A City Upon a Hill

How Sermons Changed the
Course of American History

Larry Witham

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I

The Colonial Period
(1607–1800)

How the ancient world, through England, gave America the sermon, so that it could be a "city upon a hill" and a new Israel with a covenant. How the Bible and sermon styles crossed the Atlantic, dissenters arose, and America had prophets that spoke like Jeremiah. How settlers warred with Indians, feared witches, and pleaded to Providence. How rational faith vied with "heart" religion, and great pulpits preached "horrors." How churches organized society and a theatrical preacher, George Whitefield, was famous before George Washington. How Puritan sin gave way to Benjamin Franklin's "do-goodism," and how Calvinists battled Arminians over grace and free will. How "liberty" in Christ became liberty from England, belief in foreign

conspiracies arose, and Antichrists were espied abroad. How sermons created mobs and rebellion divided pulpits, and how patriots put God on their side. How the Enlightenment and the Bible briefly united, and Jews and Catholics got their voice. How the Constitution left out "slavery" and "God" but designed a system of liberty and order. How Federalists and Democrats were born. How "infidels" threatened a new Israel and Jefferson's election was a second revolution.

CHAPTER ONE

Robert Hunt's Library

The Sermon Comes to America

Robert Hunt looked over the bow of the creaking *Susan Constant.* The masts and ropes crackled as its sails caught a wind up the wide James River in a land called Virginia. Hunt had survived seasickness and scurvy on the open ocean in the great oaken ship, typical of its kind in 1607, and now he relished the bright spring morning, which revealed a landscape of dogwoods and redbuds in bloom.

At age thirty-eight, Hunt had left a wife, children, and country church in England to make the Atlantic crossing. Soon after landing, he became the first Anglican minister to give a sermon in Jamestown, England's only permanent outpost on American shores. He had his health, his faith, and his library of religious books intact. The tribulations were finally over, or so it seemed. The *Susan Constant* and two other ships dropped anchor by a wooded prominence, easy to defend on all sides. Now the task of the roughly one hundred men and boys, a quarrelsome group already, was to colonize these woods and waterways for God and for King James I. They were there to bring wealth to the nation and convert the Indians to Christianity.

Hunt's first mission was to establish an English pattern of church worship. He began the day they landed by conducting a service under a sail strung in

The first preaching at Jamestown took place under
a sail strung in the treetops.

the treetops. His pulpit was a pole lashed between two trees, and on this he laid his *Book of Common Prayer,* which prescribed two sermons on Sunday and prayers twice a day. That first sermon is lost to history, but it is likely that Hunt, trained at university, had Puritan leanings in the Church of England and may have preached in their simpler style.

The short spring and humid summer gave way to winter, and then came the first cycles of disease and starvation. Eight months after the landing, a fire destroyed the settlement. In the ashes lay Hunt's library, the first American repository of resources—Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Christian—that produced the sermon. In fire and ash, Hunt's library christened the New World soil. Only a third of the original settlers survived the first year. Hunt was dead before he could begin his second year of preaching in the Virginia wilderness. "Our good pastor," as Captain John Smith called him, dissolved into the marshy riverbanks along with his library.

Jamestown holds a pride of place in America's founding. But like other early settlements, it was a transient affair. The English cultures that shaped

colonial America were still to come. Before then, the Roman Catholic empires of Spain, France, and Portugal also sought a foothold in America. The late sixteenth century, thanks to the Protestant and Catholic reformations, was a golden age of preaching. It was expressed in men like Hunt, but also in the Catholic friars who pioneered New Mexico and Quebec.

By the time Hunt died, a wagon train of Spanish soldiers, colonists, and Franciscan friars had trudged north into the uncharted domain called New Mexico. They named their destination Santa Fe, where two rivers met in a high plateau ringed by mountains. Most of the friars were callow but rugged young men. The Catholic reformation had decreed that they learn to preach, attend seminary if possible, and carry new handbooks with sample sermons.

The French empire landed elsewhere, at a sharp turn in the frigid St. Lawrence River, and from the fort city of Quebec the royal mandate to "increase" Catholic dominions began. In those early days both Huguenot, or French Protestant, and Catholic ministers arrived, but only Catholicism had a mission. Quebec became the springboard for Franciscans and Jesuits to carry the faith along the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and down to the delta, to be called New Orleans.

European politics dictated the pattern of settlement as well as what kinds of sermons sank roots in America. Once England had defeated the Spanish Armada, for example, it was free to attempt commercial ventures such as Jamestown. As part of the spoils of the war between England and the Netherlands, the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam became New York. This opened the way for a century of warfare between England and France, the outcome of which gave the American colonies their boundaries. Through it all, the English sermon prevailed under English dominance.

All the New World empires were Christian, however, and the library of Robert Hunt reflected that basic heritage. Having studied Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, Hunt was exposed to all the ancient works on preaching. He saw that the Old Testament orators, more prophets than preachers, nevertheless remarked on how "pleasant speech increases persuasiveness" (Proverbs 16:21). When Moses shrank back because he stammered, the Lord assured him, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exodus 4:12). The New Testament preacher also believed that divine inspiration would come. "Say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit," Jesus told his disciples (Mark 13:11).

Early Christianity, moreover, borrowed heavily from the rhetorical tools of the Greco-Roman world, finally illustrated by the life of St. Augustine, who was not the only pagan professor of Latin rhetoric to convert to Christi-

anity. Hunt's library may have contained Augustine's fifth-century work *On Christian Learning,* a synthesis of Christian preaching and classical oratory. The ancients had developed rhetoric to persuade in courts and legislatures and at ceremonies. It was an art for Everyman. But the philosophers, from Plato (in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*) to Aristotle (in *Rhetoric*), explained why rhetoric worked. The Roman statesman Cicero summed it up best in *On Invention* and *On the Orator,* works that Christians imitated for centuries.[1]

Cicero said the duty of the orator was to prove, delight, and stir, depending on the circumstances. Plain speaking could prove. A middle style pleased the ears. But grand oratory was necessary to fire audience passions. As Hunt would learn, Cicero provided a checklist for speaker preparation. Once the speaker "invents" a topic, he must arrange it, pick an oratorical style, memorize the material, and then commence delivery. The "arrangement," or *dispositio,* of a sermon was key and fueled centuries of Christian debate. Again, Cicero's common sense shone through. The ideal arrangement was an attention-getting opening, narration of the topic, proof of its argument, and an epilogue to summarize and stir the audience.

Cicero's canon was handed down. In the first century, when the Christian gospels were written, the Roman rhetor Quintilian distilled Cicero into *The Education of the Orator* and Augustine in turn applied Quintilian to Christian rhetoric a few centuries later. Now the "inventions" were Bible texts and Christian doctrines, from sin and faith to divine love and the Trinity. In thousands of sermons, Augustine interpreted Bible texts as "signs"—symbols and allegories about spiritual truths. "My own sermon nearly always displeases me," he said. Nevertheless, generations of preachers studied him, and no doubt Robert Hunt did as well.

Long before Hunt made his American landfall, the English church had gathered up all the existing wisdom of preaching, worship, and ritual in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549). Many of the pioneer clergy, however, had come under the influence of "puritanism," a movement to simplify worship and purify governance in English Protestantism. In addition to the *Book of Common Prayer,* Hunt may have carried to America the compact, Puritan-approved Geneva Bible (1560), the first to have numbered verses.

He also had two styles of preaching to choose from. One was more ornate, echoing the prayer book. The other was the "plain style," a Puritan creation, put down in *The Arte of Prophesying.* That theological work, written by William Perkins, a leading English Puritan, laid out the four-part plan for a true sermon.

1. To read the Text distinctly out of the canonicall Scripture;
2. To give the sense and understanding of it being read by the Scripture itself;
3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the naturall sense;
4. To applie (if he have the gift) the doctrine rightly collected to the manners of men in a simple and plain speech.[2]

This format would influence American rhetoric for a century or more. The title of Perkins's work, in fact, prophesied the perennial debate in American religious oratory: was the sermon an "arte," as in formal rhetoric, or a "prophesying," in which the speaker claims an ecstatic connection to God?

For Perkins and his legacy, which has been called Puritan scholasticism, the "plain-style" preacher assumed that the Bible texts revealed themselves plainly, literally, and factually. Therefore, the preacher's role simply was to give the text, explain its clear doctrine, and provide an "application" for life. The plain sermon was an extremely logical affair, famous for its divisions and subdivisions. It was perhaps Europe's most extreme version of the Reformation slogan, *sola scriptura,* or scripture alone.

In the end, Jamestown failed as a commercial venture. While it lasted, clergy came and went. Church attendance was required, and slackers were punished. The mission to Christianize the Indians was made a selling point to investors in London. The settlement was a "new Jerusalem," despite its population of roughneck men and boys. To the colony's credit, in 1619 it convened the first legislative General Assembly in America. Still, neither investors nor the crown was impressed. So in 1624 the London Company was dissolved, and the burial grounds of Hunt and his library became a royal backwater for the next two decades.

Jamestown had been named for King James I, who came to the throne from Scotland after the death in 1603 of his distant relative, Queen Elizabeth. Thanks to James, faraway New England would also be colonized, but with far greater permanence than the early exploits in Virginia.

In Scotland, James had been reared amid the harsh Protestant Reformation driven by Calvinists, followers of the French theologian John Calvin who chose a "presbyterian"—rule by ordained men—form of government. James did not like fanatical Calvinism. Like Elizabeth, he sought a *via media,* or middle way, for English Christianity after it broke with the Church of

King James I, who met the Indian princess Pocahontas, shaped American oratory with his new Bible and colonial exploits.

Rome. Though a Protestant king, James did not like the purifying "separatists" who opposed his court, state, and church. A separatist was an extreme Puritan. He was a stubborn Englishman who would not declare loyalty to the Church of England, which a moderate Puritan certainly would. The separatists made a point of denouncing the remnants of popery still seen in English Christianity.

For American history, a cell of separatists on the Scrooby estate in east England became significant. To escape prison or worse, these self-named "pilgrims" fled for tolerant Holland, and then came back, hoping to book an oceangoing passage to Virginia. Their contract ship headed for just north of the Hudson River, but the ill-guided voyage hit land at Cape Cod in 1620. Like Jamestown, the Plymouth Colony has a storied pride of place in American beginnings. They did indeed set foot on a shoreline "rock," giving the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock to history.

But for the cultural formation of America, and the transfer of the sermon, the substantial vehicle was a later event—the "Great Migration" to found Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. By then, the court of King James had two relatively new things to offer the New World plantations. One was the "witty" sermon, and the other the King James Bible. Both of them, in dif-

ferent degrees, washed up on American shores, as if part of Shakespeare's contemporaneous play about a foundering plantation voyage, *The Tempest.*

When James needed to suppress the separatists, he turned to the leading men of his church, one of whom was Lancelot Andrewes, a biblical scholar. An arm of the royal state, Andrewes also was the greatest preacher and linguist of his day. His sermon style came to be called metaphysical, for its rich play on language. He dissected words, rhymed them, and built entire sermons on a syllable. The poet John Donne, a preacher as well, brought the metaphysical style to high polish. It was the *sermon du jour* in the court of James I, and in some degree was carried to colonial outposts, especially those where a royal governor liked pomp, velvets, processions, and rituals at worship. The style may have cropped up in Virginia, but probably not in New England.

One Christmas season at James's court, Andrewes displayed the verve of this witty oratory. He preached on the birth of Jesus.

> For if this Child be "Immanuel, God with us," then without this Child, this Immanuel, we be without God. "Without Him in this world," (Eph. ii. 12), saith the Apostle; and if without Him in this, without Him in the next; and if without Him there—if it be not Immanu-el, it will be Immanu-hell; and that and no other place will fall, I fear me, to our share. Without Him, this we are. What with Him? Why, if we have Him, and God by Him, we need no more; Immanuel and Immanu-all.[3]

Such clever wordplay grated on Puritan ears, and if Latin were quoted, it brought Puritan blood to a higher boil still. By being opposites, however, the metaphysical and plain styles created a fertile tension for English oratory. A middle path would be found, but that was well after James began to set the Bible's English into new lexical channels. When he rode down from Scotland in 1603, Puritans had appealed to the red-haired and theology-minded James for a new Bible. Although James was not for Calvinist stringency, he did want to shape a Christian scripture that supported national unity and the divine right of his throne. He set Andrewes to the task. Between 1604 and 1611, the great linguist and his scholars produced the Authorized Version of the Old and New Testaments. The translation was not metaphysical. But it was majestic, beautiful, and even witty in wordplay.

Foremost, the Authorized Version supported kinghood and nationhood. The Geneva Bible used the word *tyrant,* but the King James Bible put that aside for *king* and *ruler.* The older Latin Bibles, struggling to find an equiva-

lent for Hebrew and Greek concepts of tribes, peoples, and empires, came up with the term *natio* one hundred times. The term *nation,* in a fivefold increase, had 454 uses in the King James Bible.[4]

During the civil wars after James's death, Puritan armies carried the Geneva Bible and royalists, or Cavaliers, the Authorized Version. In America, English Protestants would not come to blows over Bibles. But after two generations, when America sought to be a biblical "nation" on the model of Israel, the sermon drew upon the King James Bible as the favorite source of scripture. New England became the most literate region in the world. Its citizens believed that God had spoken in the cadence of Lancelot Andrewes and his team of Shakespearean-era editors.

For the English sermon styles to spread, they needed an English audience. The Spanish, French, and Dutch cultures had tried to make North America in their images, theologically and linguistically. Although some remnants remained, it was English culture that overwhelmingly claimed American soil, creating the audience for the early sermon. That audience was formed by four great cultural migrations from England.[5]

The "Great Migration" to Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first, lasting for a decade until 1640, when the English Civil War ended Puritan motivations to cross the Atlantic. The Puritans stayed in England to oust the king and create a Protestant commonwealth. Under Oliver Cromwell, they took control of England for a decade.

During the war, the Puritan Parliament not only beheaded the Catholic-leaning Charles I, son of James, but also his archbishop, William Laud. A chief political adviser, and a persecutor of Puritans, Laud was also a great preacher. He too had adopted metaphysical oratory with great relish, as finally illustrated in 1645, when he preached his own execution sermon on the creaking wooden scaffolding. In metaphysical style, he played on the word *red.* There was first the Red Sea crossed by Moses, and then the red communion wine of the church. After his sermon, mainly a political protest of innocence, it was his own red blood that spilled from his severed neck.

> That this Cup of red Wine might pass away from me, but since it is not that my will may, his will be done; and I shall most willingly drink of this cup as deep as he pleases, and enter into this Sea, aye and pass through it.[6]

Now that the Great Migration of Puritans to New England had basically dried up, the tables had turned, and the supporters of King Charles I and

Archbishop Laud needed a refuge. These royalists and Cavaliers began to beat a path out of southern England, their stronghold, to the Chesapeake Bay region, especially Virginia. The royalist William Berkeley, for nearly half a century the royal governor of Virginia, offered them a haven. By Berkeley's efforts, an entire royalist English class was transported to America. They transplanted an entire new society, far beyond Jamestown's ragged precedents. This included "high church" Anglican culture and a stratified social order, with manorial lords at the top and serfs at the bottom. Its plantation system stayed in place for generations. When the white indentured servants moved on, African slaves replaced them, and the Christian order continued unabated. It was a *via media* of wealth, manly honor, good taste, and official religion—an important audience for one type of sermon in America.

A different English culture planted itself around the Delaware River, scene of the middle colonies and their hub city, Philadelphia. In about 1675, the Quakers began to leave the British midlands for America. An enthusiast sect, the Quakers were thrown in prison in England for "quaking." Following the teachings of George Fox, they insisted that God spoke to each man and woman by an "inner light." Opposed by both Puritans and Cavaliers, they ended up having a chapter in the era's *Book of Martyrs.* Fox preached in tolerant Maryland in 1671, and soon his frugal, egalitarian, and industrious followers began to arrive up the Delaware River. Under the "holy experiment" of Quaker gentleman William Penn in Pennsylvania, Quakers carved out a region of tolerance, bringing European sects and their sermon styles to America in droves.

In 1717 the Quakers began to see a new kind of immigrant walking the streets of Philadelphia. The men were hard and tall, their features sharp and gaunt, while the women were shockingly loose. The largest migration of all was about to begin, and it was made up of the English, Irish, and Scots who lived around the north British borderlands. Hard by the Irish Sea, it was a land of rugged terrain, constant wars, and glorious warlords upholding their honor and customs. Over the next half century, a quarter million of them poured into the middle colonies, moved to the back country along the Appalachian Mountains, and then spread south and west. They created the core western populations of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and a new audience for the sermon.

By sect, they were mostly Presbyterian, but also Anglican, nonconformist, and even Catholic. Either way, theirs was a militant Christianity that suited their homeland culture. They liked charismatic leaders with military prowess. They preferred long-winded, exuberant preachers, and they brought to

America outdoor religious festivals, the "big meetings," "feasts of fat things," and "love feasts" that were both bawdy and religious. They would create a future American audience called the camp meeting.

Of the four migrations—Puritan, Cavalier, Quaker, and borderland—New England put the strongest stamp on the early American mind. It created the fabled Yankee, the honest, independent merchant. And New England also gave America one of its lasting theological concepts, the idea of the covenant. It was an idea that ran through both the Pilgrim flight in 1620 and the Great Migration a decade later. These two Puritan journeys, one covert and separatist, the other quite open and dominantly commercial, began with the idea of a covenant with God and among a band of people. They struggled to understand what it meant. They thrashed it out in sermon after sermon. In time, the covenant was ingrained in American thinking, almost as if burned into all future heredity of the nation.

It began with the 101 Pilgrim separatists whose single ship arrived in the winter of 1620 and anchored for months beyond the shallow Plymouth Bay. Besides weather, the Pilgrims faced another practical problem: their navigation had gone wrong. They were not at the Hudson River but had been blown north to Cape Cod. With their English charter null and void, they needed to write up a new form of government.

Under such duress, William Bradford, the governor of the Pilgrim group, gathered his band to write a covenanting document, the Mayflower Compact. It was signed November 11, 1620, and it said they would "in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together in a civil Body Politick." When the scouting party finally found a hillside spring, the surviving Pilgrims went ashore, carrying their covenant and small Geneva Bibles with them.

If Robert Hunt's library had brought to America the heritage of the sermon, the tenuous Puritan foothold carried over the covenant, a political and theological idea that now would be tested on rocky New England soil.