"Declension Comes Home": Cotton Mather, Male Youth Rebellion, and the Hope of Providential Affliction in Puritan New England

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> Methinks, I overhear the Holy One saying to me, *Run, Speak to the Young People.*[1]
>
> Cotton Mather, 1712

The topic of generational spiritual decline has been a common theme among historians interested in Puritan New England's religious trajectory.[2] The perception of such "declension" among New England clergy was linked to a variety of visible sins among youth: sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, declines in church membership, and general "frolicking" on Sabbath evenings, "the *Vilest Evening* in all the Week among them!"[3] A host of fear-inducing sermons—so-called jeremiads—indicated that this moral decay was certain to incur the Lord's wrath and speed the destruction of the "New England way" exemplified by the first generation of settlers. In fact, Puritan pastor and historian Cotton Mather surmised that the challenges of his day—religious controversies, political strife, witch trials, Indian wars, earthquakes, fires, droughts, and disease—were at once signs of God's displeasure and warnings to renew godly commitments. "... Yea, we *Degenerate* so fast," Mather noted, "that it is fear'd Occasions for that complaint will shortly be Epidemical."[4]

Historians have vigorously debated both the causes and the veracity of declension in colonial America. Perry Miller's original writing on the subject generated significant scholarly work in tracing the roots of spiritual decline to such factors as increasing wealth, mobility, and inadequate family government.[5] Some have questioned the reality of declension, positing that Puritan religion morphed and adapted rather than decayed in the New World. Others have posited that the passionate rhetoric of the jeremiad actually signaled a hope-filled recognition of the corrective rod of a fatherly God.[6] By looking

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at broader social, theological, and ecclesiological changes in this era, historians continue to wrestle with the nature of the Puritans' own self-understanding of decline within the context of their "Errand into the Wilderness."[7]

Yet while scholars have examined these issues at the macro level, few have looked at the small-scale manifestations of "declension" in Puritan parent-child relationships. In addition to the strident calls for culturewide repentance and covenant renewal, Puritan pastors also counseled Christian parents dealing with wayward children and offered guidance to those who had wandered from the fold. As the personal "face" on a more widespread cultural problem, clergymen worked to understand why young people went astray and how they might be reclaimed from Satan's clutches. Many saw a particular crisis among male "youth"—those between the ages of twelve and the early twenties—and wanted desperately to help parents and young people in these formative years. The guidance they provided both enhances and complicates our understanding of the perceived nature of declension in colonial religious culture.

Among the many Puritan divines dealing with this issue, Cotton Mather (1663–1728) serves as a fascinating case study. In the midst of his prominent role in the Salem witch trials, colonial politics, and medical debates over smallpox inoculations, Mather was primarily a pastor and a father. He preached regularly about godly parenting and youth rebellion, and many of these sermons were published for larger distribution. At the same time, this was also a deeply personal matter. While only six of his fifteen children survived childhood, Mather was anxious about each one and habitually probed them in order to ascertain the states of their souls.[8] Even more to the point, his son Increase, named for Mather's pious and renowned father, was himself a wayward youth. By addressing these issues in his diary and autobiography, therefore, Mather was also working through his own interpretations of and responses to declension "close to home."

Analyzing Mather's perspectives and practices related to youthful spiritual decline provides historians with an important vantage point for rethinking the very nature of Puritan perceptions of declension. Looking specifically at his analysis of the "private" causes of youth degeneracy and the advice he provided, I argue that Mather saw three sources of decline: the nature of "youth," parental failures, and the inscrutable sovereignty of God. After tracing his description of these causal factors, I contend that Mather's perception of decline, rooted in a strong belief in God's providence, was ultimately hopeful. Though he of course lamented youthful waywardness in his church and in his own household, Mather viewed the afflictions emerging

from these situations as God's corrective heart at work, a divine means of sparking an awakening in the hearts of young people and their parents. Mather blended human and divine causes when addressing the blight of youth rebellion, but his explanations always point back to God's disciplinary and restorative grace awakening slumbering families to renew the godly experiment. For parents, youth rebellion was itself an affliction used by God to bring about personal repentance of sin and renewed parental vigor. For youth, afflictions emerging from their rebellion (i.e., sickness and death) served to awaken them and warn others in order to foster conversion, sanctification, and a broader cultural spiritual renewal.[9]

In the end, therefore, I hope to detail Mather's etiology of youthful decline while also revealing how he interpreted God's use of the resultant afflictions as goads to spiritual renewal for both youth and their parents. While Mather was never averse to crying out about broader societal spiritual decline, an analysis of the more intimate settings of pastoral care and "self-talk" about his own parenting reveals a pervasive belief that God would use these trials—and God's chastising responses—as the very means of bringing renewal in parents' spiritual lives, in the rigor of childrearing practices, and in young people's pursuit of righteousness. For Puritans who held firmly to a belief in God's providence directed toward his covenant people, declension never had the final word.

Declension as Concept and Reality

For seventeenth-century Puritans, the perpetuation of ancestral faith was tethered to the flourishing of the family. Since Mather made it clear that godly families would themselves "issue from godly Families," he argued that Christian childrearing was the most critical means of ensuring the transmission of the gospel from generation to generation.[10] In fact, he went as far as to say that it was the family, not the church, that would be the primary salvific institution among Christians in the new world. "If *Parents* did *their* Duties as they ought," he suggested, "the *Word* publickly preached, would not be the ordinary means of *Regeneration* in the Church, but only *without* the Church, among Infidels."[11] Mather was concerned that a congregation-focused faith community created a context for parents to abdicate their responsibilities for family worship and teaching.[12] He regularly reminded parents, therefore, that the legacy and global witness of New England depended upon the continuity provided by family faith commitments.[13]

By the second half of the seventeenth century, these idyllic hopes had fallen upon hard times. Many Puritan children, as they

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grew, failed to testify to an experience of divine grace despite the fact that they had been baptized as infants. Because they could not relate testimonies of regeneration that conformed to expected conversion morphologies, they were denied full church membership and access to the Lord's Table. This issue became even more acute when these young people grew up, married, and desired to baptize their children. Since only church members were allowed this privilege, many children went unbaptized and church membership numbers declined. The so-called halfway covenant of 1662 allowed professing and obedient Christians to bring their children for baptism even if they had not demonstrated God's converting grace in their lives. Full voting membership and access to the Lord's Supper, however, was still reserved for those who could point to and relate an act of converting grace.[14] While this compromise did strike a balance between the preservation of church purity and the need to keep a larger number of citizens under the covenantal "canopy" of church influence, it also exposed the threat of declension and diminishing conversion rates within the rising generations.[15]

While historians have detailed these congregational issues, however, it is clear that pastors like Cotton Mather were concerned not only about church membership and social order but also about young people's souls. As David Hall has noted, the population of New England at the beginning of the eighteenth century was "astonishingly youthful," maintaining a median age of just sixteen.[16] In light of this youthful dominance, Mather was quite unnerved by what he saw. "But among all the *deadly Symptoms* which threaten us with a speedy Ruine," he contended, "there is none more ghastly, than the ignorance, the wildness, the lewdness found in so great a part of the *Rising Generation*."[17] Witness to pervasive Sabbath breaking, evil "company keeping," "night frolicks," sexual immorality, stealing, and drunkenness, Mather feared the social and religious consequences. Despite the "police" presence of government-appointed tithingmen, whose main responsibility was the surveillance of disorderly individuals and families, intractable youth continued to consume ministerial attention.[18] Fast days and covenant renewal ceremonies directed toward the "rising generation" were designed to halt the decline, but despite some success these remedies seemed to offer little consolation. While Mather likely overstated the actual decline, his perception of increased youthful rebellion was unequivocal.[19] With so many young people ready to "hasten to *Hell* as fast as they can," Mather indicated that he was "*so Troubled, that I cannot Speak.*"[20]

Yet Mather was seldom at a loss for words.[21] While he dutifully used the rhetoric of youthful declension to arouse a sense of urgency for

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communal reform, he also displayed a deep pastoral concern for Christian parents and their children who walked away from the faith. Indeed, though he noted that the "*Pungency*" of this trial was "*Extraordinary*," he also indicated that its "*Frequency*" was quite "*Ordinary*." "If a *Godly Parent*, have *many Children*, it is very *seldome* seen that *All* of them do prove *Ungodly*," he noted from experience, "but it is very *often* seen, that *some* of them do so."[22] Mather witnessed the tremendous grief of parents whose children lived in rebellion, indicating that many of them feared that they would "*bring forth Children, for the Murderer*."[23] He knew from counseling other parents that such trials often caused them to lose hope and even, in some cases, doubt their own salvation. "Though I am not of the *Age* to *Feel* it," he indicated in 1695 as a parent of very young children, "yet I *See* daily, and very dismal *Cause* to *Think* it, That a more *Abasing Trouble*, cannot befal a *Godly Parent*, than to behold their own Children, by the Courses of *Ungodliness*, making Themselves a *Sacrifice* unto the *Devil*."[24]

Mather would soon be "of the age" to experience this affliction. His son Increase, named for Mather's illustrious father, was born in 1699, just four years after penning these words. While Increase was the eighth child born to Mather and his wife, Abigail, "Cresy," as his father often called him, assumed a special place as the firstborn living son.[25] Baptismal naming was a significant matter for Puritans, and by calling him Increase, "in Honour to my Parent," Mather bestowed on his child the full weight and expectation of his father's godly character and life work.[26] Adding to these lofty prospects, Mather felt that he heard two distinct messages from God at the child's birth, that Increase would "bee a Servant of my Lord Jesus Christ throughout eternal Ages" and that "this Child shall glorify my Lord Jesus Christ, and bee with Him, to behold His Glory."[27] When later that year he referred to his new son as "my only and lovely Son, a Son given to mee in answer to many Prayers among the People of God, and a Son of much Observation and Expectation," it was clear that Mather's hopes for his own "rising generation" were pinned squarely upon this newborn infant.[28]

Cresy was a sickly child, but his recoveries from serious illnesses only seemed to confirm for Mather that God had something special in store for the boy.[29] During his first year, Increase was taken with "Convulsion-Fits" and appeared near death on several occasions. Mather prayed on his behalf, assuring God that he only desired his son's life to be spared if he would "serve Him exceedingly."[30] Though matters appeared desperate, he again sensed that a "good Angel of the Lord" told him the child would live.[31] Mather, in fact, often relied upon such divine words, indicating that these provided

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him a "Particular Faith" in God's election of Cresy for godly life and labor.[32] When Increase recovered from this and then also from bouts with smallpox (age three) and scarlet fever (age five), it seemed clear that he had been spared for the Lord's service.[33] By the age of six, Cresy was meeting with his grandfather Increase and with other tutors and teachers for godly instruction.[34] It appeared that God's promises for Mather's eldest son were indeed coming to fruition.[35]

By the time Increase had turned twelve, however, Mather seemed to detect within his son the spiritual drift he had witnessed in the rising generation. While he found it a "Popish and a Cursed LYE, that the Children of *Ministers* do usually miscarry more than *Others*," he also recognized that Increase showed little spiritual fruit and an enduring tendency to wander.[36] Though he had begun very intentional and personal instruction with his son by the age of eleven—the age at which Mather indicated Increase was old enough for the practice of spiritual "Consideration"—his diary reflected some early doubts about his son's direction.[37] When he noted in 1711 that he wanted to help his children use their time more effectively and to develop a sufficient desire for prayer and fear of sin, he indicated that these charges were "Especially for *Cresy*."[38] On the cusp of Increase's twelfth birthday, he noted that he was "full of Distress . . . lest some vicious and wicked Lads do corrupt him and ensnare him." His prayer for this favored son was indeed poignant and heartfelt: "*O my God, my God; give to my Son* Increase, *a changed Heart; a perfect Heart and a gracious!*"[39]

Despite these earnest prayers, laments for Increase's spiritual apathy continued unabated during his teen years. Early aspirations for a son who might follow his father and grandfather into the learned ministry dissolved in the realization that both desire and aptitude led Increase to favor "secular business."[40] While Mather certainly upheld the dignity of all labor in his theology of vocation, it is clear he thought a bit more highly of the pastor-scholar role, especially for his own child. Begrudgingly fulfilling his fatherly role of vocational placement, however, he set Increase up at around age fourteen as a merchant's apprentice and procured training for him in mathematical sciences and navigation.[41] Just before his sixteenth birthday, Mather secured him a post on a ship out of London. As with many adolescent boys in early eighteenth-century New England, expanding geographic mobility and new market-oriented occupational opportunities both widened Increase's social sphere and limited Mather's patriarchal authority and paternal watchfulness.[42] Mather actually hoped that the distance from familiar friends would initiate a fresh start, but this did not appear to be the case.[43] Mather's brother Samuel, Increase's

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uncle, kept an eye on his nephew in this new locale. Samuel soon wrote, however, that Increase was drawn to the sinful temptations of the city and to the "disease" of overspending.[44]

Though there was some prospect of restoration upon his return to New England in 1716, this hope was short lived. In 1717, at the age of eighteen, Mather received notification that a "Harlot big with a Bastard" had accused Increase of fathering a child with her and "layes her Belly to him." Though this was never proven and Mather indicated that the "most sensible Judges" thought his son to be innocent, the humiliation was severe.[45] Mather hoped this might serve as a wake-up call, but the downward spiral only continued as Increase "brought himself under public Trouble and Infamy" by taking part in various night riots with the "detestable Rakes in the Town."[46] By this time, Mather could only call him his "miserable Son," an "incorrigible Prodigal," and a "vile Sloth, accompanied with the Power of Satan still reigning over him."[47] After apparently sending him out of the family home for a time and then bringing him back, repeatedly urging repentance and reform, he received news on August 20, 1724, that Increase had died at sea. Though Mather cited promising "papers" of spiritual desire that Increase left with him as grounds for hope, he betrayed fearful apprehension regarding his son's eternal fate. In words posthumously applied to his own autobiographical account of Increase's birth, Mather stated: "But tho' this were a Son of Great Hopes, and One Son who Thousands & Thousands of Prayers, were Employ'd for him; Yett after all, a Sovereign GOD would not Accept of him. He was Buried in the Atlantic Ocean."[48]

Before Increase was born and throughout his son's life, Mather spoke and wrote a great deal about the causes of youthful wandering and the approaches Christian parents should take in addressing these familial trials. As he worked to interpret these realities for himself and for his flock, he was forced to grapple with the changing nature of youth, proper parenting practices, and his own theological beliefs about God's sovereign purposes. In doing so, Mather set forth an etiology of declension that provided a hopeful agenda for solving the Puritan "youth problem."

Interpreting the Youth Problem

Mather's assessment of New England's youth problem was offered within the context of significant shifts in the nature of the adult transition. As Patricia Tracy has convincingly argued, parent-youth tensions were exacerbated in this era due to the declining availability of land acquired through inheritance or purchase. Many youth,

therefore, were subject to prolonged dependence (with still limited prospects) or emigration in order to find new opportunities.[49] In either case, paternal authority and supervision declined as family strains increased. With fewer male youth simply following in their fathers' footsteps and with more young men forced to seek new (and often distant) forms of employment, the smooth transition into stable adulthood was compromised. The traditional rite of passage to adulthood—marriage and the formation of a new household—was frequently delayed and complicated. In some cases, youth experienced a protracted period of semidependence. In others, parents were asked to invest financially in their sons as they moved to new locations beyond the sphere of vigilant guidance. Furthermore, parents appeared to be less reliable guides in this changing landscape, sparking a degree of youthful independence and individualism less available to previous generations.[50]

Within this new reality, Mather carefully outlined what he perceived to be the multifarious causes of youthful spiritual decline. He pointed, first of all, to the inherently unstable nature of "youth." While some historians have claimed adolescence to be a late nineteenth-century invention, Mather, along with several Puritan contemporaries, recognized the critical importance of the stage beginning somewhere between the ages of twelve and fourteen and continuing into the early twenties.[51] Mather's colleague and sometimes rival Benjamin Coleman famously labeled this the "chusing time" in which a young person would select a trade, a master, an educational trajectory, and frequently a spouse.[52] From a more spiritual angle, Mather suggested that "youth" was a pivotal moment in the life course leading either toward adult faithfulness or godless decadence. It was the time during which teens would have to "lay hold on the Covenant of Grace" rather than relying on parental faith, taking responsibility for allegiance to Christ.[53] While most Puritan leaders did not think that those in these years were yet candidates for church membership, this period of semidependency was nonetheless a "chusing time" spiritually as well.[54]

On the positive side, Mather noted that this stage represented the "one special season of life" when the truth was capable of greatest effect. While young children were often "too shallow, too heedless and too sportful" for "serious counsels," and while "old men" were "too much confirmed in the ways of this world and even sermon-proof," youth represented "they that the calls of the gospel are likely to do the most good upon."[55] Mather saw some of the fruit of this spiritual passion in the formation of a weekly neighborhood "young men's meeting" given to prayer, sermon reading, Psalm singing, discussion of spiritual questions, and mutual accountability.[56] Mather

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commended such meetings to others, hoping that the natural passion of youth would overflow in a contagious spiritual hunger capable of spawning a larger revival.[57]

While this positive potential did exist, however, the negative power of youthful passion seemed to rule the day, giving the term "youth" a negative spiritual valence in Mather's world.[58] While he did speak of young ladies who were frivolous in their vain pursuit of physical beauty, Mather spent most of his energy commenting on the indiscretions of male youth.[59] In part, his concern for young men may have emerged because of the larger feminization of the church that saw female membership levels in many locales reach 70 percent or more by the 1690s.[60] "There are far more *godly Women* in the world, than there are *godly Men*," he noted as early as 1691.[61] Yet he also felt that the Devil saved his most virulent attacks for young men, assailing them with "greater *frequency* and *industry* than he does assault other Ages."[62] In part, this was a result of Satan's strategic desire to build his kingdom on the shoulders of future leaders, much as Nebuchadnezzar did with the young men of Israel. Mather also hypothesized that the Devil saw young men as easy targets, their lust for "pleasure, profit, and grandeur" and their proclivity for sexual sin, drunkenness, and church absence providing "very agreeable *Tynder*, for the sparks of [the Devil's] insinuations to fall upon."[63] Youth were "the most unsanctify'd part of Mankind," Mather reasoned, "No man is ordinarily more unholy or more unlikely to be Holy, than the young man."[64]

As Mather sought to explain the developmental reasons for youthful spiritual laxity, he focused on two major age-related issues: unrestrained "passions" and false security.[65] Mather suggested that, while certain countries were given to certain sins (i.e., the "Levity" of France, the "Haughtiness" of Spain, the "Revengefulness" of Italy, and the "Drunkenness" of Germany), certain ages were also susceptible to particular vices. While young men were obviously vulnerable to any sin, their "age," he argued, was most tempted by "the lusts," unrestrained passions that would lead them into temptations of various kinds.[66] As Ann Lombard has pointed out, Puritans identified excessive "passion" with women and children, thereby coding this as both childish and effeminate in nature. For Puritan leaders, therefore, "youth" was billed as the time during which budding men were called to eschew passion while developing the rationality, moderation, and self-control associated with true masculinity.[67] Rather than develop these postures, however, Mather saw young men giving full vent to their passions and lusts, fostering a collective peer culture in which such vices were encouraged rather than curtailed.

Mather felt that such "passions" were exacerbated within the peer-oriented packs that dominated young men's social lives. As Lombard has suggested, youthful male companionship in the late-seventeenth century was looked upon with suspicion. While contemporary American society may view such friendships as key venues for growing independence into an expanding sphere, Puritan leaders often depicted them as barriers to manhood. Most, in fact, believed that male youth were better off finding companionship among older men who were capable of demonstrating the rationality and moderation characteristic of the true man.[68] Because youth tended to congregate in groups, Mather noted, the "devils" could "diffuse their poison further."[69] He saw this first hand, in fact, not only in his own son's life but also in the "knotts of riotous Young Men" who crooned "profane and filthy songs" under his window in the middle of the night in order to "insult piety."[70] If young men failed to develop positive friendships with pious young men or older men who could serve as mentors of masculine restraint, he was sure that these youth would eventually destroy one another spiritually. "It is the Entanglement of Evil *Company*, that keeps the most of you, in the *Snares of Death*," Mather warned. "I say then, *Take Heed*, Young Man, *Take Heed*, Lest you go to *Hell* with and for your *Company*."[71]

Puritan leaders in New England attempted to eradicate or at least diminish the frequency of feasts, sporting events, and other recreational activities that encouraged a male peer culture in England.[72] Yet by the second half of the seventeenth century, a variety of both formal and spontaneous youth gatherings threatened to enflame youthful passions.[73] Militia training days provided opportunities for young men to congregate with little adult supervision. Celebrations of Guy Fawkes' Day provided similar outlets, while Mather also mentioned the development of "*Husking meetings*" where youth, "instead of answering the demands of God for *Green Ears of Corn* to be brought Him in our *Early Piety*, do make the pulling of *Ripe Ears of Corn*, an occasion of all the Lewdness in the World."[74] Even weddings—filled with "scurrilities and obscenities"—provided opportunities for sordid outcomes.[75] Along with the generally unruly actions of clusters of youth—referred to with such titles as "night-walking," "frolicking," and "carousing"—Mather spoke of the tendency for youth to tempt one another with gambling and drunkenness, especially on Sabbath evenings. He warned especially against this latter vice, noting the tendency of alcohol to destroy rationality and moderation while fueling passionate decadence of all kinds. Those youths that frequented "ale houses," Mather commented, would find these to be "Hell-Houses" indeed.[76]

Mather also pointed to sexual sin as a key problem for "passionate" male youth. Young men in this age group, he noted, were often pulled into "Quagmires" by the "uncleanness" associated with sexual immorality.[77] Such sins were aggravated, he noted, by the "promiscuous dancing" favored by raucous young people and by a growing tolerance for youthful masturbation (self-pollution), a practice that served to make their hearts "the *Ovens* that have the impure flames of Hell constantly flaming there."[78] Mather, in fact, constructed a sermon-length exposition on the topic, condemning those "who *do Evil with both Hands earnestly*" and imploring youth to place their minds instead on the glory of Christ.[79] Referring to sexual sins as "effeminacies," it was clear that Mather, like many of his contemporaries, viewed these vices as a threat to sober and responsible manhood.[80] By giving in to such passions and failing to conquer sensuality with self-control, young men revealed that they had not yet developed true masculine power. In his estimation, only when they gained the capacity to battle carnal passions and temptations would they achieve the strength that was the mark of a truly "*Manly Christianity*."[81]

Along with these sins of "passion," Mather also highlighted another source of age-specific declension: false security.[82] As one example, Mather argued that spiritual apathy among youth might stem from a misguided assumption of life's longevity. Speaking of youthful "inconsiderateness," Mather saw the folly of young people blissfully carrying on in sin without a conscious awareness of eternal danger, comparing this to a man staying to play games in a house that was on fire.[83] He noted that youth failed to "*consider their latter end*," instead acting as children who "don't know the worth of *Time*."[84] This false security, Mather believed, emerged from a failure to consider the brevity of life. He believed—and regularly stated—that about half of all people in Boston died before the age of seventeen.[85] While that estimation was likely higher than reality—historian David Stannard places the number closer to 30 percent—death was an ever-present reality.[86] Of course, since the majority of youthful deaths occurred in infancy and childhood, it is fair to assume that individuals beyond the age of twelve felt a bit more confident in their prospects of a long life. Yet Mather lamented that such presumption about the future led many youth to careless living in the present, assuming that they could enjoy youth and then embrace religion at a later time.[87] If youth delayed coming to God "upon a presumption of your having *Time* and *Strength* to Turn at your own Dispose," Mather suggested, it was likely that God would never allow them to "*Enter into His Rest*."[88]

In addition, Mather also recognized that false security could result from a reliance on pious ancestry. Many young people, he

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argued, saw themselves as spiritually safe because of their parents' faith. However, Mather was quick to warn the next generation about this complacency:

> Think not within yourselves, That because you are the *Children of Godly Parents*, you are not the *Children of Wrath, even as others*.... You need a *New Nature*, my Children, besides and beyond what you have derived from your Parents.... Winnowed Corn brings forth Corn with *Husk* and *Chaff* upon it. You that are *Born* of *Godly Parents*, are under as much necessity to be *New born*, as any whatsoever. When you come to an Age capable of making your choice, you must your selves Express a Disposition to choose the *God of your Parents*.... Thus, O Child grown up to act for thy self, Tho' *Noah*, *David*, or *Job* were thy *Father*, yet if thou dost not thy self look after a Saving *Righteousness* for thy self, thou shalt never be Saved by Theirs.[89]

"Child, If thou has not thy self the Piety of an *Isaac*," he noted, "it will avail thee nothing to have an *Abraham* for thy Father."[90]

Because of his covenantal view of reality, Mather did allow that young children belonged to Christ via the faith of their parents. As the New Testament equivalent of Old Testament circumcision, infant baptism was for him a sign and seal of this covenant reality and indicated that the child belonged to the parents' God.[91] As he noted, "Indeed, those few little Children that are descended of Believing Parents, have the same *God* that their Parents have chosen both for themselves & theirs, until they are *old* enough to *revoke* or to *renew* the choice; the Children are included in what their Parents *do*, and *have*, until they can stand upon their own two Legs."[92] Mather certainly believed this about his own children who died in infancy or very young in their childhood years. As one of his daughters lay sick and near death, for example, he cried out, "But I Beleeve, O Glorious Lord, That when I Seem to Lose these Toyes, What's Lost will fully be Restor'd, In Glory, with Eternal Joyes."[93] Mather's confidence along these lines was even revealed in the words he chose to etch on his deceased children's tombstones: "Of Such is the Kingdome of Heaven," "Reserv'd for a glorious Resurrection," "Gone, but not Lost," "Your Bones shall flourish as an Herb," and "Not as they that have no Hope."[94] Though he knew some did not share his opinion on this matter, he nonetheless noted that he would not "for a World, be without it."[95]

At the same time, Mather wanted to make sure that this wonderful hope did not spawn a dulled sense of urgency in attending to a child's salvation. While he acknowledged that very young children

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were safe within their parents' faith until they could "stand upon their own two Legs," he was equally clear that this age of accountability was unknowable.[96] Mather felt that children who had gained a "Capacity to Act Faith for yourselves" were responsible themselves for calling God "Father."[97] He was quite sure that youth, those over the age of twelve, were responsible for their own faith "in the reckoning of God." Now that they were "*come to years*," he warned, they must own the covenant for themselves lest they "Revoke and Vacate, and Annul, what your Parents did for you."[98] Security within the womb of parental faith clearly had an unknown expiration date, and Mather wanted to make sure that youth—and their parents—did not presume upon the mercy of God for too long.

While Mather certainly saw youths' passion and false security as critical age-related factors in promoting declension, however, he also recognized that parents, even Christian parents, might bear some of the blame for youthful rebellion. "Our children are miserably both neglected and indulged," Mather commented, "tho' too much be made of them in gratifying their unruly wills, nevertheless too little is made of them in providing for their immortal souls."[99] Mather saw both indulgence and neglect as the twin evils of parental failure and the chief engines of youthful declension. Historians have indicated that the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries in both England and the colonies witnessed the early growth of more child-centered homes, characterized by increasingly democratic parent-child relations, more child freedom, and affective nurture.[100] Mothers, according to Mather, were most at risk here for allowing children to "have their *Wills*," but both parents were liable to let love cloud their ability to restrain and guide their children.[101] In his estimation, parents resisted correcting children because of a misplaced desire for their affection, liberating them from discipline while simultaneously enslaving them to their own selfish desires. Such an approach, Mather contended, had devastating long-term consequences not only for the children but also for the parents: "Ah, Thou Indulgent Parent; If thou canst not *Cross* thy *Children*, when they are disposed unto that which is for the Dishonor of God, God will make thy *Children* to become *Crosses* unto thee."[102]

While indulgence was a major concern, Mather also criticized parents who neglected their children's religious nurture. In fact, he most frequently utilized the animal images of Lamentations 4 to describe negligent New England parents as "Ostriches" and "Sea-Monsters." Like ostriches, they bore children but then neglected their spiritual care. Even the cruel sea-monsters were willing to nurse their young, and yet, Mather noted, many parents failed to provide the spiritual milk children so desperately needed.[103] In even more graphic

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language, Mather referred to parents who neglected proper biblical and catechetical instruction as "*Butchers* of their Children" who were chiefly to blame for their children's damnation.[104] When children went wrong, therefore, Mather counseled parents to ask themselves whether they had fulfilled the Puritan mandate for homes to be "schools of piety."[105] Had they provided enough instruction to guide them along the right path? Had they prayed sufficiently for their children, "Every One by *Name*, Every Day, since you have had them?"[106] If not, they were at least partially responsible for their children's spiritual decline.

Such neglect was particularly reprehensible to Mather because parents were the very source of their children's sin and eternal judgment. Theologically, the reality of original sin meant that parents were genetically implicated in their children's troubling condition. They were to blame, in other words, "by nature" if not "by nurture." As he put it,

> Don't you know, That your *Children*, are the *Children of Death*, and the *Children of Hell*, and the *Children of Wrath by Nature*: And that from *you*, this *Nature* is derived and conveyed unto them!... Your *Children* are born with deadly *wounds* of Sin upon their Souls; and they may Thank *you* for those *wounds*: Unjust men, will you now do nothing for their *Healing*? Man, thy Children are dying of an horrid *poison*, in their Bowels; and it was thou that *poisn'd 'em*. What! wilt thou do nothing for their Succour![107]

Historians have indeed noted that doctrines of original sin came under attack beginning in the early-eighteenth century, and it is quite possible that Mather recognized an erosion of confidence in this core Puritan creed.[108] If parents lacked a sense of responsibility and urgency regarding their children's spiritual condition, it was only because they lacked the requisite understanding of the nature of corporate inherited sin. Purveyors of a corrupt nature at conception, parents were under compulsion to do everything in their power to seek their healing. In alarming language, Mather urged parents to picture their children speaking to them from hell about their failures, placing blame upon them for their eternal state: "O Doleful Case! If you should have the *Blood of the Souls* of your *Untaught Children* to answer for; and if in the *Torments of the Damned*, they shall utter their Direful Execrations upon you; *My Parents Murdered my Soul*!"[109]

In addition to indulgence and neglect, Mather also recognized that parental harshness could drive youth from the faith. As it turns out, Mather's disdain for indulgence did not render him a harsh disciplinarian. He certainly allowed for the need of "the rod"

on some occasions. Well known in later generations for his famous maxim, "Better Whipt, than Damn'd," Mather cited a number of Proverbs about the need for the rod to chasten and redirect children set on wayward paths.[110] Yet he also noted that he would never "Come, to give a Child a Blow" except in cases of "obstinacy" or "Something that is very Criminal." As a last resort, the rod was not to be the common expression of parental discipline. "The Slavish way of Education," he believed, "carried on, with Raving and Kicking and Scourging (in Schools as well as Families;) Tis Abominable, and a dreadful Judgment of God upon the world."[111] Mather saw excessive corporal punishment as a destructive force and a real cause of youthful rebellion. He recognized that parental austerity, harsh words, and "Cruel *Blows*" would discourage children and irreparably strain a truly relational parental authority.[112]

For all of these good reasons related to age and parental failure, Mather nevertheless had to admit that godly parents could also have ungodly offspring for no apparent cause other than the inscrutable will of God. He certainly believed that the children of godly parents were most likely to be saved. Like his father, Increase, he noted that "the Eternal *Election* of God, most generally falls upon the Children of *Godly Parents*."[113] Yet Mather also recognized that this was a trend rather than a divine law and that godly heritage and training provided no guarantee of salvation.[114] In order to demonstrate his sovereignty in salvation and to show that it was not in parents' human power to save their children, Mather proposed, God sometimes saved the children of the wicked while refusing to convert the children of the godly.[115] One needed to look no further than biblical examples such as Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Eli, Samuel, and David to see that God's sovereign will, not parental righteousness, was the ultimate arbiter of a child's path.[116] If parents could locate no other causal factors generating rebellion in a child, they might simply have to submit to God's providential hand in hardening the child's heart. While such a reality might have generated a sense of fatalistic despair, however, God's providential action nonetheless served, for Mather, as a basis for continued hope for the perpetuation of the Puritan experiment.

Help for "Distressed Parents": Declension and Renewal

In his classic work on the American jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch demonstrated that the Puritans used their cries of lament over sin as a rhetorical means of affirming the ultimate hope of their divine errand. In other words, they described affliction as God-given correction, "a father's rod used to improve the errant child."[117] In this sense,

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trials, challenges, and physical or natural disasters were reinterpreted as God-ordained means of reviving the passionate pursuit of the godly experiment. I would contend that this was also true within the context of Cotton Mather's interpretation of youth declension. A strong belief in God's special call, coupled with an unswerving confidence in his providence, meant that he could never finally see youthful degeneracy as a "decline." Instead, cases of youth rebellion (and particularly the providential afflictions that accompanied these sins) were perceived as instruments of God's awakening grace, forms of suffering designed by a loving father to rekindle the work of a chosen people.[118] Plagued by a recurring tendency to fall into complacency, Mather viewed the afflictions of youth declension as a wake-up call that would ultimately fuel a renewed zeal among both parents and youth. "All the *Changes* that now pass over us, will be *Serviceable* to us," he suggested. "They will only bring us nearer to GOD, only make us Fitter for *Heaven*. That Promise will be fulfill'd unto us; Rom. VIII. 28. *All things shall work together for Good*."[119] Even declension, therefore, provided a venue for hope.

The hope Mather provided for self-described "distressed parents" was that the divinely ordained suffering accompanying youth rebellion could actually bring renewal in parents' spiritual lives, in the rigor of childrearing practices, and in young people's pursuit of righteousness. First, Mather argued that youth waywardness could facilitate parents' spiritual development, specifically as a means of awakening them to their own sin. He theorized that a rebellious child might be a form of chastisement for a parent's past sins, fulfilling God's promise to punish iniquity to the third and fourth generations (Exod. 34:7). During Increase's rebellion, Mather regularly acknowledged that this affliction was likely a punishment for his own past sin. Around the time of his son's eighteenth birthday, he stated, "I must penitently see my own Sins chastised in what shall thus befal me, and humbly accept the Punishment of my Iniquity."[120] This was even more the case if parents had previously sinned by disobeying their own parents. Mather claimed that a wayward child was often God's just retribution for parents' own rebellion against their parents: "Have not *you* formerly Grieved the Hearts of your own *Parents*? It may be, 'tis for *This*, that your *Children* are now Grieving of yours.... There is no Sin, so sure of Recompense in this Life, as that of, *Willfully Grieving the Heart of a Parent*. Yea, it is a Sin, that rarely, if ever, misses of an Exemplary *Retaliation* here."[121] A defiant child was clearly, in Mather's eyes, a painful consequence of sin: "And if these *Undutiful Children*, ever Live to have *Children* of their own, God pays 'em home in their own Cain.... In the *Undutifulness* of their *own Children*, God makes 'em

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to *possess the Iniquities of their Youth.*"[122] This was a grievous affliction. Indeed, Mather noted, "there are *Scorpions* at the End of the *Rods*, when God makes *Rods* of *Children*, to Scourge the *Parents* with them."[123]

Rather than couching this in negative terms, however, Mather noted that this trial was God's loving discipline designed to hasten parental sanctification. Since he believed that youthful wandering might be related to parental sins, Mather recommended that parents submit to God's hand and "improve" this grief for their own purification. As one word of advice, Mather charged distressed parents to utilize the affliction of rebellious children to enhance their own "*Examination, Humiliation, and Reformation.*"[124] In fact, he believed that ungodly children could serve as spiritual "*Glasses*" for their parents, helping them see their own sin and need for repentance.[125] As parents looked upon their children, recognizing within them their own sin (both original sin and actual sin), they could use this dramatic picture as a means of fostering humility and repentance in their own lives. "You ought patiently to submit unto the *Sovereign Will* of God, in the Affliction that he has laid upon you. Art thou an *Afflicted Parent*? It is the Will of an *Heavenly Father*, that it should be so; and He therein deals no more Hardly with thee, than He hath sometimes dealt with His own dearest *Children.*"[126] Such affliction, in other words, was a gracious gift of God alerting parents to the darkness of their own souls and fostering a contrite heart.

Mather certainly "used" Increase's waywardness in this way. Immediately after his son's bastardy accusation in 1717, he noted, "I considered the Sins of my Son, as being my own; and as also calling to Remembrance the Sins of my former Years; For all of which I renewed my Repentance, with all Abasement of Soul, in the Sight of GOD."[127] In addition, it is clear that Increase's transgressions alerted Mather to his overweening concern for reputation. He said that this situation had made him "watch over" his spirit so that the "Grief and Wrath arising on such Occasion may not proceed from the Vexation of my missing the Reputation and Satisfaction which a Child of more honourable Behaviour might bring unto me."[128] Increase's trial, in other words, forced Mather to consider whether his response was motivated by a true desire for his son's reformation or by parental embarrassment. He recognized that God might be using this trial to purge him of his own self-importance. "*My God humbles me* exceedingly in the Circumstances of my poor son *Increase*," he later noted. "My Concern and Study must now be, above all things to gett my Spirit conformed unto the Humiliations, and ly low in the Dust before the Lord."[129] In his providence, God helped Mather "improve" his grief so as to make it a catalyst for repentance.

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Mather also indicated that this grief could serve as a providential stimulus to help parents see their own sins and failures toward their children, prompting them to renew the rigor of child-rearing practices necessary to bring youth back into the fold. It would cause them to recognize that they had failed to pray enough, teach enough, and punish enough to eradicate sinful proclivities in their children, raising them up to a new sense of purposefulness in their parenting. Because parents were apt to mistake morality for grace and therefore to neglect youth who appeared innocent by external appearance, rebellion could actually serve as a visible reminder of the reality of indwelling sin, prompting a renewed engagement in spiritual warfare. This in itself was a positive outcome that could bear fruit for generations to come.[130]

Since the very nature of youth incited rebellion through unbridled passion and false security, Mather believed that God would use the affliction and grief attending youth rebellion to awaken parents to attend to these areas. First, he indicated it would press parents to renew their efforts to serve as models and exemplars of holiness and sober self-control. Mather noted that "Your *Works* will more *Work* upon your *Children* than your *Words*; Your *Patterns* will do more than your *Precepts*; Your *Copies* than your *Counsils*. . . . If the old crab go backward, it is to no purpose for the young one to be directed unto going forward."[131] Mather urged parents to watch their own lives—their spiritual practices, Sabbath observance, prayerfulness, and responses to setbacks—for the sake of their watching children. He also recommended that families develop effigies and monuments of pious parents and grandparents so that they could serve as continual reminders of "*How Holily and Righteously and Unblamedly they behaved themselves.*"[132] Mather hoped that this practice of remembering would be a means of stirring up within wayward children a desire to emulate the righteous moderation of their ancestors.

Yet Mather recognized that children would need to see exemplars from within their own ranks as well. In part, this could come by selecting pious friends for wayward children, something he was continually attempting to do for Increase.[133] Furthermore, Mather commended the broad use of James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1675), the massively popular account of pious children that gained a wide readership in England and the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When the book was reprinted in New England, Mather added a supplement in which he gave accounts of local children who exhibited similar devotion. These accounts of "childhood and youth delivered from vanity by serious religion" always related to those who died young (between age 5 and 19), thus reinforcing the

brevity of life. In addition, it portrayed children who delighted in spiritual disciplines (always more than play), maintained moderation, behaved well at church, evangelized other children and adults, and, in the midst of sickness, looked with eagerness upon the life to come.[134] These children had very little in the way of excess passion, remaining placid and sober in the midst of trying circumstances and resisting the temptation to join other youth in their folly. Such exemplars provided concrete aspirational pictures and age-appropriate models of the righteous life for rebellious youth.

In addition, Mather felt that God would use the grief of youthful rebellion to enhance parents' willingness to combat false security and speak with boldness about the imminence of death and judgment. While parents were often given to dote on their children indulgently and to resist speaking about such matters, this affliction could serve as the very tool of God to promote a more direct and urgent approach. To combat youthful false security in life's longevity, Mather continually recommended that parents instruct children regarding the brevity of life and the perils of delayed godliness.[135] In addition to the written portraits of dying youth, he also recommended using the deaths of local children as prods to help rebellious children consider their eternal destiny. When a fourteen-year-old boy in their neighborhood was crushed by a cart and killed, Mather used the occasion to provide "more than ordinarily importunate Admonitions" for Increase "to become serious, and prayerful and afraid of Sin."[136] He urged young people to visit "the Burying-place" so that they could see graves "shorter than your selves."[137] He implored parents to use children's birthdays as an opportunity to help them consider the rapid movement of life and the hastening of eternity.[138] In all of this, Mather wanted parents to know that youth was often the last chance to come to salvation. If it did not happen in this stage, he suggested, it was unlikely to happen ever since the weight of accumulated habits would dull the heart to the truth of the gospel.[139] Because the time of death was so uncertain—because their "dawning time" might also be their "dying time"—Mather urged parents to help young people consider their ways and to allow the deaths of other children to serve as "Awful Calls to all of you; *Don't put off your Conversion*!"[140] In the end, he saw the grief of youth rebellion as God's providential wake-up call to engage these eternal realities.

He even posited that God could improve parents' grief by inciting them to describe the terrors of hell. In such situations of desperation, Mather noted that parents would finally tell their children that they themselves would be present at the "Glorious High Throne" of God's judgment, not to plead for clemency, but to validate

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and pronounce the sentence of eternal damnation: "And Oh! What an Infinite Consternation will fall upon your Souls, when your *Fathers*, your *Mothers*, will shake you off, and say, *You have Troubled us, and now God shall Trouble you forever! Wretch!*"[141] In corroborating God's rightful judgment and wrath upon the children, Mather noted that godly parents would lose all tenderness and compassion for the child's soul. Instead of pleading for God's forgiveness, in fact, Mather indicated that "thy *Godly Parents* themselves must *Laugh at thy Destruction, and mock when thy Fear cometh!*"[142] When youth grew hardened and rebellious, Mather suggested, parents' grief would render them more apt to utter these dramatic appeals to God's vengeance. This, more than anything, would alert children to their need for salvation and help them turn from their wicked ways.

Mather also pointed out that parents should "improve" such times to alert youth to the perils of reliance on pious ancestry. He wanted youth to know that the blessing of a godly heritage was to spark, not false security, but rather an increased sense of responsibility for owning the covenant. Far from exonerating them from God's fiery vengeance, the advantage of pious parents actually meant that youth were more accountable for their sin. In his addresses to youth, he never hesitated to inform them that the wayward children of pious parents would be punished far more extensively than those with godless parents.[143] "Think not within your selves, That because you came of *Godly Parents*, there is less Evil in your *Ungodliness*, than in that of other people," Mather noted. "No, For *you* to be *Ungodly*, will be worse, far worse, than for any other people."[144] As he suggested, this was even true with regard to rebellious youths' eternal destiny:

> Yea, When you come to Ly and Broil in that horrible *Fire* of the Wrath of God, all the *Godliness* of your *Parents*, will be but *Oyl* unto the Flame, in the Lowermost parts of the Hell reserved for you, and render the Reflections of your *Consciences*, the more Furious and Amazing, until the very *Heavens* be no more. Better thy *Father* had been an *Indian* or a *Negroe*![145]

The blessing of pious parents, in other words, actually exacerbated the punishment for those who failed to take advantage of this divine gift. Speaking directly to Increase, Mather told him that he would be "infinitely unhappy" if all the prayers and speeches of his parents and uncle were "lost upon you."[146] Clearly addressing youthful presumption, he concluded, "Yea, though you are the Children of Pious Parents, the *Advantage* you might have had by that, shall be changed into

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a *Misery*. The more *Pious Parents* you have had, the more *Forlorn Children* shall you be throughout Eternal Ages."[147]

Since indulgence and neglect were chief parental problems, Mather believed that the afflictions accompanying declension would also serve to rouse their efforts in both discipline and instruction. As a subset of the "great chain of being," Mather saw the disciplinary authority of parents as a critical reality of the created order, a divine invention fashioned for the good of human society and the progress of the Christian faith across generations.[148] It was a means, he said, to "*Curb*, and *Check*, and *Correct*, as far as you can, all the *Ungodliness*, into the *Excesses* whereof your *Ungodly Children* would be *Running*."[149] Far from cruel, therefore, discipline was a loving act of rescue, preventing youth from following their passions into destruction. Mather envisioned parents as caretakers of their children's passionate wills, holding these wills in their keeping as a safeguard against eternal death. "I make them sensible," Mather indicated, speaking of his own children; "Tis a Folly for them to pretend unto any Witt and Will of their own; They must Resign all to me, who will be sure to do what is Best; My Word must be their Law."[150]

If the rod were necessary, he counseled parents to avoid the tendency to "give a Blow in a *passion*." He recommended waiting in order to let the "passion" abate, thereby showing the children that "you deal thus with them, out of pure *Obedience* unto God, and for their true *Repentance*." Even when children lived in rebellion, Mather counseled parents to make sure that their anger was tempered with love and that their disciplinary "passion" was never so strong that children would "think you have no compassion for them."[151] Importantly, then, his disdain for passion among youth was also applied to the parents who sought their restoration. Mather felt that discipline conducted "in passion" would itself incite the child's passion to evil thoughts and retribution. A more moderate and measured approach, instead, could instill a reasoned appeal to holy living.[152]

One reason for Mather's reticence about corporal punishment was his belief that repeated harshness in physical punishment would give children a false—and indeed repulsive—picture of God. "To treat our *Children* like *Slaves*, and with such Rigour, that they shall always *Tremble* and *Abhor* to come into our presence," he noted, "This will be very unlike to our Heavenly Father. Our *Authority* should be Tempered with Kindness, and Meekness, and Loving Tenderness, that our children may *Fear* us with *Delight*, and see that we Love them, with as much *Delight*."[153] Comparing parental discipline to God's discipline, Mather spoke of the need for both "sugar" and "salt," sweet in general and firm when needed. He cited one "ancient" who

commented on the presence of both Aaron's rod and manna in the Ark of the Covenant: "In the Tabernacle, *Aaron's Rod*, and the Pot of *Manna*, were together; so . . . when the *Rod* is used, the sweetness and goodness of the *Manna* must accompany it: and *Mercy* be joined with *Severity*."[154] Without this balance, God's nature would be misrepresented, pushing youth away from God's presence and into rebellion.

Instead of the rod, therefore, Mather preferred to dispel youthful passion through more moderate means. "When your *Children* do amiss," he suggested, "call them Aside; set before them the *Precepts* of God which they have broken, and the *Threatenings* of God, which they provoked. Demand of them to profess their Sorrow for their *Fault*, and Resolve that they will be no more so *Faulty*."[155] In the context of such "admonishing," he urged parents to pinpoint particular vexing sins, to provide reasoned scriptural prohibitions against such vices, and to elicit verbal affirmation of children's agreement with the truth.[156] With Increase, he used this method almost exclusively. He often met individually with him in order to admonish him, lay out scriptural arguments, and secure commitments to the proper path. He constructed questions about life purpose, spiritual exercises, and time management to which he asked Increase to provide written answers. He admonished him about his prayer life, his activities, and his friendships, regularly asking him to commit to repentance and reform in light of his godless direction. Such verbal reproofs were designed for rational persuasion and as an indication of loving concern.[157]

As moderate discipline was the cure for indulgence (and harshness), rigorous instruction was the antidote to parental neglect. Intentional instruction included Bible reading, catechism training, and singing—the staples of Puritan family worship. At the same time, Mather felt that the affliction attending rebellion would prompt parents to adopt a more personal approach. When his son was only twelve, Mather noted that he would "never lett him spend many Minutes with me, without entring upon a Point of Conversation, that may instruct him, and enrich him, so that he may be the wiser and the better for it."[158] On Sabbath evenings, he read to Increase from "Documents of Piety, and of Discretion" in order to "shape him withal."[159] Almost daily, he asked Cresy to transcribe helpful and instructive passages into a "blank Book" in order to "animate a Principle of Religion in him."[160] Even after his eighteenth birthday, Mather assigned sermons for Increase to read, asking him to provide written prayers emerging from his study of these addresses. When he brought him back home at the age of twenty one, he still assigned him books for his edification. God's providential afflictions, in other words, would

help parents repent of their neglect and adopt a more intensive form of personal mentoring sure to foster youthful spiritual practices.[161]

For all of these techniques, however, Mather was quite sure that prayer was an indispensible, and in some ways primary, tool for reclaiming lost sons and daughters. Recognizing the sovereignty of God over youthful souls, he noted that there was nothing quite like the grief of a wayward child to drive desperate parents to their knees. This, in fact, was one of the most important providential results of affliction—a renewed passion for parental prayer. Citing the example of Augustine's mother, Monica, praying and weeping for her lost son's soul, he claimed that such prayers were often the most direct instruments of salvation and renewal in wayward children's lives. Comparing rebellious children to some of the demon-possessed individuals Jesus encountered in the gospels, he suggested that the evil in some children's souls would not come out except through vigorous prayer and fasting. He suggested that parents pray, *"There is a Lying Devil, a Wonton Devil, a Drinking Devil, a Playing Devil, a Proud Devil in this poor child of mine. O magnify thy Grace by Casting this Devil out, and Saving the Soul of my poor Child, from the Fire, into which the Devil is throwing of it."*[162] Mather was convinced that prayer was a key element necessary for healing the sinful tendencies of the rising generation. "If whole *Churches* would oftener keep Dayes of *Prayer* with *Fasting*, That the *Spirit* of God, and of *Grace*, may take a Saving Hold of their Posteritie," he claimed, "'tis probable that there would not be so much *Ungodliness*, as there is in the *Rising Generation*."[163]

Mather's diaries were replete with references to prayer for his son Increase. In the early years of wandering, he prayed for a changed heart, for Cresy's conversion, and for his vocational selection.[164] On one occasion, he set apart three days for "extraordinary Supplications" on his behalf that "he may not go on in a Course of Impiety."[165] Soon after Increase's bastardy accusation, he was back on his knees, together with his wife, pleading for Increase's soul. As he recommended to others, he also prayed with Increase, shedding tears in his presence as he prayed for the "Spirit of Grace" to fall upon him. He wanted, on these occasions, to "make him see and feel my Agonies for him."[166] In the midst of his rebellion, Mather could truly tell his son, "You know not the Child upon Earth, which has been more pray'd for, and more talk'd to, that he might be converted unto God."[167]

Mather implored parents to continue such prayers even if they failed to see results. Urging them to consider the importunate woman in Luke 18, he suggested that such prayers might bear fruit only much later in the child's life.[168] Using a phrase that has continued to hold resonance in contemporary Christian culture, he told parents to

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avoid giving up since "*Delayes* are no *Denials*."[169] Mather had, of course, experienced his own despair along these lines. When Increase was at his worst, Mather feared that "*my God has not heard me*, in the main Point of my late Supplications."[170] Yet in his diary entries, he convinced himself that "I will not yet utterly cast off the wretched Child. But I will still follow thee with Supplications, for what nothing but an almighty Arm can accomplish."[171] In fact, he indicated that, in God's sovereign timing, parents' prayers were often not answered until after the parents' death:

> There is a Stock of *Prayers*, which Pious Parents Lay up for their Children.... Now, *Children*, Tho' your Parents are *Dead*, yet the *Prayers* which they made for you before they died; These *Live* still in the *Answers* of them.... Indeed, sometimes the Children, who are not Pious, while their Parents Lived, are made so After the Death of their Parents, in answer to their Prayers.... But *after they are Dead*, all the Prayers and all the pains they had employ'd for the *Regeneration* of these Children, come into their Operation.[172]

If God did not choose to convert a child during the parents' lifetime, he noted, heaven might later confirm the parents' greatest hopes. In some cases, in fact, he claimed that angels would come and "bring the tidings" to them in heaven, assuring them that their child had turned to God.[173] All of this was meant to convey to grieving parents a hope that would bolster perseverance in prayer.

Finally, Mather saw the providential afflictions of declension as God's means of awakening either the rebellious youth themselves or the other youth of the community. He was not averse to suggesting that God often brought terrible afflictions on rebellious youth for the purpose of spurring repentance and preserving their souls. As his father, Increase, stated, "Often it is so that when the Children of Praying Parents are Wild and Wicked, the Lord brings some terrible Affliction on them, and that proves the happy means of their effectual Conversion to God in Jesus Christ."[174] Mather told a number of stories of youth who grew ill or mad because of their rebellion. While parents were providentially chastened through their rebellious children in order to promote sanctification, youth might also be afflicted in their own bodies or circumstances in order to redirect their gaze to God.[175] This revealed that while parents might fail in their indulgence and neglect, God would not abandon his people, providing the fatherly discipline necessary to generate repentance and renewal.

Furthermore, Mather felt that God could use providential afflictions in rebellious youth to spark reformation among other

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youth that would influence future generations. In this sense, he was able to redefine a seemingly hopeless present reality in terms of God's plan for future blessing. For example, he spoke of young people "killed" by God because of their misdeeds, claiming that this was God's gracious warning to others to avoid such sin. He directly attributed the death of large numbers of young men (in war, at sea, through storms, etc.) to the fact that God was directing his wrath against the ungodliness of these individuals:

> Are the *Young men Dead*? Let *All People*, and especially *Young People*, seriously Lay to Heart, the *Death* of so many *Young People* among us, and the surprising, the amazing manner of their *Death*. It was threatned, in Psal. 28.5 *Because they regard not the Words of the Lord, He shall destroy them*. Young People, would you not be *Destroy'd*! Then seriously *Regard* those *Works of the Lord*, by which He hath already *Destroy'd* so many of you.[176]

The death of ungodly youth, therefore, was a providential and culturewide affliction designed by God to awaken spiritually the other youth of the community.

In this regard, Mather took the divine promises he received regarding his son Increase and reinterpreted these lost hopes in terms of future possibilities, positing that "by his Death, a poor Child, who did no good in his Life, may do good in the World: that the Child may be an Instrument of good after he is dead."[177] Following his son's death, Mather preached and wrote to young people on the need for early piety, hoping that Increase's demise could serve as a warning for others.[178] Therefore, Mather saw his own fruitful work among youth—and God's blessing on many families through it—as the positive and God-ordained outcome of his son's unhappy end. He also had the opportunity to use the lessons learned to help his sister who was struggling with a defiant teenager, claiming that this demonstrated God's good plan through Increase's death.[179] In these ways, Mather felt that his son's death had divine purpose, inspiring present and future generations to perpetuate a pious legacy. Though the present situation was unpleasant, God's providential ripple effects could demonstrate the ultimate goodness of his larger multigenerational plan.[180]

In the end, Mather argued that a belief in God's providence should provide parents with a sense of continued hope in the midst of youth declension. The grief of rebellion could awaken parents to their own spiritual needs and lead them to repentance. If parents and children were both alive, these trials could prompt parents to

utilize modeling, discipline, instruction, and prayer to foster change. Such afflictions could even prompt a renewed desire to speak boldly of God's judgment. If the parents died, they could hope that the prayers offered as a result of God's providential "improvement" of their grief would continue to work beyond the grave. They could also hope that God's warnings and afflictions might be the very force to awaken youth to their need for repentance. In fact, even if the child died without "Evident Marks of a *Saving Change* upon them," parents could still hope that the grace of God may have broken through in the "Last Minutes" as they considered stern parental warnings evoked by these afflictions.[181] And if all hope appeared lost, as was the case with Mather's son Increase, they could place that hope in the future, believing that the next generation might learn from providential afflictions and reestablish a sustained lineage of godliness. Because God worked graciously through these afflictions to provide the spiritual grist for repentance and renewal, declension never had the final word.

In arguing for God's providential work in parents' spiritual lives, in the rigor of childrearing practices, and in young people's pursuit of righteousness, Mather was alert to the great peril of spiritual blindness in a Puritan commonwealth. Parents could be blinded over the years to the reality of their own sin. They could be blinded to their children's spiritual condition and, therefore, to the urgency of godly childrearing. Youth could be blinded by passion and especially by false security in life's longevity and pious ancestry, missing out on their need for salvation and an earnest pursuit of holiness. Yet while youth rebellion was certainly a result of this blindness, God's providential action in response was a powerful means of opening eyes. Such loving and fatherly chastisement could spark repentance and refine spiritual graces, producing, as Hebrews 12:11 reminded them, "The *peacable Fruit of Righteousness* yeelded by Affliction."[182]

As declension "came home" for Mather, inciting grief in his own life and in the lives of his parishioners, his reflections reveal a great deal about the very nature of Puritan perceptions of religious decline. Mather used the rhetoric of declension both to warn and to comfort. More specifically, the warnings themselves were the comforts, God-given wake-up calls to return youth and their parents to righteousness. Providential afflictions of this kind revealed that God still cared for them, that God was willing to utilize painful circumstances for their ultimate healing rather than leaving them in their sin. Because God cared more for their eternal than their earthly comfort—more for holiness than happiness—these trials were perceived as loving acts of chastening grace.[183] They represented modest and temporary agonies that would nonetheless preserve them from the true terrors of hell and

separation from God.[184] Reminding parents and youth about the ultimate goodness of affliction was surely a means of comforting those in such situations, providing hope that these challenges would ultimately work for their good. At the same time, such reminders also demonstrated a way of interpreting small-scale rebellion in light of large-scale confidence in God's covenantal love for his people. Mather wanted parents of all stripes—including himself—to see micro-level strife in terms of macro-level opportunities for God to fulfill his larger purposes. In doing so, Puritan parents and their children would truly own the covenant, submitting to God's sometimes-difficult providence with an eye toward the ultimate success of the divine errand.

Notes

1. Cotton Mather, *The Young Man Spoken To* (Boston: T. Green, 1712), 11.

2. See, for example, Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939); Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Glenn Wallach, *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630–1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

3. Cotton Mather, *The Gospel of Manna, To be Gathered in the Morning* (Boston: T. Green, 1710), 26.

4. Cotton Mather, *The Duty of Children Whose Parents Have Prayed for Them* (Boston: n.p, 1703), preface.

5. Miller, *The New England Mind*; Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956). While Miller persuasively argued for Puritan declension, some historians have denied this reality. See, for example, David D. Hall, "New England, 1660–1730," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 148; Edmund Morgan, "New England Puritanism: Another Approach," *William and Mary Quarterly* 18 (1961): 241–42; Robert G. Pope, "New England versus the New England Mind: The Myth of Declension," *Journal of Social History* 3, (1969): 95–99; Gerald F. Moran and Maris A. Vinovskis, *Religion, Family, and the Life Course: Explorations in the Social History of Early America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 92; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1–20; Murray G. Murphey, "Perry Miller and American Studies," *American Studies* 42 (Summer 2001): 5–18.

6. See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

7. As one example, Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall note that declension should not indicate the failure of the Puritan experiment as much as the natural recognition that parents were unable to control fully the subsequent generations. See "Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41–68.

8. For a good description of this, see Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

9. For a good look at the Puritan theology of affliction, see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); J. Sears McGee, *The Godly Man in Stuart England: Anglicans, Puritans, and the Two Tables, 1620–1670* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 15–67. McGee notes that God used suffering for the purpose of spurring repentance and testing and refining graces, assuming the role of a "loving yet chastising Father" (49).

10. Cotton Mather, *Family-Religion Urged* (Boston, n.p., 1709), 8.

11. Cotton Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen, 1699), 6. It appears that the family was even more important in New England than it had been in England because of the lack of nearby schools and churches. See Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 135; Maris Vinovskis, "Family and Schooling in Colonial and Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Family History* 12 (1987): 22.

12. Cotton Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries* (Boston: T. Green, 1702), 30–31.

13. Cotton Mather, *The Wayes and Joyes of Early Piety* (Boston: B. Green, 1712), 36–38. Edmund Morgan suggested that this reliance upon the family to sustain Puritanism amounted to a form of "tribalism" that ultimately crippled the churches. Hope was placed in the children of the godly, resisting an evangelistic impulse in favor of a protective impulse. See Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 161–86. For a more positive interpretation of tribalism, see Moran and Vinovskis, *Religion, Family, and the Life Course*, 13–20.

14. Stout, *The New England Soul*, 58. According to Stout, church membership percentages dropped to about half in settled towns like Dedham, while they were even lower in Mather's Boston. Those bringing their children for baptism had to proclaim allegiance to the "historical faith" (even if it was not yet a personal converting faith) and adhere to the behavioral strictures of God's Word and church discipline. See also Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969).

15. Pope, "New England versus the New England Mind." Pope contends that the halfway covenant was simply a representation of increased scrupulosity in defining proper conversion, making it harder to gain admission to full church membership.

16. Hall, "New England, 1660–1730," 145.

17. Cotton Mather, *Addresses to Old Men, Young Men, and Little Children* (Boston: R. Pierce, 1694), 90.

18. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 148–49. See also John F. Walzer, "A Period of Ambivalence: Eighteenth-Century American Childhood," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Jason Aronson, 1995), 352; Robert Middlekauf, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596–1728* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 199, 264. This obsession with youth morality continued on in the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. See, for example, Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

19. According to some historians, many young people did actually renew the covenant, often coordinating in time with marriage or the birth of a first child. However, in a culture where family religion and cultural continuity were inextricably intertwined, this perhaps indicated more of a strategy for a perpetual family legacy than legitimate spiritual conviction. Jonathan Edwards, for one, denigrated this practice of "family preservation" as hypocritical. Likewise, Mather focused more on the individual spiritual malaise evident in youth rather than their formal church membership or covenant renewal statistics. On these themes, see Brown and Hall, "Family Strategies," 50–61; Peterson, *The Price of Redemption*, 48-50; Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 244–56; Wallach, *Obedient Sons*, 23.

20. Mather, *The Wayes and Joyes of Early Piety*, 31. See also Cotton Mather, *Verba Opportuna* (Boston: T. Fleet, 1715), 30.

21. At the height of his career, as Mark Noll indicates, this "neurotic dynamo" was responsible for "a quarter to a third of all religious work published annually in the colonies." See Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21–22.

22. Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents* (Boston: John Allen, 1695), 5.

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Ibid., 2; Brown and Hall, "Family Strategies," 54.

25. A son, Joseph, was born in 1693 but died shortly after birth, the victim of an abnormal colon that Mather suspected was the work of witchcraft. Another son, Samuel, was born a year after Increase, in 1700, but died in 1701 of "convulsions." See Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *The Diary of Cotton Mather* (reprint New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1911), 1:164, 382 (hereafter referred to as *Diary*).

26. Ibid., 1:307–8. On naming, see also Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay . . . To Do Good* (Boston: B. Green, 1710), 54. For Puritans, naming provided a means of expressing goals for the child's nurture and, in some cases, a sense of protection for the child's spirit. Breaking with tradition in England, most New Englanders named their children for biblical figures or family members of noble character. See James Axtell, *The School upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974), 8; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 10, 17, 153, 218, 241; Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 120–22; Joseph E. Illick, "Child-Rearing in Seventeenth-Century England and America," in deMause, *The History of Childhood*, 324–25.

27. *Diary*, 1:307–8. Mather had several of these experiences in which he felt that God had given him a "particular faith" to trust him for a great result of some kind. Mather's biographer called this a "divinely sent intimation, perhaps conveyed through the invisible ministry of good angels, that a particular prayer would be answered." See Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 173.

28. *Diary*, 1:336. Anne S. Lombard notes that fathers often described expectations for their sons, though not their daughters. See Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 19. See also Wallach, *Obedient Sons*, 12.

29. Both Lombard and Wilson suggest, in contrast to the stereotype of distant and uncaring patriarchs, that fathers were often deeply invested in caring for sick children. See Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 24–27; Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man*, 134–35.

30. *Diary*, 1:337.

31. Ibid., 1:348.

32. These God-given assurances were likely even more poignant for Mather because he sought, but did not receive, similar divine guarantees during his son Samuel's subsequent illness. Samuel did not recover. See ibid., 1:380, 382.

33. Ibid., 1:447, 508.

34. Ibid., 1:583.

35. After the loss of two other sons in infancy, another son, also named Samuel, was born in 1706.

36. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 13.

37. As Lombard notes, it seems that not much was expected spiritually of young children prior to the age of seven. Mather's grandfather John Cotton noted that it was fine for younger children to "spend much time in pastime and play, for their bodies are too weak to labour and the minds to study are too shallow . . . even the first seven years are spent in pastime, and God looks not much at it" (quoted in Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 21). Puritan fathers seem to have taken on a more prominent role when sons reached the age of seven, a time when boys moved from infancy to childhood. A change of clothing typically symbolized this shift to boyhood and signified a new identification with the father rather than mother. Spiritual and educational instruction seems to have been heightened after age seven as well, sometimes by the father and sometimes through other tutors. See Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 28–33.

38. *Diary*, 2:53.

39. Ibid., 2:76.

40. Ibid., 2:204.

41. Ibid., 2:278. The famous Massachusetts School Law of 1642 actually mandated that parents and masters train up young people for an "honest lawful calling." Mather was similarly keen on the importance of parents providing a useful education for children so that that they could be "put unto some agreeable callings" (Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 18). He also saw it as important that parents consider children's

"capacities" and "inclinations" in selecting a vocation as long as the decision was also accompanied by prayer and fasting (Illick, "Child-Rearing in Seventeenth-Century England and America," 330). However, Mather was grieved that Increase chose a "life of Action" after receiving a "learned and polite education" (*Diary*, 2:299).

42. On this theme, see Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 27–28; Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679–1749* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 133–56; Ross W. Beales, "The Child in Seventeenth-Century America," in *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, ed. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); Constance Schulz, "Children and Childhood in the Eighteenth Century," in Hawes and Hiner, *American Childhood*, 74–75; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 187–90; John Demos, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and the Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 261–89. On the expansion of trade and commerce in the eighteenth century, see T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

43. As Helena Wall has pointed out, only in New England did parents send children away with hopes of moral reform. See Wall, *Fierce Communion: Family and Community in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 103.

44. Apprenticeships in New England often began between the ages of ten and fourteen, including contracts that would afford food, clothing, and perhaps some education and moral training for the youth. See Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 33–34; Axtell, *The School upon a Hill*, 114. Edmund Morgan famously suggested that many Puritan parents "put out" their children because they feared spoiling them, but this did not appear to be the case for Mather. See Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 77.

45. *Diary*, 2:484.

46. Ibid., 2:611.

47. Ibid., 2:611, 647.

48. Ronald A. Bosco, *Paterna: The Autobiography of Cotton Mather* (New York: Scholar's Facsimilies & Reprints, 1976), 158. While some youth surely underwent spiritual crises in their teen years, youthful

rebellion in this era seems to have been somewhat normative. See Roger Thompson, "Adolescent Culture in Colonial Massachusetts," *Journal of Family History* 9 (1984): 127–41.

49. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*, 93–106.

50. Ibid., 97–104.

51. On adolescence as a late nineteenth-century invention, see John and Virginia Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 31 (November 1969): 632. In addition, Joseph Kett claims that colonial Americans failed to distinguish between children and youth, viewing the differences between a seven-year-old and a seventeen-year-old as "unimportant." See Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 12. Those who contend that children in colonial society were simply viewed as "miniature adults" often argue much the same way, denying the presence of a stage between childhood and adulthood. See, for example, Demos, *A Little Commonwealth*, 134–40; Sandford Fleming, *Children and Puritanism: The Place of Children in the Life and Thought of the New England Churches, 1620–1847* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 60, 66–67, 153. Other historians have recognized the concept of adolescence in the colonial era. See, for example, Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Historical Descriptions and Prescriptions for Adolescence," *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992): 341–51 and N. Ray Hiner, "The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into: Educational Analysis in Seventeenth-Century New England," *History of Education Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1973): 15–16. Most historians seem to designate age fourteen as a key cutoff point in designating the switch from childhood to "youth." For a good description of this transition, see Ross W. Beales, "In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 27 (October 1975): 379–98.

52. Quoted in Beales, "The Child in Seventeenth-Century America," 35–36.

53. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 57.

54. Beales, "The Child in Seventeenth-Century America," 36. Mather urged young people not to wait until they were "Twice Seven Years Old" before becoming "seriously Religious." Cotton Mather, *Words of Understanding* (Boston: S. Kneel, 1724), 10.

55. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 52–53. Statistics seem to reveal that most conversions in this era took place after the age of twenty. See, for example, Charles Henry Pope, ed., *Records of the First Church at*

Dorchester in New England, 1636–1734 (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1891). Teen conversions in the Great Awakening obviously changed ideas on the "proper" age of conversion. On this theme, see Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 62–85.

56. Cotton Mather, *Early Religion Urged* (Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1694), 115–17. Mather apparently initiated a society of this kind during his own youth at the age of sixteen. Such societies were common in other locales as well. See Cotton Mather, *Religious Societies* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1724); M. M. Ramsbottom, "Religion, Society, and the Family in Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1630–1740" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1987), 205–38; Middlekauf, *The Mathers*, 193. Patricia Tracy actually saw such societies in Jonathan Edwards's era as weakening family government and the direct spiritual ties between parents and children (substituting pastoral and peer authority for parental authority). See Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*, 111.

57. Cotton Mather, *Parental Wishes and Charges* (Boston: T. Green, 1705), 32; Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 19–20. Mather expressed some of these optimistic hopes for pious youth in a piece published for a young men's religious society, entitled *Youth in Its Brightest Glory* (Boston: T. Green, 1709).

58. On the relation of passion and "the profane" in New England, see Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly*. This privileging of age over youth seems to have been somewhat reversed in the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. See Kenneth Minkema, "Old Age and Religion in the Writings and Life of Jonathan Edwards," *Church History* 70 (December 2001): 674–704.

59. Mather, *The Gospel of Manna*, 36.

60. Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 118; Moran and Vinovskis, *Religion, Family, and the Life Course*, 31, 131; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735," *American Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1976): 31; Lonna M. Malmsheimer, "Daughters of Zion: New England Roots of American Feminism," *New England Quarterly* 50 (September 1977): 487–92. Mather thought this imbalance might be the result of the "*Curse*" faced by women in submission and childbearing, along with the concomitant "*Tenderness* of their Disposition." See Cotton Mather, *Ornaments of the Daughters of Zion* (Boston: Samuel Phillips, 1691), 45. He also suggested that the fear of death in childbearing was a source of religious motivation for women. See Cotton Mather, *Tabitha Rediviva* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1713), 22. It is also possible that women sought

community in local congregations since they were more likely to relocate geographically at marriage away from stable kin networks. See Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 26–27.

61. Mather, *Ornaments of the Daughters of Zion*, 44. See also Richard D. Shiels, "The Feminization of American Congregationalism," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 46–61.

62. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 57.

63. Ibid., 97.

64. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 4–5. Mather also specified that the Hebrew for young man was "Nagnar," meaning "to cast off" (17).

65. As N. Ray Hiner has suggested, many Puritans viewed passion and sensuality as the source of most youthful sins in the teen years. See Hiner, "The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into," 16.

66. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 69–70.

67. Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 47–52. On the association of passion (including seduction) and the female nature, see also Malmsheimer, "Daughters of Zion," 487–88. It should be noted, however, that this disdain for immoral passion was coupled somewhat incongruously with Mather's heralding of passionate and emotionally charged religion. On this theme, see Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979).

68. Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 47–48, 52.

69. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 28.

70. *Diary*, 2:216. Mather favored strengthening the power of the community tithingmen in order to halt unruly youth, especially on the Sabbath. *Diary*, 1:76, 101.

71. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 29.

72. Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 55; Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 28.

73. Patricia Tracy notes that youth in the eighteenth century had progressively fewer opportunities for informal and natural gatherings because of the decline of common field agriculture, barn raisings, and corn huskings. She sees this as spawning the less desirable youthful gatherings that were disparaged by people like Mather and, later, Jonathan Edwards. See Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*, 106.

74. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 31.

75. Mather, *The Wayes and Joyes of Early Piety*, 47.

76. Roger Thompson speaks of the development of a youth peer culture (combined with peer disorder) in Middlesex, Massachusetts. He notes that youth in New England were not as organized or institutionalized as in Europe. See Thompson, "Adolescent Culture in Colonial Massachusetts," 127–41.

77. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 71. This was certainly a species of the fear of bodily sensuality and pollution mentioned by Philip Greven as common among "evangelicals" of that era. See Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 65–73.

78. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 73. See also Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 8–9; Cotton Mather, *The Pure Nazarite* (Boston: T. Fleet, 1723).

79. Mather, *The Pure Nazarite*, 2.

80. Mather also labeled self-pollution as "effeminate" in *Nicetas* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1705), 40. Lombard makes a similar point in noting that "the opprobrious term effeminate referred not to a man with homosexual feelings but to one with 'a strong heterosexual passion'" (*Making Manhood*, 63).

81. Mather, *Youth in its Brightest Glory*, 19. See also Mather, *Nicetas*, 37–38. Mather was in some ways fighting a new battle here as well. Increasingly, the sexual double standard was beginning to take hold as allowances were made for male sexual indiscretions. See Ava Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys: The Transformation of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Northampton, Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 75 (June 2002): 179–203.

82. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 78. It should be noted that false security was a pervasive theme in Puritan religious discourse, by no means restricted to youth or families. See, for example, Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 64–70.

83. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 10.

84. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 75.

85. Mather, *Words of Understanding*, 9. In *The Young Man Spoken To*, Mather noted that "Ten times more Dy before Twenty than after Sixty" (8).

86. David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 55.

87. Mather, *The Young Man Spoken To*, 8.

88. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 33.

89. Cotton Mather, *The Duty of Children Whose Parents Have Prayed for Them* (Boston, n.p., 1703), 32.

90. Cotton Mather, *Parentalia* (Boston: J. Allen, 1715), 12.

91. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 55–56.

92. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 112.

93. Bosco, *Paterna*, 137.

94. Ibid., 114.

95. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 56. It is worth noting that this was a significant reality in Mather's personal experience. Only six of his children lived beyond childhood and only two outlived him. He therefore buried thirteen of his fifteen children.

96. Other prominent New England clergy, such as Charles Chauncy and Eleazer Mather, also resisted giving a precise age in which the child came to "years of discretion," preferring to leave such decisions in the hands of local church officers. See Beales, "In Search of the Historical Child," 388–91.

97. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 54.

98. Ibid., 55, 57.

99. Mather, *Addresses to Old Men*, 90.

100. On this theme, see especially Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); Steven Mintz & Susan Kellog, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 17–23. According to Philip Greven, this new posture was more common among "moderates" and the "genteels," groups less rigorous in faith, more approving of the self, and more open to limited authority than their "evangelical" counterparts. While Greven does not speak in terms of chronological or generational change along these lines, the growth of moderate and genteel forms accelerated in the eighteenth century. Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*.

101. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 30.

102. Ibid., 24.

103. For Mather's use of these images, see Cotton Mather, *Repeated Warnings* (Boston: B. Green, 1712), 9; Mather, *Parental Wishes and Charges*, 30; Mather, *The Duty of Children*, 62; Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 33.

104. Mather, *Repeated Warnings*, 9.

105. *Diary*, 2:265.

106. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 21.

107. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 10–11. On this theme, see also Peter Gregg Slater, *Children in the New England Mind: In Death and in Life* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 41.

108. Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 128–29. Jacobs notes that the doctrine of original sin diminished in popularity in the fifty years following John Bunyan's death, reemerging as a popular theme during the ministry of George Whitefield. See also Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 145.

109. Mather, *Repeated Warnings*, 11. As Brekus has noted, rhetoric on the torments of hell seems to have increased in the eighteenth century, perhaps as a response to "humanitarian challenges" to the doctrine in this era. See Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World*, 145.

110. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 28. See also Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 32–43.

111. Bosco, *Paterna*, 194–95. See also Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 104–5; Moran and Vinovskis, *Religion, Family, and the Life Course*, 116.

112. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 20–21.

113. Ibid., 12.

114. Ibid.

115. As Robert Middlekauf has suggested, Mather was particular eager to remind his flock that their spiritual ability was worth nothing in the divine economy. His suggestion that parents could not save their children was directly in line with this larger pastoral theme. See Middlekauf, *The Mathers*, 235–53.

116. Cotton Mather, *The Best Ornaments of Youth* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1707), 3–4.

117. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 8.

118. Alexandra Walsham notes that this was the most common interpretation among early modern Protestants. God was chastising his children in order to protect them from complacency and spark reformation, protecting them from the ultimate punishment of hell. See Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, 8–20. This was part of the larger ideology termed "experimental predestinarianism" by R. T. Kendall in *Calvin and English Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

119. Cotton Mather, *Tela Praevisa* (Boston: B. Green, 1724), 12.

120. *Diary*, 2:466.

121. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 19. As McGee has indicated, Puritans believed that God—as a God of order—often sent afflictions that reflected the nature of the particular sins. This "boomerang principle" revealed that God wanted to alert his children to the nature of their sin through the particular "cross" that he sent. See McGee, *The Godly Man in Stuart England*, 36–37.

122. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 46–47. For a historical example of this, see Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, appendix.

123. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 17.

124. Ibid.

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid., 16.

127. *Diary*, 2:485.

128. Ibid., 2:465–66. On this theme, see also Middlekauf, *The Mathers*, 201–2. It is worth noting that Mather drew comfort from his other son, Samuel, who pursued godliness and, ultimately, a ministry profession. He noted, in fact, that he was the son "in whom a gracious God wonderfully makes up to me what I miss of comfort in his miserable brother" (*Diary*, 2:701).

129. Ibid., 2:486.

130. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 19–21.

131. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 30–31.

132. Mather, *Parentalia*, 31.

133. *Diary*, 2:76, 92, 447.

134. Cotton Mather, *A Token for the Children of New England* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1700).

135. See, for example, Cotton Mather, *Vita Brevis* (Boston: John Allen, 1714); Cotton Mather, *The A, B, C of Religion* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1713).

136. *Diary*, 2:64.

137. Cotton Mather, *Corderius Americanus* (Boston: John Allen, 1708), 18.

138. Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 76–78.

139. Mather, *Early Religion Urged*, 32–34, 57.

140. Mather, *The Wayes and Joyes of Early Piety*, 48.

141. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 55.

142. Mather, *The Duty of Children*, 36. See also Mather, *The Words of Understanding*, 31.

143. J. Sears McGee likewise suggests that the Puritans believed God was "more angered by their sins than He was by those of the ungodly." See McGee, *The Godly Man in Stuart England*, 27.

144. Mather, *The Duty of Children*, 33.

145. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 53.

146. *Diary*, 2:323.

147. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 78.

148. Michael Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

149. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 28.

150. Bosco, *Paterna*, 194. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World*, 50; Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 55–61, 74–86. As Mark Noll so well explained, Puritan theologies were "instinctively traditional, habitually deferential to inherited authority, and deliberately suspicious of individual self-assertion" (Noll, *America's God*, 19).

151. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 25.

152. In this sense, Mather possessed some of the characteristics defined by Greven as more "moderate" in nature, relying on persuasion

over corporal punishment and voluntary over compulsory obedience. See Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 159–70.

153. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 22.

154. Ibid., 25.

155. Ibid., 24.

156. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 27–28.

157. See, for example, *Diary*, 2: 92, 106–7, 150, 195, 199, 203, 231, 250.

158. Ibid., 2:49.

159. Ibid., 2:151. N. Ray Hiner suggests that Mather's intensive form of childrearing might have been a cause, rather than a remedy, of Increase's rebellion. See Hiner, "Cotton Mather and his Children: The Evolution of a Parent Educator, 1686–1728," in *Regulated Children/ Liberated Children: Education in Psychohistorical Perspective*, ed. Barbara Finkelstein (New York: Psychohistory Press Publishers, 1979), 36.

160. Ibid., 199.

161. Ibid., 665. His efforts with Increase clearly demonstrate what Richard Lovelace has described as Mather's passion for the "machinery of piety," concrete spiritual techniques to foster the spiritual life. He urged all of his children to develop a technique-oriented faith that was driven along by various spiritual disciplines rather than a passive orthodoxy. This was one means of generating a subjective sense of spiritual assurance among children and parents. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather*, 110–45.

162. Ibid., 32.

163. Ibid., 30–31.

164. *Diary*, 2:76, 111, 203, 212.

165. Ibid., 2:480.

166. Ibid., 2:195, 466.

167. Ibid., 2:323.

168. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 34.

169. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 34.

170. *Diary*, 2:489.

171. Ibid.

172. Mather, *Parentalia*, 19–20.

173. Ibid.

174. Increase Mather, *The Duty of Parents to Pray for Their Children* (Boston: n.p., 1703), 39.

175. See, for example, Cotton Mather, *Things That Young People Should Think Upon* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen, 1700); Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 46–51.

176. Mather, *Things that Young People Should Think Upon*, 9.

177. *Diary*, 2:765. Sarah Osborn thought similarly upon the death of her son Samuel. See Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World*, 152.

178. See, for example, Mather, *The Words of Understanding*; Cotton Mather, *Juga Jucunda* (Boston: D. Henchman, 1727).

179. *Diary*, 2:765.

180. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that youth represented the largest "harvest" of the Great Awakenings of the 1730s and 1740s. Jonathan Edwards concentrated many of his efforts toward this group, and they did (at least temporarily) engage the revivals in significant ways. See Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*; George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 150–63.

181. Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 34–35.

182. *Diary*, 2:591–92.

183. On this theme, see McGee, *The Godly Man in Stuart England*, 43.

184. Ibid., 46–47.

ABSTRACT The theme of generational religious decline has been a staple of New England Puritan historiography. Yet while scholars have examined these issues at the larger cultural and ecclesial levels, few have looked at the small-scale manifestations of such "declension" within Puritan parent-child relationships. This article looks at Cotton Mather's perceptions of the causes of and potential solutions for male youth waywardness in colonial New England. Attempting to provide pastoral wisdom for distressed parents in his congregation, Mather also had to deal with this issue in his own home. His rebellious son, Increase, served as a very personal example of a vexing public issue, and Mather worked

hard to put his pastoral ideals into "fatherly" practice. As he confronted these challenges, Mather located the causes of male youth rebellion in the perilous nature of "youth," the failures of Puritan parents, and the inscrutable sovereignty of God. In the end, I argue that Mather was ultimately hopeful about God's work and purposes in the midst of youth declension. His belief in God's providence meant that the afflictions attending youthful rebellion could be perceived as God's means of spurring repentance and renewal, addressing parental sin, bolstering godly childrearing, and arousing youth themselves in the pursuit of righteousness.

Keywords: Cotton Mather, Puritan, declension, Puritan family, Puritan childrearing