New England Election Sermons: A Model for a Public Pulpit

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Abstract

This article surveys the now largely foreign practice of election sermons delivered in colonial New England. The ultimate aim of the study is to provide a way forward for contemporary pastors: first, to challenge the modern bifurcation of the religious and the so-called secular in the public square; second, to chart a middle course between the extremes of blind partisanship and anemic passivity in commenting on public concerns. The content of election sermons also challenges prevailing evangelical notions of good government by presenting a more integrated sociopolitical life, emphasizing older priorities of the common good, justice, and prudence.

Keywords

Puritanism, New England, election sermons, preaching, public theology, church and state, politics, common good

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In March of 1884, the Massachusetts legislature was occupied with rather ordinary business. Acts to regulate the sale of coal, the prohibitions of firearm sales to minors, new standards for the admittance to insane asylums, and an updated policy to prevent the spread of contagious diseases in public schools appear in the record, and all passed within

the span of a week. One would be excused for lacking interest in this relatively uneventful record of legislative affairs and for overlooking a noteworthy historical development hidden therein—indeed, an event unprecedented in Massachusetts since its founding, a repudiation of one of its most storied institutions.

On March 6, "An Act to Repeal the Public Statutes Relating to the Annual Election Sermon" was passed. Which is to say, as the bill summary shows, that the election sermon was "dispensed with." For good measure, "the compensation of the preacher thereof" was also repealed.[1] There is no record of the vote, but the repeal act seems to have passed without incident. It was the following year, then, that for the first time in Massachusetts since 1634—excepting for the occasional cancelation due to extenuating circumstances—no election sermon was preached; a two-hundred-and-fifty-year tradition was abandoned overnight.

Almost since the very inception of the errand into the wilderness, election day in Massachusetts had been marked by the oration of an esteemed clergyman before the General Court and newly elected governor and assistants. This was a staple of colonial life, foremost in Massachusetts, and especially since other Christian holidays had by and large been jettisoned. Days of fast and thanksgiving were frequent but irregular. Election days lent some predictability to the Puritan calendar.

But as Lindsay Swift rightly noted in 1894, by the time of the General Court's move to quash the election sermon, there were few tears shed over the removal of the "last slight interdependence in the Commonwealth between Church and State."[2] In truth, for a long while prior, the annual sermon had been considered a matter of precedent rather than "sincere expression of the religious and political spirit of the age." Perhaps it is a miracle that the election sermon endured for as long as it did, far exceeding other vestiges of the Puritan era.

The first election sermon was preached by John Cotton (1585–1652), the patriarch of Massachusetts and standard-bearer of Reformed orthodoxy and the New England Way, in 1634. The last was delivered in 1884 by the universalist minister and president of Tufts University Alonzo Ames Miner (1814–1895). That these two men serve as bookends to the story of the election sermon in Massachusetts, preaching the first and last sermon exactly two and a half centuries apart, is appropriately poetic.

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[1] Charles Amos Merrill, *Supplement to the Public Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1882–1888* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1890), 152.

[2] Lindsay Swift, *The Massachusetts Election Sermons: An Essay in Descriptive Biography*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts 1 (Cambridge: Wilson & Son, 1897).

Massachusetts was the last holdout, both in championing an established church—disestablished in 1833—and continuing the election sermon practice.[3] Connecticut had ceased in 1830. Only two such sermons were ever preached in Plymouth, one in 1669 and the other in 1674.[4] New Hampshire abandoned the practice twenty-three years before Massachusetts and had not begun it until 1784, with none being preached between 1832 and 1860.[5] Where the New England Way had been the strongest it lasted the longest, but even then, it did not last.

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The election sermon's eventual demise notwithstanding, there is much to be learned from what will doubtless be a foreign practice to contemporary ministers. More important than the form and occasion of election sermons is their content.

It is no secret that churches are increasingly politically polarized.[6] Pastors continue to struggle to discern a balance between bringing the full counsel of God to bear on the lives of congregants—the lives they inhabit the other six days of the week—and not turning their pulpit into a partisan "bully." Some Christians expect pastors to address social issues; others assert a strong separation between church and world.[7] In either case, many pastors feel inadequate to mediate these seemingly contradictory demands and the in-house division, in part because they lack a sufficient, balanced model for public engagement from the pulpit. It is the contention of this article that colonial New England election sermons provide just such a model that, with minimal adjustments, can be readily adopted by contemporary pastors.

The supreme point of instruction to be gleaned from election sermons is the posture of faithful, decidedly nonreactionary plodding. The select few clergy who mounted the podium on colonial election days exhibited a vision

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[3] John D. Cushing, "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780–1833," *William & Mary Quarterly* 26.2 (April 1969): 169–90.

[4] Thomas Walley, *Balm in Gilead to Heal Sions wounds …* (Cambridge, 1669); Samuel Arnold, *David Serving his generation …* (Cambridge, 1674). Facsimiles of nearly all election sermons referenced can be accessed through the Evans Early American Imprint Collection or Early English Books Online.

[5] R. W. G. Vail, "A Check List of New England Election Sermons," *American Antiquarian Society* (October 1935): 233–66.

[6] Louis Andres Henao and David Crary, "Christian Churches Mirror Country's Political Division," *U.S. News*, November 8, 2020, https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2020-11-08/christian-churches-mirror-countrys-political-division.

[7] Ruth Graham, "Preaching or Avoiding Politics, Conservative Churches Walk a Delicate Line," *New York Times* (November 1, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/01/us/church-sermons-election-politics.html.

for society, informed by divine revelation, which they relentlessly—sometimes monotonously—preached. Their interest was to call ruler and citizen alike to faithfulness to their God-given duties, unto the common good of the whole, for the stability and tranquility of a covenant community, unto the glory of God.[8]

For two hundred years, New England preachers acted as the oracles of God to the entire community. For at least one day of the year, magistrates, clergy, and citizens gathered to be reminded of how they were to honor God and love their neighbors in their respective stations. And there is good evidence that all three estates endeavored to honor the vision for society proclaimed from the election day pulpits.[9] Such a strange, now-alien phenomenon—a society built upon and sustained by near-constant preaching—deserves to be studied for its own sake. The impetus of this article partially conforms to Swift's own study, namely, to preserve the memory of "so venerable an observance."[10] But our purpose is also to derive a strategy for the present. Controlling for contextual differences between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England and the present, the election sermon can help pastors thread the needle between deafening silence and bombastic partisanship.

To orient the reader, part I will provide a limited but important background. Part II will then highlight and expound upon several common themes that run throughout election sermons of the period in focus (roughly 1660–1760). The themes selected are not exhaustive of election sermon content—only a fraction of the sermons preached are included below. Instead, the themes and doctrines in view are those that appear repeatedly in election sermons and are most easily applicable to any sociopolitical context.

I. *Background*

The sermon was king in seventeenth-century New England. According to Harry Stout, it is unrivaled still, even by television, in terms of its reach and hold on the populace. Not so long ago, "the sermon stood alone in local New England contexts as the only regular (at least weekly) medium of public communication." By this means, New Englanders received the lion's share of their information, the "terms necessary to understand existence

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[8] See, e.g., William Stoughton, *New Englands True Interest …* (Cambridge, 1670), 16–37.

[9] Timothy H. Breen and Stephen Foster, "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of American History* 60.1 (June 1973): 5–22.

[10] Swift, *Election Sermons*, 9.

in this world and the next." With both breadth and depth, heat and light, the sermon spoke to all of life, including the social and political. Underappreciated too is the extent to which the sermon supplied the basis for interpersonal relations by providing a shared knowledge base. Again, this is owed to its reach, frequency, and consistency of content. The sheer number of sermons preached, many of which were printed, is astounding. Stout estimates that five million were delivered in the colonial period and that the average New England churchgoer listened to seven thousand sermons in a lifetime.[11] By 1776, New England ministers were collectively delivering over two thousand discourses per week. The publications of these sermons alone far outnumbered secular pamphlets "by a ratio of more than four to one."[12]

The whole scene is difficult to fathom today. Even after the Puritan era had come and gone, the sermon maintained its influence through the revolutionary period and early republic.[13] This was accomplished, in part, by establishing an array of occasions for sermons to be preached, of which election sermons were, perhaps, the most important. Of the "occasional sermons" (i.e., fast days, execution days, etc.) identified by Stout, election sermons have enjoyed comparatively limited treatment. In *The New England Soul*, Stout himself dedicates less than five pages to election sermons. Perry Miller's emphasis was on fast day sermons and the jeremiad.[14] Alice Baldwin expertly wove election sermon data into her study but limited her sample to the mid-to-late eighteenth century.[15]

Sparse analysis of election sermons is also owed to the tendency in Puritan studies to handle them in conjunction with (irregular but frequent) *political* sermons, an eighteenth-century development.[16] The political sermons were, by and large, far removed from the first few generations of the colonies and gained steam in the aftermath of myriad doctrinal and political shifts. Accordingly, the themes and emphases of *political* sermons differ from those of *election* sermons; the latter alone will be in focus here.

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[11] Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–4.

[12] Ibid., 6.

[13] See John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1959), 186–97; John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution* (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1876); Gary L. Steward, *Justifying Revolution: The American Clergy's Argument for Political Resistance, 1750–1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[14] Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 27–39.

[15] Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1928), 22–46.

[16] See Mark Noll, "The Election Sermon: Situating Religion and the Constitutional in the Eighteenth Century," *DePaul Law Review* 1223 (2010): 59.

Fast days, or days of humiliation, were truly *occasions*, usually called by civil magistrates when the colony faced great challenges or suffering. Election days, on the other hand, were annual (usually every May). As with nearly all events in colonial New England, preaching was the centerpiece. Stout paints a weighty picture of the setting of the election day discourse:

> There, seated before the speaker in the principal building of the province, were the three orders of authority: the magistrates … the deputies … the ministers …. Each would be addressed in turn so that all aspects of government and authority would be illuminated by the Word of God.[17]

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The earliest printed election sermon is from Thomas Shephard (1605–1649), preached in 1638. But Shephard's second address—he had also accepted the honor the previous year—was not printed until 1870, which is not to say that hand-copied notes and Shephard's own manuscript did not circulate at the time. The inaugural sermon by Cotton was not printed either. No sermon was delivered in 1635, 1636, 1639, or 1642. Nathaniel Ward (1578–1652) preached in 1641, the same year his *Body of Liberties* was published, but only the latter effort was printed. The legislature ordered Richard Mather's (1586–1669) 1644 sermon printed, but it never was. This is the case with several election sermons, even after 1660.[18] The same is true of Thomas Cobbet's (1608–1686) 1649 sermon. Mather's 1660 sermon is also lost to us. Prior to 1661, aside from Shepherd's terse outline from 1638, no Massachusetts election sermon was printed except Cobbet's and the eldest Mather's. No copies remain.

Accordingly, the story of the election sermon in New England begins in 1661 with John Norton's (1606–1663) *Three choice and profitable sermons*. But perhaps the circulation of Norton's sermon was limited since Cotton Mather, in 1709, called John Higginson's (1616–1708) 1662 sermon, *The Cause of God and his People in New-England*, the "first born, by way of the press, of all the Elections Sermons, that we have in our libraries."[19] And yet, even those sermons that never made it to press did not lack influence. They were often quoted or referenced in subsequent works. In any case, regular printing stabilized by 1667; all delivered thereafter were printed. This sudden flurry of printing was likely a response to the Restoration of the Stuart

[17] Stout, *New England Soul*, 29.
[18] Swift, *Election Sermons*, 14.
[19] Ibid., 15 (quoting Mather).

monarchy in 1660 as well as an effort of filial piety; the first generation was dying off by the 1660s.[20]

The Connecticut legislature began hosting election sermons in 1674. The inaugural address, *A Holy Connexion*, delivered by James Fitch (1622–1702), is among the best delivered in that colony.[21] Plymouth's first election sermon by Thomas Walley (1616–1677/8) had little competition in Plymouth, being one of two preached there, but it nevertheless is among the most readable and learned of any of the sermons. In the end, what we find is that Massachusetts was the first, last, and most ardent practitioner of the election sermon. It is from Bay Colony orations that we will draw most of our insights.

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The last bit of groundwork needed before the election sermon is approached comes to us by way of qualification. The election sermons are pervaded by the assumptions of the day. For the sake of this study, it is sufficient to acknowledge such and then proceed to the themes in focus. Our subjects clung to the premodern vision of society.[22] The vision for the city on the hill was a fully integrated society, a *secular* regime was an oxymoron, and church and state were coordinate powers, offering mutual diaconal support within proper juridical bounds.[23]

II. *Themes*

1. *The Character of Good Government*

Addressed at the outset of every election sermon was the nature, purpose, and character of government. The preachers of New England had a comparatively high view of government authority. It was a divine institution, not merely a permitted one. Some kind of civil order, Ebenezer Pemberton (1672–1717) suggested, would have been present even if man had remained

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[20] See Stout, *New England Soul*, 69–70; see also Rollo G. Silber, "Financing the Publication of Early New England Sermons," *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958): 163–78.

[21] New Hampshire, having no election sermon until 1784, sits outside of the scope of this study. The same goes for Vermont; its first election sermon was preached in 1777.

[22] See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1956), 141–42.

[23] See John Cotton, *A discourse about civil government* … (Cambridge, 1663); Miller, *Errand*, 143; George L. Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Stanley Gray, "The Political Thought of John Winthrop," *New England Quarterly* 3.4 (October 1930): 681–705; David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 121–55; Herbert L. Osgood, *The American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1957), 1:200–223.

in innocence and paradise.[24] Lapsarian humanity required even stricter order. "Was it not a Terrible Day with Israel, when that Complaint was moaned out? *There was no King in Israel* … God by appointing Government has consulted the good of the World. Levelism, is therefore an open Defiance of God, his Wisdom and Will, as well as the Reason of Mankind."[25] To these preachers, government was never something to be detested or mocked, nor something to be transcended. It was a God-given good that received its power from the risen Christ himself.[26] "Even a tyrannous Government is better than none," said Jonathan Todd (1713–1791). For without government, everyone would be his own tyrant.[27]

Though the forms of governmental polity were, within reason, subject to human determinations and varied in human history, the institution itself was divinely ordained unto certain ends and purposes. "It has not pleased God to interpose in this Case, by instituting one Form of Civil Government and obliging all Nations to submit to it," said Noah Hobart (1706–1773).[28] This was clear from both Scripture and the light of nature.[29] The form of a just government, so long as it still accomplished the ends of government, was to be adapted to the context.

Albeit most of the preachers affirmed, along with Aristotle, that a mixed form—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—was best. For Congregationalists, the mediate means by which government polity was established mirrored that of church polity, namely, voluntary compact,[30] though it flowed naturally and inevitably from the sociable nature of man.[31] Hence, John Davenport (1597–1670) called it a "humane ordinance."[32] Yet, government ultimately remained an ordinance of God; he was the first agent though an agent of means. Valid government had to be ordered to ends fitted to its God-given role and purpose, and certain duties, therefore, were incumbent upon it.

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[24] Ebenezer Pemberton, *The divine original and dignity of government asserted* … (Boston, 1710), 16.

[25] Ibid., 17. Judges 21:25 was repeated often as a sobering warning in election sermons throughout the period in focus. See, e.g., Jonathan Todd, *Civil rulers the ministers of God, for good to men* … (New London, 1749), 1.

[26] James Allin, *Magistracy an institution of Christ upon the throne* … (Boston, 1744).

[27] Todd, *Civil rulers*, 40–41.

[28] Noah Hobart, *Civil government the foundation of social happiness* … (New London, 1751), 3

[29] John Davenport, *A Sermon Preach'd at the Election of the Governor* (Cambridge, 1669), 4.

[30] Joseph Moss, *An election sermon* … (New London, 1715), 6–7; see also John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches* … (London, 1645), 2–4, 61–62.

[31] John Bulkley, *The necessity of religion in societies*… (Boston, 1713), 13–23; Solomon Williams, *A firm and immovable courage to obey God* … (New London, 1741), 1; Hobart, *Civil government*, 2.

[32] Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 4.

Purpose and End of Government. An evident blessing of government was that it restrained evil and chaos.[33] "If the Foundations be destroyed what can the Righteous do?" queried Hobart.[34] But this did not exhaust its true and positive purpose. The end of government regularly identified by election sermons is the public or common good. (Later, the "common good" was sometimes used interchangeably with "public happiness."[35]) "The publick Good is the great End, and original Design of the Institution of civil Government. It was ordain'd as a Means to promote the Peace & Welfare of the World," said Todd.[36] Those who animated government, the rulers or magistrates, as they were variously called, were to "seek the welfare, the good of the people," following Romans 13:4.[37] This mandate was "engraven on the Forehead of the Law and Light of Nature," and "owned and confirmed by the Scriptures … Hence this Law being Supreme, it limits all other Laws and Considerations."[38] Nothing could be right that was counter to it. This was the "Compass that Rulers are to steer by."[39] "Think it not enough to do no hurt," Jonathan Mitchel (1624–1668) told the Massachusetts magistrates in 1671. "Be willing to put forth thy self for the publick good according to thy Talent."[40] Ruler and citizen both were to be "studious of the common good, the weal and welfare of the whole."[41]

But what did the common good entail? For Mitchel and his compatriots, the common good necessarily included man's highest good, right religion and God himself (i.e., the universal common good).[42] "Religion is the chief and principal thing, wherein the welfare of a people stands," thundered Mitchel.

> It is impossible they should be well and do well without this, whereby they may come to serve God and glorifie him, and attain Salvation for their own Souls. The

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[33] Gurdon Saltonstall, *A Sermon Preached* … (Boston, 1697), 4.

[34] Hobart, *Civil government*, 5.

[35] See ibid., 4.

[36] Todd, *Civil rulers*, 9. See also Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 5; Samuel Whitman, *Practical godliness the way to prosperity* … (New London, 1714), 32; Azariah Mather, *Good rulers a choice blessing* (New London, 1725), 13–14; Jonathan Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall* … (Boston, 1671), 2.

[37] Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 2; ("… this is the way whereby the Ruler, as such, glorifies God … To glorifie God, is the last end and great duty of every man" [ibid., 6]).

[38] Ibid., 11.

[39] Ibid., 12.

[40] Ibid., 25.

[41] Ibid., 26–27.

[42] As Thomas Walley and Thomas Thatcher wrote in the introduction to Arnold's *David Serving his Generation* …, "Right Reason teacheth that the more common any good is, the better it is. Hence the first being is the chief good, because he is the most Common… universal good."

> weal, the excellency, end and happiness of Mankinde, lyes in true Religion: and therefore if Rulers seek the weal of a people they must needs seek the advancement and establishment of this. Hence … Religion is the chief and last end of Civil Policy.[43]

This implied, among other things, that civil authorities would enforce both tables of the Ten Commandments.

The jurisdiction of the state did not permit direct ministry to this highest good but did necessitate diaconal care for it, namely, by supporting the church and recognizing the supremacy of Christ overall.[44] Hence, "To incourage and support Religion is one of the greatest & best Ends of Government."[45] Rulers were to do this through the example of their own character as well as "taking Care for the Support of the Ministers of Religion, incouraging them to their Work; giving out Proclamations that the Ordinances of God be observed, and issuing out their Orders to pull down the Altars of strange Gods."[46] If rulers were to be a terror to evil, this was implied in their God-given duty. After all, as an institution of God, like the church, the ultimate end of government was the glorification of God, according to its power and station.

The magistrate, therefore, was to terrorize, so to speak, heresy, idolatry, and licentiousness (e.g., laziness, profaning the Sabbath, public drunkenness, etc.) according to the doctrine, standards, and confession of the church. In this way, the magistrate backed up, so to speak, the ministry, reinforcing its discipline and proclamation.[47] But the clergy also justified the state's role in religion on public grounds, namely, notorious heresy was disruptive, a threat to the social cohesion and peace of a Christian commonwealth.

Indeed, the belief that magistrates had no proper role in the care for religion was, for Puritan preachers, the root of the papist problem. The "Romish Clergy" had usurped civil authority making it impotent and thereby tearing asunder God's design. In New England, the religious role of the civil jurisdiction was properly restored.[48] The clergy guarded this restoration zealously, even into the eighteenth century. Preaching in 1749, Todd declared the suggestion that magistrates "hath Nothing to do about religious Matters" an unwelcome innovation.[49]

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[43] Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 2–3.

[44] Urian Oakes, *New-England Pleaded …* (Cambridge, 1673), 18; Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 5.

[45] Todd, *Civil rulers*, 15.

[46] Ibid., 16; see John Norton, *The Heart of New England Rent …* (Cambridge, 1659), 50.

[47] To the clergy, this was no violation of conscience; see, e.g., Nicholas Noyes, *New Englands Duty and Interest …* (Boston, 1698), 79; Stoughton, *True Interest*, 35–36; Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 18, 53–55.

[48] Todd, *Civil rulers*, 18–19.

[49] Ibid., 13.

To be sure, the church had no need for state support. She was a perfect society in that she could independently accomplish her own proper ends. That being said, "It please God ordinarily to govern the World more mediately; and when he design Good to the Church, to raise up & spirit the higher Powers to protect & help it; the People of Christ justly have their Eyes to these Vice-gerents of God for Protection and Help."[50] And this according to the promise to the church in Isaiah 60, enacted by Christ's dominion (Matt 28:18; Eph 1:22).

Accordingly, in Protestant nations, the magistrate was to be a keeper of both tables of the law and submit his ministry to Christ, caring for the purity of doctrine and worship according to his role, chiefly through support of the ministry.[51] At bare minimum, magistrates were expected to honor the Sabbath, promote the preaching of the gospel, and punish blasphemy.[52] That kings should be nursing fathers and queens nursing mothers to the church, according to Isaiah 49:23, was repeatedly invoked by colonial pulpits throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[53]

In the end, "the Interest of righteousness in the Common wealth, and Holiness in the Churches are inseparable. The prosperity of Church and Common wealth are twisted together."[54] Thus, "If there be Sickness in the Church, there will be little health in the Common-wealth … things amiss in the houses of God, are the chief cause that it goes ill with the Country."[55] Clearly, if the preachers were to be believed, the temporal authority of the colonies had an interest in keeping the spiritual authority healthy. The early modern vision of society as an organic whole implied this interdependence, and the duty of rulers to God demanded it.[56]

This view did not mean that magistrates could proffer new articles of faith, encroach on the church's discipline, or the like.[57] The church possessed her own liberty, and the temporal and spiritual powers could not be conjoined into a third kind, eroding key distinctions of nature and jurisdiction. They were to be complementary. This entailed the state's support for the spiritual

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[50] Ibid., 14; see also, Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 56; Norton, *Heart of New England*, 56.

[51] Todd, *Civil rulers*, 19; see also, Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 12.

[52] Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 13–15.

[53] See, e.g., Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 10; Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 19; James Fitch, *An Holy Connexion …* (Cambridge, 1674), 7.

[54] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 49.

[55] Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 18.

[56] See generally Otto von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900); Herbert L. Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," *Political Science Quarterly* 6.1 (March 1891): 1–28.

[57] Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 13.

power via her laws and policy. Sermons often made it clear which power or jurisdiction was to be ultimately prioritized.[58] "The Church is more dear to [God] then the Common-wealth," declared Walley in 1669. God was God to the state but Father to the church. The disparity in intimacy was clear, and this difference was directly connected to the eternal and higher nature of the church and her mission.[59] "There is a Civil Policy needful in Civil-Estate affairs," said Fitch, "but the shine is in Divine Policy … Civil Policy is a good Servant, but Divine Policy must be the Master and Ruler."[60]

Nor did this arrangement entail brutal persecution of dissenters, despite the popular narratives today. A "well-bounded Toleration," as Walley put it, was "very desirable in all Christian Common-wealths, that there may be no just occasion for any to complain of Cruelty or Persecution." But public blasphemy and idolatry were still to be punished, as well as any error that tended to "disturbing of Peace and Order in Church or State."[61]

Peace, Tranquility, and Quietness. The emphasis on the maintenance of true religion vis-à-vis the common good notwithstanding, New England clergymen acknowledged more tangible elements of the common good though material conditions were considered in "subordination to Religion."[62] Religion itself was a temporal good, though not merely so. Among "external" considerations under the magistrate's purview were the safety of his people —"they cannot possibly have well-being, without the preservation of their Being, both Personal and Political"—as well as prosperity, "in matters of outward Estate and Livelyhood."[63] Peace, tranquility, and quietness, as well as equity and order in the administration of justice, coincided with material prosperity. "Government," declared Samuel Willard (1640–1704), "is to prevent and cure the disorders that are apt to break forth among the Societies of men; and to promote the civil peace and prosperity of such a people, as well as to suppress impiety, and nourish Religion."[64]

Unity and prevention of disturbances, foreign and domestic, were the bare minimum conditions for the city on a hill to flourish.[65] In all things,

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[58] See John Norton, *The Answer* … (1648), trans. Douglas Horton (Cambridge: Belknap, 1958).

[59] Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 19; see also, Fitch, *Connexion*, 8.

[60] Fitch, *Connexion*, 14.

[61] Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 15; see also, J. M. Busted, "A Well-Bounded Toleration: Church and State in Plymouth Colony," *Journal of Church and State* 10.2 (Spring 1968): 265–79.

[62] Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 3.

[63] Ibid., 3–4.

[64] Willard, *The Character of a Good Ruler* (Boston, 1694), 3.

[65] Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 4–5; see also, Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest*, 17–18; Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 17, 21.

whether higher or lower, it was to be remembered that rulers were ministers of God and servants of their people. Indeed, "The people are not for the Rulers, but the Rulers for the people, to minister to their welfare."[66] Government, the reader will recall, was a blessing, not a curse for the colonial clergy, and especially when governors acted as true public servants. Hence, Nicholas Noyes (1647–1717), in 1698, instructed his esteemed audience, "You are the Ministers of God for our Good, & you can do nothing more acceptable to God, honourable to your Selves; nor beneficial to us; than to do your utmost to make this Land an Habitation of Justice, and Mountain of Holiness."[67] In some sense, just order was a precondition for a holy one.

2. *The Character of the Good Ruler*

Though discussion of the nature and ends of government was a foundational topic for all election sermons, no subject was more thoroughly treated than that of the character of the good ruler. It was believed that the destiny of a people was directly tied to the character of their leaders.

> We shall always find among the Israelites that Religion flourished, or langush't according to the Disposition & Practice of their Kings. And it is not to be wondered, if Magistrates are Rulers of Sodom, that those under their Conduct be the People of Gomorrah.[68]

"You are betrusted with as precious an Interest as is this day upon the Earth," preached Mitchel in 1671. That interest was "the Lives, Estates, Liberties, and Religious Enjoyments of some thousands." The eyes of the whole world and God himself were upon the magistrates, watching to see how such a weighty responsibility was stewarded.[69] For the fulfillment of this duty a ruler required a true "Compassion, so as to have a lively sense of the Condition and Concernments of this people." This, in turn, needed a "studious and solicitous" approach to the "Publick Welfare," as well as a measure of self-denial and patience, courage and constancy, wisdom and prudence, and above all, a healthy prayer life.[70]

Willard's 1694 sermon *The Character of a Good Ruler* set the tone for all subsequent discourses on the topic. Willard's progeny dutifully followed suit. Just as these preachers thought highly of government, they thought highly of those who occupied it. "Good Magistrates, good Laws, and the

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[66] Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 7.
[67] Noyes, *New-Englands Duty and Interest*, 81.
[68] Pemberton, *Divine original*, 58.
[69] Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 18–19.
[70] Ibid., 20–22; see also, Pemberton, *Divine original*, 25.

vigorous Execution of them hath been the priviledge and glory of New England," asserted Urian Oakes (1631–1681).[71]

"Rulers are Gods," thundered Pemberton in 1710, preaching on Psalm 82:6–7, "as they are God's Vicegerents." They were representatives of God's authority and justice on earth—according not to their persons but to their office—and, therefore, worthy of the utmost reverence, rivaled only by the leaders of the coordinate state, the clergy.[72] All power was derived of God, even if mediately bestowed upon men by human, constitutional means (e.g., election). Already noted is the magistrate's role in preserving religion. Good management of public religion, however, required good character in the manager. Rulers had a "double Office," insofar as they were to "maintain Justice towards men, & Piety towards God."[73]

If we could reduce the virtues of the ruler to three, per the sermons, they would be piety, justice, and prudence, all three of which were interdependent. The first criterion of electability for magistrates in colonial New England was not skill and experience but piety.[74] Indeed, if the magistrate's chief duty was to promote *public* piety and defend *true* religion, then he must himself be a possessor of *personal* piety and devotee of *true* religion. Hence, Davenport stated,

> Let Christ therefore have preheminence in all things, and in your choice of Rulers for the Commonwealth … see that they whom you choose to be Rulers, be men interressed personally in Christ: For when they that are called to Ruling Power, cease to exert it in subserviency to the Kingdom of Christ, there will be an end of New-England's Glory, and Happiness, and Safety.[75]

Piety was variously referred to as "righteousness" and "fear of God." Election preachers appealed to myriad Scriptural examples, primarily drawn from the Old Testament, to paint the picture of the pious ruler. "The Scripture plentifully shews," said Davenport, "what strong and powerful influence and efficacy, the true fear of God exerteth in reference to all Moral duties among men."[76] The end of rulers "should be to exalt Christ [not themselves] in dispensing his Government."[77] Indeed, the ministers

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[71] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 19.

[72] Pemberton, *Divine original*, 19; Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 24; Samuel Philips, *Political rulers authoriz'd and influenc'd by God …* (Boston, 1750).

[73] Willard, *Good Ruler*, 7.

[74] Whiting, *The Way of Israels Welfare*, 24.

[75] Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 11.

[76] Ibid., 10.

[77] Ibid.

directly traced a disregard for the common good to demagoguery and "the want of humility."[78]

Of course, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. These two attributes were almost always discussed in tandem and heavily emphasized. The happiness of a people was wrapped up in the wisdom of their rulers, discerned William Hubbard (1621–1704) in a lengthy 1676 oration.[79] Justice flowed from, and was regulated by, the fear of God; it was conformity to the second table of the Decalogue, whereas holiness was obedience to the first, advised Nicholas Noyes (1647–1717), and the latter was the basis of the former.[80]

Prudence, the first classical virtue, entailed self-control and assumed piety. The ruler was not to "Exert his Power Illimitedly, and Arbitrarily, but in Conformity to the Law of God, and the Light of Nature, for Gods Honour, and the promoting of the common benefit."[81] In other words, the ruler was to rule in accordance with general equity, reason, and the constitutional confines that preceded his own appointment. The good of the people required peace, order, and justice. Rulers were, therefore, to be circumspect in policy making and adjudication, making sure not needlessly to run roughshod over established customs and norms. In sum, the just ruler was one who feared God and obeyed his law, pursued the public benefit over his own, and honored the limits of his jurisdiction and rule.[82]

New England preachers were unapologetic in ascribing to rulers a paternalistic character.[83] They were to be fathers to their people. This entailed sacrificial love, but also knowledge and wisdom as to how to affect their good. Azariah Mather (1685–1737) preached in 1725 that "The great subordinate End is the Publick good; the Means and Laws of Government must be calculated to work and bring about that End & Effect." The public good was the next, immediate, or subordinate end of government since the glory of God was its final end. Then again, service of the public good was the best way to glorify God. This balance required piety and wisdom, knowledge of the "maxims" or principles that, when applied rightly, yielded this result.[84] No maxim or rule of government could contradict the law of nature or societies or run afoul the end of government itself.[85]

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[78] William Adams, *God's Eye on the Contrite …* (Boston, 1685), 22.

[79] Hubbard, *The Happiness of a People …* (Boston, 1674).

[80] Noyes, *Duty and Interest*, 8–9.

[81] Willard, *Good Ruler*, 7.

[82] Moss, *Election sermon*, 18–28; Nathaniel Appleton, *The great blessing of good rulers …* (Boston, 1742), 49.

[83] Walley, *Balm in Gilead*, 12.

[84] Mather, *Good rulers a choice blessing,* 13–14.

[85] Hobart, *Civil government*, 11.

The public good also demanded limits to magisterial power. Arbitrary power was not theirs to claim. God did not deal with his people in this way. "Absolute Dominion" that defied the "Principles of Reason" was ill-suited for "free and reasonable Beings, who need indeed to be Governed, but ought not to be Broken by the force, and weight of Power." To do otherwise was to reduce them to beasts.[86]

Hence, the good ruler "governs not by unaccountable Will, or inconstant humour … but by Stable Measures, as may best suit the Nature and Circumstances of his Subjects, and the Noble End of his Government."[87] That is to say, the good ruler rules within preestablished constitutional limits by discernable prudence born out of genuine, fatherly love for his people and right knowledge of the purpose and end of government.[88] "Kings are properly the Fathers of their People, and not Masters placed in the Throne to be Served by Slaves."[89]

More practically, beyond competence and piety, the good ruler required fortitude.

> It oftentimes happens, that the Way to please the Multitude, is, to desert the Cause of God, and betray the Interest of their Country: And, if they have Resolution enough, to stem the Current of popular Humour, and to endeavour, to the last, to prevent the Ruin a People would bring upon themselves, they will doubtless, be often censured and reproach'd, and evil intreated … [by] an unthankful People.[90]

The election day preachers advocated for the magistrates in this regard from a place of experience-wrought sympathy:

> It is the hard condition of Magistrates and Ministers that they must bear all the murmurings of discontented people, and be loaded with all the obloquies and injurious reproaches that can be. They had need be men of great meekness and patience, able to bear much, that are Pillars in the Church and Common-wealth.[91]

Rulers were highly deserving of prayer and patience, and the people were regularly warned that "If men will be despising, and censuring, and reproaching, and abusing the Gods among them … and the Angels of Churches … God can send Devils … to torment and terrifie them."[92]

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[86] Pemberton, *Divine original*, 26.
[87] Ibid., 30.
[88] Ibid., 37.
[89] Ibid., 46, 55.
[90] Todd, *Civil rulers*, 35–36.
[91] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 39.
[92] Ibid., 44.

The high bar for rulers notwithstanding, election sermons regularly reminded the audience that despite their laudable office, rulers were still fallen men prone to sin and vice. Hobart recognized the ever-present human element (of ruler and ruled) in government could destroy it, no matter how prudently it was constructed.

> Civil Government may, and too often does fail of answering it's End … This sometimes happens through the weakness or wickedness of Rulers, and sometimes through the Folly and madness of Subjects.[93]

Accordingly, people were to "make all favourable Allowances for the Infirmities, and Defects of their Rulers," and cover them with a "veil of Charity." Charitableness was derived in part from a duty to proper submissiveness to God's authorities as well as a realist reminder "not to place undue Confidences in [even] the the best Rulers."[94] All would eventually disappoint. The best rulers would realize this themselves, embrace it, and rule in all humility.[95] Only arrogant, mutinous men "can pick holes and find as many faults with our Rulers in the management of Civil and Ecclesiastical affairs."[96]

The election preachers were generally intolerant of those who made a habit of criticizing authority and public office holders.[97] However, the preachers sometimes acknowledged that there was a limit to the failings of rulers that a people could countenance.[98] For example, Pemberton noted briskly,

> Doubtless God has not left a State without a Regular Remedy to Save itself, when the Fundamental Constitution of a People is Overturned; their Laws and Liberties, Religion and Properties are openly Invaded, and ready to be made a Publick Sacrifice.[99]

The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. That being said, rebellion was generally ill-advised and rarely necessitated. Being tenacious of one's liberties was *not* synonymous with harboring "carnal confidence" in the same.[100] "When you have pious Rulers, of whose Faithfulness you have had

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[93] Hobart, *Civil government*, 5.
[94] Pemberton, *Divine original*, 70–72.
[95] Ibid., 90.
[96] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 35.
[97] Saltonstall, *Sermon Preached*, 5.
[98] Herbert Darling Foster, "The Political Theories of Calvinists before the Puritan Exodus to America," *American Historical Review* 21.3 (April 1916): 481–503.
[99] Pemberton, *Divine original*, 87.
[100] Adams, *God's Eye*, 10.

experience, Do not easily suspect them."[101] Citizens were never to complain "without cause."[102] It was "men of like infirmity" that they were electing.[103]

In the end, charity and longsuffering were mutual duties of ruler and ruled. One thing was for sure, bad rulers were a sign of judgment. In that case, "there is no Reason to complain," said James Allen (1632–1710).[104] Such a chastisement was a sign that citizens had first been derelict in their duties and was intended to humble them, returning them to the pursuit of piety and the common good.[105]

3. *The Character of the Good Citizen*

Elected officials were not the only ones addressed on election days. Hardly a sermon was given that did not forcefully remind the lay attendees of their corresponding duties to their betters. Election sermons were not a time to bash recently confirmed candidates for sport but rather a time to remind the whole commonwealth, ruler and subject, in church and state, of what God intended for, and demanded of, them. "You must submit to their Authority," Davenport told the laymen in the audience, "and perform all duties to them, whom you have chosen to be your Rulers, whether they be good or bad, by vertue of the Relation between them and you." Accordingly, electors were advised to be circumspect in their appointments. The time for scrutiny was properly prior to inauguration; thereafter, deference was owed.

The danger inherent in electing unfit and ungodly rulers pertained to the very survival of the commonwealth. The health of the commonwealth was directly tied to the conduct of the administration, just as the health of the churches was wrapped up in the zeal and faithfulness of the ministers. God could very well punish the whole for the malfeasance of the part. "If men unjust, that fear not God, be chosen Rulers of the Common-wealth," warned Davenport, "all the People are in danger of being punished by the wrath of God for the sins of their Rulers; Bad men being in publick place, will give bad counsel to corrupt Religion." To prove the point, Davenport invoked the cautionary tales of Abimelech, Jeroboam, and Manasseh.[106]

In short, it was expected that the compassionate, prudent, just ruler would be complemented by dutiful, magnanimous subjects. Whereas today it is commonplace, indeed, often encouraged, to be cynical about (even to

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[101] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded*, 52.
[102] Ibid.
[103] James Allen, *New-Englands Choicest Blessing …* (Boston, 1679), 8.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Adams, *God's Eye*, 27.
[106] Davenport, *Sermon Preach'd*, 11.

detest) public servants, New Englanders were repeatedly told to "highly prize and honour" their rulers. In part, this was because rulers were God's ordained means of maintaining "the people's weal." The style of governance and character of rulers was indicative of God's favor, or disfavor, toward a people—the blame for the latter was always located within the people themselves—but the duty of the good citizen to honor authority was somewhat impervious to circumstances. Citizens were to pray for good rulers and that "God may dispose and assist them to seek and promote your welfare," but this was not guaranteed, and true Christian citizen ethics could not depend on how favorable a regime was in a given moment. It is telling that this theme in election sermons did not waver under the tyranny of Andros,[107] nor throughout the mid-to-late eighteenth century when relations in the home government were souring.

Just as rulers are to seek the welfare of the people, so people are to be "Helpers to their own welfare." "Love thy Neighbor, much more a whole community, a multitude of thy Neighbors, is the Lord's charge to every one." This entailed more than simply the willingness to "do no hurt," but rather required that every citizen, regardless of station, spend themselves for "the public good." A "publick Spirit," perhaps above all other virtues in this context, was highly prized, and, therefore, frequently mentioned. A public spirit is sensitivity toward, and eagerness to serve, the common good. "Could [Aristotle] … produce such Sayings as these; That man was not born for himself, but for his Country … shall Christians be strangers to such a Publick Spirit, or be backward to act for the common welfare[?]" Part and parcel with serving the common good was the maintenance of order. "Keep in your places, acknowledging and attending the Order that God hath established in the place where you live."[108] Egalitarianism was not in the cards for New Englanders of the period in focus. A well-ordered society required each citizen to faithfully fulfill their role to the glory of God.

Conclusion

The optimal means for extracting insights from election sermons is reading them firsthand. Here we have sketched the skeleton upon which the flesh of every election sermon rested. Pastors desirous of bringing the pulpit to bear on politics and adjacent concerns need look no further than the

[107] See Guy Howard Miller, "Rebellion in Zion: The Overthrow of the Dominion of New England," *The Historian* 30.3 (May 1968): 439–59.

[108] Mitchell, *Nehemiah on the Wall*, 23–26.

New England model. Infinitely more effective than reactionary comment on current events and partisan politics is annually reiterating the nature, purpose, and limits of government authority, as well as the corresponding duties of ruler and subject. Better than bemoaning the gridlock of Congress, the superfluousness of government agencies, or the blunder of electoral candidates is instilling respect and charitableness toward authority and appreciation for the institution of government and reminding all parties that law and policy are inherently moral, and that government is both accountable to God and responsible for the common good of the populace.

Simultaneously, the New England template informs voters and office-holders alike of a scriptural, if aspirational, vision for society, rather than being *tossed by the wind*. Faithfully preaching such themes in season and out of season, as Puritan clergy did, is more befitting of the preaching office than the hot take, pandering screeds that pass for some political sermons today. So too does it empower the preacher over silence.

At the risk of introducing a new theme, we would be remiss if the confidence in providence vis-à-vis government that runs throughout the election sermons was not mentioned, a mood applicable in all contexts. James Allin (1692–1747), preaching in 1744, reminded the people not to panic; Christ is on the throne, and providence governs all.

> The great and sudden changes in publick affairs; the revolutions of states and kingdoms, which surprize and astonish us, are the effects of a designing mind, of an alwise cause. The various conditions and circumstances of men, that some are prosperous, others adverse; some rich, and others poor; some in dignity, while others are low and level with the earth; is not the result of meer chance, but design of Christ, and for wise ends. The beauty and glory of the whole consists very much in the variety of its parts: And the qualifications of men, for the different stations and parts they are to act, in the rank of rational beings, from Christ the fountain of wisdom.[109]

[109] Allin, *Magistracy*, 22.