

# Creating a model of christian charity



**ASSIGN  
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The Great Awakening induced a tonal shift of the language used in sermons by employing different literary devices and methods of delivery than had been used prior, and this changed the way in which preachers discussed the covenant and election in order to portray a merciless God. Throughout this paper, I will be using textual evidence from two sermons, one before the Great Awakening and one during, as well as drawing upon scholarly articles to validate my theory.

First, I looked at "A Model of Christian Charity," which was first spoken by John Winthrop in 1630 whilst aboard the *Arbella*. I selected this text in particular due to its historical renown as the "very emblem of the Puritan quest" (Morgan 145). Additionally, it provided me with a solid baseline upon which I could see how drastically sermons changed as a result of the Great Awakening.

The literary devices used by Winthrop appeal primarily to logic, especially with regards to his diction. One of the hallmarks of early New England sermons is a "folksy" manner of speech that is "attentive to the needs of a popular audience," and this type of logical diction is evident in "A Model of Christian Charity" (Jones 14). Instead of hyperbolic imagery, Winthrop took to merisms, or the contrasting of two words to refer to an entirety, and in doing this, Winthrop made his teachings easier to remember. We can see specific examples of merisms within the lines "... some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjugation" (Winthrop 178). In this, "rich" contrasts with "poor" and "high and eminent in power and dignity" contrasts with "mean and in subjugation," but these contrasting words refer to humanity as a whole.

Another example can be seen in the line “ needs partake of each other’s strength and infirmity; joy and sorrow, weal and woe” (Winthrop 183). Again, Winthrop is referring to humanity, and the contrasting words form a sort of mnemonic device.

Winthrop also makes use of alliteration for the same purpose. This is especially evident in the line “ Thou must observe whether thy brother hath present or probable, or possible means of repaying thee...” (Winthrop 181). The “ p” sound is repeated for a memorable effect.

“ A Model of Christian Charity,” like most pre-Awakening sermons, works largely through typology, or the idea that the biblical events of the Old Testament prefigure future events. In Deuteronomy, Moses delivers a sermon on the banks of the Jordan River before he and the Israelites enter Canaan, and this event prefigures John Winthrop’s delivery of a sermon aboard the Arbella before he and the passengers enter the New World (Authorized King James Version, Deut. 29). Much of the typology in Winthrop’s sermon is done through extended metaphors and allusions.

The passage “... he doth not lay a hand on the hammer, which is the immediate instrument of the sound, but sets on work the first mover or main wheel, knowing that will certainly produce the sound which he intends” contains a few of the several extended metaphors in “ A Model of Christian Charity” (Winthrop 183). The “ hammer” refers to Jesus, the “ first mover” refers to the Puritans, and the “ sound which he intends” is salvation and peace on earth. What this passage essentially says is that God will not send

Jesus to immediately save the Puritans. Rather, God will prepare the Puritans to fulfill their covenant.

Perhaps the best example of allusion is in Winthrop's iconic line, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill" (Winthrop 188). This is an important reference to the verse, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill, cannot be hid," because it shows how Winthrop views the Puritans (Mark 5. 14).

John Winthrop approaches the concept of election as something that is impermeable and unchanging, and for Winthrop and the passengers aboard the *Arbella*, their election was never in doubt because "He loves His elect because they are like Himself" (Winthrop 185). Winthrop goes even further and says that not only are the Puritans like God, but that "true Christians are of one body in Christ" (Winthrop 183). According to Winthrop, the Puritans are so sure of their election because they are one with God.

This brings me to how the idea of the covenant is viewed in "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop approaches the covenant similarly to many pre-Awakening sermons—through the belief that "God and the soul enter into a covenant for the soul's salvation" (Jones 21). He even addresses this directly and says, "Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work" (Winthrop 187). As part of their covenant, the passengers of the *Arbella* are required to extend mercy to their fellow Christians by "giving, lending and forgiving" (Winthrop 180). This is in keeping with the "law of nature" that regulates how Christians are supposed to behave (Winthrop 179). Additionally, it paints the covenant as something

that is communal in the sense that everyone must follow the laws set forth by it because “ Christ and His church make one body” (Winthrop 183).

All of this encourages a specific narrative of a kind and loving God, and the tone in which John Winthrop refers to God throughout is perhaps the most crucial to this narrative. Winthrop even quotes a bible verse and says, “ 1 John: 4. 7. “ love cometh of God and every one that loveth is born of God,” so that this love is the fruit of the new birth” (Winthrop 184). He calls Christ’s love the “ bond or ligament” that connects the Puritans to God (Winthrop 183). Winthrop says God “ commanded [him] to love his neighbor as himself”, and this cements the Puritan’s God as one who is loving.

In the eyes of Puritans before the Great Awakening, sympathy was considered “ both a doctrine and a duty” that stemmed from God (Engen 534). Indeed, part of their covenant was to extend a merciful hand to others as God had done for them in entering into a covenant that secured their salvation. God, in the eyes of John Winthrop, has given them these rules because He wants the Puritans to be like Him, and his reverent and loving tone echoes this sentiment.

The Great Awakening brought about much change, and the most prominent piece of literature that shows this is Jonathan Edwards’ “ Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” I selected this sermon in particular because of its “ unquestioned historic importance” as one of the premier texts from the Great Awakening, and also because it proves that there was a shift in tone regarding God (Hearn 452).

The literary devices used by Edwards appeal primarily to emotion, especially with regards to his diction. One of the hallmarks of sermons during the Great Awakening is a “curious indifference” to “social concerns” that plays “into the hands of reaction,” and this type of emotional diction is evident in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (Miller 52). Instead of the merisms and alliteration used by John Winthrop, Edwards took to anaphora, hyperboles, and metaphors.

We can see how Edwards used anaphora with the excerpt “nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do” (Edwards 397). The repetition of the word “nothing” has the same memorable effect that Winthrop’s merisms and alliteration did, but the reason behind it has changed. Instead of relying on simple phrases that are easy to remember, Edwards creates an emotional connection to the word “nothing” that builds upon itself with each time he repeats it. His lesson to the parishioners is thus ingrained in their emotions as opposed to their logic.

Edwards makes use of hyperboles in a similar way. He tells his congregation, “Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell...” (Edwards 395). Logically, wickedness cannot make you weigh as much as lead nor has it any effect on your weight whatsoever, but this over-exaggeration ultimately succeeds at explaining there will be consequences if one is wicked.

Additionally, Edwards likes to employ metaphors and similes. The metaphor “the bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string,

and justice bends the arrow at your heart” has the stated comparison of God’s wrath to a bow, the implied comparison of God’s vengeance to an arrow, and the personification of justice (Edwards 396). Likewise, the simile “That God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider...” has the stated comparison of Edwards’ audience to a spider (Edwards 397).

Perhaps the most effect device used by Edwards is his liberal usage of vivid imagery, and it is in his imagery that the tone of “ Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is set. Over the course of his (approximately) twelve page sermon, Jonathan Edwards includes thirty-two separate descriptions of fire and flames. Roughly four percent of “ Sinners in the Hands of Angry God” references flames or fire in some way, and this explains quite a bit with regards to the tone. Fire is commonly used in literature to symbolize anger and violence, and I argue that Edwards does that in his sermon, especially when considering the images of “ flames of divine wrath” and “ His wrath towards you burns like fire” (Edwards 397). These images of flames are made even more terrifying when combined with mentions of hell, which appears in the text fifty-one times.

Jonathan Edwards challenges the long-held notion that their election is secure, which is a direct callback to John Winthrop’s teachings in “ A Model of Christian Charity.” Unless you have been born again, he says, you are subject to the “ dismal case” of eternal torment (Edwards 400). The very concept of election is shunned as he says, “ Whatever pains a natural man takes in religion, whatever prayers he makes, till he believes in Christ, God is under no manner of obligation to keep him a moment from eternal destruction” (Edwards 394). Essentially, Jonathan Edwards believes that no

one is elect and that it is up to oneself to commit to God. Only then is salvation possible, and he asks of his parishioners if they know they are going to hell (Edwards 401). This is diametrically opposed to John Winthrop's communal views, as Edwards is placing a clear emphasis on the individual.

Regarding the idea of election, Edwards claims that “ God certainly has made no promises either of eternal life... but what are contained in the covenant of grace” (Edwards 394). It is the in the covenant that most men fail, he believes. Edwards tells his audience that, by human nature, they are corrupt. Specifically, he says, “ There are in the souls of wicked men those hellish principles reigning, that would presently kindle and flame out into hell fire...” (Edwards 393). Because humans are wicked by nature, it is up to the individual to commit to the covenant in order to “ secure them from hell one moment” (Edwards 394).

All of these devices are used by Jonathan Edwards to strengthen the narrative of a merciless God. Whereas the Puritans and Christians before the Great Awakening believed that God was kind and merciful, Christians during the Great Awakening believed that God was angry and vengeful. Edwards makes the claim that God “ abhors” his congregation because they are the same as “ the wicked unbelieving Israelites” (Edwards 390, 397). He tells the members of his church, “ When the great and angry God hath risen up and executed his awful vengeance on the poor sinner... then will God call upon the whole universe to behold that awful majesty and mighty power that is to be seen in it” (Edwards 399). Here, Edwards uses the word “ awful” to describe God, and this is especially interesting considering the word's multiplicity. Up until the nineteenth century, it was used to refer to



something that was “worthy of respect or fear,” and this is how it is used in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (Harper). Jonathan Edwards uses this word in particular because he wants his listeners to know “the fierceness of His wrath” is something to be feared (Edwards 392). In fact, he mentions God’s wrath a total of fifty-one times throughout the sermon in order to be certain his church knows God is angry with them.

The contrast between the two texts is obvious, and this makes it easy to trace how the language surrounding God changed during the Great Awakening. Before the Great Awakening, Puritans like John Winthrop spoke about God as being merciful and used the logic of direct and frank mnemonic methods to work primarily through typology and theological argument. One could say the Great Awakening awakened a shift in tone because the perspective changed.

Instead of mercy, the God of Jonathan Edwards’ day extolled vengeance and wrath. Christians no longer saw themselves as chosen by a benevolent God. The Great Awakening caused Christians to question the salvation given to them by a merciless God. Ultimately, preachers of the Great Awakening shifted the tone of the language in sermons by employing emotional imagery combined with hyperbolic metaphors to scare church congregations into honoring their covenant by fully committing to God. This new method changed the perspective from which preachers discussed the covenant and election, and the merciful God of the century prior made way for the merciless God of the Great Awakening.