and enhance corporate solidarity and internal order."<sup>40</sup> The importance (and independence) of the local congregation in Puritan religious life dictated that the sermon churchgoers heard each Sunday was the most effective way to reinforce unity within the community. While only a tiny minority of New Englanders belonged to dissenting congregations in 1735, the legalization of dissenting congregations in 1692 meant that corporate solidarity and the integrity of the congregational community could no longer, in the eyes of many, simply be taken for granted.<sup>41</sup>

Lay people, Youngs confirms, did respect a good and honorable minister, but they opposed the view that equated the word of ministers with the word of God.<sup>42</sup> The authority of a preacher's words came from the Bible, not from the minister himself or his professional standing; if a member of the clergy departed from the Biblical truths known by the laity, his congregation could dismiss him.<sup>43</sup> Even as early as the mid-seventeenth century, there was discontent with the hierarchy, as Samuel Stone complained in 1654 that the

New England clergy had become "a speaking aristocracy in the face of a silent democracy."<sup>44</sup> The result of such tensions was a renewed effort to establish clerical associations.<sup>45</sup> These attempts at separation from the laity, however, were always limited in their success by what was ultimately the people's "refusal to accept an elevated authoritarian clergy."<sup>46</sup>

Given this scheme of clerical status, where might Martha Gerrish, writing in the years just before the Great Awakening, have fit in the relationship between minister and congregation? In general terms, she was a bridge between the two. While piety, according to Stout, had not dropped off as much during this time as ministers declared,<sup>47</sup> the church was in many ways not as strong as it once was. According to David Hall, the decline in church membership, the "restlessness of many young people," and a breakdown in church discipline in late seventeenth-century New England indicate that the laity was taking a step back from the clergy.<sup>48</sup> Ministers at this time may have been particularly sensitive to the changes and tensions they sensed in the church community; they may have believed that they could use Martha's writings as one way to blur the divisions between themselves and the laity without actually readjusting their own professional status. If parishioners believed that the clergy was monopolizing the voice of the church, Martha was an example of a strong, godly voice outside the ministry;

her voice belonged to a lay person, but at the same time, it did not challenge clerical authority.

At least some in the clerical community did see something appealing in her letters; Thomas Foxcroft, a prominent minister, chose to publish them. There was in fact some special significance to the fact that the letters were printed as a kind of appendix to Nathaniel Appleton's sermon. According to William Andrews, ministers who included long diary quotations in funeral sermons that they preached did so especially to elaborate the theme of the sermon and support the points made in it.<sup>49</sup> Stout notes, too, that the printed funeral sermons delivered in remembrance of ministers "were also well suited to the task of ministerial ennoblement" as they "remind[ed] all that God's messengers were a gift that could be withdrawn."<sup>50</sup> While Martha was not a minister, she was surely one of God's messengers in the eyes of Appleton and Foxcroft.

Martha confronted many of the issues that faced ministers in the same way that they themselves did. For example, Stout observes that "however attracted eighteenth-century ministers were to the discoveries of natural reason, their regular sermons dwelt on the primacy of special revelation (the Bible) and the way of salvation it contained."<sup>51</sup> Martha, too, used her intelligence to try to understand God, but the Bible remained the sole source of truth. Like Martha, ministers "[kept] head and heart in tension, [and] avoided the heresies of Antinomianism and

Arminianism that threatened form opposite poles," according to Stout.<sup>52</sup> They sought to emphasize unity rather than division, says Youngs, and while debate was important, division on purely doctrinal issues was undesirable and obscured the larger issue of obedience to God.<sup>53</sup> Martha echoed these sentiments in her letters calling for a unity in faith rather than division over doctrinal details.

David Hall contends that both sermons and other devotional literature represented images of "idealized faith."<sup>54</sup> As he makes clear, however, not all lay people were willing to bring this ideal piety to their own lives--they simply preferred to devote some time to religion and other time to work and play.<sup>55</sup> Martha, on the other hand, sought God in all her activities; her religious life encompassed and shaped earthly cares about herself, her family, and her friends. But she was neither a minister nor a martyr glorified in religious lore, and her writings could thus have served as another model of ideal piety--a model that was closer to the familiar lives and experiences of the lay members of a New England community. Clergymen may have held out hope that her words would make an impression on people who preferred a less pervasive piety.

Ministers could hold up Martha's writings as an example to their congregations, tacitly showing them that while only the clergy could preach a sermon, the members of the laity could find their spiritual voice, just as Martha had. Churchgoers did not have to feel themselves to be a silent



majority but could see in Martha a member of the laity fulfilling many of the same roles and expressing the same ideas as the ministers. Indeed, Martha's writings were not a threat to ministerial authority or status because she was not competing with them. While she took on for herself many of the ministry's roles, such as counselor and catechist, she did nothing to cast doubt on their status, and she attended services regularly. She was perhaps an example that the laity could have a voice, but one that did not diminish the clergy's professional importance.

In the ministers' eyes, Martha was an example for the laity; she showed the members of a congregation that although they did not have university degrees and were not ordained, they could have a significant voice in the life of the spiritual community, just as she had done. Indeed, the lay people who read Martha's letters could see her as one of their own; while she was from a prominent clerical family and was, according to Appleton, more educated than many townspeople, she was nevertheless not a minister herself. If the writings of a woman could attract so much attention and praise from ministers, surely there was room for other voices of the community. She served in some way as their link to the privileged status of the clergy.

A brief sketch of the religious culture of the laity fills out the picture of the clerical-lay relationship and hints at why churchgoers may have found Martha's letters

appealing. Indeed, the laity's experiences and ideas shaped their interpretations of and reactions to Puritanism. Rutman notes that "words filter through the preconceptions, values, and concerns for the particular condition of both the speaker and listener."<sup>56</sup> Moreover, David Hall indicates that the laity was by no means a passive recipient of the doctrines and ideas of piety passed on to them by ministers, but were active makers of their own religious viewpoints.<sup>57</sup> For example, according to George Selement, many New Englanders traveled to neighboring communities to hear sermons by ministers of their choice.<sup>58</sup> Beyond the pulpit, however, family and neighbors in the community were an important source of religious ideas for people in New England. Analyzing Thomas Shepard's Confessions, Selement finds that one confessor told of learning of the doctrines of contrition and humiliation from a shepherd he met in a field.<sup>59</sup>

Another common influence on lay piety was what people read, and indeed, the late seventeenth-and early eighteenth-century laity did read. David Hall shows that the ability to read was nearly universal in New England. While many people could not write, they all could read. Puritanism stressed the central importance of reading God's word, and most people did own their own Bibles.<sup>60</sup> But, according to Hall, people also read other devotional literature, and Martha's letters would clearly have had some audience among the "common folk".

Hall's and Selement's evidence suggests, moreover, that the theological and doctrinal issues that ministers discussed in their sermons were generally comprehensible to their congregations. Thomas Shepard's confessions may not have accurately reproduced in their confessions the clerical vocabulary, but they did display a grasp of the ideas that the language expressed.<sup>61</sup> Martha also dwelt on matters of doctrine, and it is safe to assume that her words, like the ministers', would have been understood by and familiar to her readers.

But what might these people have seen in Martha's writings? Perhaps she was an inspiration. David Hall points to a general fear of illness (and the danger of death and judgment associated with it) among New Englanders,<sup>62</sup> and they may have identified with Martha's trials and tried to emulate her abiding faith. Or, she may have been a refreshing alternative to the clergy and its authority. He argues that witchcraft in the late seventeenth century signalled dissatisfaction with ministers.<sup>63</sup> If this discontent was prevalent a generation later, the perception of Martha as a "lay minister" may well have been attractive.

But where did Martha put herself in the relationship between ministers and their congregations? Did she consciously play a part? Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's use of role analysis in Good Wives provides a framework for examining the many layers of meaning embodied in Martha's letters. For a woman in the seventeenth century, "certain

patterns of behavior could be put on and taken off according to circumstances without altering the essential nature of the person," writes Ulrich.<sup>64</sup> Thus, a woman took on the role of daughter, wife, mother, educator, or household manager according to the circumstances that faced her. She could be all or one. Ulrich observes that role analysis "allows for diversity, and even for contradiction" in complex roles.<sup>65</sup>

Martha's roles were indeed complicated; she encouraged women to respect themselves as children loved and valued by God; admonished friends and family members to come to God, chastised them for immoral behavior, and counseled them when they were dying; commented on religious books that engaged her attention; and discussed matters of theology and doctrine. By identifying Martha in each of these roles, ministers of the eighteenth century could have found an effective tool to reach out to their congregations. She performed many of the pastoral duties that may have become more difficult (or less attractive) for ministers estranged from their congregations by a heightened sense of professional status, worth, and dignity.

There is no evidence that Martha consciously played these parts for an audience, and she does not comment on her views on the relationship between clergy and laity. She simply wrote about what concerned her in the way she believed would be most effective. In short, Martha's roles were strictly of her own creation. Must her letters then be

reduced to a tool of the clergy, used by them to ease tensions that may have been mounting in their relationship with the laity? While she was not simply a pawn, the ministers and their congregations may have chosen to see in her writings what they wished to see.

We can, in fact, only speculate on how Martha's writings were used by the clergy and interpreted by the people. But this speculation provides a valuable window on the religious culture, both clerical and lay, male and female, of Martha's day. David Hall writes of the gulf that exists between intellectual history and social history: the intellectual historian's reliance on language. He hopes for "the emergence of a social history of religion."<sup>66</sup> While Martha is clearly closer to the intellectual, clerical side of the issue, perhaps her writings can make some small contribution toward Hall's goal.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>David D. Hall, The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1972), 270.

<sup>2</sup>J. William T. Youngs, Jr., God's Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700-1750 (Baltimore, Md., 1976), 90, 65.

<sup>3</sup>David Hall, Faithful Shepherd, 271.

<sup>4</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 11.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Michael G. Hall, The Last American Puritan: The life of Increase Mather, 1639-1723 (Middletown, Conn., 1988), 39-40.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 313.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 315. Also quoted in Youngs, God's Messengers, 70.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Hall, Last American Puritan, 315, 317.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 20-21.

- <sup>21</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 66-67.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid., 36.
- <sup>23</sup>Harry S. Stout, The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England (New York, 1986), 162.
- <sup>24</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 35, 89.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 34.
- <sup>26</sup>Michael Hall, Last American Puritan, 313.
- <sup>27</sup>David Hall, Faithful Shepherd, 274.
- <sup>28</sup>Michael Hall, Last American Puritan, 158.
- <sup>29</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 53.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., 43.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid., 27.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid., 64.
- <sup>33</sup>David Hall, Faithful Shepherd, 271.
- <sup>34</sup>Darrett B. Rutman, American Puritanism: Faith and Practice (Philadelphia, Pa., 1970), 36.
- <sup>35</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 63. For a loosening of attendance laws, see Stout, New England Soul, 158.
- <sup>36</sup>Stout, New England Soul, 158.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid., 159.
- <sup>38</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 89.
- <sup>39</sup>Stout, New England Soul, 163.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., 149.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 103.
- <sup>43</sup>Stout, New England Soul, 150.
- <sup>44</sup>Michael Hall, Last American Puritan, 67.
- <sup>45</sup>Stout, New England Soul, 159.

- <sup>46</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 135.
- <sup>47</sup>Stout, New England Soul, 165.
- <sup>48</sup>David D. Hall, Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England (New York, 1989), 139-140.
- <sup>49</sup>William D. Andrews, "The Printed Funeral Sermons of Cotton Mather," Early American Literature, V (1970), No. 2, 26.
- <sup>50</sup>Stout, New England Soul, 161.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid., 150.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., 156.
- <sup>53</sup>Youngs, God's Messengers, 86, 80.
- <sup>54</sup>David Hall, Worlds of Wonder, 139.
- <sup>55</sup>Ibid., 138-139.
- <sup>56</sup>Rutman, American Puritanism, 32.
- <sup>57</sup>David D. Hall, "Toward a History of Popular Religion in Early America," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 53.
- <sup>58</sup>George Selement, "The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638-1645," ibid., 36.
- <sup>59</sup>Ibid., 38.
- <sup>60</sup>David Hall, Worlds of Wonder, 51.
- <sup>61</sup>David Hall, "Toward a History of Popular Religion," 52 and Selement, "Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds," 43.
- <sup>62</sup>David Hall, Worlds of Wonder, 197.
- <sup>63</sup>Ibid., 146.
- <sup>64</sup>Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750 (New York, 1982), 185.
- <sup>65</sup>Ibid., 5-6.
- <sup>66</sup>David Hall, "Toward a History of Popular Religion," 55.



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