THOUGH THE MEN AND WOMEN PORTRAYED in this book are distant in time and intellectual orientation, I would hope that they might recognize at least something of themselves in what follows. They would find my reading of their faith in gendered terms strange if not entirely incomprehensible; they would be distinctly uncomfortable with my attempts to place the inner reality of their religious experiences in the context of the larger political struggles of colony and empire; they would reject emphatically any suggestion that their commitment to sexual egalitarianism be judged by the standards of the profane world (including the world of academic feminism). But I would hope that the evocation of the evangelical sense of fellowship as one not bounded by conventional notions of time and space, a fellowship in which saints enjoyed a "glorious Oneness" with one another unmindful of the secular distinctions of wealth, status, and gender which awaited outside the meetinghouse, would strike a familiar chord. The language and cadences of evangelical religion have always struck me as providing a particularly powerful way to understand (indeed to construct) self and community, and I hope that some of the experiential flavor of evangelicalism comes through in this book, despite my efforts to encase it in the categories and analytical structures of gender history.

Throughout this book I have used the case of the Baptists of New England to illustrate the experience of evangelical Protestants more generally. The colony of Rhode Island, that refuge of religious outcasts and scourge of the Puritan establishment, was home to the first Baptist congregations in New England. Though few Baptist communities could be found outside the commercial centers of Newport and Providence in the seventeenth century, by the early eighteenth groups of missionaries from Rhode Island began to cross the border into Connecticut to assist in establishing sister churches. Despite fierce resistance on the part of the Congregational establishment, the Standing Order, these missionaries succeeded in founding a small congregation at Groton in 1704; by 1740, the number of Baptist churches in the entire colony of Connecticut stood only at three. These fledgling societies
struggled to survive until the revivals of the First Great Awakening in the 1740s dramatically changed the religious landscape of New England, swelling the ranks of dissenters such as the Baptists. Certainly not all northern evangelicals were Baptists, nor did all Baptists think and act alike in matters of religion. But Baptists were the standard-bearers for the evangelical cause in New England throughout the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries. It was not until the Methodists arrived on the scene in the late eighteenth century that the Baptists' claim to represent the evangelical wing of New England's Puritan heritage was seriously challenged.

By the term "evangelical" I mean both a distinctive theological stance and liturgical style. Evangelicals shared four religious characteristics: an insistence on the primacy of the relationship of the individual to God; lay supremacy within the meetinghouse; unfettered congregational autonomy, in which the local church functioned independently of higher authorities (either ecclesiastical or secular); and a language of religious pietism or emotional fervor. On all four counts, the Baptist community in New England represents perhaps the purest expression of the evangelical mode of worship. By refusing to baptize children and insisting on a full verbal declaration of faith on the part of adult converts who wished to join a church, Baptists remained true to the Puritan notion that religious conversion consisted of the unmediated infusion of God's grace into the individual soul. Once having been immersed in water, the convert reemerged as a new soul, reborn into a community that recognized no relationship save that of the individual with Christ.

The justification for lumping all the various Baptist factions (open and closed communion, Five and Six Principle, Seventh and First Day, General and Particular) into a single group requires some explanation. The collapsing of distinctive strands of the denomination into an undifferentiated community seems to me warranted on several levels. First, as William McLoughlin has stressed in his massive study of New England dissent, Baptists collectively faced a hostile religious establishment committed to their suppression. Even Baptists enjoying the relatively liberal climate of Rhode Island, which placed no legal or political restrictions on worship, considered their fate bound to that of their oppressed neighbors to the south because of their shared status as religious outsiders. Second, all Baptist congregations shared a common set of organizational features which placed ultimate authority in the hands of the laity and severely curtailed the role of the minister, or "elder" as they preferred, who served as a kind of "first among equals." And finally, by the late eighteenth century, decades of united opposition to the legal and political "oppressions" of the Standing Order
had effectively muted the distinctive theological and liturgical features of the various Baptist groups. McLoughlin claims that by the time of the American Revolution New England Baptists presented a united front to their ecclesiastical rivals.

To argue that the Baptist churches constituted a coherent community with a consistent world view and institutional structure is not to deny that very real and often violent disagreements existed among open and closed communion, Five and Six Principle, General and Particular Baptists. Yet the extreme sensitivity toward the finer points of doctrine exhibited by many New England Baptists only reaffirms our sense that these people held a common religious ethos. For the cardinal principle of evangelical Protestantism was the ability of lay men and women to interpret scripture for themselves, and the very fractiousness of Baptist church life is testimony to the vitality of the evangelical stress on lay initiative and individual conscience.

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