

Living According to God's Revealed Will: The Puritans and the Salem Witch Trials

By J. Brandon Burks

The alchemist begins his process toward something delightful and pleasing, namely, pure gold. The seasoned alchemist knows his fair share of failures: after hours of complex chemistry he is left with worthless rubbish. Occasionally, however, his catastrophe is not just a failure, but something more harmful: a toxic, life-threatening compound. Such was the mixture present in Salem Village in the year of 1692. The good ingredient of Reformed theology combined with the toxic ingredient of speculation proved to be a fatal mixture for the five men, fourteen women, and two dogs who were executed for witchcraft between June and September of that year.¹

As one historian put it, the phenomena surrounding the Salem witch trials “crackles, flickers, and jolts its way through American history and literature.”² The matter interests us because “Salem represents one of those rare moments in our enlightened past when the candles are knocked out and everyone seems to be groping about in the dark, the place where all good stories begin. Easy to caricature ... it is more difficult to comprehend.”³ Much ink has been spilled in wider culture delving into the political, social, and economic contexts of the witch trials. Eager to find a ready explanation, some have blamed the Puritan's calvinistic theology, their enduring fears of being attacked by Native Americans, or even hallucinogenic moldy bread.⁴ Less discussed, however, is the theological context of the New England Puritans in the late seventeenth century. Was there a working Puritan theology of witchcraft that was applied to the situation in Salem Village? If there was such a theology—or, at least, a general consensus—might it help the modern mind comprehend the deadly events that occurred in 1692?

This article will take up the difficult task of analyzing the theological context of witchcraft in late seventeenth century New England, which will reveal that a speculative theology was at play, one that sought to seek after

the hidden will of God.⁵ In examining the Puritan theology of witchcraft, the Reformed Christian seeks not after simplistic answers. The theological context is but one context, albeit an important one. Undoubtedly, a multitude of factors gave shape to the events in Salem Village. The concern here, however, is to insure that the theological context is not overlooked. After the theological context is explored, the witch trials themselves can be appraised in that light, with consideration given to modern application.

A PURITAN THEOLOGY OF WITCHCRAFT

This section will survey the works of William Perkins (1558–1602), Nathaniel Holmes (1599–1678), Richard Baxter (1615–1691), and Cotton Mather (1663–1728) to form a general Puritan view of witchcraft during this

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1. Stacy Schiff, *The Witches: Salem, 1692* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), p. 3.
2. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 3.
3. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 5.
4. See: David Levin, *What Happened in Salem?* 2nd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), xii; “Debunking The ‘Moldy Bread’ Theory,” in *The Salem Witch Museum* (17 May 2023), <https://salemwitchmuseum.com/2023/05/17/debunking-the-moldy-bread-theory/>.
5. Reformed theologians make a distinction between the hidden or secret will of God on the one hand, and God's revealed or prescriptive will on the other. Herman Bavinck, for example, explained that God's *revealed* will “is not really his (ultimate) will but only the command he issues as the rule for our conduct. In his preceptive will he does not say what he will do; it is not the rule of his conduct; it does not prescribe what God must do, but tells us what we must do. It is the rule for our conduct (Deut. 29:29).” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. by John Bolt (Baker Academic, 2011), p. 212.

time.⁶ Trying to understand the events of 1692 will prove difficult unless one first understands what the Puritans in Salem Village believed about witches in general. This section will, first, consider the nature of a witch, second, the affliction and power of the witch, third, ways to fight against witchcraft, and, finally, how to detect and punish a witch.

THE NATURE OF A WITCH

“Witchcraft is a wicked art,” taught Perkins, “serving for the works of wonders, by the assistance of the Devil, so farre forth as God shall in justice permit.”⁷ Or as Mather put it: “*Witchcraft* seems to be the Skill of Applying the *Plastic Spirit* of the World, unto some unlawful purpose, by means of a Confederacy with *Evil Spirits*.”⁸ The witch, more specifically, is a “Magician, who either by open or secret league, wittingly, and willingly, consenteth to use the aide and assistance of the Devil, in the working of Wonders.”⁹ The witch can be a man or a woman, though “the woman beeing the weaker sexe, is sooner intangled by the devils illusions with this damnable art, then the man.”¹⁰

Fundamental to the Puritan understanding of a witch is the covenant made between the witch and the devil. “The Ground of all the practices of *Witchcraft*,” explained Perkins, “is a league or covenant betweene the Witch and the Devil: wherein they doe mutually bind themselves each to other.”¹¹ After Satan deceived

humanity’s first parents in the Garden, he soon realized that man’s estate in the covenant of grace was better than before, and thus he covenants with men and women so that he “may testify both his hatred of God, and his malice against man.”¹²

Perkins taught that the covenant with Satan can be either *expressed* and *open* or *secret* and *closed*. If it is expressed and open, the witch binds himself or herself by a solemn vow to Satan, promising to “renounce the true God, his holy word, the covenant he made in Baptism, and his redemption by Christ.”¹³ The witch will also give the devil his signature or blood. In return, Satan

promiseth to be ready at his vassals command, to appeare at any time in the likeness of any creature, to consult with him, to aide and helpe him in any thing he shall take in hand, for the procurement of pleasures, honour, wealth, or preferment, to goe for him, to carry him whether he will; in a word, to doe for him, whatsoever hee shall command.¹⁴

The *secret* and *closed* covenants, by contrast, can be sought between the witch and Satan when superstition is used, either superstitious forms of prayer or the use of superstitious means to bring about a desired result. This could be in the forms of charms or even the use of unknown or barbaric means of curing diseases. Such a person consents to Satan “in his heart.”¹⁵ What is troubling about this latter sort of covenant is that one may not know he or she is evoking Satan’s help. Perkins maintained, regarding the ignorant, that “such persons have made as yet no league with Satan, but they are in the high way thereunto. And this course is a fit preparatiō to cause them to joyne with him in covenant.”¹⁶ More perplexing, the superstitions and charms could be saturated in Scripture but, nevertheless, be witchcraft. Using Scripture or prayer in a superstitious manner, conducting elaborate, ritual exorcisms like the “Papiſts,” or merely using the *name* of Jesus in a charm-like way are all unlawful forms of superstition.¹⁷

The covenant bond with Satan, especially of the open sort, was also enacted by ceremony and ritual. Just as God has sacraments and seals of His covenant, so “the devil hath his words and certaine out ward signs to ratified the same to his instruments.”¹⁸ Mather recorded that “*Witches* do say, that they form themselves much after the manner of *Congregational Churches*; and that they have a *Baptism* and a *Supper*, and *Officers* among them, abominably Resembling those of our Lord.”¹⁹

As a covenant-recruiter, the devil is said to exhibit “himself ordinarily as a small *Black man*” and bids

6. In these works, Perkins functions as the paragon, someone to which the others appeal. In fact, Mather includes a chapter from Perkins in his book, *On Witchcraft*. Baxter and Mather also show mutual appreciation with each other, and Samuel Parris, the pastor of Salem Village during this time, appeals to Baxter at points. Given the mutual citations and appreciation of each other, these works, brought together, will form a window into the general consensus of witchcraft that was operative in New England during the late seventeenth century.

7. William Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608; reprint Middletown, DE: Theophania, 2016), p. 15. The archaic spellings, capitalizations, and emphases are retained. Unless otherwise stated, all oddities are original. Hereafter, Perkins, *A Discourse*.

8. Cotton Mather, *On Witchcraft* (1962; reprint Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), p. 131.

9. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 92.

10. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 92.

11. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 33.

12. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 34–35.

13. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 36.

14. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 36.

15. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 37–38.

16. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 38.

17. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 81–84.

18. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 35.

19. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 130; also see p. 167.

people to sign his book.²⁰ Mather noted that over twenty people admitted to signing the book and entering Satan's "horrid service" filled with "Hellish *Randezvous*," "Diabolical Sacraments" for the purpose of destroying the kingdom of Jesus Christ.²¹ Normally, it is Satan who is said to initiate the temptation to sign his book, but sometimes Satan can be conjured. In one testimony from London, the son of a minister read a book entitled *Conjuration*, which caused Satan to appear.²²

As a corollary of entering into Satan's covenant, the witch was given a mark. The devil's mark, Schiff described, could be "blue or red, raised or inverted. They might resemble a nipple or a fleabite. They came and went. Essentially any dark blemish qualified, though a mark in the genital area was particular incriminating."²³ Moreover, "anything raised or discolored could qualify as a teat."²⁴ The purpose of the teat is not because Satan needs blood; rather, it allowed the devil to enter the witch's body and thus control it more efficiently.²⁵ Mather—recounting the evidence against Bridget Bishop, one of the women executed in Salem for witchcraft—recorded that a teat was found upon her body but disappeared within three to four hours.²⁶ Another purpose of the teat was to feed imps, which are supernatural, demonic creatures used for the purpose of spying and carrying out diabolical acts. These imps would suckle a witch's teat for nourishment. In one testimony, a woman came to care for her sick mother only to discover that her mother suckled an imp in the likeness of a mole.²⁷ Other reports in New England recount witches suckling yellow birds between their fingers.²⁸

One might wonder, however, if all witches were diabolical and bent on doing evil. What about those "white" witches who claim to despise evil and want to promote good? According to Perkins, the good witch is the "more horrible and detestable Monster," for the good witch will appear as a wise man or wise woman.²⁹ He or she is still in league with Satan, for this is how the devil orders his kingdom, "appointing to severall persons their severall offices and charges."³⁰ Suppose a man is afflicted by a bad witch only to be healed by a "good" one; while he was hurt by the bad witch, the good witch "hath done him a thousand times more harme, for

the one did only hurt the body, but the devil by means of the other, though he have left the body in good plight, yet he hath laid fast hold on the soule, and by curing the body, hath killed that. And the part thus cured, cannot say with David, The Lord is my helper; but the devil is my helper; for by him he is cured....

The good immediately accomplished his desire, by intangling the soule in the bands of error, ignorance, and false faith.³¹

According to Perkins, there is still yet another distinction to be made with regard to witches. Not only are there so-called white and evil witches—both being in covenant with Satan—but there are divining witches and working witches. The former are those witches who "reveal strange things either past, present, or to come, by the assistance of the Devil," while the latter are those witches who are active and operative.³²

THE AFFLICTIONS IMPOSED BY WITCHES

Having inquired into the nature of a witch, what are the afflicting powers and capabilities of a witch? Since the devil gives the witch his or her power, a consideration of Satan's power and operation must be examined. According to Mather, the devil is a fallen angel, a spiritually wicked monster who works tirelessly to fight against the kingdom of God. And while the serpent is more powerful and educated than any man on earth, God has him on a leash.³³

Why, however, does God permit the existence of this satanic evil? Perkins highlighted four reasons why God allows evil and, in particular, devilish witchcraft to occur. First, to punish the wicked for their sins; second, to avenge Himself of the ingratitude of those who have His word but do not obey it; third, to arise the godly who are slothful and living in sin; and fourth, to test His people in order to see if they will cling to Him or follow Satan.³⁴

Regarding the practice of witchcraft, Perkins believed

20. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, 67; also see pp. 103, 163, 165–166. The "Black Man" image of Satan is rich in Puritan literature. Baxter recounted a sighting of Satan as a "Big, Black Man." Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691; reprint Middletown, DE: Theophania, 2016), p. 32. Hereafter, *Worlds of Spirits*.

21. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 16, 68.

22. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 46–47.

23. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 61.

24. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 193.

25. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 194.

26. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 112.

27. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 41.

28. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 161.

29. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 95.

30. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 95.

31. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 96.

32. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 40, 73.

33. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 37–42.

34. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 7; also see pp. 30–31, 42, 117–118.

that it is the chief ordinance in Satan's kingdom. Through witches, the devil is able to work wonders toward the destruction of God's kingdom. Satan's power of illusion, his superior knowledge, the great number of his demonic army, and spiritual powers are the fuel of the witch's ministry.

Satan's power of illusion, Holmes explained, "[B]y his exceeding power and agility, he can either change the seeing power of the eye, or the condition of the air; or he can trouble the inward fancy, making it to take notice of phantoms present."³⁵ By this power of illusion, witches have been seen to appear as wolves, lions, dogs, birds, toads, or other creatures, "but only in appearance, and phantasie corrupted," for Satan, while powerful, cannot change the substance of a man into an animal.³⁶ It is by these illusions that Satan could appear in the likeness of Samuel when conjured by the witch at Endor.³⁷ The witch, by extension, has the power of *juggling*, which is deceiving people by making them think they see things that are not so.³⁸

35. Nathaniel Holmes, *Demonology and Theology*, ed. by Therese B. McMahon (1650; reprint Crossville, TN: Puritan Publications, 2014), p. 38.

36. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 24–25; c.f., Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 92–93.

37. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 64–66.

38. Holmes, *Demonology and Theology*, pp. 56–58.

39. Mather elaborated, "Some of them that have been cry'd out upon a employing *Evil Spirits* to hurt our Land, have been known to be most bloody *Fortune-Tellers*; and some of them have confessed, That when they told Fortunes, they would pretend the Rules of *Chiromancy* and the like Ignorant Science, but indeed they had no Rule (they said) but this, *The things were then Darted into their minds. Darted! Ye Wretches; By whom, I pray? Surely by none but the Devils.*" Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 19 (emphasis original).

40. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 59.

41. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 61; also see pp. 40–72.

42. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 38, 80.

43. Baxter recorded: "The raising of Storms by Witches is attested by so many, that I think it needless to recite them." Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 73. Mather taught that witches are made owners of specters by virtue of their covenant with Satan. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 68–69.

44. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 68.

45. Baxter recorded an account of an apparition bending down a boy's neck until he died. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 48.

46. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 5.

47. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 68.

48. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 13, 15. Mather and other clergy surrounding the witch trials believed similarly that the ghost of a murdered person could appear and even name his or her murderer. Later Reformed theologians, however, shy away from the belief in ghosts. While the reality of angels and demons is affirmed, it is believed that the souls of the departed no longer have contact with the living. Herman Bavinck, for example, taught, "[N]owhere does it [the Holy Scriptures] teach the possibility or reality of the dead

Furthermore, it is by the devil's superior knowledge that witches, of the divining sort, can come to know the future.³⁹ Satan knows the prophetic Scriptures and what is happening all over the world through the presence of his demonic informants; therefore, through the means of astrology, dreams, and other instruments the witch comes to know fantastical insights. Satan is able to "frame dreams in the braine of a man," and perform other such supernatural feats.⁴⁰ However, while Satan is skillful toward this end, "yet it is above his reach to determine of such things as these are, or to foretell them without helpe from God."⁴¹ In other words, while Satan is powerful, God is infinitely more powerful.

The great number of Satan's demonic army, spread all over the world, allows a witch's spells and charms to be made effective toward diabolical ends. The words he or she speaks have no power in and of themselves, but they are Satan's "watch words." The charm or enchantment works by the power of Satan "who then is stirred up, when the charme is repeated."⁴²

Divining, charms, and juggling are the chief tools of the witch. By the spiritual powers of the devil, the witch can perform mighty deeds, to include creating storms or even sending her specter to do her evil bidding.⁴³ The witches' specter is commissioned by them and represents them in order to be "the Engine of their Malice."⁴⁴ The specter has the power to haunt, bite, hit, or even kill, if permitted.⁴⁵ Mather wrote that the "learned *Scribonius*" was praying for someone afflicted by evil spirits when he himself received "an horrible Blow over the face" by an evil spirit.⁴⁶ "The people thus afflicted," continued Mather,

are miserably scratched and bitten, so that the Marks are most visible to all the World, but the cause utterly invisible; and the same Invisible Furies do most visibly stick Pins into the bodies of the afflicted, and *scale* them, and hideously distort, and disjoint all their members, besides a thousand other sorts of Plagues beyond these of any natural diseases which they give unto them, Yea, they sometimes drag the poor people out of their chambers, and carry them over Trees and Hills, or divers miles together.⁴⁷

Baxter warned, however, that it is hard to know when the specter is the devil, a witch's specter, or a human spirit. He reasoned that since "Angels can be here, and do their Office for us, without such Descent as shall abate their Joy and Glory; and why not blessed Souls too, if they shall be equal with Angels?"⁴⁸ Later, Baxter recorded an event when a specter came to a woman in

the likeness of her husband with appeals to enter her bed. She refused but, as the week progressed, the specter became violent and afflicted those present by striking their faces with black smoke and their bodies with bruises.⁴⁹ Indeed, discerning whether the specter is Satan in disguise, a witch's specter, or just that of a loved one has proven difficult.⁵⁰

Before leaving the power and means by which the witch afflicts, the most prominent—albeit extremely odd—means must be discussed. In many cases, the bewitched are brought to vomit various objects: stones, iron, nails, brass, crooked pins, blood, glass, white mercury, head-bodkins, nitre, dog's hair, bone, veins, chestnuts, flesh, hen's bone, horse's teeth, cockleshells, horse dung, feathers, thread, knives, and straw, which have all been reported to have been vomited by the bewitched.⁵¹ Baxter even recorded an account of a woman who vomited over two-hundred crooked pins in one sitting, and then continued to vomit objects for nearly six months. Men inspected her mouth before and after the vomiting to insure there was no foul play.⁵² In some cases, despite vomiting pins and sharp knives, there was surprisingly no blood.⁵³ More nefarious and suspect, some of the items vomited or voided were previously seen in a witch's basket.⁵⁴ As to how the items were placed into the victims, Mather recorded testimony of a bee flying into a boy's mouth and placing penny nails into his throat.⁵⁵

FIGHTING AGAINST WITCHCRAFT

Weapons against witchcraft range from the bizarre to the more conventional. Baxter, for example, noted a remedy from Bartholomew Carrichters, who recommended mixing various greases and herbs together as a cure for the bewitched.⁵⁶ This kind of "counter-magic" was condemned, however, by Samuel Parris, the minister of Salem Village. When Mary Sibley, a member of Parris's church, attempted her own concoction to combat the present afflictions, Parris claimed she was "going to the devil for the help against the devil," and setting up a "satanic lightning rod."⁵⁷

Perkins, taking a more conventional, means of grace approach, taught that there were preventative and restorative means of combating witchcraft. In order to prevent from being bewitched, disciplines such as becoming a member of the covenant of grace, partaking of Christ by faith, repenting of sin, living unto God in obedience and newness of life, and sitting under the preached word are the prescribed means.⁵⁸ Restorative means of combating the effects of witchcraft were a bit more complicated. Perkins maintained that the

apostolic gifts of casting out devils and curing witchcraft have ceased after about two hundred years subsequent Christ's ascension.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Perkins prescribed three restorative remedies to the afflicted: First, examine yourself and try to discover why God has allowed Satan to bewitch you, second, show forth your faith through prayer and fasting, and, finally, endure the affliction as discipline from God.⁶⁰ To this list, Mather adds that joining a church and consecrating your children are good means to prevent witchcraft; and when tormented by Satan, Mather suggested saying the following:

Satan, thy time with me is but short, Nay thy time with me shall be no more; I am unutterably sorry that it has been so much; Depart from me thou Evil-Doer, that thou would'st have me to be an Evil Doer like thy self; I will now for ever keep the Commandments of that God, in whom I Live and Move, and have my Being!⁶¹

appearing.... Further, the whole of Scripture proceeds from the idea that death is a total break with life on this side of the grave.... Scripture consistently tells us that at death all fellowship with this earth ends. The dead no longer have a share in anything that happens under the sun (Eccles. 9:5–6, 10). Nowhere is there any sign that the dead are in contact with the living: they belong to another realm, one that is totally separate from the earth.... Those who have died in the Lord are with Jesus (Phil. 1:23), stand before the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9, 15), cry out and pray, praise and serve him (6:10; 7:10, 15; 22:17). Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 711, 718 (brackets mine).

49. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 25–26.

50. Elsewhere Baxter recorded another account when the devil appeared in the likeness of someone's dead husband. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 75.

51. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 35–36, 45, 54–57, 66–68, 70, 76, 78.

52. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 54–55.

53. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 78. In still stranger tales, wood was found in a man's rectum, and a woman voided a living eel in her stool. *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 66.

54. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 78.

55. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 95.

56. Baxter recounted the following recipe: mix 4 oz. of dog's grease (well dissolved and cleaned), 8 oz. of bears grease, 24 oz. of capons grease, three trunks of mistletoe of the hasle while green (cut into pieces and pound small, and bruised together with the wood, leaves, and berries) in a vial. Leave exposed to the sun for nine weeks. After such a time, anoint bodies of the afflicted with green balsam. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 80–81.

57. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 26–27. Sibley mixed the girl's urine into a rye-flour cake and baked it amid the embers on the hearth. She then fed the "cake" to the family dog. The counter-magic was supposed to, perhaps, draw the witch into the animal, transfer the spell to the animal, or maybe even scald the witch. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 26–27.

58. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 9, 116, 118.

59. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 121–125.

60. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 121–122.

61. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 88. Compare to Jude 1:9 where Michael the archangel did not directly rebuke Satan, but he said, "The Lord rebuke you!" (cf., Zech 3:2).

The Puritans repudiated the methods of Rome in the distinguishing of devils. The elaborate rituals, procedures, relics, and formulas were seen as themselves an act of sorcery. “One great cause of the hardening of those Infidels, is, the frequent Impostures which the Romanists obtrude on the World in their Exorcisms and pretended Miracles,” explained Baxter.⁶² Since the casting out of demons has ceased with the apostles, “for any ordinary man now to command the Devil in such sort,” wrote Perkins, “is meere presumption, and a practise of Sorcerie.”⁶³ The “Papiſts,” Perkins maintained, are heirs of Simon the Magician, they have adopted satanic doctrines, and even some of their popes have been witches in league with the devil.⁶⁴ As was seen with Satan commissioning both white and evil witches to counteract each other, so the logic holds that some methods of witchcraft (e.g., Roman exorcisms) are able to combat the effects of witchcraft—as Parris stated: “going to the devil for the help against the devil.”⁶⁵

THE DISCOVERY AND PUNISHMENT OF WITCHES

In his book, *On Witchcraft*, Mather included a chapter

62. Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 59.

63. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 129.

64. Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 7, 18, 24.

65. Frederick Leahy taught something similar: “Pagan exorcisms are simply a trick by which Satan brings people increasingly under his power. The stronger demon in the sorcerer will most certainly expel the demon in a possessed person. But the person is not healed. He has not been delivered from the power of the enemy. The expelled demon can and probably will return.” Joel R. Beeke, *Fighting Satan: Knowing His Weaknesses, Strategies, and Defeat* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), p. 27. Also see: John Gill’s commentary on Luke 11:14–22.

66. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 27–28.

67. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 150.

68. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 116 (brackets mine).

69. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 132. (brackets mine).

70. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 133.

71. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 23.

72. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 132.

73. Perkins, *A Discourse*, p. 132. [Brackets mine]. Perkins taught that the law of Moses, which stated that witches were to be put to death (Exo. 22:18), was perpetual, for it seeks to maintain a perpetual moral precept and “hath in it the equitie of the Law of nature.” Perkins went on to write, “Death therefore is the just and deserved portion of the good witch.” Perkins, *A Discourse*, pp. 129–130, 134.

74. Eye witness testimony of a suspected witch’s spectator—a spectator that afflicted and tormented the accuser—was permitted as “spectral evidence.” Levin wrote, “Although the Devil could impersonate an innocent person, the ministers believed that he did not often do so. Thus spectral evidence, while not conclusive of the defendant’s guilt, seemed to be reasonable grounds for ‘presumption’ or suspicion.” Levin, *What Happened in Salem?*, p. xvii.

75. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 28.

that gave an abstract of Perkins’ method for discovering a witch. There were eight possible ways: (1) if there is presumption that warrants an occasion for examination; (2) if a man or woman is defamed for a witch; (3) if a fellow-witch has named the man or woman; (4) if after cursing a person, death or mischief follows; (5) if after quarreling or threatening a person, death of mischief follows; (6) if the person is the child, servant, or friend of a convicted witch; (7) if the person has the devil’s mark; and (8) if the suspect is inconsistent or argues from a guilty conscience.⁶⁶ It has also been testified that a witch cannot recite the Lord’s prayer, for Satan prevents those in covenant with him from doing so.⁶⁷

During the interrogations, however, the Puritans sought to exercise care that innocent persons were not wrongfully charged with witchcraft. Perkins warned: “They [the jurors] would be carefull what they do, and not to condemne any party suspected upon bare presumption, without sound and sufficient proofes, that they be not guilty through their owne rashness of shedding innocent blood.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Mather explained that if innocent blood were shed, “[H]ow unhappy are we!”⁶⁹ Mather also warned that Satan, masquerading as an angel of light, can deceive people into thinking justice is being served when in truth it be only mischief. On the other hand, if only guilty witches are brought to justice, “*How Happy!*”⁷⁰

Mather taught that the witch could, nevertheless, confess and repent, at which time the authorities would rejoice “in a Soul sav’d from Death.”⁷¹ Perkins shared the same sympathy: “All Witches judicially and lawfully convicted, ought to have space of repentance granted unto them.”⁷² However, Perkins maintains a stricter course, arguing that, “wherein they may be instructed and exhorted, and then afterwards executed. . . . [T]he magistrate must execute justice upon malefactors lawfully convicted, whether they repent or not.”⁷³

THE EVENTS OF SALEM VILLAGE, 1692

Having surveyed the theological context of the Salem Village Puritans, the events surrounding the witch trials can be examined. In fact, the theological beliefs of the Puritans are manifest in the witch trials themselves, including their belief in “spectral evidence.”⁷⁴ One aspect not quite settled at this point in the Puritan mind, however, was whether or not the devil could afflict someone in the likeness of an innocent person. This unresolved debate illustrated the dangers of a speculative theology.

“Salem village owed its existence in part to its fear of ambush,” wrote Schiff.⁷⁵ As farmers ventured northwest,

away from Salem town, they began to settle and to seek institutions of their own. At one point they petitioned Boston, for why should they be required to trek, especially after dark, ten miles to Salem town just for their turn at guard duty?⁷⁶ The farmers eventually prevailed, despite the fact that the rich landowner, Nathaniel Putnam, was fined for “bitterly affronting and abusing” the town officials in the process.⁷⁷

The relationship between Salem town and Salem village was rocky from the beginning. Salem village refused to help pay for Salem town’s new meetinghouse, arguing that Salem town ought to help pay for theirs. Salem town finally agreed in 1672 and provided Salem village with a hand-me-down pulpit and deacon’s seat.⁷⁸

Salem village’s first minister, twenty-two year old James Bayley, a recent Harvard graduate, proved to be unqualified, negligent, and at times offensive.⁷⁹ Though his sister-in-law married into the renowned Putnam family, he was not spared from Putnam opposition. While the church was hopeful and supportive when they called him in 1673, thirty-nine church members supported him and sixteen opposed him. The latter, however, proved to be a powerful force. After lawsuits were filed on both sides, Bayley realized a future in Salem village was non-existent, and, in 1679, he moved across the village.⁸⁰

Salem village then called George Burroughs to the pulpit, a man described as “a handsome, diminutive, dark-haired man,” who graduated from Harvard just behind Bayley.⁸¹ He was older and had experience serving in frontier parishes—even surviving a Native American attack. Accepting the call to the parish in 1679, Burroughs was forced out in 1683.⁸² From the beginning, the church failed to collect his salary, and thus he was forced to borrow from the Putnams—money he would not be able to repay.⁸³ Schiff commented, “The village was to blame on both counts, having neglected to pay its minister in the first place.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Burroughs did not help matters: “Burroughs had been unwilling to organize private meetings or cool village tempers. He preached what he felt like.”⁸⁵

The village then called Deodat Lawson, a British-born man and son of a Cambridge-educated minister, in 1684. Prior to his call to Salem, Lawson had served as an apprentice to a prosperous ironmonger and also as a royal physician. After serving two of the expected seven years at Salem, Lawson returned to secular pursuits.⁸⁶

At a time when Harvard graduates could not find a pulpit, Salem village called a friend of Lawson, Samuel Parris, a man without a bachelor’s degree, in 1688. Spending most of his early years in warm and beautiful

Barbados, his move to Salem—a cold and primitive settlement—was difficult.⁸⁷ The village citizens were hopeful, however, as Parris was older and had seen more of the world than the previous ministers.⁸⁸

It was under Parris’s tenure when, as Mather would explain, the devil came upon New England.⁸⁹ The panic began in January of 1692 when several young girls, two of whom lived in the Parris house, began to have strange fits.⁹⁰ The girls would attempt to strangle themselves, their body parts went out of joint (e.g., jaws, wrists, etc.), blindness or deafness would come upon them, writhing and foaming were witnessed, pins were seen under their skin, and they would fall into trances and lay as dead for hours.⁹¹

“The minister’s initial response,” explained Richard Godbeer, “was to seek the advice of William Griggs, the local physician.”⁹² Griggs, however, concluded that the

76. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 28.

77. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 29.

78. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 29.

79. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 30.

80. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. ix, 31.

81. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. ix, 31.

82. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. ix.

83. The Putnams threatened to have him arrested if he could not pay back his loan. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 31.

84. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 31–32.

85. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 32.

86. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 32–33.

87. His accustom to warm weather is seen in his constant battle over having enough firewood. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 38, 40–41.

88. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 36–37.

89. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 11–16, 18, 21. Cotton Mather, a twenty-nine year old Congregationalist minister, is well known for his part in the witch trials, though his involvement was limited. While he did advise at times, Schiff noted, “Cotton Mather remained largely in Boston but so much dwelled on Salem afterwards that he essentially wrote himself into the story. He composed much of his 1692 diary after the fact.” Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 11.

90. Richard Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), pp. 1–2. There is an interesting calendar issue regarding the year. Schiff notes: “Because the pope approved the Gregorian calendar, New England rejected it, stubbornly continue to date the start of the year to March 25. (When witches were assaulting their first victims in Salem village, it was 1691 in North America, 1692 in Europe).” Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 7.

91. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 21, 186–187.

92. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 2. However, at seventy-one, Griggs was not a university-trained physician. He could read but not write, and owned nine medical text books. He was, however, the best candidate, for in 1692 neither Salem Village nor Salem Town had a university-trained doctor. Moreover, Schiff explained, “A basic medical kit of the time looked little different from an ancient Greek one, consisting as it did of beetle’s blood, fox lung, and dried dolphin heart. In powders or plasters, snails figured in many remedies.... The fat roasted hedgehog dripped into the ear constituted an excellent remedy for deafness.... Cotton Mather believed sixty drops of

girls were “under an evil hand.”⁹³ The other ministers of whom Parris consulted agreed with Griggs. Perplexed as to how to handle the fits, Parris encouraged the girls to name their tormentors; by the end of February they named three people, one of whom was Tituba, a slave in Parris’ house. The next month, Parris would preach on March 27 that “Our Lord Jesus Christ knows how many Devils there are in his Church, and who they are.”⁹⁴ Accusations began to fly as to who may be these devils. In total, 150 men and women would be formally charged with witchcraft during that year.⁹⁵

The winter is particularly problematic for witchcraft accusations, and the fact that 1692 was a particularly bad winter didn’t help matters.⁹⁶ Schiff elaborates on the context of Salem village, January 1692:

So it was that in late January 1692—about the time that a vicious Indian attack razed York, Maine, leaving its mutilated minister dead on his doorstep; as a thaw released New England from an uncommonly brutal winter; as

lavender and a mouthful of gingerbread cured memory loss.” Not only this, but a hysteria outbreak prior to 1692 was treated with “a brew of breast milk and the blood from an amputated tomcat ear.” Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 23–24.

93. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 2.

94. Samuel Parris, *The Sermon Notebook of Samuel Parris 1689–1694*, ed. by James E. Cooper Jr. and Kenneth P. Minkema (Boston, MA: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1993), p. 195.

95. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, pp. 1, 3.

96. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 4–5.

97. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 20.

98. Even a five-year old girl could be relied upon to spin flax or sew counterpanes. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 22.

99. Normally, the fee for interrupting a minister was five pounds or two hours on the block. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 83.

100. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 3.

101. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 3.

102. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 3.

103. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 120, 162, 207, 210, 224. This general outlook of the courts was seen even after 1692 when a suspect in a larceny case insisted, “I am no thief.” The judge replied: “You must prove that.” Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 207.

104. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, pp. 4–5, 81–82. Tituba originally rejected the notion of her being a witch. When her plea seemed to have no effect on the magistrates, she changed her story. Filled with biblical imagery, her years sitting under Parris served her well in the tale she concocted. Despite some problems in her story (e.g., she dated her witch acquaintances to after the girls had experienced their first pains), the magistrates believed her and were assured they were on the right track. In return, they spared her life. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 53–60.

105. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the trials of all nineteen people executed for witchcraft. The two selected above will serve as a sampling on the kinds of things that happened in a trial.

106. Godbeer, pp. 101–102; Schiff, *The Witches*, p. xi.

107. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 213.

word arrived that an ocean away a new Massachusetts governor had kissed the ring of William III and would be sailing home with a new charter, one that promised at last to deliver the colony from months of anarchy—reports flew about that something was grievously wrong in the household of Samuel Parris, the Salem village minister.⁹⁷

In that dreadful year, the officials delivered arrest warrants just as fast as the young girls could name the witches who were afflicting them. After all, the seemingly supernatural fits disrupted life in Salem, motivating the officials to put a quick end to the disturbance.⁹⁸ Everyone was needed to perform his or her duties, both at home and in the community, and, more problematic, the fits brought chaos to the church.⁹⁹

In 1684, London had withdrawn the charter that, for sixty years, had allowed the colonists in Massachusetts to order their own affairs with little interference; in January of 1692 there was still no legally established government, as the new governor had yet to arrive.¹⁰⁰ No governor means that there are no trials. When Sir William Phips arrived in Boston on May 14, he enacted Oyer and Terminer (“to hear and determine”), which are special courts to address extraordinary situations where there is a rapid accumulation of suspects that would otherwise overwhelm ordinary courts.¹⁰¹ With over four dozen suspects arrested in suspicion of witchcraft, he had little recourse. The governor appointed six magistrates to his council, though none with a law degree. William Stoughton, his chief justice of the court, was a Harvard trained minister, and thus more fit to address supernatural crimes.¹⁰²

The examination of the suspects was intense and intimidating. The suspect appeared to be treated as guilty until proven innocent, the afflicted persons were assumed to be right and the suspect wrong, and thus the suspected witches soon realized that it was better to lie and accuse others rather than to tell the truth.¹⁰³ After all, as was seen with Tituba, if a suspected witch confessed and named others, he or she may save his or her life.¹⁰⁴

Bridget Bishop and George Burroughs were two of the suspected witches tried and executed by these courts.¹⁰⁵ Bishop, an attractive (albeit argumentative) woman in her early fifties, was the first of the accused to be tried on June 2, 1692.¹⁰⁶ As one historian recounted, “No other witchcraft suspect could rival Bridget Bishop for supernatural activity or bedroom disturbances.”¹⁰⁷ Bishop had been accused of witchcraft before, just after her second husband died, and poppets were said to

have been discovered in her house seventeen years earlier.¹⁰⁸ This made her a likely suspect.

Several men came forward claiming she appeared to them during the night—one even claiming several ghosts of the departed came forth along with Bishop's specter and accused Bishop of murdering them. Apart from spectral evidence, a teat was discovered on her body with which she nursed her imp, and then the teat miraculously disappeared within three to four hours.¹⁰⁹ In another accusation, a man claimed to have stabbed Bishop's specter's coat, and, to the dismay of the jurors, as she sat in the Salem court, her coat bore the same tear as described.¹¹⁰ Perhaps the most incriminating evidence was seen when, during the trial, the afflicted girls were sent into convulsive fits when she gazed at them, only to be relieved when Bishop touched them.¹¹¹ One of the examiners, John Hathorne, responded, saying, "You are acting witchcraft before us."¹¹² And Mather asserted, "There was little occasion to prove the *Witchcraft*, it being evident and notorious to all beholders."¹¹³

Bishop continued to plead her innocence, claiming she knew not the afflicted, that she made no pact with the devil, and that she knew not the existence of witches or Satan's book. Still, the examiner pressed forward: "Goody Bishop, what contract have you made with the Devil?" "Can you not find in your heart to tell the truth?" "Why, have you not a heart to confess the truth?"¹¹⁴ In all, Mather cited fourteen pieces of evidence and testimonies that were brought against Bishop; the accumulation of which was convincing and Bishop was executed on the 10th of June.¹¹⁵

George Burroughs, the previous minister of Salem village, was fetched from his dwelling in Maine to face charges of witchcraft in the very building he preached in years ago. John Hathorne and George Corwin built a careful case against Burroughs, collecting nearly thirty testimonies against him.¹¹⁶ It was claimed that the specter of Burroughs had physically assaulted several people; that he, though a puny man, had supernatural strength, even killing his previous wives, and also that, being the leader of the witches, he dwelt in a haunted house.¹¹⁷

Parris, recording the examination on May 9th, noted that Burroughs confessed that it had been so long that he could not remember his last communion, and that he denied that his house in Casco was haunted, "yet he owned there were toads."¹¹⁸ As with the others, there was testimony of spirits of the departed that claimed to have been murdered by Burroughs.¹¹⁹ So disgusted was Mather that he wrote, "Glad should I have been, if I had never known the Name of this Man; or never had this occasion to mention so much as the first Letters of his

Name."¹²⁰ Mary Walcott, one accuser, wrote, "I believe in my heart that Mr. George Burroughs is a dreadful wizard and that he had often afflicted and tormented me and the aforementioned persons by his acts of witchcraft."¹²¹ Sarah Wilson further testified that the night before Burroughs was executed, which would take place on August 19th, that "there was a great meeting of the witches" and that Burroughs was present, partaking of the devil's sacrament and attempting one final time to convince her to join him.¹²²

What is one to make of these trials? Were Bishop, Burroughs, and the others really witches in league with Satan? Were the afflicted girls just pretending? Doubtless, there were indeed strange occurrences. Mather spoke of marks being manifested on the afflicted right before the eyes of all present.¹²³ Lawson, the previous minister, affirmed that the fits were "preternatural," for the girls would "screw" their bodies in such a way that a well person could not, and that their strength was "much beyond the ordinary force of the same person when they are in their right mind."¹²⁴ As Schiff described, "Their symptoms were nerve-rackingly, bloodcurdlingly authentic; the raving disrupted all affairs."¹²⁵

Nevertheless, there is reason to be suspicious.¹²⁶ For

108. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 198; Godbeer, p. 101.

109. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 200, 215. The report from the examiners stated that they had "discovered a preternatural excrescence of flesh between the pudendum and anus much like to teats," and that "upon a second search about three to four hours distance, did find the said Bridget Bishop, alias Oliver, in a clear and free state from any preternatural excrescence as formally seen by us." Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 108.

110. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 195.

111. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 107. This is often called the "touch test." It was thought that when a witch touched a person he or she is afflicting, the person would recover. Conversely, when a witch gazed upon the afflicted (the "evil eye") it was thought to cause fits and suffering. See: Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 186, 211.

112. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 104.

113. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 106.

114. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, pp. 103–104.

115. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 102; Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 106–113.

116. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 150, 155; Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 99.

117. Ann Putnam Jr. would call him a "conjurer." Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, pp. 128, 131, 139; Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 116, 129, 155, 157–159; Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 103–105.

118. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 131.

119. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 101.

120. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 99.

121. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 135.

122. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 142.

123. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 162–163, 170–171.

124. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 59.

125. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 124.

126. Baxter noted that girls given to fantastical lying may still give

one, the girls seemed to use the same wording as if they agreed beforehand, and there was a unity to the fits. Some of the girls even announced: “Look to her! She will have a fit presently,” or “We shall all fall.”¹²⁷ A more telling reason for suspicion is when Mary Warren, the maid of John Proctor, and one of the afflicted, suggested that the girls were acting when she, during a fit, was severely rebuked by Proctor who intended to “thresh the devil out of her.”¹²⁸ In another trial, Sarah Bibber, one of the afflicted, was caught jabbing herself with a pin before she collapsed in pain.¹²⁹

Perhaps the most convincing reason for suspicion is in the fact that the girls could be corrected when they accused someone with high standing. For example, at one point Samuel Willard, minister to three of the judges, was named but quickly dismissed by the judges, claiming the girls were “mistaken in the person.”¹³⁰ In a similar instance, Elizabeth Proctor was accused by an afflicted girl but, when rebuked, the teenager said she did it for “sport.”¹³¹ That same day, two witnesses heard the Putnam family putting words into the mouth of one of the afflicted girls.¹³²

As the summer progressed, a growing number of ministers became uneasy by the reports coming from Salem Village—and this accompanied by a number of the confessors now recanting their confessions. By October, Governor Phips informed London that he had prohibited further arrests for witchcraft except for those cases that were “unavoidable.”¹³³ The Court of Oyer and Terminer was dissolved on October 29, and forty-nine of the fifty-two still imprisoned for witchcraft were acquitted in the regular courts. The remaining three

occasion for Satan to set in: “Lustful, Rank, Girls and young Widows, that plot for some amorous, procacious Design, or have Imaginations conquered by Lust: Though, I think, when they come to a Furor uterinus, Satan oft sets in.” Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, p. 12.

127. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 109, 131.

128. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 95.

129. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 220.

130. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 224–225.

131. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 96.

132. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 96.

133. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 5.

134. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, p. 5.

135. Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, pp. 176–177.

136. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. xiv.

137. James S. Pike, *The New Puritan: New England Two Hundred Years Ago; Some Account Of The Life Of Robert Pike, The Puritan Who Defended The Quakers, Resisted Clerical Domination And Opposed The Witchcraft Prosecution* (1879; reprint: Leicestershire, UK: Forgotten Books, 2015), pp. 147–148.

138. Pike, *The New Puritan*, p. 164.

139. Pike, *The New Puritan*, p. 150.

140. Pike, *The New Puritan*, pp. 150–152.

were immediately sentenced to death, but the governor intervened and reprieved the convicted witches.¹³⁴ Throughout the remaining years, many of the accusers and jurymen came forward to apologize for their part. On August 25, 1706 Ann Putnam, an accuser of many of the suspected witches, wrote:

I desire to be humbled before God for that sad and humbling Providence that befell my father’s family in the year about 1692; that I, then being in my childhood, should by such a Providence of God be made an instrument for the accusing of several persons of a grievous crime, whereby their lives were taken away from them, whom now I have just grounds and good reason to believe they were innocent persons; and that it was a great delusion of Satan that deceived me in that sad time.... I desire to lie in the dust, and earnestly beg forgiveness of God, and from all those unto whom I have given just cause of sorrow and offense, whose relations were taken away or accused.¹³⁵

Not all of the Puritans in 1692 supported the witch trials, however. Robert Pike, for example, was one of the first to voice concern about the trials.¹³⁶ In a time when “no one dared to breast the storm, for such resistance was deemed evidence of complicity with the imps and witches, who, with all the powers of hell at their back, were aiming at the overthrow of God’s kingdom on earth,” Pike was brought to speak out against the proceedings when a friend, Mary Bradbury, was accused.¹³⁷ Himself a council member, Pike opposed the trials not because he rejected the general Puritan view of witchcraft, but because he believed Satan could appear as an innocent person, rendering spectral evidence null and void.¹³⁸ “I further humbly present for consideration,” Pike wrote, “the doubtfulness and unsafety of admitting spectral testimony against the life of any that are of blameless conversion, and plead innocence.”¹³⁹ In a stroke of masterful persuasion, Pike cited Perkins, the very person his opponents appealed to, in order to illustrate that Satan can appear as an “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14) and he did, according to Perkins, come in the appearance Samuel (1 Sam. 28:14); thus, so too can he appear as an innocent person. If this be the case, the spectral which the afflicted have seen, and the words spoken to them by the spectral, may have been from the devil, the father of lies (John 8:44)—this alone should be grounds to reject such spectral testimonies in favor of the pleas of innocence.¹⁴⁰

The possibility that Satan could assume the form of an innocent was brought up throughout the trials, but

ultimately disregarded. For example, magistrate John Hathorne had his doubts, but Parris cast them aside: "We are either saints or devils; the Scripture gives us no medium."¹⁴¹ Minister Samuel Willard taught that the devil "could represent anyone he pleased; he required no pact."¹⁴² But chief justice William Stoughton thought it unlikely, believing God would not "allow the righteous to work evil against their will." Stoughton maintained that "if the girls saw Rebecca Nurse choke Ann Putnam Jr., then Rebecca Nurse must be a witch."¹⁴³ This was seen again in late June when Massachusetts ministers proposed that Satan might indeed disguise himself as an innocent, but the idea was ultimately disregarded by the judges.¹⁴⁴ Mather, for his part, seems to give practically confusing instructions. On the one hand he allows that the devil might impersonate an innocent and virtuous person, but with a "nevertheless" he called for a "speedy and vigorous persecution."¹⁴⁵

SIFTING THROUGH SPECULATION AND TRUTH

The theological context of Salem Village and the events surrounding the witch trials give occasion to now consider gleanable insights and applications to the present day. Specifically, how might a Reformed, Puritan-admiring Christian assess the witch trials? Doubtless, negative applications of what *not* to do are evident, but there are, nevertheless, many things to be learned by way of positive principles. There are at least five examples or principles, both negative and positive, to which the Reformed Christian will do well to take heed.

First, on the more negative note, the witch trials teach against absolutizing speculations. Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson noted that Mather was given to "mystical tendencies," and that his book, *On Witchcraft*, was "highly speculative" and "Mather at his worst."¹⁴⁶ Nowhere in Scripture does one read of teats and imps; nor of the evil eye or touch test. This information, Mather claimed, was gained from the spiritual ("invisible") world itself and, therefore, could be incorporated into one's theological knowledge. Mather argued,

That we are safe, when we make just as much use of all Advice from the invisible World, as God send it for. It is a safe Principle, That when God Almighty permits any Spirit from the unseen Regions, to visit us with suprizing Informations, there is then something to be enquired after; we are then to enquire of one another, What Cause there is for such things? The peculiar Government of God, over the unbodied Intelligences, is a sufficient Foundation for this Principle.¹⁴⁷

This principle of incorporating spectral sightings and other extraordinary phenomena into one's theological body of knowledge pushes against the Reformed principle that the Christian is to live according to the *revealed* will of God (see: Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q.39; Belgic Confession, Art. 7). Allowing fireside stories and fantastical signs and wonders to overshadow the perspicuous Word of God, proved deadly to those innocent lives in Salem Village.

In light of the witch trials, the Christian should be brought to see the glorious doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in matters of not only salvation, but also in life and godliness (1 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:3–4). Where Scripture is silent, one must follow John Calvin's advice: "Yet it is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know [in Scripture]."¹⁴⁸ Doubtless, the Puritans were faced with a unique problem: The fits and afflictions seemed to be real. Moreover, Scripture does not, in detail, instruct the pastor in how to deal with pins under the skin, nor of nails in the throat. The Puritans gathered the testimony of others for assistance in such matters. The problem, however, is that these testimonies were then firmly established as *sure truths*. Based on these testimonies, there came to be a "known" method for discovering and punishing a witch. Against pleas of innocence, this speculative theology proved to be a bloody art.

Second, turning to positive examples, the Puritans were eager to affirm the sovereignty of God, even in the face of evil. They took trials and sufferings as *afflictive providence* from God (Job 1:8–12; Heb. 12:7; Jas. 1:2–3,

141. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 94.

142. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 208.

143. Schiff, *The Witches*, p. 231.

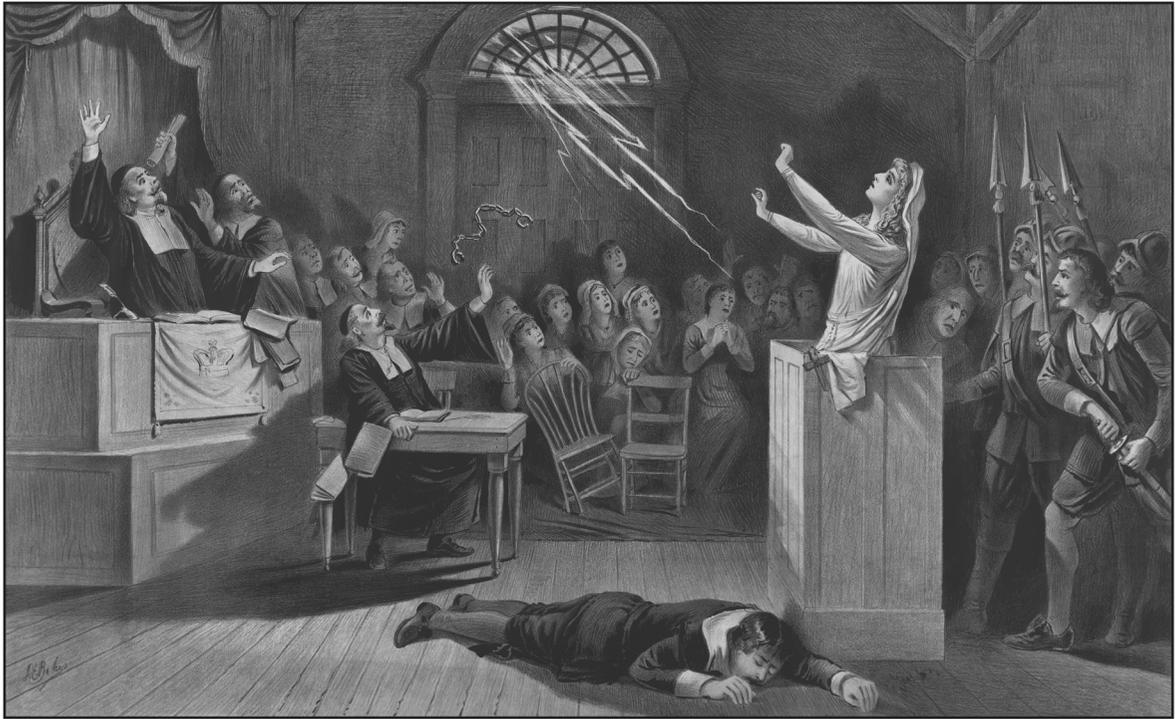
144. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 223–224.

145. Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 211–212.

146. Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, p. 421, 426. While Mather and Perkins were intellectuals and spiritual giants in many respects, there are aspects of their teaching that dabble in the highly speculative. In reading Mather, Holmes, Baxter, Pike, and Parris, all wish to stay in line with Perkins. It is difficult to know how much Perkins's pre-conversion interest in the occult and black magic influenced his speculative demonology. See: Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, p. 469.

147. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, pp. 25–26. Or as Holmes stated after writing about a witch's nakedness and "drinking health to the Devil" that this testimony "has been documented by many good men." Holmes, *Demonology and Theology*, p. 49. The testimony and acts from both the seen and unseen world provided the content of this speculative theology of witchcraft.

148. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, 3.25.6 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 1960), p. 997 (brackets mine).



"The witch no. 1." Reproduced from LC-DIG-ppmsca-09402 (digital file from original print) LC-USZ62-475 (b&w film copy neg.), Library of Congress.

12; 1 Pet. 1:6–7; 4:12).¹⁴⁹ Regarding the darkness that descended upon New England, Mather wrote, "[W]e have all the Reason imaginable to ascribe in unto the Rebuke of Heaven upon us for our manifold Apostasies."¹⁵⁰ Conversely, and on a more comforting note, Mather praised, "What a wonder of Mercy is it, that no Devil could ever yet make a prey of us!"¹⁵¹ God and Satan, good and evil, are not two equal forces:

We are poor, Travellers in a World, which is as well the Devils *Field*, as the Devils *Gaol*; a World in every Nook whereof, the Devil in encamped, with *Bands of Robbers*, to pester all that have their *Face looking Zion-ward*: And are we all this while preserved from the undoing Snares of the *Devil*? It is *Thou, O keeper of Israel, that hast hitherto been our Keeper!* And therefore, *Bless the Lord, O my soul, who has redeemed thy Life from the Destroyer!*¹⁵²

149. See: Brian H. Cosby, *Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

150. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 14.

151. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 53.

152. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 54.

153. Holmes, *Demonology and Theology*, p. 50.

154. Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, p. 86.

Third, the Puritans warned against seeking out spiritists, witches, and sorcerers (see: Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:10–11). Holmes pontificated that people were attracted to witchcraft for the same reasons Saul sought the witch at Endor: "These psychics and witches can and will answer them *to their desires*."¹⁵³ The Christian must not be tempted toward these ungodly means. In fact, "It were better for you to bide by the losse, yea to live and die in any sickness, then to tempt God by seeking helpe at charmers hands: for their helpe is dangerous, and commeth from the devil, whereupon if ye rest your selves, ye ioyne league with him, and so hazzard eternally the safetie both of bodies and soules."¹⁵⁴ In other words, the Christian affirms the demonic capabilities of spiritists and witches (Exo. 7:11; 30 16:16–24; Acts 16:16–19; Rev 13:13–15), but seeks to avoid those capabilities (Acts 19:17–20)—even when it may serve to a seeming positive end—for sorcery is a work of the flesh for which one will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Gal. 5:19–21).

Fourth, the Puritans stressed the necessity of guarding against witchcraft. This is why several of them wrote books against the damned art. Holmes wrote on witchcraft because (like Paul in Athens) his spirit was stirred by the idolatry he witnessed; Perkins wrote because the church was being assailed by this "rife and common

sinne in these our daies”; and Mather wrote because not many others were writing about this important topic.¹⁵⁵ If this was true in their day, surely it stands true today. Television shows and movies celebrate witchcraft, and the religion known as Wicca is one of the fastest growing in America.¹⁵⁶ Surely, the church must be instructed on the dangers of witchcraft. Unquestionably, Mather was correct that witchcraft “introduces the devil into the midst of us.”¹⁵⁷ “I say then,” advised Mather, “let not only all *Witchcrafts* be duly abominated with us, but also let us be duly watchful against all the *Steps* leading thereunto.”¹⁵⁸

Finally, the Puritans help to ward off the acidic naturalism that has so captured the modern mind. The reader is reminded that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Also, as the Nicene Creed confessed, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things *visible and invisible*.” The modern *penchant* of looking only to natural explanations is something the Puritans will not allow. Avoiding the pitfalls of the Puritans, the church can still learn many helpful lessons.

CONCLUSION

The Salem witch trials stand as a tragic example of what can happen when even spiritual giants live according to a speculative theology. Once in the realm of speculation, one will find it hard to navigate and even harder to stop. Could Satan come in the spectral form of an innocent? The great wheel of speculation arbitrarily stopped—and not in the favor of the innocent victims of Salem Village.

As the Reformed Christian looks back to these horrific events, he or she is reminded of the sufficiency of Scripture. His or her weapon against the damned art of witchcraft is not teat-exams, the Lord's Prayer test, or even the gallows, but rather prayer, fasting, and the preached word.¹⁵⁹ The Christian, standing in the armor of God, is the best person to address the witchcraft obsession that is “rife and common in these our days,” doing so in ways that avoid the pitfalls of the past, but without the complete eschewing of the past. Even when they got some things wrong—nay, tragically wrong!—the Puritans have much to teach us.

The Puritans were intellectual and spiritual giants and they are worthy of one's attention and meditation.¹⁶⁰ Beeke and Mark Jones described Puritanism

as a “vigorous Calvinism” movement: “Experientially, it was warm and contagious; evangelistically, it was aggressive, yet tender; ecclesiastically, it sought to practice the headship of Christ over the faith, worship, and order of His body, the church; politically, it was active, balanced, and bound by conscious before God.”¹⁶¹ When studying the witch trials, the student must be reminded not to *throw the baby out with the bath water*. “No doubt there was a good deal of Puritan bath-water needing to be emptied,” wrote J.I. Packer; but the complete eschewing of Puritanism (a movement lasting from 1560 to 1710) is spiritually and devotionally inadvisable.¹⁶² After all, who can reject a movement that “sought to reform the church so that it was completely faithful to the Bible and promoted models of godly living”?¹⁶³ Oh Christian, live in accord with the revealed will of God! ■

155. Holmes, *Demonology and Theology*, 14; Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 3, 13; Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 5.

156. Catharine Edwards Sanders, *Wicca's Charm: Understanding the Spiritual Hunger Behind the Rise of Modern Witchcraft and Pagan Spirituality* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2005), pp. 4–5.

157. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 79.

158. Mather, *On Witchcraft*, p. 79.

159. As Martin Luther taught, “The devil hates the Word of God more than any other thing.” Beeke, *Fighting Satan*, p. 23.

160. Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson point to the benefits of reading the Puritans today: “With the Spirit's blessing, Puritan writings can enrich your life as a Christian in many ways as they open the Scriptures and apply them practically, probing your conscious, indicting your sins, leading you to repentance, shaping your faith, guiding your conduct, comforting you in Christ and conforming you to Him, and bringing you into full assurance of salvation and a lifestyle of gratitude to the triune God for His great salvation.” Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, p. xix.

161. Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012), p. 5.

162. J. I. Packer, *Puritan Portraits* (Geanies House, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2012), pp. 11–12.

163. Simonetta Carr, *Church History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2022), p. 88.

In Brief: William Perkins, *The Properties of the Ministry of the Word. A Commentarie or Exposition, vpon the five first chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Legat, 1604), pp. 158–163. The text has been edited for modern spelling and punctuation.

To proceed further, the delusion or bewitching of the Galatians, is set forth by two arguments. The first is the end in these words, *that ye should not obey the truth*. Before I come to the consideration of these words, a doubt must be resolved. For some man may say that this epistle is corrupted, because these words are wanting in sundry translations and editions of the Bible: and Jerome says that they were not found in the copies of the bible in his days. *Answer*. In the editions and translations of the bible, there are sundry differences and diversities of readings: and these differences are not the fault of the Scripture, but of the men which used to write out the bible: for the bible heretofore was spread abroad, not by printing, but by writing. Again, though in the books of the bible there be sundry varieties of reading, yet the providence of God has so watched over the Bible, that the sense thereof remains entire, sound, and incorrupt, specially in the grounds of religion. And not the words principally, but the sense is the Scripture. And that which I say appears in this text: for whether these words be left in, or put out, the sense of the verse is one and the same.

These words, *that ye should not obey the truth*, are meant of the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5, and 16:28). And the obedience of faith is propounded unto us without adding, detracting, or changing. And this the Galatians did not: for they added justification by works to the doctrine of Paul, touching justification by faith alone: by which addition they depraved the truth and showed that indeed they beleaved not the truth. Here let us observe the scope of all the malice of the devil: and that is to hinder or overthrow our faith. The first thing the devil aimed at in our first parents was to overthrow their faith and to cause them to doubt of the truth of God's word. The first temptation wherewith our Savior Christ was assaulted was against his faith, as he was man: If thou be the Son of God thou canst cause these stones in thy hunger to be made bread: but thou canst not cause these stones to be made bread: therefore, thou art not the child of God. The devil desired to sift out all the faith of the apostles, and to leave in them nothing but the chaff of unbelief (Luke 22). The devil blinds the eyes of men *that the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ may not shine vnto them* (2 Cor. 4:4). This must teach us that we must not only hold and know the true religion for the time, but also build ourselves upon our faith (Jude, v. 20), and be rooted and stablished upon our faith and religion (Col. 1:23), and the rather because it has been the manner of this nation wickedly to change religion with the times. And that we may indeed be rooted upon our religion, we must not boast of the greatness and strength of our faith, but rather labor to see in ourselves

a sea of unbelief: heartily to bewail it, and to strive to believe, and so to go on from faith to faith.

The truth here mentioned, is the heavenly doctrine of the gospel, so called for two causes. First, because it is an absolute truth without error. It is a principle not to be called in question, that *the apostles and prophets, in writing and preaching, could not err*. It may be said, they were men, as we are, and therefore subject to err and be deceived in judgment. *Answer*. Judgment is twofold. One, conceived by the discourse of natural reason; the other, conceived by the apprehension of things revealed by God. In the first, the apostles and prophets might err and be deceived, as Nathan and Peter were. In the second, they could not, because it was framed in them by the inspiration and instinct of the Holy Ghost. And therefore, they never erred, either in preaching or writing. The second cause why the gospel is called *the truth*, is because it is a most worthy truth, namely, the truth which is according to godliness (Titus 1[.1]). It may be said, what is the truth? And how shall we know it, considering there be so many dissentions? *Answer*. First, make thyself fit to know, and then shalt thou know the truth. And thou shalt be fitted to know the truth, if thou first of all give thyself to obey it. Read the golden text, John 7:17. *Obey, and ye shall know*.

The second thing, whereby the delusion of the Galatians is expressed, is the sign thereof, in these words, *to whom Jesus Christ was described*, etc. That is, to whom I have preached the doctrine of salvation by Christ in lively and evident manner, even as if Christ had been painted before your eyes, and had been crucified, in, or among you. And this is a manifest token that the Galatians were deluded, because they could not acknowledge the truth when it was set forth unto them (as it were) in orient colors. And where Paul saith, that *Christ was before described*, I refer it to the time before their revolt.

Here first, we are to observe, the properties of the Ministry of the Word. The first, that it must be plain, perspicuous, and evident, as if the doctrine were pictured and painted out before the eyes of men. Therefore the Church of Rome deals wickedly in keeping the Scriptures in an unknown tongue. For this is to cover that from the people, which is to be paine before the eyes of their minds. Again, that kind of preaching is to be blamed, in which there is used a mixed kind of variety of languages before the unlearned. For this is a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:22). And in this kind of preaching we do not paint Christ, but we paint out our own selves. It is a byword among us: *It was a very plain sermon*. And I say again, *the plainer, the better*.

The second property of the Ministry of the Word is that it must be powerful and lively in operation, and as it were crucifying Christ within us, and causing us to feel the virtue of His passion. The Word preached must pierce into the heart, like a two edged sword (Heb. 4:12). True prophecy judges men, discovers the things of the heart, and causes men to say, *The Lord is within you* (1 Cor. 14:25). Continued on page 158.

In Brief: William Perkins, The Properties of the Ministry of the Word. Continued from page 102.

The scepter of Christ whereby He smites the nations, is in His mouth (Isa. 11:4); that is, in the ministry of the Word (Jer. 15:19). And it is the same ministry which shakes heaven and earth (Hag. 2:6). By this it appears that to take a text and to make a discourse upon something in the said text, showing much invention of wit, and much reading, and human learning, is not to preach Christ in a lively manner. It will be said: what then? I answer with Paul, *who is sufficient either for the speaking or doing of these things?* Yet something may be shown. Know therefore that the effectual and powerful preaching of the Word, stands in three things. The first is true and proper interpretation of the Scripture, and that by itself: for Scripture is both the gloss and the text. The second is savory and wholesome doctrine gathered out of the Scriptures truly expounded. The third is the application of the said doctrine, either to the information of the judgment, or to the reformation of the life. This is the preaching that is of power. Let all the sons of the prophets think upon these things and study to be doers of them.

Furthermore, two questions are here resolved. The first is whether images be necessary in the congregations of the people of God? **ANS.** There are Christian images and pictures, and they are very necessary. And these images are sermons of Christ and the right administration of the sacraments. For in them Christ is described and painted out unto us. As for the painted and carved images of the Papiſts, we utterly detest them as idols. They allege that they are *laymen's books*: but Habakuk says, *they are doctors of lies* (Hab. 2:18). And where the lively preaching of the word is, there is no need of them. And therefore images were not established in churches in these west parts till after 700 years. As long as the church had golden teachers, there were no wooden images: but when golden teachers did degenerate, and become wooden teachers, then came both golden and wooden images. It is further said, why may not we paint Christ in our churches with colors as with words in sermons? **ANS.** The one the Lord allows, namely, the description of Christ in speech. But the carving or painting of images in churches, and that for religious use, He condemns (Exod. 20: 6).

The second question is whether there be now in the church of God any sacrifice or oblation of Christ? **ANSWER.** There is after a sort. For there is a lively representation of the passion of Christ in the preaching of the Word and in the administration of the Lord's Supper, as if Christ were yet in crucifying, and as though His blood were now distilling from His hands and sides. As for the sacrifice of the Mass, it is an abomination and a mere mockery. For there the priest, when he says, *Accept these gifts*, etc., is become a Mediator between Christ and God: and the body and blood of Christ is offered in an unbloody manner; that is, blood is offered without blood: and the priest, when he has offered Christ, eats up all that he has

offered. Yet for this damnable oblation many stand: and the reason is because they are bewitched and enchanted with pretended shows of Fathers, Councils, Antiquity, Succession, etc.

Lastly, here we learn what is the duty of all believers; namely, to behold Christ crucified. *O daughters of Sion, behold your king* (Cant. 3:11). But where must we behold him? Not in roods and crucifixes after the Popish manner; but we must look on Him as He propounds Himself unto us in the Word and sacraments. For thus is He the true object of our faith. And how must we behold him? By the eye of faith, which makes us both see Him and feel Him (as it were) crucified in us. Here note that implicit faith (which is to believe as the church believes) is a blind faith: for by it we cannot contemplate and behold Christ. And the common fault is here to be noted, whereby men neglect and pass by this contemplation of Christ. There is among us the evil eye that devours all it sees: there is the adulterous eye: but where is the eye of faith to behold Christ? Where is the force of this eye to be seen which makes the thing which it beholds to be ours, and us like unto it? We love to trick and paint our bodies, and some to set fine complexions on their faces (and therefore complexions at this day are made a kind of merchandise); but away with such vanities. If ye love to be painted: I will tell you what ye shall do. The office of the ministers is to describe and paint out Christ unto us: let them paint Christ crucified in the heart, and set up His image there, and then shalt thou have a favorable complexion in the eye both of God and man.

That this contemplation of Christ by faith may take more place, and be the better practiced, consider the use of it. First, by beholding Christ crucified, we see our misery and wickedness. For our sins are the swords and spears which have crucified Him (Zech. 12:10). Secondly, this sight brings us true and lively comfort: for beholding Christ crucified, we see paradise as it were in the midst of hell: we see the handwriting against us cancelled (Col. 2:14); we see the remission of our sins written with the heart blood of Christ and sealed with the same. Thirdly, this sight of Christ makes a universal change of us. The chameleon takes to it the colors of the things which it sees and are near unto it: and the believing heart takes to it the disposition and mind that was in Christ crucified, by viewing and beholding of Christ. This sight makes us mourn and bleed in our hearts for our offences, when we consider that Christ was crucified for them: and it makes us love Christ when we consider the love of God in Christ crucified.

Lastly, this thing must be a terror to all the ungodly. For they have no care to behold Christ, but by their lewd lives they crucify him: and for this cause in the day of judgment they shall see with heavy hearts Christ to be their judge whom they have pierced (Rev. 1:7). Better therefore it is, now in the day of grace, to behold Him with the eye of faith to our comfort, than now to despise Him and then to behold Him to our everlasting shame, with the eye of confusion. ■