

## READING THE SERMON

### SOME THOUGHTS ON CRITICAL STRATEGIES

New England readers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century did not have the same literary tastes as most modern American readers. They would not have thought well of the short stories and novels that modern readers prefer. In early in New England, histories and sermons were far more important to the literary culture. Part of this has its roots in the religious movements that inspired many of the colonists to come to the Massachusetts and Bay Colonies. Both the Puritans and the Pilgrims drew on a common Calvinist foundation, and with that foundation came a suspicion of art and poetry. Truth lay in the words of the Bible, and beauty could be used to make the false seem true. These are the principles that influenced Puritan literary style, which is called *plain style*.

Plain style, however, does not mean simple. One of the ironies of Puritan writing is that — in its attempt to avoid the elaborations and decorations of decadent, fashionable English prose — it created its own elaborate symbolic systems, using both structure and scripture. Readers at the time were very well versed in these systems, and hence read and critiqued sermons with great relish, attending both to the substance and style. Sermons became one of the 'authorized' places for literary expression; they were not only a source of edification, but of entertainment and artistic expression.

A sermon was not necessarily limited to the pulpit; public speeches often borrowed from the sermon. It was the most familiar and respectable mode of public speech. John Winthrop, for instance, uses the sermon as the foundation for his famous address, “Modell of Christian Charity.”

#### WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF A SERMON?

The sermon tended to follow an established form, and understanding this form can help us learn about the Puritan way of thinking. Central to the sermon was logic and reason. These sermons are meant as logical proofs that establish both the correct interpretation of a scriptural passage, and its reasonable application in everyday life. They are arguments meant to prove a thesis about the Divine message in a given passage. In fact, this larger purpose is evident in the overall structure of the sermon itself. There are four parts to a Puritan sermon: text, doctrine, reasons, and application.

**Text:** The text refers to the scriptural passage that the sermon will elucidate. It is always given at the very beginning of the sermon. The minister's task is to reveal and interpret the Divine Word contained in this passage. The ideal is to say no more or no less than what is contained or implied by this passage.

**Doctrine:** After the text is given, the sermon offers us something like a thesis; this section of the sermon is meant to prepare the audience for the argument that follows by telling them what the minister will prove in the next two sections. This section is, like the text, fairly brief, as the key part of the sermon is not the conclusion, but the proof of the conclusion's validity.

**Reasons:** This section is often the most difficult for modern readers to engage with and interpret, because it where the minister must justify the doctrine set forth. One of the first features you will notice about this section is the tendency to set forth a sequence of elaborately (even laboriously) argued points in numbered paragraphs and subparagraphs. Although this section is often initially intimidating, it is also often the richest in terms of both insight into the Puritan mind and in terms of the ways they use rhetoric. Many of the choices in this section are meant to reinforce the impression that the argument is based entirely on reason and logic, deduced from scripture. However, this is often a technique that masks other kinds of rhetorical appeals and literary strategies that are as important to how the sermon attempts to persuade the audience.

**Application:** Once the validity of the argument has been established and the meaning of "divine word" interpreted, this message had to be applied to the contemporary moment. This often meant drawing lessons from the text that pointed the way to necessary reforms within the congregation. These sins in need of attention could be individual or collective; to the Puritans, the distinction between the two was not as significant as it is to modern readers. Individual sin always had its effect on the community as a whole, since all were bound under the Covenant by what John Winthrop called "the ligaments of love," and hence were "one body in Christ." The Application is also a place where we can see how rhetoric and figurative language worked in conjunction with logical appeals to create its desired effects on the audience.