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BIBLICAL TEXTS AND THEMES IN AMERICAN PURITAN PREACHING, 1630-1700

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While the American Puritans and their sermonic literature have been studied perhaps more thoroughly than most other topics in American church history, some basic questions still remain that have not been dealt with either accurately or sufficiently. Two such questions will be the focus of this article: (1) Did the Puritan clergy preach predominantly from the OT or from the NT? (2) Are there any thematic patterns discernible in their preaching, and if so, what are they?

Data for this study consist of 466 extant sermons and theological treatises in sermon form preached and written between 1630 and 1700 in the five Massachusetts towns of Boston, Cambridge, Dedham, Dorchester, and Roxbury. These five communities were selected because their early founding (prior to 1640) permits an analysis of the sermons of three generations of clergy prior to 1700. The year 1700 was selected as an appropriate ending date, since it was the seventeenth century that contained the era of Puritan religious dominance and exclusiveness in New England. While no claim is made that the sermon sample includes every extant sermon from these towns, I believe that a large majority of such sermons have been included.

1. *OT and NT Usage*

It has been assumed by at least one Puritan scholar, Emory Elliott, that the selection of sermon texts from the NT indicated sermons dealing with "mercy and grace" and a "gentle, loving, and protective Christ," while sermon texts from the OT dealt with "the image of the angry and wrathful God the Father."[1] Elliott arrives

[1]Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 13-14 (including n. 10 on p. 14).

at a figure of 113 New-England sermons based on OT texts and 104 sermons based on NT texts published between 1650 and 1695. He mentions that prior to 1650, NT texts predominated, but gives no figure.

Examination of my larger sermon sample gives a more detailed picture. An analysis of these 466 sermons shows that 196 (42.1%) were based on OT texts, whereas 270 (57.9%) were based on NT texts (see Table 1 on p. 115). Great caution should be exercised, however, in drawing conclusions as to the meaning of this data without verifying the relationship between OT or NT texts and the actual themes of the sermons based on them. Because NT texts in Elliott's sample outnumber OT ones after 1680, he concluded that there was an abandonment of the rhetoric of wrath in the last two decades of the seventeenth century, the focus on this theme being replaced with messages of assurance and hope.[2]

Is it, however, valid to assume that the Puritan ministry used one Testament or the other to emphasize a certain view of God or his dealings with men, or to assume that one Testament or the other was preferred by the clergy as a whole? A proper understanding of the Puritan view of the nature and authority of the Bible, as well as an understanding of Puritan biblical interpretation, will indicate that such assumptions are incorrect.

The Puritan clergy believed in the infallibility of the Scriptures, seeing the Bible composed of both OT and NT as the absolutely reliable, accurate, and complete Word of God.[3] The entire Bible

[2]Ibid.

[3]For a small sampling of such statements in seventeenth-century American Puritan sermons, see Thomas Shepard, *A Short Catechism Familiary Teaching The Knowledge of God, and of our Selves* (Cambridge, Mass., 1654), p. 14; *Subjection to Christ in all His Ordinances and Appointments, the best means to preserve our Liberty* (London, 1652), p. 153; Increase Mather, *David Serving His Generation* (Boston, 1698), p. 11; Samuel Willard, *Impenitent Sinners Warned of their Misery and Summoned to Judgment* (Boston, 1693), p. 4; *Humiliations follow'd with Deliverances* (Boston, 1697), pp. 4-5; John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish* (London, 1650), p. 11; Samuel Danforth, *An Astronomical Description of the Late Comet or Blazing Star, Together With a brief Theological Application thereof* (Cambridge, Mass., 1650), p. 16; John Eliot, *The Christian Commonwealth* (London, 1659), pp. 34-35; Richard Mather, *An Answer to Two Questions* (Boston, 1712; published posthumously), p. 21; John Davenport, *Gods Call to His People to Turn unto Him* (Cambridge, Mass., 1669), p. 7. See also Allen Carden, "The Word of God in Puritan New England: Seventeenth-Century Perspectives on the Nature and Authority of the Bible," *AUSS* 17 (1980): 1-16.

TABLE 1

Three Generations of Clergy and the Sermon Texts Selected (by Testament) in Sermons Preached Before 1700 in Boston, Cambridge, Dedham, Dorchester, and Roxbury, Massachusetts

First Generation (born before 1610)	*OT Texts*	*NT Texts*
John Cotton	5	24
John Wilson	2	-
Richard Mather	3	-
John Allin	1	4
John Davenport	2	-
John Eliot	-	3
Thomas Shepard	6	19
John Norton	2	27
John Oxenbridge	2	1
Total	**23**	**78**
Second Generation (born 1620-1639)		
Thomas Thacher	16	7
Jonathan Mitchel	9	24
Samuel Danforth	1	1
Urian Oakes	3	1
James Allen	6	1
Joshua Moodey	4	2
Increase Mather	39	28
Total	**78**	**64**
Third Generation (born 1640-1669)		
Samuel Willard	22	46
Josiah Flynt	7	19
William Adams	4	-
Nathaniel Gookin	19	24
John Danforth	1	1
William Brattle	1	11
Cotton Mather	41	26
Joseph Belcher	-	1
Total	**95**	**128**
Grand Total	**196**	**270**

was deemed worthy of acceptance. Consequently, sermon texts were drawn from all parts of the Bible, and virtually every word of every text was gleaned for every possible shade of meaning. When it came to the written Word of God, there was "no part unprofitable." John Cotton testified that "I never yet observed any part of a Scripture . . . but without carnall affection, or straining of wit, it might holily be applyed both with power and profit, and delight to an honest heart."[4]

The tremendous variety of biblical sermon texts used in the pulpits of the Massachusetts towns of Boston, Cambridge, Dedham, Dorchester, and Roxbury between 1630 and 1700 can be seen in the fact that of the sixty-six books accepted as canonical by most Protestants (including the Puritans), extant sermon texts were drawn from fifty-two of them. Books of the Bible not represented in my sample of extant sermon texts are Ruth, Lamentations, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, and Zephaniah in the OT and 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude in the NT. It is thus evident that Puritan preaching was not oriented more toward the OT than to the NT, but that a balance was maintained. This gives further credence to the idea that the Puritan clergy accepted the Bible in its totality as the Word of God.

A comparison of sermon texts with the actual doctrinal themes in the sermons indicates that clear-cut differences between OT and NT preaching are hard to find. Had Elliott delved more deeply into the Puritan clergy's view of the Bible, he would have discovered that both Testaments were perceived as a unity, with Christ as the focal point of each. Hence, some OT texts were used as the basis for sermons about Christ's love, just as some NT passages were used to denounce sin and to warn of judgment.

2. *Typology*

Utilization of typology as a method of biblical interpretation by the Puritan clergy helps in understanding their belief in the unity of both Testaments. The use of "types" was in itself a biblical concept whereby OT characters, rituals, places, etc., were viewed as symbols or foreshadowings of NT realities. Thus most OT passages were interpreted with a dual meaning—a past reality

[4]John Cotton, *Of the Holiness of Church Members* (London, 1650), p. 69.

or symbol which served as the type and pointed to the antitype, or a later or still future reality, which was always "something more glorious than the type." Samuel Willard explained that "as to the Histories of the Old Testament, besides that they are Exemplary and Written for our Admonition, there are many persons and things recorded in them, which are also Typical, referring to Christ and to spiritual things."[5]

Biblical typology was not a novel idea to the Puritan divines of New England. This system of interpreting the Scriptures was clearly based on a Reformation precedent and served as a basic system of linking the OT with the NT. In recent years, historians have finally come to realize that "an understanding of typology is central to reading Puritan texts and to identifying the references of Puritan imagery," and that "to be unaware of typological traditions is to distort basic Puritan beliefs."[6]

Some of the types expounded in the sermonic literature included God's ordering of the details of the Jewish Tabernacle as a type of the "Gospel Church," Noah's Ark also as a "Type of Gods Church" (with Christ as the door), the promised land of Canaan as a type of heaven, and the sun-darkened Shulammite woman of the Song of Solomon as a type of a sinful church.[7] Israel's deliverance from Egypt was interpreted as "a type of God's people coming out of sin, and passing through the red sea of Christ's blood, and going

[5]Samuel Willard, *The Child's Portion* (Boston, 1684), p. 7; *The Man of War* (Boston, 1699), p. 4.

[6]Thomas M. Davis, "The Traditions of Puritan Typology," in Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *Typology and Early American Literature* (Amherst, Mass., 1972), p. 11. For a survey of the development of a typological view of the Bible, see Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London, 1960).

[7]Samuel Willard, *The Sinfulness of Worshipping God With Men's Institutions* (Boston, 1691), p. 15; Cotton Mather, *Work upon the Ark* (Boston, 1689), p. 4; Samuel Willard, sermon of March 10, 1686, *Substance of Sermons delivered by Several Ministers in Boston*, MS by Cotton Mather, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; Increase Mather, *The Mystery of Israel's Salvation, Explained and Applyed* (London, 1669), p. 54; Jonathan Mitchel, *A discourse of The Glory To which God hath called Believers by Jesus Christ* (Boston, 1721; published posthumously), p. 197; Thomas Shepard, *The Church Membership of Children, and Their Right to Baptisme* (Cambridge, Mass., 1663), p. 6; John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles, or Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), pp. 23, 24, 31.

through the wilderness of temptations."[8] Baptism was interpreted as a type of affliction and cleansing in the blood of Christ, the Babylonian captivity of Israel was viewed as "a type of that great captivity, partly of sin, which God's people are subject to be drawn to," and Israel's wars to drive out the pagan Canaanites were paralleled with the believers' wars to drive sin out of their lives.[9] The destruction of Jerusalem and dissolution of the Jewish state was interpreted as "a type of the great day of Judgment." Most of ancient Israel's recorded experiences were seen to have meaning for the saints of New England; Urian Oakes even went so far as to refer to "New-England-Israel" in one of his sermons.[10]

The greatest and most frequent antitype in Puritan sermons was Christ, who was seen as the principal subject of the Bible in both Testaments. Some of the OT types seen as prefiguring Christ included Samson, the Mosaic Tabernacle and the later temple, and the "tree of life" in the Garden of Eden, as well as Moses, Joseph, Adam, and Solomon. King David was viewed as typifying Christ as the head of the Church, the OT high priest was seen as a type of Christ's making intercession to God for the saints, and the penitential sacrifices of the Mosaic Law were considered as prefiguring Christ's sacrifice.[11]

[8]John Cotton, *The Way of Life* (London, 1641), p. 157.

[9]John Cotton, *The Saints Support & Comfort, In the Time of Distress and Danger* (London, 1658), pp. 32, 34; Urian Oakes, *The Unconquerable, All Conquering, & more-then-conquering Soldier* (Cambridge, Mass., 1647), p. 12.

[10]Urian Oakes, *New England Pleaded with, And pressed to consider the things which concern her Peace at least in this her Day* (Cambridge, Mass., 1673), pp. 17, 23.

[11]Thomas Shepard, *The Saints Jewel* (Boston, 1708; published posthumously), p. 46; John Norton, *Three Choice and Profitable Sermons Opened and Applyed* (Boston, 1686), pp. 121, 136; John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* (London, 1651), pp. 2, 78; Cotton Mather, *Batteries Upon the Kingdom of the Devil* (London, 1695), p. 48; Willard, *The Sinfulness*, p. 15; John Cotton, *The Bloudy Tenent, Washed, And made white in the bloud of the Lambe* (London, 1647), p. 72; Cotton, *Exposition of Canticles*, p. 21; Increase Mather, *Mystery of Israel's Salvation*, p. 125; Samuel Willard, *The Doctrine of the Covenant of Redemption* (Boston, 1693), pp. 9-10, 43; John Eliot, *The Harmony of the Gospels* (Boston, 1687), p. 53; Samuel Willard, *Covenant-Keeping The Way to Blessedness* (Boston, 1682), p. 78; idem, *The Character of a Good Ruler* (Boston, 1694), p. 6; Cotton Mather, *A Present from a Farr Countrey* (Boston, 1698), pp. 36, 40; Norton, *Three Sermons*, pp. 33-34.

In Puritan thinking, the primary subject of the Bible was Christ and the plan of salvation available through him. With this belief held in common, Puritan interpreters could find general agreement in the rendering of many scriptural passages. John Cotton asked, "What were the [OT] ceremonies but shadows of Christ . . . ? All the understanding Israelites did see that these things did point at Christ."[12] Cotton Mather displayed his enthusiasm for typological interpretations as he proclaimed,

> Among all the many Subjects which a Preacher of the Gospel has to insist upon, I know not whether any would carry a greater mixture of pleasure and profit, than that of the Types which exhibited Evangelical Mysteries unto Israel of old. . . . In every Chapter of the Bible, there is to be found something of our Blessed Jesus . . . every paragraph of the Bible is a spot of Ground where before we dig far, we shall find the Pearl of Great Price [Christ]. . . . And not only the Person of the Messiah, but His Conditions, and the Miseries, and the Enemies, from which we are by Him delivered: All of these were Preached in and by those Types of old.[13]

Increase Mather stated that when it came to the Mosaic Law, "All the Ceremonies did one way or another point at Christ."[14] John Norton concurred, preaching that "truths of Christ are laid up under the types of the Ceremonial Law, [so that] if you understood it, you would see Christ through it. . . ."[15] John Cotton, in referring to the Psalms, stated that they were "full of Christ, as [are] other Scriptures."[16] Cotton Mather summarized Puritan biblical interpretation in pithy fashion when he stated, "In short, Jesus Christ is the key that unlocks all the Scriptures. We have searched the Scriptures, and know them to good purpose, when we

[12]John Cotton, *A Sermon Preached by the Reverend, Mr. John Cotton, Teacher of the First Church in Boston in New-England* (Boston, 1713; published posthumously), p. 23.

[13]Cotton Mather, *Work upon the Ark*, pp. 1-2 of Introd., and p. 2.

[14]Increase Mather, *Practical Truths Tending to Promote the Power of Godliness* (Boston, 1682), p. 95.

[15]Norton, *Three Sermons*, p. 33.

[16]John Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes a Gospel Ordinance* (London, 1647), p. 4.

have dug so far into them, as to find them all testifying of the Lord Jesus Christ."[17]

3. *Sermon Themes: General Overview*

Having given evidence for the Puritan view of the unity of both OT and NT in the person of Christ, I will now examine the sermons of the three generations of Massachusetts clergy from the standpoint of determining what general themes are discernible. Along with this, an examination will be made of the biblical texts used as a basis for the sermons within each generation, and within each sermonic theme.

Table 1 (on p. 115, above) divides the ministers of the five communities into three generations based on the years of their births: (1) those born prior to 1610, all of whom were English-born and educated; (2) those born 1620-1639, most of them English-born and educated at Harvard College; and (3) those born 1640-1669 in New England and educated at Harvard. Also indicated in Table 1 is the number of pre-1700 extant sermons based on OT and NT texts for each minister.

Once again, caution must be exercised in interpreting the data. While it does appear that the first and third generations of clergy in Table 1 preached more often from the NT, and the second generation chose more sermon texts from the OT, this fact in itself is less meaningful than knowing the themes of the sermons.

Analysis of the sermon sample made it apparent that certain themes predominated. In fact, it was possible to categorize 375 of the 466 sermons into five general thematic areas: (1) the person and work of Christ, (2) the problem of sin, (3) the call to salvation, (4) the call to holy living, and (5) family relationships in the church and in the home. The remaining 91 sermons dealt with a wide range of topics, difficult to categorize thematically.

Although many, if not most, of the sermons dealt with secondary themes as well as with a primary theme, it is the primary themes that fall within the scope of the present study. This primary theme of a sermon is fairly easy to discern, both from the Bible text used and from the fact that the format of Puritan sermons included

[17]Cotton Mather, *Addresses to Old Men, and Young Men, and Little Children* (Boston, 1690), p. 10.

a doctrinal statement (that is, a formal statement of the principal teaching to be expounded in the sermon). The doctrinal statement was nearly always related very closely to the selected Bible text and often was merely a rephrasing of it. Stating a doctrine served to give focus to the entire sermon, and to let the congregation know clearly just what the main point of the homily was going to be. When a sermon was deemed worthy of publication, the doctrine was clearly marked with a large "D" or "DOCT:" or "DOCTRINE," so that the reader could not miss it (a boon for the modern researcher as well as the Puritan saint).

Table 2 (on p. 123) indicates the number and percentage of sermons preached on the five general themes by each generation of ministers, as well as the source (OT or NT) for those sermons.

4. *Sermon Themes: Analysis of the Five Main Categories*

Sin

In all three generations combined, the theme most frequently used in the sermons was that of sin. Such sermons could take several approaches. Some dealt with a condemnation of specific sins, some with the concept of sin in general and its impact on the community and the individual; many sermons on this topic dealt with the spiritual consequences of sin and the availability of forgiveness through true repentance.

Sin was frequently defined by the clergy, but its essence was seen as disobedience to God and "His Word" (a favorite Puritan designation for the Bible). Nathaniel Gookin described sin as "ye want of conformity unto, or ye transgression of gods law in Some act of man."[18] According to Cotton Mather, "Sin is in the very Nature of it, a Departure from God: and therefore it is a departure from that Felicity and Fruition which is most of all to be desired."[19] In the eyes of Samuel Willard, "every sin is an act of disobedience to that God, on whom we have our entire dependence, and to

[18]Nathaniel Gookin, sermon [1687], *Sermon Notes*, 1687, MS, Harvard University Library, Cambridge, Mass., p. 118.

[19]Cotton Mather, *Pillars of Salt* (Boston, 1699), p. 10.

whom we owe our selves and our whole lives."[20] Cotton Mather became vehement in his warning and denunciation of what sin did to mankind: "Let us Beware of every Sin: for Sin will Turn a Man into a Devil. Oh! Vile Sin, horrid SIN, cursed SIN; or to speak a more Pungent word, than all of that; Oh SINFUL Sin; how Pernicious art thou unto the Souls of Men!"[21]

Since the ministry viewed sin as the cause of spiritual death for the non-elect, and the cause of great misery even for those elected to salvation, they felt compelled to denounce sin repeatedly from the pulpit. For all three generations of preachers, sermons based on the theme of sin numbered 115, comprising 24.7% of the total sermons analyzed. The percentage of sermons dealing primarily with sin was lowest for the first generation of clergy and highest for the second generation, while the third generation preached on this theme nearly as frequently as the second generation. It is interesting to note that while the second generation preached against sin primarily from the OT, the third generation turned more often to the NT for its discussion of sin. This further demonstrates the "interchangeability" of both Testaments in Puritan preaching.

Holiness

The second most frequent theme in the sermons under study was that of holiness. The clergy recognized that the life of the saint was not an easy one; sin lurked in every shadow, and the old nature of the best of saints could easily be revived, causing their Christian experience to run amuck. Although most of the clergy denounced the merit of good works in obtaining salvation, it was agreed that the saints had definite responsibilities to God following conversion. Believers were, as the Bible put it, the "temple of God,"[22] and they should conduct themselves accordingly. The not-yet regenerate members of the congregation were also urged to live lives of holiness, not in order to earn their salvation, but rather for the good of the covenanted community. It was, of course, the Bible—or

[20]Samuel Willard, *Impenitent Sinners Warned of their Misery and Summoned to Judgment* (Boston, 1699), p. 4.

[21]Cotton Mather, *The Way to Excel* (Boston, 1697), p. 26.

[22]Cotton Mather, *Holiness of Church Members*, p. 48 (Bible quotation from 2 Cor 6:16).

TABLE 2

Biblical Themes and Texts (by Testament) in Sermons by Three Generations of Clergy

	Theme:	*Sin*		*Holiness*		*Salvation*		*Christ*		*Family of God*		*All Sermon Texts Regardless of Theme*	
	Text:	OT	NT	OT	NT	OT	NT	OT	NT	OT	NT	OT	NT
ALL GENERATIONS	No. of sermons per OT and NT	64	51	41	62	19	71	10	37	9	11	196	270
	Total sermons	115		103		90		47		20		(includes 91 uncategorized sermons	
	% of sermons on each theme	24.7%		22.1%		19.3%		10.1%		4.3%		or 19.5% of total)	
FIRST GENERATION	No. of sermons per OT and NT	6	9	2	23	10	17	1	20	0	1	23	78
	Total sermons	15		25		27		21		1		(includes 12 uncategorized sermons	
	% of sermons on each theme	14.8%		24.8%		26.7%		20.8%		1.0%		or 11.9% of total)	
SECOND GENERATION	No. of sermons per OT and NT	29	7	13	17	2	10	4	12	2	0	78	64
	Total sermons	36		30		12		16		2		(includes 46 uncategorized sermons	
	% of sermons on each theme	25.3%		21.1%		8.5%		11.3%		1.4%		or 32.4% of total)	
THIRD GENERATION	No. of sermons per OT and NT	29	35	26	22	7	44	5	5	7	10	95	128
	Total sermons	64		48		51		10		17		(includes 33 uncategorized sermons	
	% of sermons on each theme	28.7%		21.5%		22.9%		4.5%		7.6%		or 14.8% of total)	

more accurately, the Puritan interpretation of the Bible—that provided clergy and laity alike with guidelines for saintly behavior and attitudes.

The sermon sample contains 103 sermons dealing with the theme of holiness, or 22.1% of the total sermons for all three generations. The emphasis given to this theme is more constant for the three generations than is the case with the other sermon themes: 24.8% for the first generation, 21.1% for the second generation, and 21.5% for the third generation. The first-generation clergy preached on the theme of holiness primarily from the NT, the second generation showed a slight preference for the NT, and the third generation preached on this theme a little more often from the OT.

Salvation

Sermons preached on the theme of salvation numbered 90, accounting for 19.3% of the sermons for all three generations. The Puritans' acute awareness of sin undoubtedly served to make them very conscious of the necessity of personal spiritual salvation. Christ's work of reconciling man and God was desperately needed, since "all flesh is corrupt."[23] It was clear to the Puritan ministry that according to the Word, "all men by nature do need salvation Jn. 3.16."[24] "We are all by nature children of wrath and Enemies [of God]," according to William Adams, "but they who are gotten into Christ they are thereby reconciled, Co. 1:21, 22."[25]

The clergy, by preaching rather frequently on the theme of salvation, clearly recognized that by no means had their entire congregations undergone conversion experiences. This was true as much for the first generation of ministers—in fact, their sermons dealing with a call to salvation made up the largest single percentage among the five main sermon topics (26.7%). The second generation showed a greatly reduced emphasis on this theme (8.5%),

[23]Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, p. 168.

[24]William Brattle, sermon of July 30, 1699, Sermon Notes, Aug. 3, 1699-July, 1706, MS, Harvard University Library, Cambridge, Mass.

[25]William Adams, *The Necessity of the Pouring out of the Spirit from on High upon a Sinning Apostatizing people, Set under Judgment in Order to their Merciful Deliverance and Salvation* (Boston, 1679), p. 38.

while a renewed surge of interest in the topic of salvation appeared in the sermons of the third generation (22.9%), who preached during a time of perceived declension and tapering off of conversion experiences. For this theme, a large percentage of sermon texts were drawn from the NT, although the OT was used frequently, as well.

Person and Work of Christ

The fourth sermon theme, in order of frequency, was that of the person and work of Christ. Sermons with this as the primary theme account for 10.1% of the sermons for all three generations.

It is of interest to note that of all the sermons on the theme of Christ, over one-fourth of them were based on OT texts. This should not be surprising, however, in light of Puritan typological interpretation of the OT and perception of Christ as the focal point of the whole Bible.

A thorough and accurate understanding of Christ was crucial to the Puritan cause, for without a knowledge and belief in "fundamental Truths, about ye Lord christ," the unregenerate sinner "cannot be saved." According to Increase Mather, these essential truths included: "That Jesus of Nazareth is ye true Messiah, John 8.24"; "That Jesus christ is ye Eternal son of God"; "That Jesus christ is Man as well as god"; "That Hee is ye only mediator [between man and God]"; and "That salvation is obtained only from him, and ye merit of his Righteousness."[26]

"Unless we preach who Christ is," stated William Brattle, "it is in vain to preach faith, for none can believe in him who they know nothing of."[27] This knowledge was extremely important in Puritan eyes, because "they that remain ignorant of Christ, must be in danger of death, yea of eternal Death."[28]

Sermons about Christ comprised 20.8% of the categorized sermons for the first generation of pastors, 11.3% for the second generation, and 4.5% for the third generation. It was perhaps a lack of preaching about Christ in the latter part of the seventeenth century that caused Increase Mather to lament, "It is marvellous to

[26]Increase Mather, Sermon of March 21, 1686, *Substance of Sermons*, MS, Harvard University Library, p. 77.

[27]Brattle, Sermon of Sept. 17, 1699, *Sermon Notes*, MS, n.p.

[28]Increase Mather, *Mystery of Christ*, p. 42.

consider what Ignorance is in many that call themselves Christians; . . . if they be examined about Christ, they are found exceeding ignorant."[29]

Family Relationships

A fifth thematic categorization is based on sermons dealing with the concept of the family of God in its various aspects. When it came to explaining God's relationship to man as well as man's relationship to his fellow man, the Bible authors frequently used the human family as an analogy. This biblical approach was deemed important by the Puritan clergy, who placed a strong emphasis on human relationships and who viewed church and community in familial terms. The saints were conceptualized as being members of the family of God, and a good deal of Puritan theology was pictured in domestic terms. For the Puritans, the family was the first institution created by God and served as the basic model which God had ordained for society.[30]

Several of the sermons on this theme call for strengthening of domestic life. Increase Mather, for example, stressed the importance of families and in 1679 bemoaned what he perceived as their decline: "Families are the Nurceryes for Church and Commonwealth, ruine Families, and ruine all. Order them well and the public State will fare the better; the great wound and misery of New England is that Families are out of order."[31]

Other sermons used the family theme to describe God's relationship to man. Cotton Mather devoted a lengthy sermon to an explanation of the ways in which God is our Father.[32] Joshua Moodey described divinely appointed adversity as "Fatherly chastisement."[33] Nathaniel Gookin urged his congregation to think of God "not so much as a Revenger but as a gracious father in Heaven." Gookin also comforted his hearers with the fact that

[29]Ibid., p. 38.

[30]See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, new ed. (New York, 1966), p. 133.

[31]Increase Mather, *A Call from Heaven* (Boston, 1679).

[32]In Cotton Mather, *Addresses*, beginning on p. 96.

[33]Joshua Moodey, sermon of March 4, 1686, *Substance of Sermons*, MS, Huntington Library, p. 1.

believers "are ye children of god, they may call god their father"; as to "their new birth, they have god for their father . . . they are ye objects of the redeeming love of god."[34] Samuel Willard emphasized that at the time of their conversions, the saints "are taken into God's Family, and that not as Servants but as Children, there to abide forever, Joh. 8.35." In light of this, Willard went on to urge the saints to "love God with a filial affection."[35]

Although the number of sermons dealing primarily with the concept of the family of God in church, community, and domestic life numbered only twenty, references to this topic as a secondary theme can be found in numerous sermons. It is noteworthy that the third generation of ministers provided the vast majority of such sermons, and that they went to both Testaments for biblical texts. In the last two decades or so of the seventeenth century, many of the clergy perceived a growing apostasy on the part of New England's children. Increase Mather sadly observed in 1679 that "there is a doleful degeneracy appearing in the face of this generation [of youth], and no man can say, but that the body of the present generation will perish both temporally and eternally. . . ."[36]

5. *Conclusion*

Even though the extant sermons make up a small percentage of the total sermons preached in the seventeenth century in the five Massachusetts towns of Boston, Cambridge, Dedham, Dorchester, and Roxbury, several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of them presented above. One is that the clergy had a very high regard for the Scriptures of both OT and NT. Not only was every sermon based on a biblical text, but the sermons also contain numerous—often scores—of supporting texts drawn widely from throughout the Bible, regardless of the location of the principal text.

To make generalizations about the nature of Puritan theology based solely on the clergy's choice of OT or NT texts, however, is

[34]Nathaniel Gookin, sermon of June 8, 1690, *Sermon Notes*, Apr. 24-Aug. 13, 1690, MS, Harvard University Library, p. 22; sermon [1687], *Sermon Notes*, 1687, MS, Harvard University Library, p. 13.

[35]Samuel Willard, *The Child's Portion* (Boston, 1684), pp. 15-19.

[36]Increase Mather, *Call From Heaven*, p. 19.

relatively meaningless and can be very misleading. It is also clear that the clergy saw Christ as the focal point of both Testaments, and that through the interpretive system of typology they had a rationale for the unity of both Testaments. Perhaps the most obvious conclusion to be reached concerning the clergy's use of OT and NT for sermon texts is that they drew freely from both Testaments for these texts. No theme relied solely on one Testament for proof texts; the clergy saw the whole Bible as a unified, useful source of sermon material. The clergy's use of Scripture in this manner was consistent with their stated belief that the entire Bible was the inspired, authoritative, cohesive, and non-contradictory Word of God.

An examination of the doctrinal teachings of the sermons leads to the conclusion that certain broad themes recurred in Puritan preaching throughout the seventeenth century. These themes point out the major concerns of the ministry: that their congregations have a keen awareness of sin, that they be challenged and encouraged to holy living, that they experience God's salvation, that they know about Christ and his role in bringing salvation, and that they realize their position as members of the family of God.

Among the three generations of seventeenth-century Puritan clergy in the Massachusetts towns under study, a basic theological unity and continuity appears to have existed. The same general themes are evidenced in the great majority of the sermons of all three generations of ministers, although the emphasis given to the themes did vary considerably in some cases. It should be pointed out, however, that among the ministers within each generation, a variation of thematic emphasis can also be seen. Nevertheless, each generation as a whole did display certain characteristic emphases.

It can be concluded, furthermore, that among the ministerial fellowship of the seventeenth century, there was flexibility and freedom in the selection of sermon material, yet at the same time there existed a set of limits within which one could expect most sermons to fall. These limits were the themes (and topics within those themes) with which the Bible dealt extensively and to which the ministry were attracted because of events and trends which were perceived by each generation as having importance for New England's "errand into the wilderness."