

KING DEPOSED:  
NEW RELIGIOUS RHETORIC  
REIGNS ON AMERICAN FRONTIER

by

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The original religious rhetoricians in America were Puritan preachers. Rhetoric was their central task and was a formidable force in their culture. Moreover, since "the sermon was the most typical and influential of ... early American culture-shaping institutions,"<sup>1</sup> their practices primarily determined religious rhetorical patterns for almost three centuries. Thus, we can assert that the king of American rhetoric until the beginning of the nineteenth century was Puritan rhetoric. Although, this king's reign was an extended one, it was not without challenges. By the middle of his first century, the king was being challenged by some of his once-loyal subjects through the rhetoric of the Half-way Covenant. Later, as his reign entered its second century, challenges came both from within his ranks and from outside his ranks through the rhetoric of the Great Awakening. Each challenge weakened Puritanism's rule over rhetoric, and when the final challenge came during the Second Great Awakening, the king could no longer sustain his power. Thus, a new rhetoric took the throne and ruled America, especially on the western frontier.

This paper sketches the nature of the original Puritan rhetoric, examines the early and middle challenges, and sets forth the details of the confrontation leading to the ultimate downfall of the once mighty rhetorical ruler. It then demonstrates how one native rhetoric, that of the Disciples of Christ, played a dominant role as the king was finally deposed.

Among the influences that gave Puritan rhetoric its form, theology was foremost and is the primary concern in this discussion. Puritan theology, derived primarily from John Calvin and with the absolute sovereignty of God as its foundation, set forth five emphases which dominated the rhetoric: (1) total depravity, (2) election and predestination, (3) limited atonement, (4) the irresistibility of God's grace, and (5) the perseverance of the saints. The first two emphases set up an impossible situation in which man was inherently, totally sinful and needed to be reconciled to God. However, God was so holy and sovereign that He was inapproachable. Since man was totally depraved, he could not develop saving faith; he was completely helpless. Saving faith, like grace, was the gift of God to those whom God had arbitrarily elected and then predestined to be saved. Once God revealed to an individual that he was elect, the person could not reject the gift of grace; and having received the gift, he could never lose it. The primary instrument in aiding men to discover if they were among the elect, and hence to receive

saving grace, was the sermon. Using this instrument extensively, as well as intensively, Puritan preachers pointed to the conversion process: (1) knowledge and understanding of biblical doctrines, (2) acceptance of the righteousness of God revealed in the doctrines, (3) conviction of one's own unrighteousness and sinful condition in contrast to God's righteousness, (4) fear because of one's damnation, (5) awareness of the possible presence of saving faith, (6) an unsettling, agonizing struggle between doubt and faith and fear and confidence, (7) and, finally, if God had chosen, the overwhelming assurance of election and saving grace. This led the Puritans to accept into the church membership only those who could demonstrate election by relating a satisfactory experience of saving grace. Thus, church membership was restrictive since it was equivalent to election and salvation and emphasized a unique, mystical experience.

This theological position was strongly responsible for determining the form and purpose of the rhetoric. In order for listeners to know and understand doctrine the sermon first had to be directed to the intellect. Only after the intellect had been addressed sufficiently could the sermon rightly address the emotions. "Religion was personal and emotional; but it was first reasonable and reasoning!"<sup>2</sup> So, Puritan rhetoric took as its dominant pattern a two part structure, the first part focusing on application of doctrine and motivational appeals.<sup>3</sup> Preachers of the first generation strove to maintain a strict balance between the two parts of the sermon and to balance the purposes of the parts. Since true faith was based on knowledge,

it must be the result of understanding biblical doctrines and rational acceptance of them. The personal experience of faith followed this understanding, and only in this order should the affections be evoked. In other words, the intellect accepted the understanding of doctrine, the will embraced it, and finally, the emotions were challenged and allowed to be expressed. Through participation in this rhetorical activity the elect would eventually experience saving grace and faith, while the non-elect would seek the experience in vain. Because this was the primary path to assurance of election and thus to salvation, everyone had to participate.

An early challenge to this ruling rhetoric came from within the king's own community in the form of the Half-way covenant. This covenant resulted over concern for the spiritual status of the children of church members and a decline in church membership following 1650. As children of the elect, they had been baptized. However, when they grew up, many failed to relate a saving experience and enter membership. Then, as they had children, the crisis increased because their children were not entitled to baptism. Thus, church membership declined. In 1662, the issue was addressed by the Half-way Covenant which stated that "the baptized but unregenerate children of the founders would continue to be considered partial church members and their own offspring would be eligible for baptism and partial membership."<sup>4</sup> Partial membership meant that they were enrolled in the



church but could not partake of the Lord's Supper, vote in the church, or have the civil franchise until they demonstrated election. "An immediate effect . . . was to rend the uniformity of New England thought."<sup>5</sup> In addition, this Covenant led to a division in the uniformity of the rhetoric. While some continued to preach in the traditional mode of bringing about the assurance of election, others began to extend half-way membership to any individual who gained knowledge of Scripture and its doctrines, led a moral life, and professed faith. As baptised but unconverted people came into the churches, some preachers began to address them as though their faculties had been freed from the paralysis of original depravity. Then, motivational appeals began to intrude upon the doctrinal section of the sermon rather than being restricted to the application section. The once-seamless robe worn by our rhetorical king began to come apart as numerous subjects of his realm pulled in different directions, while bidding the king to sanction their particular rhetorical practices. In an effort to keep their king looking respectable, Puritans attempted to repair his rhetorical robe by sewing it together with three distinct seams in the form of three rhetorical emphases: (1) the anti-rational, anti-intellectual emphasis stressing emotional zeal typified by Solomon Stoddard, (2) the anti-emotional emphasis stressing the rational approach typified by Thomas Brattle and Benjamin Coleman, and (3) the moderate emphasis stressing a balanced

retention intellect and emotion typified by Increase and Cotton Mather. A critical insight at this point is that each emphasis still kept Calvinism at its center, even if in a modified form, and the king continued to sit in the throne (even though he now wore a royal robe tattered by the tribulations of rhetorical rebellions). However, his power was less secure than it had been.

The coming of the Great Awakening in the 1700's confronted Calvinistic rhetoric with a new and stronger challenge to its reign. George Whitefield, the preacher who epitomized the Great Awakening, was a committed Calvinist. However, even as he stressed depravity, justification by faith, and election, he set up a theological and rhetorical conflict: either one is elect and his salvation is predestined or one can actively participate with God for salvation. If the former is true, why preach to the masses and urge them to strive for justification? If the latter is true, why talk about predestination and election? Thus, Whitefield and other revivalists unwittingly opened the gates of the royal grounds for the entry of Arminian theology and its rhetorical pattern, and this eventually led to the downfall of Calvinism as king of American religious rhetoric.

The Great Awakening was an intimate part of a cultural revolution that swept America in the second half of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century. Politically, disestablishment centered in the Revolutionary War. Religiously, disestablishment began with the Revolution and continued during the decades following the

American victory, thus in part becoming a religious expression of democracy in action. Economically, free land and opportunity in the West spurred the growth of democratic individualism. Those who joined this cultural revolution were looking for opportunities to improve their lives.

"They were full of courage, impatient of restraint, lovers of liberty, and firm believers in the doctrine of equality," according to William Warren Sweet.<sup>6</sup> They were quite willing to accept new ideas in order to build a thoroughly democratic society; and as they experienced political and economic liberty, they desired the same in religion.

Therefore, while the democratic spirit increased in influence, Calvinistic rhetoric decreased in influence as it lost its appeal for numerous people who participated in the intense individualism of secular rhetorics. Calvinism's five points had developed into rhetorical dramas depicting individuals as totally helpless to act in behalf of their salvation. These dramas appealed to those who originally participated in them, at least in part because they lived in a social system based upon a hereditary class structure in which the only hope for commoners to reach a position of eminence was to do so in the world hereafter. The dramas were further validated because those early participants lived in a religious community which based status on divine right rather than on human or inherited privilege. However, these appeals lost their sanction in a culture of yeoman farmers on the American frontier. In this culture the

Calvinistic dramas were challenged by democratic depictions of faith in natural reason, individualism, personal worth and equality, right of private judgment, and the value of voluntary organizations. For most American westerners the Calvinistic rhetorical emphasis became, in the words of Authur Schlessenger, Jr., "unreasonable. . . and unbearable."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it was simply incompatible with secular rhetorics which arose to explain the reality of the new Western culture. Thus, the conditions of the frontier created a propitious time for the emergence of new rhetorical patterns to celebrate the culture's new conditions.

Arminianism, which infiltrated American religious rhetoric during the Great Awakening, became a full-grown force in the early nineteenth century during the Second Great Awakening. Arminian theology fostered a rhetoric which dramatized listeners as men of free will, fully capable of participating with God in salvation. Instead of being antagonists who were totally unable to act in behalf of their own salvation, listeners were challenged to picture themselves as leading characters in a drama which depicted them as extremely valuable to God, the objects of a plan to salvation for all men, and people who were fully free to cooperate with God in working out their salvation. Arminian theology and rhetoric replaced Calvinism's abstruse and complex concepts with simplicity and intelligibility, replaced the most significant character in the drama

of salvation, the God of wrath, with a God of love, and replaced man as a helpless creature with man as an active agent in the process of salvation. Arminianism tended to become "the theology of the common man, since its principal tenets jibed with his . . . experience."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the scene was set for the ultimate clash between the two rhetorical approaches and for the final defeat of Calvinism as king of American religious rhetoric.

One pertinent force which joined the battle and fought vigorously to overthrow the king was the Disciples of Christ, a religious movement born and bred on the American frontier during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The rapid growth of the Disciples during their early decades testifies to the power of their persuasion. Although they did not exist as a movement until 1809, by 1850 they numbered 118,000 members and constituted the sixth largest Protestant body in America.<sup>9</sup> Early Disciples' leaders had been Presbyterian subjects of King Calvinism who revolted and developed a rhetoric dramatizing the value and dignity of man and the place of common sense in conversion. Their rhetoric insisted that man was not inherently depraved and thus not under an inevitable necessity to sin. Rather, man was prone to evil and easily seduced to sin, but he was free to yield to sin or refrain from it. Moreover, in his freedom of will, man had a responsible part to play in God's plan of salvation.

The Disciples' rhetorical practice was shaped by claims that assumed that "God was no less reasonable than the best men" and that he had set forth a reasonable plan of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

The Disciples came into the rhetorical scene at a time when the most popular rhetorical approaches, whether Calvinistic or Arminian, "saw the upheaval of emotional experience as God's sign of His sovereign act by which he did what no man could do."<sup>11</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, the revivalist in the first half of the nineteenth century, was typical in regarding overt, emotionalistic experience as essential to conversion, and consequently he made the "mourner's bench" or "anxious seat" a vital part of the conversion process. "Praying through" to assurance of salvation seems to have been the nineteenth century remnant of traditional Calvinism's experience of the assurance of election. The psychological (i.e., emotive) experience which followed the intellect's acceptance of doctrine in the original rhetoric was now the central focus of conversion, and little, if any, emphasis fell on the role of the rational. So, a rhetoric which rushed to the front lines to claim the listener's allegiance and bring him to the necessary emotional upheaval was "ungenteel, rough and ready rhetoric" which consisted of barnyard metaphor, sarcasm, ridicule, invective, virtuperation, use of the vernacular and vulgar speech of the audience, shouting, loose structure, and extemporaneous delivery



(which to the frontiersman meant no advance preparation.)<sup>12</sup> Organization was unimportant, and close reasoning was deprecated. "If a minister appealed to logic or used notes or prepared his sermon, he was only standing in the way of direct confrontation with God."<sup>13</sup> Such rhetorical practices sought emotionalistic responses as signs of strong spiritual experiences.

The Disciples' rhetoric was dramatized so that it possessed emotional appeal, but Disciples opposed the overt emotionalism common to frontier revivalism. A partial explanation of the persuasive power of the rhetoric may lie in the way it appealed to the frontiersman's faith in the average man's natural reason, common sense, and God-given ability and right to help determine his own destiny. So the conversion dramas were usually presented in the rational mode. Disciples insisted that the New Testament contained a clear plan of salvation and that any intelligent person, using his God-given common sense, could find this plan, follow its "logical steps," and be saved. On the one hand, God acted in the completed historical revelation in Jesus Christ to establish the means of salvation for every individual; on the other hand, man was free to respond to God by gratefully accepting God's forgiveness, participating in it through the ordinances (specifically, baptism of a believer by immersion and weekly observance of the Lord's Supper), and growing in Christian character and witness.

The dramas set forth the Messiahship of Jesus as the central "fact" of the gospel. After this "fact" had been "proved" by appeal to the Bible, the rhetoric challenged the listener to believe, repent, and be immersed. When the listener acted as the rhetorical drama suggested, he was assured of "an immediate and personal acquittal from sins, . . . a prompt salvation from the guilt and power of sin. . . and a being filled with joy and the Holy Spirit."<sup>14</sup> Walter Scott, premier first generation evangelist, was predominant in producing this rhetorical stance, and he triumphantly termed it "the gospel restored."<sup>15</sup> Scott popularized this emphasis among Disciples while laboring as a traveling evangelist. He is credited with at least one thousand conversions each year for thirty years and with leading Disciples in their "amazing expansion" as a people in frontier America through the use of this rhetorical emphasis.<sup>16</sup> So, the rhetoric stressing assurance-of-salvation-through-willing-cooperation-with-God reached thousands of Americans and contributed generously to Calvinism's downfall.

One of the clearest expressions of the conversion drama is found in Elijah Goodwin's "Funeral Sermon of Florence Mathes."<sup>17</sup> Like most Disciples' preachers Goodwin begins with a biblical text, Revelation 22:14: "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city." After a few opening comments regarding

Mrs. Mathes (comments which became crucial to his drama later on) Goodwin enters a lengthy section explaining the text in its context. He concludes that "the city" of the text is not a literal heavenly city but represents "the glorified state of the redeemed."<sup>18</sup> The "departed sister" has entered that glorified state, and the key question in contemplating the New Jerusalem is, "Lord, who shall enter that happy state? Who shall dwell in the holy temple?"<sup>19</sup> Goodwin's reply is his proposition and forms the basis for the conversion fantasy, "Still, he has prepared for them a city, and has suspended their admittance into it upon obedience to his revealed will."<sup>20</sup> He then quotes several scriptures to reinforce the duty of obedience (Matt. 7:21 and 12:15, John 15:10, 2 Peter 1:10, I Peter 3:10-11), and alludes to two of Jesus' parables.<sup>21</sup> He asserts that one can fail to enter the eternal city, not merely by gross sins and vice, but by not actively obeying Christ's commands. He supports this with references to the account of final judgment in Matthew 25 and the incident in King Saul's life when he spared King Amalek. Thus, he enforces his proposition regarding the necessity to obey all of Christ's commands.<sup>22</sup>

Goodwin then moves to the basic commands which "may be regarded as the head of a class."<sup>23</sup> The first character in the drama is "the sinner who has never made his peace with God," whom he dramatically takes through the process of conversion. The character acts out his role as he obeys each command in God's plan of salvation: (1) "to harken to the

voice of God;" (2) "to believe, to receive the divine testimony as true, and thus to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with all the heart" as Son of God and Savior: (3) to repent, "which implies sorrow for sin, confession of sin, and a turning away from sin:" and (4) "to be immersed in the name of the Lord Jesus."<sup>24</sup> Obedience to these commands makes one a Christian, changing his role in the drama from antagonist to protagonist. Having become a Christian, the character's role broadens into "new duties and responsibilities."<sup>25</sup> He must incorporate into his life the Christ-like qualities of 2 Peter 1:5-7: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity; and Goodwin defines and describes the essence of each quality for his dramatic character.

Goodwin then brings "our departed sister" into the dramatic action. He had prepared for her role in the drama in the opening paragraphs of the sermon when he characterized her as "an aged mother in Israel" who spent "more than sixty years of her life in the service of our common Lord and Master."<sup>26</sup> She was a faithful member of the Baptist church for twenty years; then, "becoming acquainted with a people who discarded all human creeds, and unscriptural names, she united with them, taking the name Christian, as her only church name, and the Bible as her only religious creed."<sup>27</sup> She was among the first in Indiana to identify with "the great reformatory movement of the nineteenth century."<sup>28</sup>

The drama presents the Disciples' movement as God's movement, and Goodwin concludes his opening dramatization of Mrs. Mathes' Disciplehood, stating, "Thus she served the Lord faithfully and died triumphantly in full hope of eternal life."<sup>29</sup>

In the closing portion of the sermon Goodwin continues to characterize Mrs. Mathes as the dramatic model of conversion. She heard the voice of God, she believed, repented, was immersed into Christ, and became "a member of his mystical body."<sup>30</sup> She demonstrated the desired life-style of a Christian: she was "noted for her benevolence and kindness to the poor and needy;" she possessed an abundance of charity, generosity, and forgiveness; she reared her family of eleven children "in the right ways of the Lord," so that all were members of the Christian Church and three were preachers; she was a good citizen and patriot; she was a true and faithful wife and mother; she was faithful and punctual in church attendance; and she looked forward to eternity in heaven.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, "having spend a long life in doing the commandments of God, who had a right--yes, a constitutional right to the tree of life, which right also gives the privilege of entering in through the gates into the city of God."<sup>32</sup>

Following the dramatization of the conversion process Goodwin speaks briefly to the children of Mrs. Mathes. He depicts Mrs. Mathes as speaking "from that far-off land." First, he had her speak a word of comfort, "Weep not for me, I now rest from all my labors, and am comforted. . . ." Then,

he has her speak a word of exhortation to the children, "Children, come home. Do the commandments, that you may also enjoy the honors that cluster around the throne of God." Next, Mathes directly exhorts all listeners to make it their "life-business to do the commandments" in order to enter the "heavenly state." Finally, he makes an appeal to the unconverted, "Sinners, come to Christ, and commence to obey the commandments."<sup>33</sup> With this rhetorical approach dramatizing an Arminian perspective on conversion, the Disciples of Christ attracted thousands of converts and contributed significantly to the final defeat of Calvinism as king of American religious rhetoric.

#### SUMMARY

By the time Goodwin preached his funeral sermon for Mrs. Mathes, Calvinism, established by Puritan preachers as the once formidable king of American religious rhetoric, was a monarch whose subjects had been won away gradually by more attractive aspirants for their loyalty. His position had been too seriously weakened by the Half-way Covenant, the Great Awakening, and cultural and societal transitions to withstand the assault. When the Disciples of Christ arrive to join the battle, their rhetorical drama, especially its focus on salvation, added a crucial weapon to the arsenal of the king's enemies. The Disciples of Christ and their rhetorical allies, together with the cultural forces of individual freedom, personal worth, human equality, and human capability, finally deposed King Calvinism and completed the religious and rhetorical revolution which began many years before their inception.



## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Robert T. Oliver, History of Public Speaking in America (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Incorporated, 1969), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene E. White, "Puritan Preaching and the Authority of God," in Preaching in American History, ed. DeWitte Holland (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 72. Faculty psychology also had a strong impact on Puritan rhetoric. White discusses this briefly on pp. 60ff.

<sup>3</sup>Although preached during the great Awakening rather during the first generation, Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God," is an excellent example of the original Puritan rhetorical pattern. This pattern is quite evident in the arrangement of the sermon in A. Craig Baird, ed., American Public Addresses, 1740-1952 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, Incorporated, 1956), pp. 15-28.

<sup>4</sup>White, p. 54. For a thorough examination of the Half-way Covenant see Robert G. Pope, The Half-way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>The American Churches: An Interpretation (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1948), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup>"The Age of Jackson," in The Sage of Bethany: a Pioneer in Broadcloth, compiled by Perry E. Gresham (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1960), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>Sweet, p. 132.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>10</sup>Alfred T. DeGroot, Disciple Thought: A History (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1965), p. 76.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ernest G. Bormann, "The Rhetorical Theory of William Henry Milburn," Speech Monographs, 36 (March 1969), 28.

<sup>13</sup>Edward M. Collins, Jr., "The Rhetoric of Sensation Challenges the Rhetoric of the Intellect: An Eighteenth Century Controversy," in Preaching in American History, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Scott, "Circular Letter," Evangelist, 1 (1832), 18.

<sup>15</sup>See Scott's comments in The Evangelist, 2 (1833), 160-62. For a more extensive exposition see his book, The Gospel Restored: a Discourse of the True Gospel of Jesus Christ, in which the Facts, Principles, Duties, and Privileges of Christianity are Arranged, Defined, and Discussed, and the Gospel in its Various Parts Shewn to be Adopted to the Nature and Necessities of Man in his Present Condition (Cincinnati: O. H. Donough, 1836).

<sup>16</sup>Dwight Stevenson, "Walter Scott and Evangelism," in Voices from Cane Ridge, ed. Rhodes Thompson (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1954), pp. 176-77.

<sup>17</sup>In The Western Preacher, ed. James M. Mathes (2nd ed., Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keyes, and Company, Printers, 1859), pp. 40-58.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Italics mine.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-52.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 53. Each command is "proved by biblical references.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-58.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.