The Breakfast Club

Constitutional Minute for 15 August 2024

A Short History of American Election Sermons

Note: this essay was written to form the Appendix of a Study Guide for *The Christian History of the Constitution of the United States of American, Volume III*, subtitled the *Biblical Foundations of the Constitution*, being published next month. Due to the limited distribution of the Study Guide I decided to also release the essay as a Constitutional Minute for Breakfast Club.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible for 21st Century Americans, or even 21st Century Christians for that matter, to fully appreciate the daily impact of Christianity and the Bible on 17th Century Americans. We think we know; we can read biographies, first-person accounts such as William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and the findings of current historians, but there is an inescapable intellectual and emotional divide that prevents us from fully sensing the fullness of life 400 years removed. Our worldviews, as much as we would prefer otherwise, are "clouded" by, among other faults, the forced separation of church and state we have actually lived. A separation foisted upon us by the Supreme Court's interpretation of a single letter from a sitting President to the Danbury (CT) Baptists.[1]

For the Pilgrims (1620) and Puritans (1630) who settled in New England, their faith was life itself. The church was the center of their world. They intently studied the Bible and attempted to live by it, moment by moment. Upon touching American soil the Bible was also their law book; they had little choice, there simply was no local government; Parliament, sitting 3,000 miles distant, was of no help. They quickly established civil government, but the overlap in its authority with church government often blurred distinctions. One example: voting for civil magistrates and members of the General Court (the legislature) was limited to freemen, but those freemen had also to be church members.

"[T]he unity of religion and politics was so axiomatic that very few men would even have grasped the idea that church and state could be distinct. For the Puritan mind it was not possible to segregate a man's spiritual life from his communal life."[2]

"To the men of New England who had been nourished from their youth on the election sermons and who had been thoroughly enlightened by their pastors in theoretical and practical politics,

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[1] *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).
[2] Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1956), 141-142.

it was but natural to turn to the ministers when they needed some one to express their ideas of government.... [T]he clergy had an immense opportunity to push home their cherished convictions and to help in forming the new political institutions."[3]

"[The Fathers of the Republic] invoked God in their civil assemblies, called upon their chosen teachers of religion for counsel from the Bible, and recognized its precepts as the law of their public conduct. The Fathers did not divorce politics and religion, but they denounced the separation as ungodly. They prepared for the struggle, and went into battle, not as soldiers of fortune, but, like Cromwell and the soldiers of the Commonwealth, with the Word of God in their hearts , and trusting in him. This was the secret of that moral energy which sustained the Republic in its material weakness against superior numbers, and discipline, and all the power of England."[4]

In 1936, The American Antiquarian Society (AAS) published *A Check List of New England Election Sermons*, By R. W. G. Vail.[5] This was a list of all known election sermons that took place in any of the New England colonies-turned-states. Each entry also referenced the libraries or public collections where an original printed copy of the sermon could be found. The Hall-Slater Library is keeper of thirty-four election sermons (including one Connecticut sermon the AAS for some reason missed), ten artillery company election sermons, and forty-one sermons or discourses on other topics, mainly political.

Let's now examine the experience, by colony.

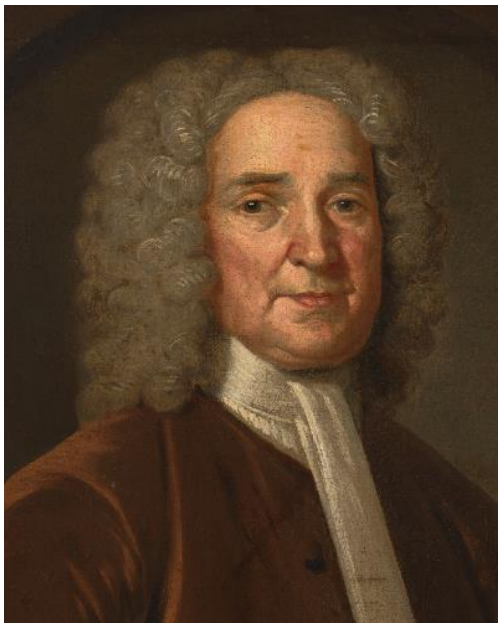
Massachusetts (est. 1628) provides us with both the first and the last example of an election sermon.

[3] Alice Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1958), 134.

[4] John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution*, (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1860), preface.

[5] The "Checklist" can be downloaded from: https://americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44806928.pdf.

Reverand John Cotton (r) has the distinction of delivering the first-ever election sermon in the North American colonies, perhaps in all of England. Born in 1585, in Derby, England, to a lawyer father and "a gracious and pious mother,"[6] John was fortunate enough to be admitted to Cambridge University where he attended first Trinity College (B.A., 1603), and then Emmanuel College (M.A. 1606). He received a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1613, and began preaching at St. Botolph's Church, Boston, in Lincolnshire, England.



Cotton was greatly influenced by his reading of John Calvin ("[H]e that has Calvin has them all.") and was decidedly anti-Catholic. These two influences put him on a course toward Puritanism. His preaching became more and more non-conformist, but his gentle and accommodating demeanor kept him out of hot water with Church of England authorities for a long while.

Cotton married a widow with a young daughter, but soon was forced into hiding to avoid being called into examination for his preaching. Settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (est. 1628) heard about Cotton's flight and sent him letters (how they got to him in hiding, we do not know) urging him to come to New England.

In June or July 1633, Cotton, accompanied by his pregnant wife and step-daughter, sailed for Massachusetts to begin a new life far from the reach of the English Church. During the voyage, a son, Seaborn, joined the young family. In September, Massachusetts Bay Colony welcomed their new arrivals and immediately set Cotton to work at the Boston meetinghouse which later became the First Church of Boston.

Cotton's energetic preaching style resulted in more conversions in his first six months than the church had experienced in the previous year. This effectiveness was probably what led the following May to Cotton being invited to address the newly elected legislature (the general Court) in the first colonial election sermon.

Cotton's sermon was not published—there would not be a print shop in Boston until 1638—and the sermon did not apparently strike a receptive chord since three years elapsed before Reverand Thomas Shepard was asked to give the second election sermon. But soon election sermons became an annual occurrence, and it became quite an honor to be invited to deliver one from Boston's growing group of ministers.

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[6] As later described by his grandson, the famous New England minister, Cotton Mather.

Connecticut was established in 1636, by Thomas Hooker after Hooker was "asked to leave" Massachusetts. The colony conducted its first election sermon in 1674, and the last one in 1830. The colony was second only to Massachusetts in the number of election sermons delivered.

The **Plymouth Colony** was established with the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620. In 1891, Plymouth was absorbed into the Massachusetts Colony. The American Antiquarian Society "checklist" only shows two election sermons conducted in this small colony, in 1669 and 1674.

New Hampshire (established 1623 or 1638 depending on your definition of "established") held election sermons from 1784 to 1861.

Vermont (established as an independent province in 1777, admitted to the union in 1791) held annual election sermons from 1777 to 1834. After a twenty-year layoff, they held three more in 1856-1858, before finally ending the practice for good.

The "Checklist" documents a total of 484 election sermons preached in the New England region alone.[7] There seems to be no consolidated list of election sermons in other states/regions.

The purpose of election sermons was simple: call both the elected and the electors to task before God, explaining, since it had generally been a year since they last heard it, what God expected of both groups. Although the primary audience was the newly elected government, congregants filled the remainder of the church space.

To explore the subject of political sermons during the founding period, I highly recommend the two-volume set by Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz entitled *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760-1805*. Also, John Wingate Thornton's 1860 classic: *The Pulpit of the American Revolution*, is available in a facsimile reprint, as is Alice Baldwin's *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (1958).

"Some of these election sermons discussed the government of the ancient Hebrews and its excellencies; many were theoretical, concerned with the origin and end of government; some dealt more particularly with their own charters and the dearly won rights of Englishmen; some, with great freedom of speech, gave practical advice to the Assembly about well-known evils and desirable laws; the majority discussed in greater or less detail the qualities and responsibilities of magistrates. Year after year the same themes were discussed; often the same phraseology was used."[8]

The themes of most election sermons included these elements:[9]

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[7] Massachusetts: 236, Connecticut: 136, Vermont: 63, New Hampshire: 47 and Plymouth: 2.
[8] Baldwin, 5.
[9] Cline, Timon. (2021). "New England Election Sermons: A Model for a Public Pulpit," accessed on August 9, 2024, at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Timon-Cline-2/publication/353317185_New_England_Election_Sermons_A_Model_for_a_Public_Pulpit/links/60f33a3cfb568a7098b941e5/New-England-Election-Sermons-A-Model-for-a-Public-Pulpit?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19.

A. ***The Character of Good Government.*** The Puritans knew government was a necessity and knew the Bible commanded its obedience, but they had personally experienced governments that used their power inappropriately to usurp religious rights. Legislators were reminded what "good" government would look like and that their devotion to that goal would be closely watched: "[Y]ou are empowered to make righteous laws for promoting public order and good morals;"(Langdon, 1788). Other examples can be found in: *The True Principles of Government,* by Samuel West, and *The True Principles of Civil Government,* by Samuel Cooke, both reviewed in *CHOC III*.

   a. ***Public Happiness as the Goal of Government: "***No more can mankind be conducted to happiness; or civil societies united, and enjoy peace and prosperity, without observing the moral principles and connections, which the same Almighty Creator has established for the government of the moral world." (Elizur Goodrich, 1787).

B. ***The Character of the Good Ruler.*** Another common theme was the character God (and the people) expected of elected officials. "[B]e yourselves the best examples of righteousness and the fear of GOD." (Elizur Goodrich, 1787). "The just ruler will not fear to have his public conduct critically inspected, but will choose to recommend himself to the approbation of every man." (Samuel Cooke, 1770). Similar examples are found in: "The Duty of Magistrates," by Samuel Stillman; "The Wise Ruler a Loyal Subject," by Nathaniel Ells; and "The Political Advantages of Godliness," by Isaac Lewis.

C. ***The Character of the Good Citizen.*** According to several scripture references, the good citizen is to honor and obey his elected representatives and the laws duly passed by them. "It is the duty of the people to support the magistrate, in the due execution of the laws." (Samuel Stillman, 1779). Other examples are found in: "A Comprehensive View of the Relationship Between Citizens and Governors," by Zabdiel Adams, 1782. But the good citizen also had other responsibilities. Reverand Samual West covered these in his sermon "On the Right to Rebel Against Governors," in May 1776.

D. ***God's Providence in Preserving his Church.*** Examples: See: "God's Conduct of His Church With His Glorious Arm," by Jeremiah Shepard, 1715.

Ministers chose a wide variety of scriptures to focus their message, Examples from the five sermons we analyze in *CHOC III* include Deuteronomy 4: 5–8, Psalm 122:3, II Samuel 23:3-4, Matthew 22:21, and Titus 3:1.

Another form of election sermon was given just before or immediately after the local Artillery company would elect their officers for the upcoming year. In the "Artillery Sermon," the pastor would often extend his remarks to the unique duties of a soldier unto God. Examples include:

"*The Lord, A Man of War*,"[10] "*True Faith Makes the Best Soldiers*,"[11] and "*The Character and Duties of a Christian Soldier*."[12]

What distinguished election sermons from other political sermons was of course the audience: the entire newly elected legislature (called the "General Court" in New England) along with the governor and his Lieutenant. But congregations in all the colonies/states frequently heard politically motivated or themed sermons, unrelated to elections. Examples include:

- "Two Discourses on Liberty; delivered at the North Church, in Newbury-port on Lord's Day June 5th 1774," by Nathaniel Niles, M.A.
- "The present situation of other nations of the world, contrasted with our own," A sermon, delivered at Charlestown, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, February 19, 1795; being the day recommended by George Washington, president of the United States of America, for publick thanksgiving and prayer. by Rev. Jedidiah Morse.
- "A sermon on the duty of civil obedience, as required in Scripture," by Rev. William White, 1795.

As stated earlier, true elections sermons, with the elected government in attendance, ended in 1884, in Massachusetts. But one can still encounter "Election Sermons" today in a handful of churches. These are sermons, usually given in the week preceding an election, in which the minister reminds his congregation of the importance of voting and to "vote your conscience." Pastor Gary Hamrick of Cornerstone Chapel in Leesburg, Virginia, is a good example. His "Election Day Sermons" preached October 16, 2016, and again on October 25, 2020, have been uploaded to Youtube.com. In his 2016 sermon, which no longer appears on Youtube, he actually placed the main features of the platforms of the Democratic Party and Republican Party side by side on a PowerPoint slide and then asks his audience: which one could a Christian in good conscience vote for? There are a few other brave pastors around the country who understand the importance of Christians engaging in the political process and are not reticent in telling their congregations so.

Christians today can no longer remain unengaged with the political process in all its many facets. If Christians do not engage as election officials, non-Christians will; if Christians do not stand for election to public office, non-Christians will; if Christians do not vote, non-Christians will. Christians will more readily do these things when their pastors explain their importance.

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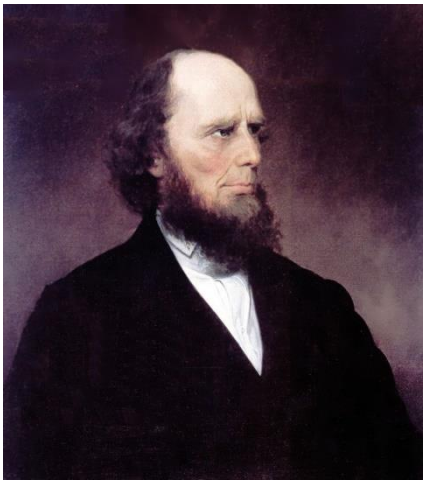
[10] "A Sermon Preached at the Desire of the Honourable Artillery Company in Boston, June 2, 1735," by Hull Abbot, M.A.

[11] "A Sermon Preached before the ancient and honourable Artillery-Company, on their Anniversary Meeting for the Election of Officers, June 6th 1748," by Samuel Dunbar, M.A.

[12] "Preached Before the Ancient and Honorable Company of Artillery on Monday, June 7, 1790," by Jonathan Homar, M.A.

In 1873, Reverand Charles Finney (r) said: "Brethren, our preaching will bear its legitimate fruits. If immorality prevails in the land, the fault is ours in a great degree. If there is a decay of conscience, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the public press lacks moral discrimination, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the church is degenerate and worldly, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the world loses its interest in religion, the pulpit is responsible for it. If Satan rules in our halls of legislation, the pulpit is responsible for it. If our politics become so corrupt that the very foundations of our government are ready to fall away, the pulpit is responsible for it. Let us not ignore this fact, my dear brethren; but let us lay it to heart, and be thoroughly awake to our responsibility in respect to the morals of this nation."[13]



Election sermons reminded the elected who they worked for, reminded elected and electors of their separate responsibilities under God, reminded both of God's view of government, and kept church and state mutually supportive without overstepping the authority of either. "The Constitutional Convention and the written Constitution were the children of the pulpit;" [14]

Bring back the Election Sermon!!

[13] Charles Finney, "The Decay of Conscience," published in *The Independent of New York*, December 4, 1873.
[14] Baldwin, 134.