The Conclusions of the Massachusetts Bay Elders (1695)

As a result of claims of 12-year-old Ann Putnam and others in Salem Village, Massachusetts, in 1692, a total of 19 people were executed for being witches. In addition, another accused individual was executed for refusing to submit to a trial, and several others died while in prison awaiting trial or execution. The trials were widely publicized at the time, and they continue to capture public attention through modern representations of the events, such as Arthur Miller’s 1953 play, The Crucible. In 1695, the elders of Salem’s churches met to consider the role of Pastor Samuel Parris in the witchcraft hysteria.

The elders and messengers of the churches—met in council at Salem Village, April 3, 1695, to consider and determine what is to be done for the composure of the present unhappy differences in that place,—after solemn invocation of God in Christ for his direction, do unanimously declare and advise as followeth:—

I. We judge that, albeit in the late and the dark time of the confusions, wherein Satan had obtained a more than ordinary liberty to be sifting of this plantation, there were sundry unwarrantable and uncomfortable steps taken by Mr. Samuel Parris, the pastor of the Church in Salem Village, then under the hurrying distractions of amazing afflictions; yet the said Mr. Parris, by the good hand of God brought unto a better sense of things, hath so fully expressed it, that a Christian charity may and should receive satisfaction therewith.

II. Inasmuch as divers Christian brethren in the church of Salem Village have been offended at Mr. Parris for his conduct in the time of the difficulties and calamities which have distressed them, we now advise them charitably to accept the satisfaction which he hath tendered in his Christian acknowledgments of the errors therein committed; yea, to endeavor, as far as 'tis possible, the fullest reconciliation of their minds unto communion with him, in the whole exercise of his ministry, and with the rest of the church (Matt. vi. 12-14; Luke xvii. 3; James v. 16). . .

V. Having observed that there is in Salem Village a spirit full of contentions and animosities, too sadly verifying the blemish which hath heretofore lain upon them, and that some complaints brought against Mr. Parris have been either causeless and groundless, or unduly aggravated, we do, in the name and fear of the Lord, solemnly warn them to consider, whether, if they continue to devour one another, it will not be bitterness in the latter end; and beware lest the Lord be provoked thereby utterly to deprive them of those which they should account their precious and pleasant things, and abandon them to all the desolations of a people that sin away the mercies of the gospel (James iii. 16; Gal. v. 15; 2 Sam ii. 26; Isa. v. 4, 5, 6; Matt. xxi. 43).

VI. If the distempers in Salem Village should be (which God forbid!) so incurable, that
Mr. Parris, after all, find that he cannot, with any comfort and service, continue in his present station, his removal from thence will not expose him unto any hard character with us, nor, we hope, with the rest of the people of God among whom we live (Matt. x. 14; Acts xxii. 18).

All which advice we follow with our prayers that the God of peace would bruise Satan under our feet. Now, the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means.

Increase Mather, Moderator.
Joseph Bridgham.
Samuel Checkley.
William Torrey.
Joseph Boynton.
Richard Middlecot.
John Walley.
Jer: Dummer.
Nehemiah Jewet.
Ephraim Hunt.
Nathll. Williams.
Samuel Phillips.
James Allen.
Samuel Torrey.
Samuel Willard.
Edward Payson.
Cotton Mather.

Document Analysis
Do the elders blame Mr. Parris for the hysteria? Do they imply that he may have fabricated the story?

What is the elders’ conclusion? Should Parris be punished?

What was the purpose of this meeting of the elders? What were the elders attempting to accomplish?