

**THE SACRAMENTAL ART OF JOHN DONNE'S SERMONS
ON THE
PENITENTIAL PSALMS**

by

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Abstract

John Donne was indisputably the foremost English preacher of his day. Many studies have focussed on his instructional methods; fewer have concentrated on how he tries to move his hearers. Donne especially liked preaching on the psalms. Since Christian antiquity, the seven psalms known as the penitential psalms have enjoyed a privileged place in church worship. They are central to the sacrament of penance. By Donne's time, changes in the Church of England's sacramental theology had all but eliminated the practice of penance. Nevertheless, Donne considers penance or, as it had become known, repentance, to be a crucial part of believers' lives. With his sermons on the penitential psalms Donne contributes to the vast body of literature surrounding the sacrament of penance, but his contribution is unique. He thinks that since the second person of the Trinity is identified with the Word of God, the institution of preaching God's Word is incarnational. In the sacraments, the priest ushers in the Body of Christ; in the sermon, Donne believes, the preacher's role is similar. For Donne, sermonizing is sacramental in effect. In his sermons he attempts to bring the real presence of God to his listeners. Moreover, his sermons display a "sacramental mimesis": they enact their subject matter by their very words and try to effect change in the listeners as the words are uttered. Further, Donne thinks that since God established all the ordinances of the church, none of them should be ignored. Therefore, Donne's twenty-one sermons on the penitential psalms reveal a preacher who is on the one hand a conservative churchman and on the other a startlingly innovative preacher.

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This work is dedicated to my children,

Colin Michael

and

Claire Elizabeth

Rave on John Donne, rave on thou holy fool,
Down through the weeks of ages
In the moss-borne dark dank pools.
Rave on down through the industrial revolution,
Impericism, atomic and nuclear age,
Rave on down through the corridors,
Rave on words on printed page.

Van Morrison

Introduction

The world owes a debt to the impulsiveness of John Donne. Had he not secretly married Ann More in 1601, he probably would have remained in the employ of the Lord Keeper, Sir Thomas Egerton, and frequented court circles for most of his life. But after many years of trying and failing to secure a court position, Donne was finally ordained in the Church of England. During his seventeen years as a priest, he wrote many sermons, a large number of which have survived. His diverse London congregations included the poor and the wealthy. He preached to workers and merchants, to students, to lawyers and judges, to priests and bishops, to the nobility, and to the royal households of James I and Charles I. He preached at the highest and most influential level possible, and in doing so he not only fulfilled a noble vocation, he also enriched English literature.

Donne turned repeatedly to the Book of Psalms and to the Epistles of Saint Paul for his sermon texts. He was extremely partial to the psalms, for he viewed them as perfect poems, the literary works of God himself. He begins one sermon by admitting his predilection for the psalms and epistles:

Almost every man hath his *Appetite*, and his *tast* disposed to some kind of *meates* rather than others; He knows what dish he would choose, for his first, and for his second course. We have often the same disposition in our

spirituall Diet; a man may have a particular love towards such or such a book of Scripture, and in such an affection, I acknowledge, that my spirituall appetite carries me still, upon the *Psalms of David*, for a first course, for the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and upon the *Epistles of Saint Paul*, for a second course, for the New: and my meditations even for these *publike exercises* to Gods Church, returne oftneft to these two.

(2.1.1–10)¹

Donne justifies his “*spirituall Diet*”:

For my Diet, I have Saint *Augustines* protestation, that he loved the *Book of Psalms*, and Saint *Chrysostomes*, that he loved Saint *Pauls Epistles*, with a particular devotion. I may have another more particular reason, because they are Scriptures, written in such forms, as I have been most accustomed to; Saint *Pauls* being Letters, and *Davids* being Poems: For, God gives us, not onely that which is meerly necessary, but that which is convenient too; He does not onely feed us, but *feed us with marrow, and with fatnesse*; he gives us our instruction in cheerfull forms, not in a

¹Textual references to Donne’s sermons in this thesis are in parentheses following the excerpt. The numbers within the parentheses refer to the volume, sermon, and line numbers of *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962).

sowre, and sullen, and angry, and unacceptable way, but cheerfully, in *Psalms*, which is also a limited, and a restrained form; Not in an *Oration*, not in *Prose*, but in *Psalms*; which is such a form as is both curious, and requires diligence in the making, and then when it is made, can have nothing, no syllable taken from it, nor added to it: Therefore is Gods will delivered to us in *Psalms*, that we might have it the more cheerfully, and that we might have it the more certainly, because where all the words are numbred, and measured, and weighed, the whole work is the lesse subject to falsification, either by subtraction or addition.

(2.1.17–35)

The psalms, then, perfectly express the mind and will of God—indeed, to such an extent that one cannot add or subtract a single syllable from them without ill effect.

Some of Donne's favourite psalms were the seven known as the penitential psalms. These are Psalm 6 (*Domine, ne in furore*), Psalm 32 (*Beati, quorum*), Psalm 38 (*Domine, ne in furore*), Psalm 51 (*Miserere mei, Deus*), Psalm 102 (*Domine, exaudi*), Psalm 130 (*De profundis*), and Psalm 143 (*Domine exaudi*). He apparently did not preach on all seven, for there remain sermons on only four—Psalms 6, 32, 38, and 51. Of the total of 160 surviving sermons by Donne,² twenty-one treat texts from these four

²Any study of Donne's sermons must be based, of course, on a text of those sermons. We have no way of verifying precisely what Donne said in his oral delivery. Almost certainly the text available to us, whether it be the *LXXX Sermons* of 1640, the *Fifty Sermons* of 1649, or the *XXVI Sermons* of 1660, Alford's edition of 1839, or Potter and Simpson's modern edition, does

psalms. A twenty-second sermon, on Psalm 38, is lost.³ It is clear that he spent a significant amount of his preaching career on these psalms. Further, he spoke on them in depth, preaching a series on each of three psalms and a single sermon on a fourth. It is safe to say, then, that for Donne the penitential psalms hold special importance.

From the earliest days of the church, the penitential psalms have occupied a privileged place in Christian worship. They focus on sin, repentance, and the willingness of God to forgive sinners and restore their relationship with him. Since the psalms were regarded as the works of David, the penitential psalms were considered to be his personal chronicles of penitence. If David, God's beloved, was able to express his repentance in the penitential psalms and achieve the assurance of reconciliation, then what better texts could serve and comfort all penitent Christians? With this rationale the penitential psalms for centuries lay at the heart of the practice of penance.

Handling sin is the essential concern of the church, and from shortly after its inception until the Reformation the church dealt with sin practically through the institution of penance. It is not easy for us to imagine how the early church dealt with

not contain the form of the sermons exactly as Donne delivered them. As Evelyn Simpson remarks, Donne typically would make an outline of his sermon and then write copious notes under each heading. He would then commit the sermon to memory and deliver it without notes. Occasionally persons wanted a copy of the sermon, in which case Donne wrote out the sermon from his outline notes. Certainly the fact that Donne transcribed his sermons from extensive notes provides some evidence that the text did not differ radically from the spoken sermon. Donne's most dangerous transcription occurred when King Charles and Archbishop Laud asked him for a copy of his April 1627 sermon, delivered at Whitehall (*Sermons* 7.16). The King had taken offence at the sermon, but after reading it and hearing Donne's apology, he let the matter rest.

³See page 169.

sin. Today Christianity is widely seen as a religion of forgiveness, and certainly the early church would agree that forgiveness is at the heart of the religion. However, when we speak of contemporary concepts of Christian forgiveness, we speak in terms substantially different from those of the early church.

Modern Christians believe that forgiveness of sins is available innumerable times in their lifetime. But the thought of the church of the first centuries was not so liberal. Initially the church allowed only a single occasion on which a person's serious sins might be forgiven, then two, then gradually more. At first a sinner was able to obtain forgiveness by undergoing a strict form of penance. But the doctrine of penance changed dramatically over the centuries. By Donne's time, penance bore only a faint resemblance to its earlier form. Thus when we analyze how Donne addresses penance or repentance in his sermons on the penitential psalms, it is important to bear in mind the development of the legacy that he inherited.

Since its earliest years, the church has based its capacity to forgive sins on Christ's directions in Scripture concerning the retention and remission of sins. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ grants Peter a special position of authority in the church:

Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

(Matthew 16:18–19)⁴

Later in Matthew's gospel and in the Gospel of John, Christ gives to the apostles a similar power to loose and bind. As Watkins observes, these commissions are the foundation of the penitential system.⁵

Following the Apostolic Council at Jerusalem in the first century A.D.,⁶ the church considered three sins as capital or mortal: idolatry, fornication, and homicide.⁷ A baptized Christian who committed one of these sins fell from the state of grace and remained there for eternity unless he were reconciled to God. In the first two centuries following the Council, there were two trains of thought concerning the reconciliation of those who had committed mortal sin. The rigorists held that one guilty of mortal sin could not hope for reconciliation to the church within his lifetime; he must hang all his hopes of forgiveness in the hereafter on the mercy of God. The more lenient teachers believed that remission of such sins was possible even after baptism. But until the early third century, the rigorists prevailed.⁸ Serious sins were forgivable through a single post-baptismal penance, while mortal sins were not forgivable by the church at all. In

⁴All biblical quotations are from the Authorized Version.

⁵Oscar D. Watkins, *A History of Penance: Being a Study of the Authorities (A) For the whole Church to A.D. 450 (B) For the Western Church from A.D. 450 to A.D. 1215*, 2 vols. (London, 1920; rept. New York: Burt Franklin, 1961), 1:8.

⁶Acts 15:6.

⁷Watkins, 1:13–15.

⁸See Appendix, p. 239.

other words, Christians had received forgiveness of their sins at baptism, and after baptism, if they were serious about their faith, they would sin no more. However, out of his abundant mercy, God had provided one more chance to weak believers who stumbled. No one should need more chances.⁹

Reconciliation was not an easy matter. In the East there was a formal procedure for public penance, which every penitent had to follow. A penitent had to pass through five stages: the weeping (*fletus*) or mourning (*πρόσκλαυσις*), in which the sinner stood outside the portal of the church, lamenting his sins and begging the entering communicants to pray for him; the hearing (*auditio* or *ἀκρόασις*), where the penitent stood with the catechumens within the narthex and heard the sermon but departed before the prayers; the falling (*substratio* or *ὑπόπτωσις*), when he was allowed into the nave with the catechumens to lie or to kneel during the prayers for him; the bystanding (*consistentia, congregatio, or σύστασις*), in which he could remain with the faithful but could not go forward for the Eucharist; and lastly, the participation of the hallowed (*μέθεξις τῶν ἁγιασμάτων*). This system of graded penance was common in much of Asia Minor, but it did not find general acceptance in the western churches or in the larger eastern churches of Antioch and Constantinople.¹⁰

⁹See Appendix, p. 240.

¹⁰See Appendix, p. 240.

Over the next three centuries the strictures of penance were relaxed. John Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407) was a key liberalizing figure. He scorned public, graded penance as intolerable:

I do not take thee into a theatre of thy fellow-servants, or compel thee to disclose thy sins to man. Unroll thy conscience before God, and show Him the wounds, and ask of Him the remedies: show to Him Who upbraids not but heals Speak then that thou mayest profit. Speak in order that, putting off here all thy sins, thou mayest go forth clean and freed from thy transgressions, and mayest escape that intolerable publication.¹¹

By rejecting the structured, public mode of penance, Chrysostom opened the question of how a penitent might demonstrate sorrow for his sins and be reconciled to the church. He held that sinners might carry out their penitence, their *μετάνοια*, by confession, contrition, humility, almsgiving, prayer, or forgiveness of others.¹² They

¹¹“*Non te in theatrum conservorum tuorum duco, neque hominibus peccata revelare cogo; conscientiam tuam expande coram Deo, ostende ipsi vulnera, et ab eo medicamenta postula: ostende non exprobandi, sed curanti Dic igitur, ut id lucro tibi sit: dic, ut illis hic depositis, illo abeas purus et a delictis vacuus, et ab intoleranda promulgatione illa libereris.*” Chrysostom, *De incomprehensibili Dei natura*, Hom. 5 (Migne, PG, 48.746).

¹²Chrysostom, *De diabolo tentatore*, Hom. 2 (Migne, PG, 49.263); *De Pœnitentia*, Hom. 2 (Migne, PG, 49.284–89).

were not to prefer one method over another necessarily; and they might perform several concurrently. But no sin was beyond the reach of any of these methods.¹³

Chrysostom's conception of penance eventually became the norm for the western church. It lies behind the most significant development in the sacrament of penance, the shift from the public, formal ceremony to a private, personal rite. The personal rite of penance was endorsed by the church in its decretal from the Fourth Lateran Council of A.D.1215, known as *Omnis utrius sexus*. This resolution declared that all believers of discerning age must perform penance at least once a year.¹⁴

With the spread of private penance there developed a vast body of literature, which was intended to be read by both the clergy and the laity. This is devotional literature, and it includes poems, songs, allegories, homilies, plays, and paraphrases of the penitential psalms. The literary tradition begins in earnest with the Celtic works of the sixth and seventh centuries known as the penitentials. These were codes of prescribed penances and were used by priests who heard the private confessions of sinners under their cure.

It is against the variegated background of penitential literature that we must view Donne's decision to preach upon the penitential psalms. Hundreds of writers before him had treated the penitential psalms; without them, it is reasonable to say that Donne would never have considered preaching his series. Therefore, when he writes at the beginning

¹³Chrysostom, *De Pœnitentia*, Hom. 3 (Migne, *PG*, 49.293).

¹⁴See Appendix, p. 261

of his sermons, "Preached upon the Penitentiall Psalmes," he is calling to mind the entire body of penitential literature that precedes him. He is not breaking entirely new ground; he is building upon a foundation that is centuries old. His sermons are full of references to authorities on penance. Frequently he cites the Fathers, especially Augustine, on confession and absolution. He refers to Theodore of the early British church. He calls on the medieval churchmen, such as Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux. And he looks to theologians closer to his time, such as Luther, Calvin, and Bellarmine. Thus, as Donne preaches on the penitential psalms, he recognizes that he is contributing to the long line of penitential literature.

In this study I shall place Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms within the penitential tradition and determine his special contribution to it. At first blush, an examination of the history of the seven psalms alone might seem to be all that we need to place the sermons within a comprehensible context. But we cannot read his sermons for long before we begin to ask questions that do not find their answers in the psalms themselves. Donne's sermons force us to enquire into the nature of the penitent's place within the church. This enquiry leads us to the doctrine of penance itself, not just the literature that grew out of it.

Until the middle of the sixteenth century, penance enjoyed its status as one of the seven sacraments, but as teaching in the Church of England changed, the number of sacraments was predominantly accepted as two—baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, removing penance from its place as a sacrament did not obviate the need for Christians to practice penance. Believers still needed a means to deal with sin.

Donne provides such a means by appealing to the ancient tradition of preaching on the penitential psalms. In his sermons he attempts to convince his hearers of their need to repent. He tries to make them step toward repentance and, ultimately, toward a restored relationship with God. He speaks to the conscious understanding of his hearers in his sermons, but he realizes that he must reach more than their bare intellect. He understands the Word of God to be a powerful agent, and he believes that as God's minister on earth he is able to bring that forceful Word to God's people. He sees the sermon as a sacred moment, an instant at which God is present among the congregation, making his presence and his will known through the mouth of the preacher. God moves in the sermon, Donne believes, and he is able actually to shed his grace on the assembled auditors. The Word does not just persuade their rational mind; it infuses their heart and their will and effects a *μετάνοια*, a turning from sin.

I shall demonstrate what I believe is the central feature of Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms: they reveal that Donne considers preaching to be sacramental. By this I do not mean that he thinks preaching is a sacrament. Rather, Donne regards preaching as sacramental in *effect*. The sermon, he believes, achieves ends similar to the sacraments, and it achieves these ends by similar means. Donne is always careful to differentiate the Word and the sacraments as two types of "ordinances"; at least, he does not call preaching a sacrament. But if he differentiates them in name, he does not so clearly distinguish them in effect. He consistently links them, because to him they display the means by which God acts in the lives of human beings. By reviewing the

prevailing views of the sacraments—especially the Lord’s Supper—we can gain an understanding of how Donne himself views his preaching.

Throughout the history of the church, the teaching on the Lord’s Supper has been broadly diverse. This is perhaps especially true for the period of the Reformation. Despite the wide variety of belief, however, most Christians view the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament during which participants in some way receive Christ. The Eucharist is a time to celebrate receiving, or having received, the body and blood of the Son of God. But the Son is also the Word; and therefore to receive the Word implies receiving the Son. Receiving the Son in the Word is at the heart of Donne’s sermons. For just as he sees the Lord’s Supper as an event during which Christ is present with his people, so Donne views the sermon. For him the sermon is an incarnational occasion. While the preacher utters the words of the sermon, the Word descends among and is present with the minister and the auditors. This powerful Word cannot be present without a sacramental effect.

As he preaches on sin, repentance, and reconciliation, Donne uses strikingly sophisticated literary techniques. He believes that the human soul consists of the memory, understanding, and will, and therefore he does not address any one of these components exclusively. He uses words to reach the understanding, but he consciously shapes his sermons to reflect or imitate their subject matter. Through this mimesis he attempts to effect the very thing about which he speaks. When he preaches on the metaphorical purification ritual of the *Asperges*, for example, he believes that his words convey to his hearers the spiritual purging which is the aim of the rite. As he preaches, then, Donne engages in a special form of mimesis—a “sacramental mimesis”—by which

he enacts with his words the subject matter of his sermons. By considering each of his sermons on the penitential psalms, I shall show how Donne achieves this remarkable homiletic innovation. However, to begin to grasp the sacramental quality of Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms, it is important to come to an understanding of the term "sacrament." Further, it is necessary to determine the state of the sacrament of penance in Donne's time. As a priest in the Church of England, Donne is not able to pronounce the efficacious priestly absolution of the pre-Reformation church. Nevertheless, through the medium of his extraordinarily engaging sermons, he offers to his listeners absolution in his very words.

Finally, besides displaying a mimetic function and a sacramental quality, Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms provide a strong endorsement of the institutions or ordinances of the Church of England. Again and again, Donne tells his listeners that the only way that they can deal with their sin and become reconciled to God is by coming to church and participating in the worship. There is no such thing as the solitary Christian, he says; God acts in believers' lives only through the church. To cut oneself off from the church is to cut oneself off from God. Of all the ordinances in which one participates in church, Donne believes that none holds a higher place than preaching. Therefore, in my review of each of the sermons I shall show his clear endorsement of the traditions of the church and his special regard for the sermon and the sacraments.

Chapter 1: Sprinklings of Grace from the Sermon on Psalm 51:7

Donne's sole sermon on Psalm 51 is startling and innovative. It is also his boldest statement on the mystical power of the ordinances. Psalm 51, *Miserere mei, Deus*, is the best known of the seven penitential psalms, and it has been part of the liturgy since ancient times. It is surprising, perhaps, that Donne did not write more than one sermon on the psalm, since it presents many dramatic opportunities to a good preacher. What is not surprising, however, is that Donne chose as his text the evocative seventh verse:

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."

In this sermon he goes beyond defending or extolling the ordinances and actually enacts the liturgy or, more precisely, a symbolically cleansing ritual in the liturgy which is known as the *Asperges*. Donne intends that his words, invoking the presence and infused by the power of the Holy Spirit, should cleanse his hearers. In so doing he reveals his conviction that the Word of God, that is, both the received scriptures and the second person of the Trinity, operates powerfully, in a sacramental fashion, among his listeners in the setting of the church.

The rite of the *Asperges* takes its name from Donne's text for the sermon.¹⁵ The word derives from the infinitive *aspergere*, to sprinkle, and means "Thou shalt sprinkle." In the *Asperges*, which occurs before the principal Mass on Sundays and holy or feast days, the priest processes inside the church with an *aspergillum*, or holy water sprinkler—in Greek the word is *perirrhaterium*—and sprinkles the congregation while words from Psalm 51, *Asperges me, domine, hyssopo*, are said or sung. The *aspergillum* may be a kind of horsehair brush or metal wand and is dipped in water carried in a small vessel called an *aspersorium*. While certain reformers denounced the rite as popish, for centuries—possibly as early as the second century—the *Asperges* had been used as a ritual of twofold significance. First, it was used to cleanse metaphorically a new church or altar and to cleanse the church and altar before Mass. Second, it was used to remind parishioners of the waters of their baptism, helping them to recall in quiet meditation that in baptism Christ had cleansed them from their inherited sin. An *Asperges* service dated about 1470 and later adopted by Hugh Latimer contains these words:

Remember youre promys made yn baptism,
 And Chrystys mercifull bloudshedyng;
 By the whyche most holy sprynklyng

¹⁵In the Authorized Version, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow;" and in the Vulgate, "*Asperges me, domine, hyssopo, et mundabor; lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor*" (Psalm 51:7).

Off all youre sins youe haue fre perdun.¹⁶

The ceremonial use of the *aspergillum* and water goes back to the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, which prescribes a ritual cleansing with hyssop and water for people and objects that had come into contact with a dead person.¹⁷ And in the book of Ezekiel, God promises to save his exiled people by taking them from among the heathen, gathering them into their own land, and sprinkling clean water upon them to cleanse them.¹⁸

Donne had in mind the ritual of the *Asperges* when he wrote the sermon on Psalm 51. The text upon which he preaches is the text that gives the ritual its name and is recited during the rite. He refers to an *aspergillum*, and defines the ordinances of the Church—the Word and the sacraments—as a hyssop and blood-sprinkler, that is, as an *aspergillum*. He equates the cleansing that David craves with the sprinkling by which God cleanses his people in Ezekiel. He reminds his hearers of their need to consider their sinfulness and the grace of God by which they are cleansed. He asks his audience to recall that their baptism cleansed them from their inherited sin. He cautions his

¹⁶Edward L. Cutts, *A Dictionary of the Church of England* (London: SPCK, 1895), 325. Cutts's source is the Reverend H. T. Kingdon, in a paper entitled "An Early Vernacular Service," read before the Wiltshire Archaeological Society, 1877, as reported in *Church Quarterly*, vol. 18, p. 448. Kingdon's paper is also referred to in Christopher Wordsworth and Henry Littlehales, *The Old Service-Books of the English Church* (London: Methuen, 1904), 165, as having appeared in the *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, v. 18.

¹⁷Numbers 19:18.

¹⁸Ezekiel 36:25.

congregation that when David asks to be purged he has in mind more than a sprinkling, that is, more than an aspersion when they come to church.

In this sermon, Donne draws on both aspects of the *Asperges*—the cleansing and the reminding—to make his central point: all of us need cleansing, and only God can cleanse us. But Donne does not just talk about the effects or the cause of cleansing; he uses the sermon itself as a metaphor for the *Asperges*. The sermon is a kind of *aspergillum*. George Herbert's "The Church-porch," subtitled *Perirrhanterium*—that is, *aspergillum*—ends with the poet's invitation:

Thou, whom the former precepts have
 Sprinkled and taught, how to behave
 Thy self in church; approach, and taste
 The churches mysticall repast.¹⁹

Herbert composed his poetic sprinklings; Donne, in the sermon on Psalm 51, composed a prose equivalent.

Donne begins his sermon by calling his congregation to remember their baptismal covenant. He recounts a story. One Pambo, a devout hermit, seeks out a man more learned than he and applies to be his disciple. The teacher tells him to master his first lesson, from Psalm 39: "I will take heed to my wayes, that I sin not with my tongue."

¹⁹*The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: J.M. Dent, 1974), 46.

After 20 years Pambo still has not perfected that lesson and is upbraided by his teacher. Pambo's fault, says Donne, is that he employed all his diligence on future things. But if he had begun with the text from Psalm 51,

which is but a calling to our memory that which is past . . . If he had begun his first lesson at this, with the presenting of all his passed sins, in the sight of the Father, and in the Mediation and merit of the Sonne, he would have been sooner perfect in that lesson, and would have found himselfe, even by laying open his disease, so *purged with Hyssop* as that he should have been *cleane*, and so *washed*, as that he should have been *whiter then snow*.

(5.15.29–35)

In his exordium, then, Donne urges his hearers to look back and acknowledge their shortcomings and exhorts them to open themselves to the mercy of God.

Donne uses words, not water, for his call to remembrance, but the effect is just as clear: All of us, if we would but reflect a moment, need cleansing, and God is the one who cleanses us. The first cleansing is, of course, through baptism. Donne's call parallels that of the Christ of Thomas à Kempis, who advises his disciple to prepare carefully to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion:

I am the lover of purity and giver of all holiness. I seek a pure heart, and there will I dwell . . . If you wish Me to come and dwell with you, purify the old leaven,

and cleanse the dwelling of your heart. Exclude the whole world and its sinful clamour; sit there alone, like a sparrow on the roof-top, and consider your sinfulness in bitterness of soul.

(4:12)²⁰

After his call to remembrance, Donne divides the sermon into two main parts, the *Person* and the *Action*. The persons are God and David. Donne spends almost no time on the person of God, saying in essence that God is God, and that we must not enquire into his methods, his “secrets of state” (5.15.88–9). As for David, Donne reiterates the common notion that he is a perfect example, since his person includes all states between a shepherd and a king, and his sin includes all sins between omissions and compounded, habitual sins. In this part of the sermon, Donne describes the unrelenting nature of sin, the apparent innocuous character of nascent sin, the escalation of sin, and one man’s pleading to be cleansed from sin.

Donne uses David’s example to emphasize how one nurtures sin so that by the time one commits a sin, it is “an old, an inveterate sin, before it be borne” (5.15.194–5). Sin escalates, he says: “the next sin will needs be a better sin then the last” so that “this generation of sin is infinite; infinite in number, infinite in duration.” Sin is compelling and powerful, he states:

²⁰Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. and introduction by Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952), 207.

O how impossible a thing is it then for us to condition and capitulate with
 God, or with our owne Nature, and say to him, or to our selves, We will
 sin thus long and no longer, Thus far, and no farther, this sin, and no more
 ...!

(5.15.272–81)

While David continued in his sin, Donne states, he doubtless carried out all the
 external acts of worship. Yet without repentance, David's worship makes his sin only
 worse. Donne then focusses on his own congregation and declaims:

How little a thing then is it, nay how great a thing, that is, how great an
 aggravating of thy sin, if thou thinke to bribe God with a Sabboth, or with an
 almes; And as a criminall person would faine come to Sanctuary, not because it is
 a consecrated place, but because it rescues him from the Magistrate, So thou
 comest to Church, not because God is here, but that thy being here may redeeme
 thee from the imputation of prophanenesse.

(5.15.294–301)

Donne concludes this part of the sermon with an imagined dialogue between God
 and David, in which David insists that only God is capable of purging him, despite God's
 objections that he has given human beings the light of nature, and the light of the law, and

the ordinances of the church to cleanse their souls. These are not enough, David protests: only if God takes him into his own hands will he be cleansed sufficiently and enduringly.

In the next part of his sermon, Donne discusses the *Action* in his psalm text and continues to play out the rite of the *Asperges* with words. There are really two actions, purging and washing. We should not confuse this purgation with the modern usage, which suggests emetics and purgative tonics. The word denotes general, not just bodily, cleansing. Donne discusses the means of purgation, the hyssop. Hyssop dipped in blood was used as a ritual cleanser in the Old Testament. It is uncertain precisely which plant is meant in the Old Testament by the word translated as hyssop, but as Donne says, "it imports us nothing to know, of what plant that *Aspergillum*, that Blood-sprinkler was made" (5.15.482–3). And while the hyssop was in former days literally a blood-sprinkler, says Donne, the modern hyssop, the modern blood-sprinkler, is the ordinance of the church which is used to apply reconciliation:

God hath given us a free and publike passage of his Word, and Sacraments . . .
and he purges us with that Hyssope, with the application of his promises, with the
absolution of our sins, with a redintegration into his mysticall body, by the seales
of reconciliation. And this reconciliation to God, by the blood of Christ, applied
in the Ordinances of the Church, is that which *David* begs for his cleansing . . .

(5.15.519–26)

The effect of the sprinkling with the ordinances of the Church is cleansing, Donne says, but he gives cleansing a special meaning. Cleansing is

that disposition, which God by his grace, infuses into us, That we stand in the congregation, and Communion of Saints, capable of those mercies, which God hath by his Ordinance, annexed to these meetings; That we may so feele at all times when we come hither, such a working of his Hyssop, such a benefit of his Ordinance, as that we beleeve all our former sins to be so forgiven, as that if God should translate us now, this minute, to another life, this *Dosis* of this purging Hyssop, *received now*, had so wrought, as that we should be assuredly translated into the Kingdome of heaven. [Emphasis added.]

(5.15.586–95)

To be cleansed is to be bred in the visible Church, and

to be continued in the disposition, and working of the meanes of cleansing, that [w]e may alwayes grow under the dew, and breath in the ayre of Gods grace exhibited in his Ordinance.

(5.15.555–8).

Here Donne is acting out the spiritual purifying of the *Asperges* by explicitly telling his congregation that they are being cleansed even as they attend to his preaching.

His sermon, which is a part of the ordinance of the church, is the purging hyssop. The very act of Donne's preaching the sermon to a congregation, therefore, is the act of cleansing about which he speaks within the sermon itself. The benefit of the ordinance, or hyssop, he says, is "received now." The congregation is to see his sermon as the hyssop, as the *aspergillum*, and just as the water of the *Asperges* carries a blessing to those on whom it is sprinkled, so Donne's sermon carries a blessing to those on whom the words fall.

Donne next discusses the second action, washing. In this action, he says, David requests the grace against relapses into sin. This washing is "more then a sprinkling, A totall, and intire washing; More then being an ordinary partaker of the outward meanes, The Word, and Sacraments" (5.15.601-4). It is perseverance in the faith, he says,

a building up of habits of religious actions, visible to others, and it is a holy and firme confidence created in us by the Spirit of God, that we shall keepe that building in reparation, and goe forward with it to our lives end.

(5.15.605-8)

The purging with the hyssop of the ordinances of the Church delivers us from the redness of the earth of which we are made, that is, our guilt, says Donne. But it is the washing that restores our whiteness. And the degree of that washing is to make us whiter than snow. We are washed as white as snow through the ordinances of the church:

Nothing in this world can send me home in such a whitenesse, no morall counsaile, no morall comfort, no morall constancy; as Gods Absolution by his Minister, as the profitable hearing of a Sermon, the worthy receiving of the Sacrament do.

(5.15.666–9)

However, since the establishment of the church, Donne states, the ordinances of the church are the cleansing hyssop.

The washing of which David speaks, Donne says, is a washing that begins in baptism, continues in tears throughout our life, and ends perhaps in the blood of martyrdom. The washing is not to be intermittent or partial; not just an aspersion:

It is not a *stillicidium*, a spout, a showre, a bucket powred out upon us, when we come to Church, a Sabbath-sanctification, and no more, but a water that enters into every office of our house, and washes every action proceeding from every faculty of the soule.

(5.15.616–20)

Thus even though God uses the ordinances of the Church as his hyssop, the cleansing effected by those ordinances, that *Asperges*, is insufficient to keep us on the path of sanctification. It is but a preliminary step to washing, which is, in Donne's words,

a continuall succession of Grace, working effectually to present Habits of religious acts, and constituting a holy purpose of persevering in them, that induces the Whitenesse, the Candor, the Dealbation that *David* begs here.

(5.15.620–4)

The *Asperges* is not intended to be a complete or sufficient ritual by itself. It is preliminary and preparatory to the Mass, the crucial ritual of the adult Christian. In the same way, Donne's sermon, as one of the ordinances of the church, is insufficient to effect the hearers' sanctification: it may send them home in whiteness, but it does not keep them white. It is not all his congregation needs for their life of faith. It is a first, preparatory step in receiving the continual succession of grace that is the washing of which Donne speaks. In both cases, the real and the metaphorical aspersion, the recipients of grace are reminded of their baptism and the reason for it and become partakers of God's cleansing power.

Donne concludes his sermon by reminding his audience that the action of the psalm text, the cleansing and the washing, is wholly the work of God. David, he says, does not bring the hyssop and ask God to make the cleansing potion (5.15.734–35). "David does not say, Do thou wash me, and I will perfect thy worke" (5.15.738–39). The entire work is God's. At least, Donne hedges, God's work in conjunction with man's will.

Donne's "Sacramental Mimesis"

Donne's enactment of the *Asperges* in this sermon entitles us to regard his view of preaching as an exalted one—so exalted, in fact, that he considered the very words he spoke as God's appointed minister to have an effect on his hearers beyond simply conveying the propositional. Donne always links the Word and the sacraments as ordinances of the Church. Normally one receives a measure of divine grace by participating in the sacraments. Donne appears to differentiate the Word from the sacraments by using two separate words for each, and therefore one would think that Donne considers the Word distinct—in both purpose and effect—from the sacraments. And yet consider the effect of his preaching on Psalm 51. He tells his congregation that at the very moment they hear his words they are being cleansed by God's grace. Granted, the *Asperges* is not a sacrament, only a ritual that is part of a larger rite. But Donne leaves no doubt in his sermon that his hearers are cleansed by his preaching. His preaching reminds them of their sins, reminds them of their need for cleansing, and in fact leaves them cleansed, albeit only for the time being. In his sermon on Psalm 51, Donne's words become sprinklings of grace that carry to his congregation cleansing and redemption. The words of his sermon are more than symbols that signify meaning. They are conveyances of divine grace, and therefore they are sacramental in effect. In this sermon Donne believes that he is effecting by preaching the very essence of the penitential psalm itself: remembrance, contrition, confession, absolution, and the resolution to lead a new life.

Donne's astoundingly complex accomplishment in this sermon leads naturally to more questions. Did he attempt to convey grace to his hearers similarly in other ser-

mons? Why did he preach so many sermons on the penitential psalms? Was he attempting to achieve something special in his entire series on the penitential psalms? I contend that the answer to this last question is affirmative. Repeatedly throughout his series of sermons, Donne invites his auditory to receive the grace and the person of God. Because he believes that his words invoke the presence of God, he believes that his hearers will be changed through the medium of preaching.

Chapter 2: Critical Responses to Donne's Sermons

The extremely diverse scholarly approaches to Donne's sermons have contributed a great deal to our understanding of his preaching. The fact that there is such large number of surviving works promises even more rich study. Most often, scholars focus on the various means that Donne uses to teach his congregation. A good sermon does instruct its hearers, it is true, but it also moves them, and Donne delivered many sermons that did both. It is in considering Donne's views on moving his hearers that the most interesting inquiry lies.

Donne sees the sermon as a vehicle of grace. He thinks that to deliver a sermon is to deliver the Word of God, and as that Word—the scriptures and the person of Christ—is delivered, God manifests himself to his people. The sermon is not intended to be solely or primarily an intellectual exercise. It is to be an encounter between God and his people, and as such it is a sacred moment.

To acquire some insight into Donne's view of the sermon as a sacred occasion, it is important to review some of the significant scholarly treatments of his sermons.

Although some scholars have remarked that the sermons operate at levels beyond the rational, few seem to have reflected upon what is for Donne the supernatural effect of his sermons.

T.S. Eliot did not regard Donne's sermons highly. In a well-known essay comparing Donne unfavourably with Lancelot Andrewes, he hesitates over Logan Pearsall Smith's observation that Donne "attempts to say the incommunicable in his sermons"²¹:

We may cavil at the word "incommunicable," and pause to ask whether the incommunicable is not often the vague and unformed . . .²²

Eliot continues:

About Donne there hangs the shadow of the impure motive; and impure motives lent their aid to a facile success. He is a little of the religious spellbinder, the Reverend Billy Sunday of his time, the flesh-creeper, the sorcerer of emotional orgy. We emphasize this aspect to the point of the grotesque. Donne . . . lacked spiritual discipline.

(Ibid., 20)

Eliot appears to be saying that Donne is all style and no substance, that Donne intends flourishes of oratory to evoke an emotional rather than a considered response in

²¹Logan Pearsall Smith, *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), xxxv.

²²T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928), 19–20.

his hearers. But besides the obvious fact that there is plenty of rational argumentation in Donne's sermons, Eliot seems also to overlook the fundamental purpose of a sermon. A sermon, after all, is not just to educate the rational intellect of the hearer; it must move the listener, and at times that requires oratory that will evoke an intensely emotional response. Donne's congregations, clearly, were not attending lectures, and did not expect to attend lectures. They expected to hear a sermon by which they would be moved.

Some thirty years later, in the commentary on her edition of Donne's sermons, Evelyn Simpson also criticizes Donne, especially his sermons on the penitential psalms. She remarks upon his indebtedness to St. Augustine, but she claims that he is perhaps too influenced by Augustine's teachings on sin:

A modern reader cannot help feeling that an undue number of Donne's sermons are devoted to four of the Penitential Psalms . . . and that in many other sermons there is too much emphasis on sin and its punishment.

(10: 357-8)

Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms "are for the most part tedious," Simpson says; "we could well have dispensed with at least half of them" (10:358). Further, she asserts, Donne "meditates too long on human guilt and frailty" and thereby "distorts the Christian message" of the assurance of forgiveness (10:358). However, by thus criticizing Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms, Simpson appears to display a characteristically Protestant bias against penance. In the rush to rid themselves of all Roman dogma, many

Reformers fought the idea that good works play a part in salvation. If we are predestined to salvation, the argument goes, and if we are unconditionally elected to that salvation, then whether or not we perform good works is irrelevant. While the Bible directs Christians to spend their lives in acts of charity, ultimately salvation depends not on those acts but on the gracious, unmerited call of God. The Roman church may well agree that salvation depends on God's call. However, it has also officially recognized since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that Christians will sin, and that they will need to repent and confess at least once a year. What prevents sinners from languishing in sin is God's gift of true repentance, which regularly turns sinners back to him.

Therefore, when Simpson states that in his sermons Donne places too much emphasis on sin, she ignores the fundamental Christian teaching that the assurance of forgiveness comes with a cost. That cost, Donne knew, is the discomfort, even anguish, that genuinely repentant people experience in confession, when they admit to God, as in the words of the Book of Common Prayer,

We knowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word and deed, against thy divine majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, and be heartily sorry for

these our misdoings. The remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable.

(Booby, 259)

At the heart of the Christian message of God's forgiveness lies the individual's admission of sin. There can be no absolution without confession. As Donne knows, it is the preacher's duty, following the long penitential tradition, to tell his flock what they should confess and why. Sinners can glimpse the magnitude of God's mercy of forgiveness only when they understand how much there is for him to forgive. Therefore, part of Donne's purpose in his sermons on the penitential psalms is to teach his listeners about sin. But far from being bleak discourses on human frailty and iniquity, these sermons are exhortations to faith and conduits of grace. It is therefore inaccurate to argue, as Simpson does, that Donne distorts the Christian message.

Like those of Simpson, the comments of George Parfitt suffer from imbalance. Parfitt observes that Donne's sermons are marked by vividly eloquent phrasing and that they linger in literary history as "patches of brilliant style." However, he maintains, they are elitist, since they serve primarily to bolster the reigns of James I and Charles I. Donne's manner throughout the sermons, he asserts, is authoritarian. He "dazzles" the "common person" with references and rhetoric, and speaks *to* the common person rather than *for* him.²³ But Parfitt is apparently unsure of the role of preacher and the place of the

²³George Parfitt, *John Donne: A Literary Life* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 117-20.

sermon in seventeenth-century worship. He does not say how a preacher might speak *for* the people, and Donne likewise spends no time considering this matter. Parfitt's complaint is with the ecclesiastical structure of the Church of England, something Donne never seriously challenges. Instead, Donne sees himself as an appointed officer of God, one who as priest administers the sacraments and as prophet declares the Word and will of God. Certainly Donne speaks for the people in his prayers as he raises their concerns to God, but in his sermons Donne clearly displays his conviction that he is in a unique position to instruct, move, and save his listeners. He is doing more than consciously aligning himself with the power elite, as Parfitt suggests. Donne believes that in his sermons on the penitential psalms he is invoking the presence of God so that God will cast his grace on the gathered hearers.

There are a number of studies analyzing Donne's method of constructing sermons. W. Fraser Mitchell focusses on his rhetorical techniques and stylistic influences, his themes, and his use of wit.²⁴ Laurence Stapleton briefly examines Donne's sermons as a literary art form.²⁵ Winfried Schleiner considers the nature of figurative discourse in the sermons and remarks upon, among other things, the decorum of Donne's imagery and the

²⁴Mitchell, 93–97; 133–94, *passim*.

²⁵Laurence Stapleton, "The Moment of the Sermon," in *The Elected Circle: Studies in the Art of Prose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). Stapleton observes, "No other seventeenth-century prose writer had so many channels of meaning at his command: not only rhythm, but words that are like transistors, shining imagery, metaphors that unify thought and liberate feeling, the orchestration of paragraphs and pages" (p. 40).

areas of imagery to which he resorts.²⁶ John Shawcross stresses the qualities and effects of the sermons that become apparent as we view them as oral performances, conversations between the preacher and listeners.²⁷ And while John Chamberlin, Janel Mueller, Achsah Guibbory, Dennis Quinn, and Joan Webber have argued that Donne appeals to the memory above the reason of his listeners to reach them with the Word of God, Noralyn Masselink argues for the integration of memory and reason. Donne's purpose, she states, is not to remind *rather* than to teach, but to remind *in order to* teach.

"Memory is a prerequisite for understanding;" she writes, "without memory, reasoning is impossible." Thus Donne does not appeal to the memory of his hearers *instead of or in addition to* their reason; he "gets at" the intellect or reason *by means of* the memory.²⁸

Masselink argues strongly that Donne's epistemology is founded upon sensory perceptions. These perceptions inform and shape the memory, and the memory of them confronts the reason (pp. 62, 65).

²⁶Winfried Schleiner, *The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970).

²⁷John T. Shawcross, "The Concept of *Sermo* in Herbert and Donne," *John Donne Journal* 6 (1987): 203–12.

²⁸Noralyn Masselink, "Donne's Epistemology and the Appeal to Memory," *John Donne Journal* 8 (1989): 57–88. See John Chamberlin, *Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-Discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976); Janel Mueller, *Donne's Prebend Sermons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Achsah Guibbory, "John Donne and Memory as 'the Art of Salvation,'" *HLQ* 63 (1980): 261–74; Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963); Dennis Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," *ELH* 27 (1960): 276–97.

Terry Sherwood emphasizes the place of reason in the faith of Donne, and with good evidence.²⁹ Donne is clear about the rational basis for the tenets of faith, just as he is clear that proper prayer is grounded in reason for its form and substance. God's method, he states in his sermon on Psalm 32:8, is

To make us understand, certainly those things which belong to our Salvation, are not *In-intelligibilia*, not In-intelligible, un-understandable, un-conceivable things, but the Articles of faith are discernible by Reason. For though Reason cannot apprehend that a Virgin should have a Son, or that God should be made Man and dye, if we put our Reason primarily and immediately upon the Article single . . . yet if we pursue Gods Method, and see what our understanding can doe, we shall see, that out of ratiocination and discourse, and probabilities, and very similitudes, at last will arise evident and necessary conclusions.

(9.16.178–88)

Nevertheless, as Sherwood readily admits, Donne does not believe that only reason is necessary for faith.³⁰ Donne qualifies his statement above by stressing the role of grace:

²⁹Terry G. Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), especially pp. 35–52.

³⁰“The rational acceptance of Scripture is crucial in Donne's epistemology, further illustrating reason's priority to faith. Of course, simple acceptance of the Bible as God's scripture is not itself sufficient for belief, but simply takes one to the threshold of faith” (p. 36).

God exalts our naturall facultie of understanding by Grace to apprehend [mysteries of religion], and then to that submission and assent, which he by grace produces out of our understanding, by a succeeding and more powerfull Grace he sets to the Seale of Faith.

(9.16.200–205)

Timothy Stevens's thesis on the sermons on the penitential psalms focuses on the psychological and spiritual state of the penitent individual. He says that Donne aims to "address the individual self and to reveal the present state of the soul."³¹ The sermons "aim to make the listener more self-aware and to engage the listener in a process of self-transformation" (p. 4). Donne in these sermons is "explicitly concerned with the education of the soul" (p. 12). Stevens views the sermons against the background of Paul Ricoeur's three dimensions of moral evil³²: guilt, sin, and defilement" (p. 115). Unfortunately, his emphasis tends to make Donne's series sound rather like a modern psychological self-help manual than a sustained effort to confront believers with their role before the Infinite.

³¹Timothy Scott Stevens, *Things That Belong To The Way: John Donne's Sermons on the Penitential Psalms* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1990), 2.

³²Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 7.

Debra K. Shuger has remarked³³ that Donne remains close to the classical rhetorical tradition, which was concerned to make “absent and remote things present to your understanding” (4.2.899–901). She cites the ancient Aristotelian dilemma between *magnitudo*, the greatest object, or that most worth knowing, and *praesentia*, the most vivid representation. Put another way, the most excellent things are also the most distant from our perception.³⁴ Shuger argues that Donne’s works reveal the parallel between the rhetorical and theological. That is, while he thinks that rhetoric makes absent and remote things present to our understanding, he also believes that preaching and the sacraments bring Christ “nearer [to humankind] in visible and sensible things.” The sacraments and preaching are perceptible, Shuger writes, and therefore they are more knowable to us. Yet they are also signs of the more excellent and therefore less apprehensible object. Donne attempts to resolve the dilemma, she says, by moving the emotions.³⁵ In Donne’s sermons, she states, the *magnitudo* and *praesentia* conjoin, leading inevitably to an emphasis on the image or the use of concrete detail to suggest the supersensible.

Certainly Donne as a rhetorician knows that he must reach the emotions of his listeners to move them. There abound in his sermons concrete and emotive images. Yet despite his high regard for rhetoric, Donne knows that finally it cannot make God real to believers. Donne specifically states that rhetoric cannot bring “Eternity” closer to our

³³Debra K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 197–98.

³⁴Ibid., 195.

³⁵Ibid., 199.

understanding. No one can know what it is to see or love or enjoy God in heaven, he says, “till he have passed through that eternity, and that everlastingnesse; and that he can never doe” (4.2.894–6). Arithmetic is “barren” in such a pursuit, he says, “and yet Arithmetique will tell you, how many single graines of sand, will fill this hollow Vault to the Firmament” (4.2.897–9). Likewise, rhetoric is “empty,” “and yet Rhetorique will make absent and remote things present to your understanding” (4.2.900–901). “How infirme, how impotent are all asistances,” he continues, “if they be put to expresse this Eternity?” (4.2.903–4). For all its power, then, rhetoric is finally unable to make us comprehend the love of God. What will make God’s love present to us, however, are the sacraments and preaching, through which God himself moves.

Convincing arguments have been made for the place of memory and reason in the sermons of Donne, and while some scholars have analyzed Donne’s use of rhetorical technique and his implementation of figurative discourse, and others have evaluated Donne’s sermons on their ability to maintain a readership over time, not enough attention has been accorded to the sermons as sacred performances. Donne is not primarily concerned with witty or grand oration. He is mainly concerned with delivering the Word of God to his auditory. To focus on Donne’s sermons for their rhetorical technique or their imagery or their structure—despite the insight into his method we might thereby acquire—would seem, I think, somehow immaterial to Donne. His purpose in preaching on the penitential psalms is finally pastoral. He knows the intoxicating power of words in general and the especially arresting power of the Word of God. He believes that as a preacher delivering the Word of God to the people of God in the House of God he is

acting in a moment of time, a holy moment in which heavenly and earthly time and space conjoin. John Shawcross is therefore correct in emphasizing the oral quality of the sermon when he states:

The oral performance received its name from the Latin noun *sermo* . . . which meant a *speaking* or *talking* with someone, a *conversation* It always carries the connotation of ordinary speech and the language of conversation The concept of *sermo* which thus underlies the sermon is a conversation which, as in ordinary speech, develops by a joining together of ideas.³⁶

Shawcross's understanding of *sermo* is helpful in an analysis of Donne's sermons. But while Donne's sermons at times display the quality of conversation between speaker and listener, I wish to stress the role of the Holy Spirit in his works. That is, Donne believes that the sermon is not simply a linear conversation between preacher and believer. It is neither a mere lecture nor a mere conversation. It is an occasion. It is a performance, and a sacred one, because God is present, in the form of the Holy Spirit, in and among the gathered believers. God is present in the Word preached because the Word is God.³⁷

³⁶Shawcross, 204.

³⁷Cf. John 1:1, 14: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

If we assert that Donne believes that God is present at the sermon, then it is fitting to speak of Donne's sacramental or incarnational homiletics. For if the Word is God, then where that Word is, God will also be. Joan Webber speaks in such terms when she refers to Donne's "sacramental view of the Word." With this view, she says, Donne sees the sermon as a point of connection between God and man:

Not only is the sermon a channel of grace, as the preacher is the instrument of the Holy Ghost; it is also a symbolic joining of God with man in the union of the preacher's words with those of Scripture.³⁸

Sermon and sacrament are very close in Donne's mind, Webber states: he builds a paragraph and sermon from a word or phrase that combines the outward sense with inward grace (p. 133).

Webber's argument accords with that of Dennis Quinn, who observes that Donne has an incarnational understanding of preaching and often refers to preaching as "manifesting Christ."³⁹ Further, he remarks, in the sermons on Psalm 38 Donne not only explains sin to his auditory, he reveals it. Having done so, however, Donne is aware that a sacramental step, not merely a rational assertion, is necessary to heal the sinner. And in

³⁸Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 125.

³⁹Dennis Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," *ELH* 27 (1960): 276–97. See pp. 282ff.: "This manifestation is a kind of incarnation—'caro in verbo, he that is made flesh comes in the word, that is Christ comes in the preaching thereof' (II, 251)."

his sermons on Psalm 6, Quinn argues, Donne uses the text as an instrument of salvation: the congregation is expected to experience the psalm spiritually rather than to understand it or grasp its moral (p. 295). Therefore in their very structure Donne's sermons re-enact the truth that Donne sees in the biblical texts (p. 296). As a result, by preaching, the preacher cooperates in the sacramental application of Christ's merits to hearer's souls. In this application it is the memory of the hearers that Donne aims to engage, rather than their rational intellect (pp. 284, 297).

Thomas Merrill goes further than either Webber or Quinn in his analysis of Donne's sacramental view of preaching. He makes two points that require examination. First, he argues that Donne's homiletics are demonstrably Puritan rather than conservative, and that as a preaching theorist Donne is completely in agreement with the Puritan Thomas Cartwright. Second, he states that Donne views preaching as sacramental.

Merrill explains his first point as follows:

The basis of this curious alliance [between Donne and Cartwright] was a shared belief that the Word of God, when preached before a congregation by an ordained minister, constituted a real encounter with the living God speaking through a human instrument, the minister. The sermon was in

effect, if not in name, a sacramental rite which was an *ipso facto* effective channel of divine grace.⁴⁰

Merrill claims that owing to the disputes of the Reformation over the nature of God's participation in the Eucharist, Christians became confused about the corporate significance of the sacraments. Consequently, the sermon received more attention than it had previously, and in continental Europe reformers began to see the sermon as a liturgical function as efficacious in salvation as the sacraments themselves. The Holy Spirit was seen as present and operative in the preached Word, and as a result the confusion over the divine presence in the worship ceremony lessened (pp. 118–19). By contrast, Merrill argues, conservative Anglicans continued to regard the sermon merely as a useful adjunct to worship that helped to instruct believers on baptism and the Lord's Supper.

There is support for Merrill's argument about the differing views of preaching. Cartwright's opinion of preaching was so high that he thought the sacraments should never be administered without giving a sermon beforehand. He insisted that since the "the life of the sacraments dependeth of the preaching of the word of God, there must of

⁴⁰Thomas F. Merrill, "The Sermon as Sacrament," in *Christian Criticism: A Study of Literary God-Talk* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1976), 161. This chapter was first published as "John Donne and the Word of God," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 69 (1968): 597–616.

necessity the word of God be, not read, but preached unto the people, amongst whom the sacraments are administered.”⁴¹

On the conservative Anglican side, John Whitgift flatly disagreed with Cartwright. While readily admitting that preaching was “very convenient,” Whitgift stated that it was the quality, not the quantity, of sermons that mattered.⁴² Further, he argued, it was “absurd” and a “foul error” to contend that the life of the sacraments depended upon preaching; their life, he said, depended upon the actual promises that God had made and that were recorded in the scriptures, not upon preaching about them (3:22).

Merrill argues that conservatives had a static view of the scriptures, while Puritans had a dynamic view. He states:

The Puritans . . . understood “Word of God” dynamically. The Word was not mere Scripture; it was Christ, immediate and present, mediated through the Holy Spirit in the ordinance of preaching. The Holy Ghost worked as the minister preached and descended upon the congregation providing a direct confrontation with the Holy Presence.

(p. 263)

⁴¹Thomas Cartwright, quoted by John Whitgift in his *Defence of the Answer to the Admonition, Against the Reply of Thomas Cartwright*, in *The Works of John Whitgift*, ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: Parker Society, Cambridge University Press, 1853), 3:22.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 3:1.

However, he continues, the conservative Anglicans did not hold such an exalted opinion of the efficacy of the preached Word. They considered it a static mode of edification, a scholarly aid to faith, but not an instance of divine activity (p. 164).

A review of his evidence reveals that Merrill appears to overstate the difference between the views of the Puritans and the conservatives. For example, he claims that while Donne believes that Christ is the Word and the preacher is the voice of that Word, Hooker thinks that only the scriptures are the Word of God. This is to misstate Hooker's position. For when Hooker states "We therefore have no *word of God* but the Scripture" (5.21.2), he is arguing about the canonicity of the Bible. He argues that the word of God was revealed to prophets and apostles by "immediate divine inspiration" (5.21.2); their apostolic sermons constituted the Word of God to their auditors; and their writings constitute the Word of God to us. Therefore, Hooker says, it is wrong to say, as some Protestants claimed, that the sermon of a modern preacher is the Word of God. The Word of God, Hooker argues, is the scriptures alone.

Further, Merrill claims that Donne "pressed a radically dynamic definition" of the Word of God in opposition to Hooker's view. He quotes Donne:

Christ is *verbum*, The word; not A word, but The Word: The minister is
Vox, voyce; not A voyce, but The Voyce, The voyce of that word, and no
 other.

(2.7.304–311)

But clearly the orthodox position that Donne here states is one with which Hooker had no quarrel. Hooker plainly does not believe that only the scriptures are the Word of God, for he confesses that the Son is the eternal Word (5.51–54). And as for the contention that Hooker views the Scriptures as a static “doctrinal instrument” (5.21.3) it is clear that Hooker regards the Word as active and efficacious. The Word of God, he writes, with the concurrence of the Holy Spirit, *converts, edifies, and saves* souls (5.21.5). Moreover, its efficacy is not limited to the single medium of sermons; rather, the truth of the Word can be communicated in many different ways by several different kinds of “preaching.” Since preaching, he says, is simply the “open publication of heavenly mysteries” (5.18.1) reading, catechising, and sermonizing are all valid forms of preaching:

Whatsoever fit means there are to notify the mysteries of the word of God, whether publicly (which we call Preaching) or in private howsoever, the word by *every such mean* even “ordinarily” doth save, and not only by being delivered unto men in Sermons.

(5.21.3)

Further, Hooker is far from pushing the sermon to the periphery of divine worship. He supports the Puritan respect for the ordinance of preaching:

So worthy a part of divine service we should greatly wrong, if we did not esteem Preaching as the blessed ordinance of God, sermons as keys to the

kingdom of heaven, as wings to the soul, as a spur to the good affections of man, unto the sound and healthy as food, as physic unto diseased minds. Wherefore how highly soever it may please them with words of truth to extol sermons, they shall not herein offend us.

(5.22.1)

Finally, Merrill states that Donne believes that the Word is not Gospel unless it is preached. He cites Donne (p. 165), italicizing the last clause for emphasis:

Nothing is Gospell, not *Evangelium*, good message, *if it be not put into a Messengers mouth; and delivered by him.*

(7.16.125–27)

But we must place this comment in context. Donne is speaking about the “ordinance” of the Church, and he puns on the military sense of the word. This ordinance batters the soul, he says, and by the breach the Spirit enters. The preachers are “an *Earth-quake*, and shake an earthly soule; They are the *sonnes of thunder*, and scatter a cloudy conscience” (7.16.116–17). Next Donne uses the metaphor of light, alluding to Christ’s warning to believers not to hide their light under a bushel:

Therefore what Christ tels us in the darke, he bids us speake in the light;
and what he saies in our eare, he bids us preach on the house top. Nothing

is Gospell, not *Evangelium*, good message, if it be not put into a Messengers mouth, and delivered by him; nothing is conducible to his end, nor available to our salvation, except it be avowable doctrine, doctrine that may be spoke aloud, though it awake them, that sleep in their sinne, and make them the more froward, for being so awaked.

(7.16.123–30)

Donne is merely here reiterating the belief that he states repeatedly in his sermons: in saving us the Word of God first speaks to our understanding. The Word is communicated to us in words, and we use our reason to try to fathom those words. He is not saying, as Merrill implies, that no Gospel exists at all unless it is preached in sermons by ordained ministers.

While it is true that the Puritans and conservative Anglicans demonstrably differed on their views of the nature of preaching and the role of the sacraments, I maintain that the conservative Anglican view of scripture is not so obviously static as Merrill suggests. To suggest, therefore, that Donne is firmly in the camp of Puritan preaching theorists, and that Donne formed a “curious alliance” with the Puritans, is to misread the Puritans, Donne, and other conservative Anglicans.

Where Merrill is correct, however, and where he is most interesting, is in his second argument, that Donne has a sacramental view of preaching. Calling Donne a Puritan in preaching theory because he has a sacramental conception of sermons does not much help us to understand Donne. He is unlike Puritans in too many other ways to be

considered one of them. Moreover, as E. Brooks Holifield shows, there was no single sacramental doctrine among Puritans.⁴³ However, it is true that Donne has a sacramental view of preaching. He shares the Puritans' veneration of the Word, but he shares equally the conservative reverence for the sacraments. Donne never argues that the opportunity to meet God in the sermon replaces the opportunity in the sacraments. He does not mean to elevate preaching to so high a position, and he does not mean to detract from the sacraments.⁴⁴ Rather than say that Donne's preaching theory is distinctly Puritan, then, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that Donne sees preaching as a means to encounter God in the same way that one encounters him in the sacraments. The question therefore arises, How do people meet God in the sacraments? This question is the focus of ensuing chapters.

Elena Levy-Navarro argues in her dissertation that in his religious writings, especially his religious lyrics, "Donne desires to create a literary ritual with the power to effect absolution in the human life."⁴⁵ He fails to effect his desired absolution, she writes, because he uses different guises and symbolic patterns to express a private form of repentance which can never be shared by a worship community (pp. 104–5). I do not think it is possible to say with certainty that Donne fails to effect absolution. In his

⁴³E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570–1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁴⁴Merrill also makes this point at pp. 165–66.

⁴⁵Elena Luisa Levy-Navarro, *The Penitential Poem: The Transformation of the Sacrament of Penance and Its Impact on the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1992), 80.

sermons he clearly offers his auditors the grace of God, which can lead them to repentance and absolution. And he uses methods that his hearers can recognize and share: at times the sermons even have a familiar ritualistic tone about them. Donne attempts to effect absolution in his hearers; it is not inconceivable that he might succeed.

Theresa DiPasquale also enquires into the sacramental nature of Donne's poetry. She argues that in his divine poems he "explores the written word's potential to do for readers precisely what the Christian sacraments do for their receivers." In these works, she states, "the text functions as a visible sign like the water of Baptism or the bread of the Eucharist; it is set up as a means of grace for the devout reader."⁴⁶ Thus in "The Crosse" Donne attempts to make his own representation of the cross—the poem itself—a sacramental, grace-conveying sign (p. 18).

In his sermons on the penitential psalms, however, Donne is charged as a priest in the Church of England with ensuring the spiritual welfare of his people. Thus as he tries to make the person of Christ a real presence in the lives of his listeners, he is concerned with their very lives. He understands that he has a responsibility to bring his congregations to a state of reconciliation with God. He knows that God will visit his hearers in the sacrament of the Eucharist, but to make them ready to receive that sacrament, he must prepare the way. That way is through repentance. In order to effect repentance, he offers them his sacramental sermons on the penitential psalms.

⁴⁶Theresa Maria DiPasquale, *John Donne's Sacramental Poetics* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1989), 17.

Chapter 3: Views of the Sacraments to the Reformation

In light of the diversity of doctrine on the sacraments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is clear that to use the terms “sacrament” and “sacramental,” especially in relation to Donne’s sermons, requires some clarification. For example, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper acquired vastly different meaning and significance in the various branches of the church. It has become common to regard the differing views of the Lord’s Supper during the Reformation as falling into four camps: Roman Catholic transubstantiation, Lutheran consubstantiation, Calvinist covenantalism and Zwinglian memorialism. In truth, however, the scene was much more complex, as such scholars as C.W. Dugmore and E. Brooks Holifield have pointed out.⁴⁷ Dugmore reveals that the Reformers were hardly the first to question Catholic teachings on the Mass; for centuries, he writes, Catholic churchmen had debated the Real Presence, the functions and efficacy of the Mass, and the properties of the elements of the Eucharist.⁴⁸ The debate continued through the Council of Trent; but until then, there was no single uniform Catholic doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Opposite Rome, there was also great divergence of

⁴⁷C.W. Dugmore, *The Mass and the English Reformers* (London: Macmillan, 1958) and E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570–1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁴⁸Dugmore, 39–80 and *passim*.

opinion in the Church of England and continental Protestant churches. There were profound differences as to the purpose and effect of the sacraments, the manner in which they should be administered, and the characteristics of those who could receive them. Thus in order to call Donne's sermons "sacramental," it is necessary to answer the question, What is a sacrament?

Augustine teaches that a sacrament is "a visible sign of an invisible grace,"⁴⁹ and this broad definition survives through the Reformation. But the definition is not a helpful one, since it leaves many questions unanswered. For example, what, if any, is the purpose or effect of the sacraments? Article 25 of the Thirty-nine Articles in the Book of Common Prayer of 1562 attempts an answer. It reads, in part, as follows:

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

According to the Church of England of the sixteenth century, then, sacraments are *effectual* signs of grace; and they *confirm* and *quicken* believers in their faith. As Holifield points out, however, the influential Ulrich Zwingli first denied—although he

⁴⁹Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus* 26.50 (PL 40.344).

later granted—that the sacraments had any effect. Because he believed that ultimate truth lay in the spiritual realm, he denied that the physical elements of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper could transmit grace. Therefore the supper could only be a figure or memorial of Christ's death.⁵⁰ John Calvin regarded the sacraments as seals, using the term in the legal sense of a device that makes a written agreement valid. In his *Institutes* he writes:

It seems to me that a simple and proper definition [of a sacrament] would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.

(4.14.1)⁵¹

The sacraments, Calvin asserts,

are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God's Word . . . Or we might call them mirrors in which we may contemplate the riches of God's grace, which he lavishes upon us.

(4.14.6)

⁵⁰Holifield, 10–11.

⁵¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

Puritan preachers, influenced by the arguments of Calvin, regarded the Lord's Supper mainly as a seal of the covenant and as a source of assurance.⁵² Not that they thought the elements of the Eucharist themselves conveyed assurance of faith; rather, as William Perkins argues, it is the believer himself who, when considering that he is properly using the elements before him, assures himself that he will thereby receive an increase in grace from God.⁵³ Richard Hooker agrees that the elements themselves do not confer grace ("they conteine *in them selves* no vitall force or efficacie"⁵⁴), but he allows more efficacy to the sacraments than does Perkins. Sacraments, he maintains, are neither bare resemblances or memorials of absent things, nor naked signs assuring believers of the grace they have received earlier. Rather, he takes baptism and the Eucharist

for meanes effectuall whereby God when wee take the sacramentes delivereth into our handes that grace available unto eternall life, which grace the sacramentes represent or signifie.

(5.57.5, p. 247)

⁵²Holifield, 51.

⁵³Holifield, 53, citing William Perkins, *A Reformed Catholike* (London, 1635), 610.

⁵⁴Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book 5, ed. W. Speed Hill, in the Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 5.57.4, p. 246.

In the Eucharist, Hooker continues, we receive Christ, “impartinge therein him selfe and that grace which the Eucharist properlie bestoweth” (5.57.6, p. 248). Sacraments are a “plaine and sensible token” by which we can know what we cannot see. By these “sensible meanes” God communicates those blessings which are incomprehensible (5.57.3); by sacraments God “deriveth”⁵⁵ into every member of the church the saving grace of Christ (5.57.5).

It is probably most helpful to say that opinions on the sacraments near the beginning of the seventeenth century fall generally into two broad categories: the subjective and the objective. The subjective holds that the sacraments are occasions of thankful remembrance of God’s blessings. We receive them as seals of God’s new covenant with us and as signs of assurance that God intends to remain faithful to us. God grants us his grace in receiving the sacraments, but the grace that he gives us is something of a reminder of all the benefits of his works. God by his grace builds up our faith as we receive the sacraments. In order to receive the benefits of that grace, we need to come to the sacraments with a prepared and a pure heart.

The objective view of the sacraments holds that God acts in the ceremonies and that he gives to partakers a supernatural gift of grace. However, grace does not come from merely enacting the ceremonies themselves, as though they were magic spells. We prepare properly to receive the sacraments. But the grace that we obtain in the

⁵⁵This word should be understood in the sense of the following *OED* entry: “To convey from one (treated as a source) to another, as by transmission, descent, etc.; to transmit, impart, communicate, pass on, hand on.”

sacraments is more than an assurance within our own minds of God's faithfulness. Provided that we participate worthily, God in the sacraments actually gives us grace "unto eternal life," in Hooker's words (5.57.6).

Donne holds the objective view of the sacraments. That is, while he agrees with many of the aspects of the subjective view, he goes further, and believes that God actually conveys effectual grace to those who participate in the sacraments. This grace is more than a reminder of his good works: it is a gift of faith that enables his people to maintain their salvation.

The Reformation and the Sacrament of Penance

It is impossible to read the various works on the penitential psalms in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries without considering the effect of the Reformation on the sacrament of penance. Penance has always been a complex matter, for it has developed over a long time and has accrued the contributions of devout souls and keen minds over the centuries. The practice of penance, though diverse, has long sought to express in external forms its three parts—contrition, confession, and satisfaction. To many reformers the emphasis on external forms of penance was repugnant: such forms only concealed and superseded true penance, the inward condition of a penitent believer's heart. To focus on penance as a sacrament, as an outward sign, was to miss the whole point of penance.

Luther did not argue with the traditional three-part scheme of penance, but he did believe that the Roman Catholic church since the days of scholasticism had misconstrued

the three parts. He believed that contrition alone, coupled with the promise of God's forgiveness through Christ's one atoning work for all sins, was sufficient for the forgiveness of sins. Therefore any absolution that a priest pronounces is simply a declaration of an event that has already occurred: God has forgiven the contrite sinner's transgressions. And whereas confession and priestly absolution had always been preconditions to Holy Communion, Luther maintained that contrition alone, with the attendant belief that God's grace was available in the Eucharist, was all that one needed to approach the altar. He did not support the notion of confession and absolution as a purifying rite before Holy Communion. And yet Luther nevertheless found the process of unburdening one's conscience before a priest and hearing him pronounce God's absolution to be a great consolation.⁵⁶ As for the third part of penance, satisfaction, it is accomplished through the finished work of Christ, not through the works of penitents.

Calvin, on the other hand, had more difficulty with the teaching that true penance, or repentance, consisted of contrition, confession, and satisfaction.⁵⁷ He was not at all sympathetic with the practice of auricular confession. The church's teachings on auricular confession had always demanded that the confessant make a complete confession, and it was up to the confessor to ensure that the confession was complete.

Concerning satisfaction, Calvin's response to the schoolmen was simple: Christ's death on the cross is the only work of satisfaction necessary to account for the sins of any

⁵⁶See Tentler, 349–61.

⁵⁷*Institutes*, 3.4.1.

believer. The distinction between guilt and penalty, the former being remitted by God's mercy, the latter being remitted by works of satisfaction, is specious.⁵⁸

For Calvin, repentance and the forgiveness of sins are consequents of faith.⁵⁹ The church's proper emphasis is on teaching people to hunger and thirst after God's mercy; then believers will see how they offend God and will be moved to repent. But it is not the fullness of contrition that brings a sinner forgiveness, nor is repentance the cause of forgiveness. Forgiveness comes only from the mercy of God alone.⁶⁰ And yet one is to live one's life in repentance, which is a gift from God. To live in repentance, while not overemphasizing external acts of penance, is to live a holy life.⁶¹

Richard Hooker agrees with Calvin that repentance is a gift of God,⁶² but he is not so quick to reject the traditional threefold structure of penance, contrition, confession, and satisfaction. He sees these components as the proper parts of penitence.⁶³ They are, however, part of the *virtue* of repentance, that is, that inward repentance which pleases God, not part of the *discipline* of repentance, the outward penitence with which the

⁵⁸3.4.30.

⁵⁹3.3.1.

⁶⁰3.4.3.

⁶¹3.3.16–20.

⁶²*Of the Laws of Ecclesiasticall Polity*, Books 6 through 8 ed. P.G. Stanwood, in the Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, vol. 3 (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1981), 6.3.2, p. 7.

⁶³6.3.5–6.5.9.

church is satisfied.⁶⁴ In the virtue of repentance, says Hooker, contrition is “that alteration, whereby the will which was before delighted with sinne, doth now abhorre and shunne nothing more.”⁶⁵ Confession, likewise, is also a necessary part of penitence: “Wee say, Lett noe man looke for pardon, which doth smother and conceale sinne, where in dutie it should be revealed.”⁶⁶ But confession is to be to God, not to priests: the doctrine of mandatory auricular confession is foreign both to the teachings of the Church Fathers and to the Scriptures,⁶⁷ and the notion that auricular confession is a sacrament is simply wrong.⁶⁸ Satisfaction is also a crucial part of repentance, but we must not confuse Christ’s perfect work of satisfaction with our deeds of satisfaction. God demands justice for sins, and the only work that can fulfill his demand is the infinite recompense of Christ’s death. We do not offer our works of satisfaction to God to redeem or buy out sin, but as tokens of meek submission. God does not accept them because of their value but because of his mercy.⁶⁹ To satisfy injured persons, Hooker says that penitents must provide restitution; concerning the church, he notes that in the times of the fathers penitents had to display “verie manifest tokens given of a true pœnitent and contrite

⁶⁴6.3.1.

⁶⁵6.3.5., p. 12.

⁶⁶6.4.4., p. 18.

⁶⁷6.4.4–6.4.16.

⁶⁸6.4.5.

⁶⁹6.5.3.

spirit.”⁷⁰ And as for absolution, Hooker is quite clear: God alone forgives or remits sins; priests only declare God’s forgiveness. Priestly absolution is not efficacious to take away sin.⁷¹

By the end of the sixteenth century the reformers were united in denouncing the Roman Catholic teaching that auricular confession was necessary for the remission of sins. The movement against auricular confession had gained gradual but eventually widespread support in the Church of England. Henry VIII had originally defended auricular confession in his *Book against Luther* (1521),⁷² but his opinion was not enough to quell dissent. In 1536 the *Ten Articles* were passed to “stablish Christian quietness and unity” in the church. *The Ten Articles* recognize only three sacraments, not seven: baptism, the Eucharist, and penance. *The Ten Articles* state that the sacrament of penance includes auricular confession, and that priestly absolution is indispensable. Article III, on “The Sacrament of Penance,” provides as follows:

The sacrament was institute of Christ in the newe testament, as a thyng so necessary for mannes saluation, that no man, which after his baptisme is fallen agayne, and hath commytted deadely synne, can without the same be saued, or

⁷⁰6.6.7., p. 80.

⁷¹6.6.4; 6.6.14.

⁷²Henry VIII, *Assertio septem sacramentorum aduersus M. Lutherū* (London: R. Pynson, 1521), *STC* 13078.

atteine euerlasting lyfe. who has committed deadly sin after Baptism can be saved without it.⁷³

Confessants are to have as much faith in the priest's words of absolution as they would in the very words and voice of God himself.⁷⁴ Therefore, believers are "in no wise" to condemn auricular confession, for it is "a very expedient and necessary meane, wherby they may require and aske this absolution at the prestes handes."⁷⁵

In 1537 the convocation of bishops at Lambeth, under Cranmer, drafted *The Institution of a Christen Man* or, as it came to be known, the *Bishops' Book*. While it did not much alter the teaching of *The Ten Articles* on the sacrament of penance, it did firmly reinstate all seven sacraments to their former place. The discussion in the *Bishops' Book* of the seven sacraments and of the sacrament of penance has a decidedly non-reformed tone. Outspoken reformers must have objected to the tenor of this *Item* under "The Sacrament of Penaunce":

⁷³[*The Ten Articles of 1536*] *Articles deuised by the Kynges highnes maiestie, to stablyshe christen quietnes and vnities amonge vs . . .* (London: T. Berthelet, 1536), sig. B2^v.

⁷⁴Sig. B4^r.

⁷⁵Sig. B4^r.

Item that by penaunce and suche good workes of the same, we shall not only obteyne euerlastyng lyfe, but also we shall deserue remission or mitigation of the presente peynes and afflyctions, whyche we susteygne in this worlde.⁷⁶

In 1538, again under Cranmer's lead, *The Thirteen Articles* were drafted, heavily influenced by the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. Article VIII, *De Pœnitentia*, provides that penance, which comprises auricular confession, is necessary for salvation to those who sin after baptism.⁷⁷ Then in 1539 the Duke of Norfolk introduced to Parliament *The Six Articles Act*, otherwise known as an *Act for the Abolishing of Diversity of Opinions*.⁷⁸ The act does not mention the sacrament of penance, but it does establish, in the sixth article, "that auricular confession is expedient and necessary to be retained and continued, used and frequented in the Church of God."⁷⁹ Anyone who preached or taught otherwise received the death penalty, and his property was forfeited to the crown.⁸⁰ There is, significantly, no theological defence of auricular confession or of the sacrament of penance in *The Six Articles*; the tenor of the act is more one of enforcement than instruction.

⁷⁶[*The Bishops' Book*] *The institution of a christen man, conteynyng the exposition of the crede, of the seuen sacraments*. . . (London: T. Berthelet, 1537), sig. K2^v; STC 5163.

⁷⁷Drury, 221.

⁷⁸Henry Gee and William John Hardy, *Documents Illustrative of English Church History* (London: Macmillan, 1921), 303.

⁷⁹Ibid., 306.

⁸⁰Ibid., 308–9.

In 1543, a wholehearted theological defence of the sacrament of penance again appeared, this time in *The King's Book*, or as it is also known, *A necessary doctrine and erudition for any christen man, sette furthe by the kynges maiestie*. As in *The Ten Articles* and *The Institution of a Christen Man*, penance is considered a sacrament and is “so necessary for mans saluation, that without it, no man, that offendeth god, can be saued, or atteyne euerlastynge lyfe.”⁸¹ *The King's Book* emphasizes the sacramental nature of penance, going so far as to affirm that “the sacrament of penaunce is properly the absolution, pronounced by the priest, upon such as be penitent for their synnes and so do knowlege and shewe themselues to be” (sig. F3^r). The three parts of penance are contrition, confession, and satisfaction, all of which are “wayes and meanes expedient and necessary to obteyne the sayde absolution” (sig. F3^r). *The King's Book* therefore seems to be conservative in its traditional treatment of penance as sacramental; yet it makes a significant concession to the contritionist school by stating that if a penitent is really sorry for his sins and wishes to change his ways but cannot find an available priest to confess to, “he shall undoubtedly haue pardon and forgyuenesse of all his myssedoinges” (sig. G1^v).

Just nine years later, *The Forty-two Articles* of 1552 do not even mention penance.⁸² These *Articles* define sacraments and discuss baptism and the Lord's Supper,

⁸¹[*The King's Book*] *A necessary doctrine and erudition for any christen man, sette furthe by the kynges maiestie* (London: T. Barthelet, 1543), sig. F3^r; STC 5168.

⁸²[*The Forty-two Articles*] *Articles agreed on by the bishoppes . . . in the synode at London, M.D.LII for the auoiding of controuersie in opinions . . .* (London: R. Grafton, 1553), STC 10034.

but they do not state how many sacraments the church recognizes. Not surprisingly, this ambiguity proved unsatisfactory. When *The Thirty-nine Articles* were drafted in 1562, the number of sacraments was clearly set at two,⁸³ and the status of penance was settled. *Article 17* provided that the place of “penitence” was not to be denied “to such as fal into synne after baptisme”; and *Article 25* provided that Penance, though often considered a sacrament, is not to be considered “a sacrament of the Gospel,” because it “hath not any visible signe, or ceremonie, ordayned of God.”⁸⁴ Further, *Article 35* lists the titles of homilies contained in *The Second Book of Homilies* (1562)⁸⁵; among them is the homily “Of Repentaunce and of True Reconciliation unto God.” This homily begins by asserting that

There is nothyng that the holy ghoste doeth soo muche laboure in all the
 Scryptures to beate into mennes heades, as repentaunce, amendment of lyfe, and
 spedye returnyng unto the Lorde God of hostes.

(fol. 273^v)

⁸³*Article 26.*

⁸⁴[*The Thirty-nine Articles of 1562*] *Articles, whereupon it was agreed by the archbysshops, and bisshops in M.D.lxii.* (London: R. Jugge and J. Cawood [1563?]), *STC* 10038.3.

⁸⁵*The Seconde Tome of Homelyes of such matters as were promised and Intituled in the former part of Homelyes, set out by the aucthoritie of the Quenes Maiestie . . .* (London: Richard Jugge and John Cawood, 1563).

The homily goes on to affirm that “no doctrine is so necessarye in the Church of God, as is the doctryne of repentaunce and amendement of lyfe” (fol. 273^v). Christians are not to doubt that forgiveness is available to them if, after sinning, they “ryse agayne by repentaunce, & with a full purpose of amendement of life, do flee vnto the mercy of God” (fol. 280^r), but neither are they to think that they are capable in their own strength to return to God. Repentance is clearly a gift (fol. 282^r). And rather than citing the three traditional parts of penance, the homily lists four: contrition of the heart; unfeigned confession and acknowledging of our sins to God; faith, by which we take hold of God’s promises of forgiveness; and amendement of life, evidenced by or bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance (fols. 282^r–286^v).

Concerning auricular confession, which only twenty years earlier was confirmed as essential to forgiveness, “Of Repentaunce” is definite: it is not necessary. Believers’ sins are forgiven before confession. “What neede we then to tell forth our sinnes into the eare of the Priest, sith that they be already taken away?” (fol. 284^v). The homilist provides a place for confession to a learned curate, pastor, or “some other godly learned man,” so that the believer may receive at their hands “the comfortable salue of Gods worde,” but, he says “it is agaynste true Chrystian libertie, that any man, shoulde be bounde to the numbrynge of hys synnes, as it hath bene vsed heretofore in the tyme of blyndnesse and ignorance.”⁸⁶ St. John Chrysostom, after centuries, has finally prevailed.⁸⁷

⁸⁶Fol. 285 [misnumbered 278]^v.

⁸⁷See Appendix, p. 245.

In fact, reformers often went to Chrysostom and to Peter Lombard for texts to support the demotion of the sacrament of penance. For instance, in his *Defence of the Apology of the Church of England*, John Jewel aligns himself with the contritionist school of Lombard by quoting the following passage:

We may safely say that, without confession of the mouth and absolution of the outward pain, sins may be forgiven by the contrition and humility of the heart.⁸⁸

And some thirty years later, Hooker cites Chrysostom:

Lett the enquire and presentment of thy offenses bee made in thyne owne thoughts, Lett the tribunal whereat thou arraignest thyselfe, bee without wittnes; Lett God and only God, see thee and thy confession.⁸⁹

As a result of the changes in the Church of England's position on penance, there were changes in the liturgy. The role of priestly absolution moved from being efficacious to declarative, and as a result the nature of liturgical confession and absolution changed. For if one were bound only to confess one's sins to God rather than to a priest, and if God

⁸⁸*Defence*, chapter 7, division 2; *Works* 3:377.

⁸⁹*Laws*, 6.4.13; Hooker is quoting Chrysostom, *De Poenitentia et Confessione*. John Jewel quotes the same passage in *The Defence of the Apology of the Church of England*, part 2, c. 7, div. 2. See *The Works of John Jewel*, ed. John Ayre for The Parker Society, 4 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1848), 3:376.

forgave one's sins on seeing one's contrition, then the role of the priest was merely to hear one's confession and pronounce the absolution that God had already effected. The indicative pronouncement of the priest to the penitent, *Ego te absolvo*, which was confirmed as the crucial and effectual part of the sacrament of penance by the Council of Trent,⁹⁰ would seem to be untenable in the liturgy. Thus following the general confession in the order for Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549, there is the following declaratory absolution:

Almightie GOD our heauenly father, who of his greate mercye, hath promysed forgeuenesse of synnes to all them, which with heartye repentaunce and true fayth turne vnto hym: haue mercy upon you, pardon and deliuer you from all your sinnes, confirme and strengthen you in all goodnes, and bring you to euerlasting lyfe: through Iesus Christe our Lord. Amen.⁹¹

There is nothing efficacious about this absolution; it merely serves to assure people that God has forgiven their confessed sins. And to underscore the consolatory role of the absolution, there follow the "comfortable words," scriptural assurances of forgiveness introduced with the words "Heare what coumfortable woordes our sauour

⁹⁰Lea, 1:488.

⁹¹F.E. Brightman, *The English Rite: Being a Synopsis of the Sources and Revisions of the Book of Common Prayer*, 2 vols. (London: Rivingtons, 1921), 2:698.

Christe sayeth, to all that truely turne to him."⁹² The general confession and the absolution are missing from the 1549 version of the offices for matins and evensong; but they were inserted in the 1552 version and have been in place ever since. The absolutions in the services for matins and evensong are still declaratory, but they differ from the absolution of the Holy Communion in that they are ambiguous about the priest's role. The 1552 absolution for matins reads as follows:

Almightie God, the father of oure Lorde Iesus Christ, which desireth not the death of a synner, but rather that he maye turne from his wickednes and lyue: & hath geuen power and commaundement to his ministers, to declare and pronounce to hys people beeynge penitent, the absolucion and remission of theyr synnes: he pardoneth & absolueth al them, which truely repent, and unfeyndedly beleue his holy Gospell. Wherefore we beseche him to graunt us true repentaunce. . . .⁹³

Thus the liturgy seems to be developing consistently with Church teaching on penance. And yet, curiously, there is a vestige of sacramental penance in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick. The 1549 Prayer Book provides an opportunity for the sick person to make a "special confession" of his sins, following which the priest is directed to pronounce this absolution:

⁹²Ibid., 2:698.

⁹³Ibid., 1:132–33.

Our lord Iesus Christ, who hath lefte power to his church to absolue al sinners, which truely repent and beleue in hym, of his greate mercy forgeue thee thine offences: and by his authoritie committed to me, I absolue thee from al thy synnes, in the name of the father, and of the sonne and. &c. Amen.

[1552]⁹⁴

The 1552 and 1661 Prayer Books contain the same form of absolution, but the rubric does not tell the priest specifically to say the exact words given; rather, he is told that he “shal absolue hym after thys *sorte*.” Elena Levy-Navarro has noted this ambiguity and has stated that it undermines the efficaciousness of the spoken absolution.⁹⁵ Regardless of whether the priest was to pronounce the words of absolution in precisely the form given, however, the *Ego te absolvo* that was at the center of the dispute over the sacramental nature of penance is present in each form. The priest might have some latitude, but the key words are still there.

There might appear to be ambivalence about penance in the Church of England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries despite the apparent resolution of the matter in the official articles of faith. On the one hand, the church seems to settle the fact that auricular confession is not required for the forgiveness of sins. Further, it seems established that priestly absolution is only declarative of the forgiveness that God has already conferred

⁹⁴Ibid., 2:828–29.

⁹⁵Elena Luisa Levy-Navarro, *The Penitential Poem*, 35.

on a truly contrite sinner. *The Second Book of Homilies* makes these points clear, as do Hooker's *Laws*. Yet, on the other hand, there remains the odd indicative formula for absolution in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick, which, unless we consider it a mere oversight by the compilers of the Prayer Book, seems to grant priests the power that Hooker, the Homilies, and other reformers reserve to God alone. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that by retaining the *Ego te absolvo* in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick, the Church of England was clinging to the notion of efficacious priestly absolution. Hooker is simply too clear on the matter. At the end of Book 6 of the *Laws*, he recapitulates:

lett it suffice thus farre to have shewed, how God alone doth truely give, the vertue of repentance alone procure, and private ministeriall absolution butt declare remission of sinnes.

(6.6.14)

The church cannot have it both ways: priestly absolution either is or is not effectual to remit sins. The forms for absolution in the orders for Holy Communion, morning prayer, and evening prayer all are quite clear that absolution by priests in the Church of England is declaratory, not effectual. In the face of those forms and of leading church teaching, the apparently efficacious priestly absolution in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick must be viewed as something most unusual and not as a deliberate attempt to maintain sacramental confession and absolution in the Church of England.

In fact the Church of England did not generally retain sacramental penance after the Reformation. One way to help ensure that former teachings about sacramental penance did not creep back into the church was to avoid using the word “penance” except in very special circumstances. Reformers preferred the word “repentance.” Both words were English translations of the word *μετάνοια*, but repentance tended to emphasize a “change of mind,” or amendment of life. Penance, in the opinion of reformers, tended to emphasize the external act of discipline. Thus William Fulke, writing in the defence of the English translations of the Bible against the attacks of the Catholic Gregory Martin, states

The cause why we never use that word “penance,” is, for that you mean not thereby that which the scripture calleth *μετάνοιαν*, but a certain punishment taken upon men for satisfaction of their sins unto God; which is abominable for all christian ears to hear, which acknowledge that “the blood of Christ” only “purgeth us from all sin.”⁹⁶

Hooker shows a clear preference for the term “repentance” throughout Book 6 of the *Laws*. Lancelot Andrewes, in his series of sermons preached on Ash Wednesday,

⁹⁶William Fulke, *A Defense of the sincere and true Translations of the holie Scriptures into the English tong, against the manifolde cauils, friuolous quarels, and impudent slaunders of Gregorie Martin . . .* (London: Henrie Bynneman, 1583); Parker Society (Cambridge: University Press, 1843), 429.

emphasizes repentance as a turning back of the whole life to God.⁹⁷ Andrewes's emphasis is significant, for he is preaching on the day on which the church traditionally admitted penitents into formal penance. And yet he tries to lead his hearers not to penance, but to repentance. Repentance, he says, is "nothing else but *redire ad principia*, 'a kind of circling,' to return to Him by repentance from Whom by sin we have turned away."⁹⁸ Repentance is at the same time a gift of God and the voluntary response of men or women, without compulsion, to God's call (pp. 357, 365). Above all, he exclaims, it is the turning to God "with the whole heart entire, no purpose of recidivation!" (p. 365).

It is clear that Andrewes is speaking of repentance in terms similar to those that characterized the penitents in ancient times. The Fathers had always taught that the truly penitent were to show genuine remorse for their sins and a purpose never to fall into sin again. Indeed, given the public *exomologesis* that penitents underwent, it is not difficult to suppose that a huge number of penitents would have felt certain shame and possible remorse for their acknowledged sin. But the repentance that Andrewes is enjoining is one that will never be put on clear public display. This repentance might only be inferred as the repentant believer carries out the traditional, sometimes public, works of repentance: prayer, fasting, and alms-giving. Certainly genuine repentance was always part of the sacrament of penance; it would have been shocking for any teacher to go so far as to say

⁹⁷Nicholas Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes the Preacher (1555–1626): The Origins of the Mystical Theology of the Church of England*, trans. Andrew Louth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 131, n105.

⁹⁸Lancelot Andrewes, *Sermons of Repentance and Fasting, Preached on Ash-Wednesday, in Ninety-Six Sermons*, ed. J.P. Wilson, 5 vols. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 4:358.

that sacramental penance was so effectual that it could grant remission of sins to an impenitent confessant. But as the notion of penance, or repentance, shifted in reformed thought from being an act with external features to an entirely internal decision, the need to emphasize genuine repentance became more important. There was no priest to intercede for the penitent, none to pronounce an effectual absolution. The reformed Christian, whether Calvinist or Arminian, could only hope and trust that God viewed his repentance favourably.

While the concept of repentance superseded the sacrament of penance in the reformed Church of England, there remained a vestige of penitential discipline that had ancient roots. Despite the fact that repentance had become a matter largely between the penitent and God, there remained a place for public penance. Penitents who had committed particularly egregious sins—those who had “gone about, with devices of false opinions, to hurt true godliness, and shake religion, or with corrupt and wicked life had raised grievous and public offences,”⁹⁹ and such offenders as fornicators, blasphemers, and adulterers—made public confession of their sins in sackcloth and ashes and were excommunicated until they had fulfilled their penance. Paul’s Cross was a popular place for penitents to appear.¹⁰⁰ In 1580 Archbishop Edmund Grindal prepared an order for

⁹⁹Alexander Nowell, *A Catechisme or first Instruction and Learning of Christian Religion* (London: John Day, 1570; Cambridge: Parker Society, 1853), 455.

¹⁰⁰Millar MacLure, *The Register of Sermons Preached at Paul’s Cross, 1534-1642*, revised and expanded by Peter Pauls and Jackson Campbell Boswell, Occasional Publications of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 6 (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989), records a number of instances of public penance, dating from 1538, when one John Forest, a friar, while attending a sermon of Hugh Latimer’s, “obstinately refused to do penance for denying the royal

public penance, in which he set out the procedures to follow and a form of examination and confession.¹⁰¹ Public penance was apparently common enough in 1610 that Joseph Hall, writing in his *Characters of Virtues and Vices*, could find a comprehending readership for his piece “Of the penitent.”¹⁰²

The disciplinary aspect of penance remained, then, for while God might have forgiven the sins of the truly repentant person, the fact remained that the sinner had offended the church. In order to be reconciled to the church, the penitent needed to undergo *exomologesis* akin to that of the ancient church. Presumably, however, so long as one’s sins remained secret, one needed never to worry about being forced into public penance. For if there was no direction to confess to a priest once a year, one could keep one’s sins between oneself and God.

supremacy, ‘standing stiff and proud in his malicious mind’”(p. 22). On September 29, 1549, a man did penance for “conjuring” (p. 31). February 9, 1612 was the occasion of the penance of Moll Cutpurse, the Roaring Girl, for wearing men’s apparel. The event did not go as the clergy might have hoped, since Moll was drunk and her gang picked pockets (p. 98). And in November, 1618, Lady Markham did penance for marrying one of her servants while her husband was alive (p. 113). See also pp. 37, 98, 134, and 136–37.

¹⁰¹Grindal, “The Archbishop’s direction for Penance,” in *Remains*, p. 455.

¹⁰²Joseph Hall, *Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall*, ed. Philip Wynter, 10 vols. (Oxford, 1863; rept., New York: AMS Press, 1969), 6:101–3.

The Effect of the Changes in the Sacrament of Preaching

Thomas Tentler sums up the views of the opposing parties on sacramental confession in the late Reformation, those supporting the Reformed side and those supporting the Catholic side:

For one party, sacramental confession would represent an unchristian instrument of torment and an encouragement to hypocrisy—leaving people proud, licentious, and unrepentant; utterly failing to comfort them; and leading ultimately to eternal damnation. For another party it would remain the highest pastoral art, a just and certain discipline; making essential but possible demands on Christian consciences; preserving the divine order in Christ's Church; and assuring, as well as anything in this world could, the consoling gift of eternal salvation.¹⁰³

Tentler states that sacramental confession served two functions: consolation, or cure of anxiety in the confessant, and discipline, or social control.¹⁰⁴ Certainly penitents who heard the absolution were consoled; and inarguably the institutions of public penance and of mandated private confession exerted some social control.¹⁰⁵ But this

¹⁰³Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, 368.

¹⁰⁴Tentler, xvi and passim.

¹⁰⁵See Thomas Pollock Oakley, *English Penitential Discipline and Anglo-Saxon Law in Their Joint Influence*, Columbia Studies in History, Economics and Public Law vol. 107, no. 2;

formulation fails to consider what is probably the primary motivation behind penance, at least after the very early and tenuous years of the church: the motivation of the faithful response to the urgings of God. It is not just consolation, the soothing of anxiety that penitents seek when they open their hearts to God. The penitential process involves an affirmation of the sovereignty of an absolutely just, yet absolutely merciful God.

Penitents admit their failure to meet the standards of righteousness that a just God sets; and in their failure they acknowledge their indebtedness to the forgiveness of a merciful God. Penitents are not just seeking psychological comfort; they are making a confession of faith. Likewise, the priest who has charge of souls is not just interested in exerting control over them, although it would be optimistic to say that this never occurred. The priest's foremost concern is supposed to be for the well-being of his flock, and part of his mission is to ensure that nothing hinders those under his cure in their Christian faith. The sincere priest's response of faith is therefore to move his parishioners to repentance so that their life hereafter will be assured. The sacrament of penance provided a forum in which both the contrite believer and the dutiful priest could exercise their faith.

In the absence of sacramental confession, the ways of the penitent and the priest became less clear. One of the benefits of the sacrament of penance was that it provided both priests and parishioners with the knowledge that believers, to some extent at least, were dealing with their sin. Without sacramental confession, the priest could only do his

best to convince his flock of the need for repentance. And although repentance is a gift from God, their response was largely up to them.

Elena Levy-Navarro argues in her dissertation,¹⁰⁶ I think rightly, that the individual believer was more or less left to his or her own devices and initiative in repenting, confessing, and seeking reconciliation to God. She argues further that as a result of the transformation of the sacrament of penance and its decline in stature, lyric poets, including Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne substituted their poetry for the sacrament in an attempt to manifest and explore their personal spiritual development.

The emphasis on the inwardness of repentance, arising out of the diminution in the stature of the sacrament of penance, places a greater burden on the priest to ensure that those under his cure are handling their sin. The priest more than ever carries the responsibility of preaching repentance to his auditory. Granted, preachers had long lamented the absence of alacrity among their parishioners to do penance. But at least they knew when their preaching was successful, for as more parishioners came to confession, they could see the results of their call to repentance. Among reformed preachers, however, there was no such concrete indicator by which to gauge the effectiveness of their preaching. The best they could do was hope that God was reaching his people through the words they spoke; they might never know whether their hearers had truly turned back to God. They needed to believe that God was giving his gift of

¹⁰⁶Levy-Navarro, *The Penitential Poem*.

repentance to those in whom the preached word found place. Their task, therefore, was to ensure that the word of God went out to all hearers.

Chapter 4: The Sacramental Nature of Donne's Sermons on the Penitential Psalms

Donne cannot offer the sacrament of penance to his Church of England hearers; he can, however, offer them the words of God. He believes that preaching is a fearsome responsibility, standing alongside the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in importance. The Word and the sacraments are the whole business of the church, he says. We bear the burden of irrecoverable sinfulness, but God

takes off the burden, of *Irremediableness*, of *irrecoverableness*, and he reaches out his hand, in his Ordinances, in his Word and Sacraments, by which we may be disburdned of all our sins.

(2.5.142)

Donne is always careful to differentiate the Word and the sacraments as two types of ordinances; at least, he does not call preaching a sacrament. But while he differentiates them in name, he does not so clearly distinguish them in effect. He consistently links them, because for him they are both gifts from God for the salvation of the world. The sacraments alone do not effect our salvation; there must be knowledge as well. This knowledge comes from God's Word, preached by God's ministers. Donne therefore believes that preaching is no less important than administering the sacraments; and if

God's grace is somehow made available through the sacraments, then it is also made available through the Word. Without the Word, the sacraments either become mere external shows or they acquire an air of magic. The Word provides some understanding of the sacraments. In Donne's view, God, who is the Word, informs his church through the medium of the Word.

In order to fulfill their purpose, Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms perform three primary functions. Two of these are traditional and obvious: they instruct and attempt to move the hearer. From Augustine's time to Donne's these functions had been the accepted ends of preaching.¹⁰⁷ They are common to virtually all of the penitential literature before the seventeenth century, and Donne continues the tradition by instructing and exhorting his hearers. But he also adds something new. His sermons on the penitential psalms serve what I term a sacramental purpose. That is, Donne believes that preaching is a divinely ordained institution that conveys to or confers upon the recipients a measure of God's grace. His sermons are more than compositions of words, and they do more than impart propositional truths. They are sacred performances. They are invocatory events: they call for God's presence. It is through them that hearers are prepared for the consummate form of earthly union with God—the Lord's Supper.

The sermons on the penitential psalms reveal Donne's belief that as he preaches, God visits the congregation. For him, the church, wielding the "ordinances" of God, the

¹⁰⁷W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of Its Literary Aspects* (London: SPCK, 1932; rept., New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 93; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 4, iv. See Quinn, see Hickey.

Word and the Sacraments, is the primary site of God's action in the lives of people. It is there that God changes the hearts of men and women. And it is through the ordinances, especially the ordinance of the preached Word, that he changes them.

As a preacher, Donne sees himself as the instrument of God. The voice that the congregation hears is his, but the words are God's. Therefore, while he is preaching his sermons on the penitential psalms, Donne believes that God is speaking to his congregation. Just as it is the priest who brings God's grace to believers in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, so it is he who brings it to them in the preaching of the Word.

But while Donne thinks that God grants grace to the congregation during his sermons, he also realizes that preparatory to the granting of that grace is instruction, exhortation and admonition. Therefore, his first purpose in the sermons on the penitential psalms is always to instruct his hearers on the biblical text. This instruction inevitably leads to exhortation and admonition. Only by fulfilling these preparatory steps is he able to provide a setting for the next and, ultimately, most important event: the descent of the saving grace of God.

As he teaches and tries to move his hearers, Donne never loses sight of the fact that he is preaching to bring about a union between God and his hearers. He views his sermons on the penitential psalms as the means by which God confronts listeners with his demands for a holy life. To induce his auditors to repent, he uses the example of David in the penitential psalms. For Donne, these psalms are the ideal expressions of the longings of a conflicted, repentant soul. Therefore there is in these sermons a constant call to

repentance. Donne is fighting for the salvation of his congregation, and he believes that that salvation is impossible without repentance. First, however, he must instruct his hearers so that they will be moved to receive God's saving grace.

Donne's Rhetorical Approach

In opening the psalms to his congregation, Donne generally uses a three-tiered approach. First, he explains his text historically. That is, he provides the literal meaning of the text and explains how it applies to the historical figure of David. Then he offers an allegorical interpretation. Using this method, he tells his listeners how they are similar to David, that David's struggles are theirs, and that David's responses should be theirs as well. Finally, he renders what he terms a "prophetical" or "evangelical" understanding, in which he describes how David in the text prefigures Christ. These are modes of instruction, and using them Donne helps his listeners to understand the various levels of meaning in the text. However, this instruction does not by itself lead them to repentance, any more than simply coming to church makes a person a sincere believer. It is a precursor to Donne's other purposes, which are to move and ultimately to save his listeners.

W. Fraser Mitchell argues that in all his sermons Donne eschews the classical five-part rhetorical scheme for oratory—*exordium*, *narratio*, *confirmatio*, *confutatio*, and *conclusio*—in favour of the newer homiletical system of Bartholomew Keckermann (ca.

1571–1609).¹⁰⁸ Rather than simply applying classical rhetorical principles to preaching, Keckermann devised a new, essentially five-part, plan for sermons. His plan for the composition of a sermon comprises the two main categories of treatment and embellishment. Treatment includes consideration of the scriptural text, division, explanation of the text, amplification, and application. Embellishment might be by a number of devices, including the use of figures and copious language.¹⁰⁹

As we might expect, Donne does not slavishly follow Keckermann's many rules on style, but he seems to have been comfortable with Keckermann's five-part structural model. Even so, however, there are exceptions in his sermons. For although the long *exordium* had generally fallen out of fashion by his time, Donne is too aware of the illustrative power of a good story to avoid using the classical device altogether.¹¹⁰ For the most part, however, he opens his sermons with a brief consideration of his biblical text and follows with the division, in which he announces the main parts of his sermon. Donne's divisions are interesting not for the number of parts but for the headings that he chooses. They are frequently surprising, and often they do not seem to follow naturally from his text. For example, he divides his sermon on Psalm 6:1 ("O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure") into two main parts. They are

¹⁰⁸Bartholomew Keckermann, *Rhetoricæ Ecclesiasticæ, Siue Artis Formandi et Habendi Conciones Sacras, Libri Dvo . . . Editio tertia*, Hanover, 1606.

¹⁰⁹See Mitchell, 94–97.

¹¹⁰See, for example, the opening of Donne's sermon on Psalm 51.7, where Donne recounts the story of the devout hermit Pambo. On the decline of the *exordium*, see Mitchell, 95–96.

not the fairly obvious topics of God's anger and hot displeasure. Instead, his first part is the *person* to whom David turns for relief, and his second is the *relief* that David seeks. The first part, Donne argues, comprises three "steps": "first that [David] makes his first access to God onely And secondly, that it is to God by Name And then, that name in which hee comes to him here, is the name of *Iehovah*." The second part of the sermon concerns the relief that David seeks in verse 1, which is "deprecation" (5.16.363). That is, David asks God to turn away his rebuke and chastisement. Certainly Donne's divisions are logical; but they are frequently unexpected and perhaps, for that reason, more memorable.

After the division comes the body of the sermon, which includes explanation and amplification. Here Donne employs his wit and learning to open the meaning of his text to his congregation. Finally, at the conclusion of his sermons is often, but not always, the application, in which Donne might recapitulate the main thoughts of his address and enjoin his hearers to follow his teaching. However, sometimes Donne appears to rush the endings of his sermons and concludes either abruptly or with only a cursory exhortation. And often he ends with a prayer, which, though purporting to be addressed to God, is also addressed to his congregation. These prayers are genuine requests or affirmations of faith, but they are also a way that Donne instructs and encourages his congregation.

Evelyn Simpson, the modern-day editor of Donne's sermons, stated in 1958 that the sermons on the penitential psalms would never have many readers (9:38). "Donne rose magnificently to the great opportunities provided by Christmas and Easter," she claims, "but it was also his duty to provide for the weeks of penance and self-examination

[of Advent and Lent]. He did not shrink from this somewhat monotonous task” (9:39). With considerable understatement Simpson calls the seasons of penance “necessary,” and she states that Donne tried to teach his congregation how to make the best use of them (9:39). Simpson’s view of the sermons is clear. In fact, however, Donne believes that the joy of the resurrection cannot come about without the anguish of penitence. And he knows that God can do nothing with a heart that is not prepared to receive him. For Donne the seasons of penitence and reflection are not just “necessary”; they are critical to the eternal salvation of a person’s soul. It is inaccurate, therefore, to claim that Donne viewed preaching on the penitential psalms as monotonous.

Donne’s deep concern for his congregations and his profound joy at having the opportunity to play a part in their salvation are evident in his sermons on the penitential psalms. His writing is at times bold and astonishingly vivid, and at times familiar and intimate. He comforts, he cajoles, he cautions, he soothes, he thunders, and he whispers. He deliberately employs cadences and rhythms that are calculated to have a stirring effect on his hearers. And he uses images that he intends to be engraved upon the memory of his auditors. All of his efforts serve his main purpose: to prepare the way for the advent of God.

Donne’s View of the Sermon as Ordinance

As a priest, Donne is particularly concerned to open the minds of his hearers to the reality that God moves in their midst. In his sermons he attempts to emphasize to his congregation that God is accessible, and that he is accessible by employing his ordinances

in church. Donne believes that our experience of God will always be mediated in this life; but he also thinks that the ordinances of the church bring us as close to him as possible on earth. And in his view, no ordinance is more important to the adult believer than the sermon.

Donne discusses the ordinances in many of his sermons, not just in those on the penitential psalms. He is probably most eloquent in his sermon dated 1628 on 1 Corinthians 13:12 (“For now we see through a glasse darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know, even as also I am knowne.”). In this sermon Donne says that in God’s ordinances we see and know him only as in a reflection and darkly, yet that is the clearest we will see and know him in this life. In heaven, and only there, we will see and know him clearly, face to face, unmediated. In the meantime, however, on earth, we can only partly know God. And we can know God best in church.

We can see that God exists by looking at the natural world around us, but we cannot know anything about him unless we come to church. That is where God tells us about himself:

Our Place, our Academy, our University is the Church, our *medium*, is the Ordinance of God in his Church, Preaching, and Sacraments; and our light is the light of faith.

(8.9.46–9)

The church, then, is our academy for learning about God. But merely being bred in the church is not enough; people may be bred there all their lives and still learn nothing (8.9.301–2). Once we attend church, we require the means by which to learn. Those means are the ordinances and institutions of the church. When we use those means, we affirm our part in God's community:

[K]nowledge by faith in this world, is *Gratiae communis*, it is an effect and fruit of that Grace which God shed upon the whole communion of Saints, that is, upon all those who in this Academy, the Church, do embrace the *Medium*, that is, the Ordinances of the Church.

(8.9.369–72)

Of all the ordinances, Donne states, the most powerful for acquiring knowledge of God is Scripture, but "the Scripture in the Church" (8.9.304–6). He does not oppose reading Scripture at home, but the church is the primary place where one should hear it. At home, the Holy Ghost acts but as a "Remembrancer" (8.9.309). In church, however, the Holy Spirit "is with thee, as a Doctor to teach thee." Donne tells his listeners,

First learne at Church, and then meditate at home, Receive the seed by hearing the Scriptures interpreted here, and water it by returning to those places at home. When Christ bids you *Search the Scriptures*, he meanes you should go to them, who have a warrant to search; A warrant in their

Calling. To know which are Scriptures, To know what the holy Ghost saies in the Scriptures, apply thy selfe to the Church.

(8.9.311–18)

The Scriptures, he says, are the "evidence" of the knowledge of God. This evidence must be sealed to believers in the sacraments, and delivered to them in preaching, in the presence of the congregation (8.9.323–26).

Our knowledge of God here is to be found exclusively in the church: "to know God, by beleaving, not only Him, but in Him, is only in the Academy of the Church, only through the Medium of the Ordinances there, and only by the light of Faith" (8.9.346–49). However, as efficacious as is the role of the Holy Spirit, and as fine are the ordinances of the church, our best sight and knowledge of God here, *nunc*, are "but *In aenigmatē*, in an obscure Riddle, a representation, *darkly*, and *in part . . .*" (8.9.238–39). Our sight and knowledge of God here will always be deficient. In heaven, though, things will be different, and therefore our primary focus ought to be on the promise of the *tunc*. Thus we should not think that we can ever see God more clearly here than he has revealed himself to us. The sight of God in his essence and the knowledge of God as he knows us will come, Donne says, but not until later.

Nonetheless, even though our best sight and knowledge of God here cannot compare with those in heaven, the priest's job is still necessary. One might be tempted to argue that since our best knowledge of God on earth is a mere shadow of the knowledge to come, we should not waste time pursuing knowledge here. But Donne has no patience with this argument. What we know of God here, incomplete as it may be, is given to us

through the light of faith, he says; faith is “a blessed presence” (8.9.378) and “an union of God in this life” (8.9.356). It is a gift from God. Further, since God himself teaches us in church, he obviously does not think that the pursuit of such knowledge is a waste of time. As for the role of the priest, although the scriptures are the evidence of the knowledge of God, the evidence must be “sealed” to believers in the sacraments and “delivered” to them in preaching (8.9.323–25).

As Schleiner points out, Donne often employs the image of the seal in his sermons to express evidence for and to confirm a prior fact.¹¹¹ The Eucharist is therefore the seal of reconciliation,¹¹² and the priest has an active and crucial role in the process. Further, Scripture is sealed in the sacraments, and preaching is sealed in applying scripture. Again, the priest is engaged in delivering the evidence of Scripture to believers in the sermon. But just as ultimately it is God who seals reconciliation to believers in the sacraments, so it is God who delivers the truth of the Scriptures to them. Although the preacher utters the words of the sermon to the hearing of the congregation, God’s Holy Spirit utters the truth to the soul of the individual.

For Donne, then, the ordinances of the church are the singular means by which we can approach God. They are instituted by God himself as the rites or actions of his church. Having established a community of the faithful and having confirmed that community as his own by his gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God sanctioned certain

¹¹¹Schleiner, *The Imagery of John Donne’s Sermons*, 104–21.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 120.

methods to strengthen believers in their faith. For Donne these methods are not mere reminders of God's works; they are themselves God's works. The Church does not enact the ordinances simply out of obedience to God; it follows them knowing that to do so means to approach God as closely as one can in this life.

Donne's View of the Sacraments

Donne clearly believes that more occurs in the celebration of the sacraments than a mere ratification of God's promises. He sees the sacraments along the same lines as Hooker, as "means effectual," ceremonies in which God conducts, or "derives," saving grace into the hearts of individual believers.

Donne understands that this saving grace is the same grace that the psalmist receives as he proceeds through his penitence and writes down his experience. He does not believe the sacraments to be efficacious regardless of the state of mind of the participant; he is too clear throughout his sermons that God cannot work in a hard heart. He believes that the individual must be prepared to receive the blessings of God's grace, but once the preparation is complete, God showers that person with his grace.

While the differing parties in the debate on the sacraments could not reach a consensus on the nature of the sacraments, many were nevertheless able to agree, to some extent, on one thing: somehow the participants in the sacraments received the blessing of God's grace. They did not agree on what grace was or how believers received it, but they did agree that God honoured the sincere believer with blessing. Hooker's "effectual and saving grace" would have smacked of superstition and popery to many Protestants, but

not to Donne. Throughout his sermons on the penitential psalms, Donne displays his conviction that the grace that God bestows in the sacraments is not just a gift of gratitude upon remembering his works. It is more than the calling to mind God's forgiveness, or his mercy, or his sacrificial love. It is an effectual and active grace, a gift that equips us and enables us to live lives of faith and obedience. It is a cleansing grace: we are changed when we come face to face with God in the sacraments. We need to come to the sacraments with open, honest, and contrite hearts, of course; without these we cannot expect that God will give us any blessing. He will not be deceived, and he will not be mocked: we cannot come to him in disguise for his blessing, as Jacob came to Isaac.¹¹³

Donne repeatedly reminds his hearers in these sermons that if they wish to receive God's blessing, they must approach him with humble and remorseful hearts. Memory plays a role in this approach: when believers remember what God has done for them, they will become repentant. Although Donne says in a sermon on Psalm 38, and is often quoted as saying, that "Salvation is but the art of memory" (2.2.52), he does not thereby intend that salvation consists in simply remembering God's good works. They must be willing to act upon their repentance, for then God will bless them. But all this must occur in the setting of the church, by the means of God's ordinances. And the ordinance at the root of repentance is the sermon, for through it God speaks to the memory, understanding, and will of the individual. Yet while God speaks to our understanding, it is his grace that moves our will. Donne believes that the encounter with grace is at the

¹¹³Genesis 27.

heart of the sermon, and nowhere is that encounter more important than in the sermons on the penitential psalms.

Donne's view of the sacraments as vehicles of grace is apparent in his sermons, as Itrat Husain has remarked.¹¹⁴ The sacraments, Donne says,

exhibit and convey grace; and grace is such a light, such a torch, such a beacon, as where it is, it is easily seen.

(2.12.290–2)

The way that they convey grace is by changing the life of the believer in a sacred encounter with God. Donne writes of this purifying grace:

In [the] Sacrament, besides the *naturall* union (that Christ hath taken our *Nature*,) and the *Mysticall union*, (that Christ hath taken us into the body of *his Church*) by a *spirituall union*, when we apply faithfully his Merits to our soules, and by a *Sacramentall union*, when we receive the visible seales thereof, worthily, we are so washed in his bloud, as that we stand in the sight of his Father, as cleane, and innocent, as himselfe, both because he and we are thereby become one body, and because the garment of his righteousness covers us all.

¹¹⁴Itrat Husain, *The Dogmatic and Mystical Theology of John Donne* (London: SPCK, 1938), 26–35.

(5.8.196–203)

No one can absolve himself, Donne continues; the “basin of the water of absolution” in which people are cleansed “is only in the church and in the minister thereof” (5.8.220–2).

Just how God worked in believers’ lives through the sacraments was argued throughout the Reformation. Donne, however, is never so definite—or perhaps never so presumptuous—as to hold forth on the precise nature of God’s involvement with the individual. He remains tactfully mystified about how God’s grace operates, relegating reason to a subordinate place:

How a visible sign, water, or wine . . . should confer grace, *fateor me non posse capere*, saies a learned Bishop in the Roman Church; as easie a matter as they make it, he professes that he cannot understand it: he argues it subtilly, but he concludes it modestly . . . this must saies he be the end of all, that these things are not to be considered in the reason of man, but in the Covenant of God: God hath covenanted with his people, to be present with them in certain places, in the Church at certain times, when they make their congregation, in certain actions, when they meet to pray; and though he be not bound in the nature of the action, yet he is

bound in his covenant to exhibit grace, and to strengthen grace, in certain sacrifices, and certain sacraments.

(2.12.169–81)

And while he is sure that sacraments exhibit and convey grace, Donne does not anatomize them to determine exactly how or when that grace is conveyed. He writes:

As there is a lustre in a precious stone, which no mans eye or finger can limit to a certain place or point in that stone, so though we do not assign in the sacrament, where, that is, in what circumstance or part of that holy action grace is; or when, or how it enters . . . yet whosoever receives this sacrament worthily, sees evidently an entrance, and a growth of grace in himself.

(2.12.292–301)

Although Donne is unwilling and unable to delve into the mechanics of God's operative grace, he is quite prepared to state the effects of that grace. The grace of God purifies believers, he claims. The ordinances of the church—the Word and the sacraments—are vehicles of grace. Therefore when the ordinances are effected, grace flows, and spiritual purification occurs.

The Sacramental Nature of the Sermons on the Penitential Psalms

In his sermons on the penitential psalms Donne tries to convey in some measure this saving grace to his listeners. One of the most remarkable characteristics of these sermons is that in addressing his hearers with words, Donne imitates the sacramental process itself. Donne's sermons are more than treatises on sin and redemption; they are works that mirror the process of reconciliation itself. They are metaphors, and by them Donne intends that his hearers will receive the very blessings about which the sermons speak. The sermons are themselves the means by which the people are, in some fashion and to some extent, saved. By listening to the sermons, the congregation actually becomes involved in their subject matter. As he speaks, Donne is conscious that God is among his people and working with his Spirit in them. Therefore, if Donne speaks about the cleansing that God gives his followers, the sermon itself is intended to cleanse its hearers by the very utterance of the words. If Donne intends to bring his listeners to participation in the ordinances of the church so that they will thereby be reconciled to God, he tells his congregation that they are being reconciled even as they participate in the ordinance of the sermon. And if he wants to bring his hearers to confession and reconciliation, his sermons themselves reflect the process of self-examination, confession, and absolution. Donne's sermons are therefore of a high order of expression: they not only convey truth about God, but they also are the means by which that truth is made effective in the lives of believers.

Donne sees salvation as ongoing, and he has this in mind in his sermons on the penitential psalms. To be "saved" means to walk in the way of faith, to accept God's mercy, and to heed his demands. In these sermons Donne above all emphasizes that

believers must maintain their relationship with God. One may fall out of that relationship by consistently ignoring God and by hardening one's heart to his continuous beckoning. But one may also maintain a close relationship with God and respond to his proddings. This is what it means to work out one's salvation: to strive to do God's will. Again and again in his sermons on the penitential psalms Donne attempts to move his hearers to restore or continue their relationship with God. That is, he constantly tries to establish his congregation firmly in the way of salvation. And the way they become established is by following the ordinances of the church. For the ordinances are the signs of God's grace. Throughout the sermons on Psalm 6, for example, Donne repeatedly tells his listeners that to receive the grace of God they must avail themselves of the ordinances, which are God's gifts to his people for their salvation.

While he does not specifically call all the ordinances sacraments, Donne invests the ordinances with the properties of sacraments. If we adopt Hooker's view of the sacraments as "signs of effectual grace," then it is clear that Donne sees the ordinances in this light. For Donne the ordinances, and therefore sermons, are the means by which God sends his grace to draw and keep his followers close to him. For this reason it is fitting to call Donne's preaching, especially his preaching on the penitential psalms, sacramental in effect. In each of these sermons there is present a profoundly sacramental quality. Donne does not lead his listeners in formal penance, but he does something similar: he guides them through penitence and hopes to effect their reconciliation to God.

*The Sermons on Psalm 6**Dating*

There are six surviving sermons by Donne on Psalm 6: one on verse 1, one on verses 2 and 3, two on verses 4 and 5, one on verses 6 and 7, and one on verses 8 to 10. These sermons appear consecutively in *LXXX Sermons* (1640).¹¹⁵ The dates of the sermons are uncertain, even though the sermon on Psalm 6:6–7 bears the heading “*Preached to the King at White-hall, upon the occasion of the Fast, April 5, 1628.*” Simpson dates the sermons variously from 1623 to 1628 (5:30–31). P. G. Stanwood¹¹⁶ and I. A. Shapiro,¹¹⁷ by contrast, both argue that Donne composed the sermons relatively early in his priestly career, between 1616 and 1622, as a series in his Lincoln’s Inn years. They believe that the sermon dated 1628 is a reworking of a sermon that Donne first gave at Lincoln’s Inn. Shapiro argues, and Stanwood concurs, that only the first sixty-four lines of the sermon and the last forty are specific to that occasion. It appears that originally the sermon probably started at line sixty-four, which reads thus:

This whole Psalme is a prayer; And the prayer is partly Deprecatory.

¹¹⁵John Donne, *LXXX Sermons preached by that learned and reverend divine, Iohn Donne, Dr in Divinity, late Deane of the Cathedrall, Church of S. Pauls London*. Printed for Richard Royston and Richard Marriot, London, 1640.

¹¹⁶P.G. Stanwood, “Donne’s Earliest Sermons and the Penitential Tradition,” in *John Donne’s Religous Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, eds. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances Malpezzi (Conway, Arkansas: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), 366–79.

¹¹⁷I.A. Shapiro, “Donne’s Sermon Dates,” *Review of English Studies* 31 (1980): 55.

(8.8.64–65)

The sermon on Psalm 6:2–3, the second sermon in the series, begins similarly:

This whole Psalme is prayer; And the whole prayer is either Deprecatory, as in the first verse, or Postulatory.

(5.17.1–2)

And the third sermon, on Psalm 6:4–5, commences likewise:

The whole Psalme is Prayer; and Prayer is our whole service to God.

(5.18.1–2)

Donne evidently liked this form of opening, because he used it in another sermon on the penitential psalms, his sermon on Psalm 38:9, which begins this way:

The whole psalme hath two parts, 1 a prayer and then reasons of that prayer. The prayer hath 2 parts, 1 a deprecatory prayer in the 1 verse, and then a postulatory in the 2 last.

(2.6.1–3)

The similarity of the openings of three other sermons on the penitential psalms does not prove conclusively that the sermons were written at the same time. But after reviewing the body of the sermon bearing the 1628 date, I agree with Shapiro's contention that the text contains nothing to preclude its having been composed about the same time as the other sermons on Psalm 6. It is reasonable to conclude, as Shapiro does,

that Donne wrote all the sermons on Psalm 6 roughly contemporaneously and not, as Simpson believes, over a five-year period ending in 1628. It is also reasonable to conclude that Donne wrote all the sermons on Psalm 6 consecutively, beginning with the sermon on verse 1 and ending with the sermon on verses 8 to 10. It stretches credulity to suppose that Donne or any preacher would have written four sermons on the first five verses of a ten-verse psalm, wait some years and skip two verses to write a sermon on the last three verses, and then wait still longer before writing a sermon on the skipped verses. He had, after all, preached another, shorter, series within a year, his series of three sermons on John 1:8.¹¹⁸

It is reasonable, then, despite the 1628 date that the sermon on Psalm 6:6–7 bears and the 1623 date that Simpson ascribes to the sermon on Psalm 6:8–10, to suppose that all the sermons on Psalm 6 were first written and preached at roughly the same time as part of a series. We may never know why Donne chose to preach a series on this psalm when he did. We can state, however, that Donne knew that by preaching on Psalm 6 he was keeping alive the long tradition of penitential literature.

¹¹⁸He mentions in the third sermon on John that he had preached on the text first on Christmas and next at Midsummer; the third sermon bears the heading “Preached at Saint Pauls 13. October, 1622.”

Structure

Donne identifies three distinct parts in Psalm 6. There is, in his terms, the “deprecatory” part, the “postulatory” part, and the “gratulatory” part. The first verse of the psalm is “deprecatory,” he says. That is, David asks God for a reprieve from being rebuked in anger and chastened in hot displeasure. Verses 2 to 7 are “postulatory.” In these verses David reasons with God, telling God why he should spare him from his wrath. But while this part of the psalm is the longest, Donne states, it is not therefore the most important. There is simply more to say about these verses, as he displays in his four sermons on them. The “gratulatory” part of the psalm is verses 8 to 10. In his only sermon on these verses, Donne discusses the praise and thanksgiving that are rightfully God's.

That Psalm 6 consists of three parts does not seem to occur to Donne until his last sermon on the psalm. In his first sermon he says only that his text is deprecatory (5.16.355–58), while in the next four sermons he states that David's prayer is deprecatory and postulatory (5.17.1–2; 5.18.33–35; 5.19.205–6, 277–82). Finally, in the last sermon, he states that the psalm is deprecatory, postulatory, and gratulatory (6.1.39–45). It appears that Donne's view of the psalm changed as he proceeded through his series. It is helpful to keep in mind the following outline in considering these sermons:

Psalm 6

1. Deprecatory part: Psalm 6:1 one sermon
2. Postulatory part: Psalm 6:2–7 four sermons
3. Gratulatory part: Psalm 6:8–10 one sermon

By the time he reaches the last sermon on Psalm 6, Donne is convinced that the psalm is a perfect penitential prayer, devised in flawless proportion and with unassailable logic. The beginning is deprecatory out of necessity, he says, for we should not leave ourselves open to God's indignation before coming to our other petitions (6.1.45–52). The deprecation is only one verse long because David knows that he should not presume to tell God how to work his purposes (6.1.65–67). The postulatory part of the psalm is next and longest both to show us that our needs are many and to remind us that if God does not answer us right away, our duty is still to persist in prayer (6.1.67–70). And the gratulatory part is shorter than the postulatory because people do not need as much instruction in being thankful as they do in prayer. Further, the gratulatory part comes last in the psalm because there it leaves the best impression on the memory. In all metrical compositions, Donne says, of which the psalms are an example,

the force of the whole piece, is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it currant.

(6.1.81–85)

Themes

Throughout his series on Psalm 6 Donne emphasizes the role of the minister in the life of the believer. In order to be saved, believers must be baptized, must pray, must obey the Word of God, must repent, and must celebrate the Lord's Supper. Again and again Donne tells his hearers that these things are critical to their lives as Christians. The Word and the Sacraments are the "ordinances" of God, his arsenal in the battle for his people's salvation. And they can be found only in the church. As one of these ordinances, Donne's preaching plays the special role of preparing the congregation to receive God. His preaching does so not merely by providing information to his hearers. Donne believes that because God is speaking through him, God himself confronts every single listener. Donne's series of sermons on Psalm 6 is a direct attempt both to tell listeners about God's grace and to make that grace real to them. He tells them that to be saved they need to follow the ordinances that God has laid down for the church. Further, he assures them that as they participate in the ordinance of the sermon, they are, to some extent, being saved.

Psalm 6:1

Donne's sermon on Psalm 6:1 is throughout a call to repentance. He instructs his listeners on David's repentance and assures them that God is merciful to the penitent sinner. As he preaches, Donne believes that God is at work among the congregation. He expects that his listeners will come away from the sermon changed.

Donne begins this sermon by placing Psalm 6 within a historical and theological context. He thinks that David's complaints arise from a spiritual crisis resulting from his sins with Uriah and Bathsheba (5.16.56–59). The text is evidence of David's repentance, Donne claims, and he urges his listeners to repent too. God does not remember our repented sins, he states, for his mercy is a sea of mercy:

And as the Sea retaines no impression of the Ships that passe in it, (for Navies make no path in the Sea) so when we put out into the boundlesse Sea of the blood of Christ Jesus, by which onely wee have reconciliation to God, there remaines no record against us; for God hath cancelled that record which he kept.

(5.16.15–20)

After the *divisio*, Donne considers first the person of God. But he does not focus on the nature of the person of God. Instead, he discusses David's actions: his turning to God, his calling God by name, and his calling God by the special name of Jehovah. David turns to God in his affliction, Donne notes, not to other diversions. Donne warns his hearers likewise not to flee from God:

If [David] *fled to Sea, to Heaven, to Hell*, he was sure to meet *God there*; and there thou shalt meet him too, if thou fly from God, to the reliefe of outward comforts, of musicke, of mirth, of drinke, of cordialls, of Comedies, of conversation. Not that such recreations are unlawfull . . . but when thy sadnesse

proceeds from a sense of thy sinnes . . . it is a new, and a greater sin, to goe about to overcome that holy sadnesse, with these prophane diversions . . . to fly *Ad consolatiunculas creaturulae* . . . to the little and contemptible comforts of little and contemptible creatures.

(5.16.117–29)

Donne tells his listeners to turn to God by name, not to some vague notion of God as though God were a “diffused power, that spreads itselfe over all creatures.” When one comes to God by name, he says, one remembers specifically all of God’s blessings, and one acknowledges and reestablishes one’s relationship with him (5.16.144–46).

Donne then states that while God has many names in the Bible, David calls him by his greatest name, Jehovah. By addressing God as Jehovah, David confesses all of his attributes, power, and benefits. In contrast, the Gentiles could not so address God,

but broke God in pieces, and changed God into single money, and made a fragmentarie God of every Power, and Attribute in God, of every blessing from God, nay of every malediction, and judgement of God. A clap of thunder made a *Iupiter*, a tempest at sea made a *Neptune*, an earthquake made a *Pluto*; *Feare* came to be a God, and a *Fever* came to be a God; Every thing that they were in love with, or afraid of, came to be canonized, and made a God amongst them.

(5.16.262–70)

As he does in many of his sermons, Donne appeals to the memory of his hearers to lead them to repentance. He does not tell them anything that they do not already know; rather, he reminds them what the church has taught them all their lives. They are God's people, God has not forsaken them, and they owe their duty to him. When they experience trouble in life, they should turn for comfort to God, and to nothing else. They should turn to God by name to acknowledge and confirm their intimate relationship with him. And they should turn specifically to Jesus, the New Testament Jehovah, in whom they have their being and salvation.

Donne's painstaking consideration of his psalm text in the first part of the sermon owes a debt to such preachers as Lancelot Andrewes¹¹⁹ and contravenes Keckermann's directions against expounding on every single word of the text.¹²⁰ Donne stresses that God, and God intimately, and God as he appeared to humankind in the form of Jesus Christ, is the one we are to approach in prayer and repentance. Once he has established these points firmly in the minds of his hearers, he proceeds to the remainder of the psalm.

The second part of the sermon deals with the relief that David seeks from God. Donne states that David's deprecatory prayer is not simply for deliverance from God's rebuke and chastisement. These are beneficial. No, he says, David prays God not to

¹¹⁹See, e.g., Nicholas Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes the Preacher (1555–1626): The Origins of the Mystical Theology of the Church of England*, trans. Andrew Louth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹²⁰“Nec est necesse simul et semel totius textus verba explicare, sed phrasi vna explicata et sententia declarata, statim amplificetur et applicetur, et sic deinceps per reliquas partes textus procedatur” (Keckermann, c. 7, p. 69, “*De verborum explicatione*”). Cited by Mitchell, 97.

rebuke him *in anger* or chastise him *in hot displeasure*. God's anger changes rebuke from a salutary measure into a lethal one; it makes "all the Physick poison, and all that was intended for our mollifying, to advance our obduration" (5.16.607–9). Hot displeasure, Donne says, is a poison of the soul that causes obduration and, ultimately, impenitence: "a finall impenitence in this life, and an infinite impenitiblenesse in the next" (5.16.655–56). David rightly fears this kind of rebuke and chastisement.

Having raised the prospect that God might foresake them, Donne is careful to comfort his congregation. He reassures them that they have not fallen under the unassuageable anger of God if they can still pray to be spared his wrath. It is when they no longer show concern for God's anger, he implies, that they really ought to be worried.

As Donne concludes the sermon, he reveals his conception of the priest's role in bringing his hearers to repentance. It seems that without the priest's ministrations in church, believers' attempts at reconciliation are pointless. For it is the priest, Donne says, who brings God's grace to the people:

Gods blessings . . . we shed upon the Congregation in our Sermons, and . . .
 . seale to every soule in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

(5.16.720–21)

This notion of the centrality of the priest's role in the lives of his flock is prevalent throughout Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms. God has established the ordinances of the Word and the sacraments, Donne says repeatedly, and by taking part in

them a person is saved. The major event in the weekly life of a Christian, Donne believes, is attending the worship service. At that service God speaks through the minister. It is the minister who reminds the people of God's work, he says, and who reminds them that God is "the destination" of their prayers. Although they may have kindled God's anger by their actions during the week, they may assuage that anger by their prayers in church. The priest is the facilitator of their prayers, Donne says, and it is therefore the priest who actually brings reconciliation to the people. It is he who sheds the grace of God on them by delivering the sermons and conducting the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

In this sermon Donne displays his profound regard for all the ordinances of the church, and specifically the ordinances of the sermon and the sacraments. He reveals his belief that the ordinances are sacramental in effect, in that they are an active means of conveying God's grace. They are neither bare memorials, in the case of the Lord's Supper, nor mere lectures, in the case of the sermon. They are infused with significance and charged with power.

Donne's following four sermons on Psalm 6 deal with the next six verses of the psalm, verses 2 to 7. These are the verses that he calls the "postulatory" part of Psalm 6. The four sermons on these verses form a discrete group within the larger series on Psalm 6. In these sermons Donne discusses David's petitions, focussing on the things that he asks God to do and the reasons for them. Throughout the four sermons Donne holds up David's humble penitential behaviour as an example. And he continues to emphasize the exclusive role that the church and its ministers play in securing the salvation of believers.

Psalm 6:2-3

The first of the four sermons is on verses 2 and 3: "Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am weake; O Lord, heale me, for my bones are vexed: my soule is also sore vexed; but thou O Lord, how long?" In this sermon Donne considers two of the five petitions in the psalm. They are *Miserere mei*, "Have mercy upon me," and *Sana me*, "Heal me." Again he uses his careful word-by-word consideration of the biblical text. He divides the sermon into four parts: the two petitions, the reasons for those petitions, the delay in God's answering the petitions, and the duty of believers to wait for God to deliver them.

As Donne discusses David's petitions, he says that they are the "grone of a sick soule" (5.17.76). He realizes that not everyone will share David's penitential disposition, and to those who do not, he suggests a course of action: come to church. Perhaps they have not yet considered their sins and are not troubled by them. Nevertheless,

Though that spirit that possesses thee, that sin that governes thee, lie still a while, and sleepe under all the thunders, which we denounce from this place, so that for a while thou beest not moved nor affected with all that is said, yet . . . thou doest come nearer and nearer to God, though thou discerne it not, and at one time or other, this blessed exorcisme, this holy Charme, this Ordinance of God, the word of God in the mouth of his servant, shall provoke and awaken that spirit of security in thee, and thou shalt feele him begin to storme, and at first that spirit,

thy spirit will say to the spirit of the Preacher, *Tune qui conturbas? Art thou he that troublest Israel? . . . Art thou he that troublest the peace of my conscience, and the security of my wayes?*

(5.17.215–28)

Donne is saying that the preached Word of God is a powerful agent. It disturbs the complacent spirit of the sinner in a mysterious way. It jostles the sleeping conscience. But it is able to do so only as the Word preached in the church. It is in the setting of the church, voiced by a minister of God, that the Word has power to bring to its hearers the troubling Spirit of God. For it is as the Word is preached that God comes to the hearers, awaking their spirits and confronting them with his presence.

Donne next discusses the reasons behind the petitions in the psalm. As he does, he reveals his view of Psalm 6 as a perfect penitential prayer. Each petition in the psalm has its reason, he says, and each reason makes the petition a complete prayer. Of the first petition, *Miserere me*, he observes:

We consider this first accesse to God, *Miserere mei, Have mercy upon me*, to be but a kind of imperfect prayer, but the first step; but it were none at all, if it had no reason, and therefore it hath this, *Quia infirmus, Because I am weake*.

(5.17.282–85)

In other words, Donne discerns a rationality in David's psalmody and a fundamental reasonableness in God himself. David believes that prayers must include a lucid reason why God should accept them. In the first petition the reason is "Because I am weake." This reason, Donne says, "is a just motive to induce God to bring thee to himselfe" (5.17.305–6). After David begs God to consider him, Donne says, and after he reveals his weakness, God seems not to have heard him, for he asks, "But thou, O Lord, how long?"

This "How long?" forms the brief third part of the sermon. Donne claims that David himself spends little time on this question because he dares not proceed far in it. With a "holy abruptnesse" David asks simply, "How long?" and then breaks off his questioning. Donne does likewise. Instead, he moves to ground that will yield more discussion.

In the final part of the sermon Donne reminds his hearers of the person for whom David waits:

The root of all, all temporall, all spirituall blessings, is he, to whom *David* leads us here, *Dominus, The Lord*; Lord, as he is Proprietary of all creatures; He made All, and therefore is Lord of All . . . as all things have all their being from him, their very being, and their well-being, their Creation, and their Conservation.

(5.17.811–17)

Donne urges his listeners to pray to Jehovah by name, as David did. Finally, Donne ends by exhorting his auditory to pray and stay—to ascend to God through prayer and to attend God’s descent to us.

In this sermon Donne has instructed his listeners on four important points. If they want to maintain their faith, they need to come to church, they need to pray correctly, they need to wait patiently for God’s answer, and they need to pray to God by his most powerful name, Jehovah. If they fail in any of these areas, they are in danger of losing their fellowship with God. And to carry out each of them they need to be humble and penitent. The way to achieve this state is by hearing the preached Word, that “holy Charme,” which will change their hearts.

As he does in his sermon on Psalm 6:1, Donne here emphasizes the efficacy of the ordinances. He refers to the Word of God as a “holy Charme” in the mouth of God’s servant, the priest. This “holy Charme” is active and effective: it is a powerful agent that actually assaults the conscience of the hearer, “troubling” the soul of the individual into repentance. But the Word is not an amulet. Believers are not changed or guided or protected by God simply by having a Bible brandished over them. The Word must be preached by the minister, for it is through the minister’s mouth, as it utters God’s Word, that God speaks. Once a believer hears the Word preached, he can achieve a state of humility and penitent subjection. This humility and penitence are gifts from God.

By discussing the agency of the Word of God as it is spoken by the minister, Donne stresses again the sacramental effect of preaching. Preaching is a sign of effectual grace. It does not just convince hearers intellectually that they must repent; it troubles

them, and it moves them to the state of repentance. More specifically, it is the Spirit of God that troubles the listeners through the preached Word. Thus as the preacher utters the Word of God, the Spirit accompanies the Word and troubles the hearts of hearers. The preached Word is therefore the vehicle by which the troubling Spirit of God and the comforting grace of God enter the hearts of Christians. Preaching conveys to believers the means necessary to effect a change in will.

Psalm 6:4-5

Donne continues to emphasize true repentance in his next two sermons on Psalm 6, and he continues to display his understanding of the sacramental nature of preaching in the two sermons on Psalm 6: 4-5. He resumes his explanation of the postulatory part of Psalm 6 with his treatment, in two sermons, of verses 4 and 5, "Returne, O Lord; deliver my soule; O Lord save me, for thy mercies sake. For in death there is no remembrance of thee; and in the Grave, who shall give thee thanks?" In the first sermon Donne repeats his observation that the whole psalm is a prayer, and he comments on the nature of prayer.

Donne proceeds to the *divisio*, dividing the sermon into three parts according to the three petitions of verses 4 and 5: *Revertere Domine*, "Return O Lord"; *Eripe animam*, "Deliver my soule"; and *Salvum fac*, "O Lord save me." Again he states that David provides reasons for each of his petitions. He reserves his discussion of those reasons for the next sermon, dealing only with the petitions on this occasion.

In the first section of the sermon, Donne discusses the petition “Return O Lord.” The Hebrew word *Shubah*, translated *Return*, has three possible meanings, he says. It can mean for a thing to come back to the place to which it is naturally disposed. Thus God has a place to which he returns, his church. He returns to his people in the ordinances of his Word and sacraments:

If to day I can heare his voyce . . . I am become his *Vbi*, his place . . . and so in the Church, in the Sermon, in the Sacrament he returnes to us.

(5.18.157–63)

The word “Return” can also refer to the anger of God, Donne argues. God stays, but his anger is “returned away from us” (5.18.169–70). The final sense of the Hebrew *Shubah* in this verse, he explains, might be “Lord, return us to you” (5.18.196–99). To return in this sense, he says, is to ask God to make his offers of grace in his ordinances powerful and effectual upon us (5.18.211–12).

Donne settles on the first meaning of “Return.” He says that God comes back to his people as they are gathered in church. God visits us, Donne says, in his Word or in his actions, in a sermon or in a sickness (5.18.251–52). Further, God returns to us as often as he assembles his people in “these holy Convocations” (5.18.293–94). Then he returns “in the dispensation and distribution of his graces, in his Word and Sacraments” (5.18.303–5). Thus if one wishes to repent, the church is the proper setting for it. There one will encounter the grace and the mercy, even the very presence, of God.

Donne moves to the second part of the sermon, the petition “Deliver my soule.” This “Deliver” can mean either “Deliver me from temptations and provocations of the flesh” or “Deliver me in trials.” The Hebrew *Chalatz*, he states, is best understood as a sudden catching hold of and snatching at the soul of a man on the brink of a sin (5.18.418–20). This is the meaning here, he explains:

When we are ingaged, and enthralled in such a tentation, then, though God be not delighted with our danger, yet then is God most delighted to help us, when we are in danger; and then, he comes not only to deliver us from that imminent, and particular danger . . . but He shall proceed in his worke, and *make fat thy soule*.

(5.18.443–57)

God achieves this fattening of the soul in response to the third petition, “O Lord Save me.” The Hebrew is *Iashang*, the root of the name Jesus, Donne says; David prays for the salvation that Jesus would eventually bring. He asks for the same thing that the church asks for.

Donne ends his sermon by advising his auditors that when they make the last of the three petitions—“Save me”—they must not depend wholly on God to work out their salvation. They are fellow-workers with God:

Now beloved, you may know, that your selves have a part in those means, which God uses to that purpose, your selves are instruments, though not causes of your own salvation.

(5.18.559–61)

It is not enough simply to sit back and wait for salvation to come, despite one's plea to God.

In this sermon Donne again emphasizes the complex nature of repentance. To repent, a sinner must come to church. There God visits the individual to bring him to repentance. But Donne also argues for the importance of the individual's role in his own salvation. Even though a person is healed by God's grace in church, he is not a passive receptacle. He must take steps toward salvation after being touched by God.

The speaker in the psalm recognizes that his sin separates him from God, and he begs God to return and reinstate his relationship with him. For Donne, the avenue by which God returns to his sinful people in the church is the ordinances. God has chosen to act in the lives of his people, Donne says, and his means are the ordinances. They are the place where repentant believers may encounter God's forgiving presence. One should not expect to meet God in miracles or in extraordinary revelations; one should expect to meet him in his ordinances. It is in them that he is present. Thus when the psalmist begs, "Return, O Lord," and Donne echoes that cry, Donne expects that God will return to his people as they assemble in church for worship. He comes back "in the dispensation and distribution of his graces, in his Word and Sacraments" (5.18.303–5).

In the third sermon on the postulatory nature of Psalm 6, Donne discusses the reasons behind the three petitions in the previous sermon. This second sermon on Psalm 6:4–5 is one of Donne’s shortest sermons, a scant 334 lines in *Sermons*, barely half the average length of his other works. While in the preceding sermon Donne says that prayers must have reasons, here he maintains that prayers must be reasonable. There must be “a faire probability that that particular which I pray for, doth conduce to his glory and my good, and that therefore God is likely to grant it” (5.19.5–7). There is such a thing as an outlandish request, it seems, and such a request is improper.

Donne divides this sermon in two, considering the reasons “for thy mercie sake” and “for in death there is no remembrance of thee, and in the grave, who shall give thee thanks?” First, concerning God’s mercy, Donne states that we must “give” God his mercy to gain his mercy. He uses a commercial conceit:

If God were to sell me this *Returning*, this *Delivering*, this *Saving*, and all that I pray for; what could I offer God for that, so great as his owne mercy, in which I offer him the Innocencie, the Obedience, the Blood of his onely Son. If I buy of the Kings land, I must pay for it in the Kings money; I have no Myne, nor Mint of mine owne; If I would have any thing from God, I must give him that which is his

owne for it, that is, his mercy; And this is to give God his mercy, To give God thanks for his mercy, To give all to his mercy

(5.19.77–85)

Donne then moves to the next reason in his text. Before the church was established, he says, the godly had not so clear a vision of the afterlife as Christians do. Therefore they deprecated death and desired to live (5.19.133). But now, he maintains, because the future of believers is clear and the church is secure, deprecation of death is no longer appropriate. Instead, he argues, we must see that David is worried that God's absence might bring him to "such a deadly, and such a hellish state in this world, as that *In death*" (5.19.289–90). Donne warns his congregation against falling into the death of which David speaks (5.19.330–35).

In this brief sermon Donne's views on his role as preacher of God's Word are clear. He does not preach about how to live a happier or more fulfilling life; he preaches about life and death. He is concerned with saving the very lives of his people. He sees that as a priest he is charged with keeping them from destruction. And the site in which he carries out that charge is the church, for it is there that God works. Therefore, Donne believes, only by coming to church and taking what the minister of God offers can a sinner be saved.

While Donne may believe that the process of repentance can begin when believers are outside the church building, he stresses that the normal procedure is for believers to come into the physical church. It is there, he believes, that God directly gives them the

grace they need to repent. Just as the sacraments must be celebrated by a priest within the community of the church, so, Donne believes, repentance must occur within the church, mediated by the priest. Believers must come to church, hear a sermon from the mouth of the preacher, and thereby enjoy the gift of repentance. Reading the Bible at home is not a useless exercise, but hearing it in church is how God intended his Word to be received.

Moreover, Donne in this sermon emphasizes that the preached Word is not just a treatise presented by a learned speaker. The sermon, he believes, is the very means by which God returns to the church and enters the hearts and minds of listeners. As he does in the Lord's Supper, God offers himself to his hearers in the sermon. He gives them the gift of grace to examine their hearts and to resolve to amend their lives in penitent obedience.

Psalm 6:6-7

The last of the four sermons on the postulatory nature of Psalm 6 is on verses 6 and 7, "I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim, I water my couch with my teares. Mine eye is consumed because of griefe; it waxeth old, because of all mine enemies." This is the sermon that carries the heading "*Preached to the King at White-hall, upon the occasion of the Fast, April 5, 1628.*" Donne makes some introductory remarks about fasting to link the sermon to the occasion in 1628 on which he delivers it, but as I have said, it appears that he wrote the body of the sermon much earlier. At line 64 of *Sermons*, Donne begins his real exegesis. He finds in his text the reasons behind the petitions that occur earlier in the psalm. These reasons, he explains,

are the penitential acts of David. He divides the sermon into two parts as he considers David's acts: what David did, and what we must do.

In the first part of the sermon Donne explores nine different aspects of David's conduct. David groaned, Donne notes; he laboured with sighing; he wept; he wept continually in the night; he wept all night; his eye was consumed with grief; his eye was dimmed; it was full of grief; and it grew old with grief. Characteristically, Donne expands his thoughts on David's conduct using a compelling cadence:

First he sighed, and sighed so; and groaned, and groaned so; passionately, vehemently, and then openly, exemplarily; and he was not ashamed of it, for he came to weeping, though he knew it would be thought childish: And that in that abundance, *Natare feci*, and *Liquefeci lectum*, He *watred* his *bed*, dissolved his bed, made his bed to swimme, surrounded his bed with *teares*; And more, he macerated his bed with that brine.

(8.8.133–40)

David perfected his repentance, Donne says, and so must we. We must weep abundant tears of repentance (8.8.290–314), and we must not rest until all our sense of former sin is gone (8.8.417–19). Donne comforts his listeners by telling them not to look at their sins without seeing Christ too, and not to confess to God without hearing the promises of his forgiveness (8.8.547–49).

The second part of the sermon contains the most extensive discussion of repentance in all of Donne's sermons on Psalm 6. He considers what God requires of us after he has remitted our sin. He rejects the notion that after our repentance and God's pardon there remain temporal punishments that require satisfaction. Still, he supports the practice of performing acts of repentance after being pardoned. David carried out such acts, and so should we, he says, because there is an "indissoluble knot" between the essential parts of repentance and the fruits of repentance (8.8.782-93).

Donne reiterates a point that he has made in his other sermons on Psalm 6: we must not depend wholly on God to work out our salvation. Repentance is ongoing, he writes, and we must never rest from performing works of repentance:

Trust not to the treasure of the Church; neither the imaginary treasure of the Church of Rome, which pretends an inexhaustible mine of the works of other men, to distribute and bestow; No, nor to the true treasure of the true Church, that is, Absolution, upon confession, and Repentance; No, trust not to the merits of Christ himselfe, in their application to thee . . . except thou remember thy sins in thy bed, and poure out thy teares from thine eyes, and fulfill the sufferings of Christ in thy selfe. Nothing can be added to Christs merits; that is true: but something must be added to thee; a disposition in thee, for the application of that which is his Trust not in others, not in the Church, nor in Christ himselfe, so, as to doe nothing for thy selfe; Nor trust not in that, which thou doest for thy selfe, so, as at any time to thinke, thou hast done enough and needest do no more.

Donne concludes the sermon with a reference to the occasion of the fast. He prays that God would prosper the Crown and the church, and he seems to promise God that he and the congregation will regularly fast (8.8.975–77). However, the sermon could have ended forty lines earlier without any loss of coherence. The conclusion seems clearly to have been added just for the fast of April 5, 1628. Donne is convinced that the ordinary way that God works to bring believers to sigh, to moan, and to weep, that is, honestly to face and lament their sins, is through the hearing of the Word preached in church. Just as believers come to church to receive Holy Communion, “the sacrament of reconciliation,” as Donne likes to call it, they must come to church to take the step preceding that, the step that makes possible the proper reception of the sacrament. For it is in the church that God is present; it is there that he operates; it is as believers listen to his Word that he moves in grace to bring them to repentance. Donne regards the Word not as a private devotional tool but as an instrument of the Church. It is in the church that this instrument must sound, for it is there that God intends it to have its desired effect. That effect, Donne maintains, is to make people sigh, moan, and weep for their sinfulness.

In the four sermons on the postulatory character of Psalm 6, Donne emphasizes a number of aspects of repentance. He explains to his hearers how to pray the prayer of repentance, why to pray, what to pray for, and whom to pray to. He tells them how to behave after their prayers have been heard. And he emphasizes that the touchstone of all

repentance is the church, for it is there that the sinner makes preparation to encounter the mercy of God. Further, it is in the church that God touches individuals, as he visits them during the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.

Psalm 6:8–10

In the previous sermon Donne explains the nature of repentance, following David's example—that is, what the repentance of a truly contrite Christian should look like. In the sermon on Psalm 6:8–10 Donne focusses on actually moving his hearers to repentance. This sermon is a call to repentance, and Donne expects a response from his listeners. This sermon covers the last three verses, 8 through 10: “Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquitie; for the Lord hath heard the voyce of my weeping. The Lord hath heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer. Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed: let them returne and be ashamed suddenly.” After announcing that there are three sections to Psalm 6—the deprecatory, postulatory, and gratulatory—Donne defends David's construction of the psalm, justifying the relative amount of time David spends on each of the three sections. He then launches into his discussion of the third section, the gratulatory. He divides the sermon into three parts: David's thankfulness; the reason for David's confidence in his gratitude; and David's apparent bitterness in the final words of the psalm.

Donne's discussion of David's thankfulness is somewhat puzzling. He has told us that David has left his gratulation to the end of the psalm, and he has explained why.¹²¹ However, his actual consideration of David's thankfulness leaves us wondering how he could have regarded the first part of verse 8 as an expression of thanks. The thankfulness that God requires from us, he says, consists mainly of declaring his mercies to others to win them over and to strengthen them in the faith (6.1.119–22). According to Donne, David does this in verse 8 when he says "Depart from me all ye workers of iniquity." He explains:

This *David* does in this noble and ingenuous publication, and protestation, I have strength enough, and company enough, power enough, and pleasure enough, joy enough, and treasure enough, honour enough, and recompence enough in my God alone, in him I shall surely have all which you can pretend to give, and therefore
Discedite à me, Depart from me all ye workers of iniquity.

(6.1.123–28)

Whether those whom David commands away were his own bad servants or his enemies, Donne says, David still declares his thankfulness to God by ridding himself of them.

David's thankfulness is certainly not something that immediately springs to mind upon reading the first half of verse 8. Donne is digging for meaning here, as though a

¹²¹See p. 100, *supra*.

thought has occurred to him—surely David is thankful even in his adversity—which he must somehow try to support from the text. It is nimble exegesis indeed that extracts from this portion of verse 8 the theme of thankfulness—the theme, Donne says, that enables us to characterize the final three verses as gratulatory.

In the second part of the sermon Donne considers two reasons for David's confidence in God. First, he says, David is certain that God has heard his prayer. David's tears are an "embassage," which finds an audience in God (6.1.293–311). Second, David is sure that God never wearies of hearing his supplications (6.1.399–403).

Donne's discussion of the first reason is significant. He moves from considering David's assurance that God has heard his weeping to a more general consideration of the tears of all penitent people. God hears the voice of our looks and the voice of our tears, sometimes better than the voice of our words (6.1.323–25; 354–56). For the person who is too distraught even to shed tears, Donne has this consolation:

As God sees the water in the spring in the veines of the earth, before it bubble
upon the face of the earth; so God sees teares in the heart of a man, before they
blubber his face; God heares the teares of that sorrowfull soule, which for sorrow
cannot shed teares.

(6.1.361–65)

In the third part of the sermon Donne discusses David's apparent denunciation of his enemies in the last verse of the psalm. There are two ways to take David's words, he

says. They may be words of imprecation, by which David expresses his desire that bad things fall upon his enemies; or they may be words of prediction, by which David pronounces the things that shall befall them (6.1.495–501). Donne prefers the latter interpretation, but even in the former, he says, David wishes the men no harm as men (6.1.557–59).

Donne concludes by stating that the worst curse that comes out of David's mouth is really a plea that God would correct his enemy. He then assures his congregation that the worst harm he means them as their minister is to denounce their sins. He says that he wishes to "see blood in your faces, the blood of your Saviour working in that shame for sin" (6.1.789–90). Finally, he urges them to repent, to return to the state of innocence that they enjoyed at baptism, and to the state of blessedness that God gave them when they last received communion.

The entire final paragraph of the sermon, some thirty-six lines in *Sermons*, is a call to repentance. In this call, Donne emphasizes the centrality and importance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Believers should try to achieve the condition that they enjoyed after having received the sacraments, he states. This paragraph is a fitting conclusion to his series on Psalm 6. Throughout the series he has laboured to convince his listeners of the importance of repentance. He has tried to spark their memory and test their reason, he has attempted to frighten them, and he has appealed to their gratitude, all in an effort to make them crave reconciliation with God. He has told his listeners that during the sermon, the "holy Charme," God has been present with them, awakening their spirits to bring them face to face with him. And he has

maintained that to seal their reconciliation with him, they must worthily participate in the Lord's Supper. The same emphasis on repentance, reconciliation, and receiving Holy Communion is present in Donne's series on Psalm 32. And again, Donne's elevated view of the ordinances of the church is accentuated.

Throughout this sermon Donne warns his congregation of the sorrows and suffering that will befall them if they refuse to repent, just as ills fell upon David's unrepentant enemies. He demands from his hearers the evidence of repentance: he wants them to show him their flushed faces, red with shame for their sins. He expects his listeners to be searching their conscience as they listen to his words, and he expects that they will be honest with both him and God. He believes that as he preaches, his words will pierce their exterior and go straight to their innermost being, to the place where they harbour their sin. It is when they no longer hide that sin, but admit it to themselves and reveal it to God, that they will feel shame. The reward for their candour, Donne says, is one of inestimable worth: it is a state of blessedness, of reconciliation with God.

Donne expects to see a change in his hearers even as he preaches his sermon to them. He does not believe that he is the cause of that change; he is, perhaps, the catalyst. It is God, moving through his Word into the hearts of believers, that causes the change in them. But without the voice of the preacher, God's Word remains undelivered, and the pathway to the hearts of the people remains closed. Once again Donne reveals his belief that there is more to a sermon than the argument of a skilled orator aimed at persuading others. The sermon has special, effective power. It is the means by which God uses his grace to change his followers.

Summary: The sermons on Psalm 6

In his series on Psalm 6, Donne accentuates, above all, the effectual grace of God. He stresses the role of the minister and what the minister can accomplish among his listeners in the worship service. He underscores the dynamic quality of the Word of God and its ability, as a "holy charme," to effect change in its hearers. He emphasizes the functions of the ordinances of the church, and argues that they are the means by which God returns to his people and visits them with his grace. And, of course, he highlights repentance, telling his congregation what it is to repent and, finally, moving them to repentance.

Throughout his series on Psalm 6 Donne's high regard for the sermon is clear. The sermon, as one of the God-given ordinances of the church, is the means by which God speaks to his people. The sermon instructs believers in doctrine, but, perhaps most important, it is a vehicle of God's grace through which hearers are moved, by that grace, to seek reconciliation with God. It is through the sermon that believers experience the presence of God, and, having experienced that presence, are changed. The sermon is therefore effectual, not *ex opere operato*, but because it is how God reaches his people. It is a necessary step towards the ultimate reconciliation that they will enjoy in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

*The Sermons on Psalm 32**Dating*

There are eight sermons in Donne's series on Psalm 32. The series appears complete, for Donne covers all eleven verses of the psalm. Simpson admits that it is difficult to place a certain date on these sermons, but she states that they probably do not belong to Donne's early preaching career because their style is that of the middle or late years of his ministry (9:34). However, since she does not explain how the stylistic characteristics of Donne's sermons on Psalm 32 fit his middle or later years, this criterion for dating is not helpful. Further, she says, since Donne already preached two series of sermons in his Lincoln's Inn period, the second of which she dates to 1622 or 1623, the third series, on Psalm 32, must belong to a later period of Donne's ministry (9:34). But she provides no reason why Donne could not have preached three series during his Lincoln's Inn years. Simpson's dates for the sermons on Psalm 32 are therefore unsupported. Stanwood, however, believes that these sermons likely belong to the earlier part of Donne's preaching career, along with his other sermons on the penitential psalms. Assuming that Donne wrote the sermons on Psalm 6 and Psalm 38 while he was at Lincoln's Inn, he argues, it is reasonable to suppose that Donne also wrote the sermons on Psalm 32 then.¹²² Nevertheless, since the sermons lack dates, there is no positive evidence as to the dating of these sermons.

¹²²Stanwood, "Donne's Earliest Sermons," 372.

Themes

In his thesis Timothy Stevens says that the purpose of Psalm 32 and of Donne's treatment of it is "to rectify the understanding."¹²³ In support of that claim he cites a passage in the penultimate sermon in the series (p. 163):

This faculty of understanding in man is not always well understood by men. The whole Psalme is a Psalme to rectify the understanding; it is in the title thereof, *Dauids Instruction*.

(9.17.415–17)

It is true that Donne talks about rectifying the understanding in his series on Psalm 32, but he does not see this statement as the seminal theme of all his sermons on the psalm. He does not make the statement until halfway through the seventh sermon in the series. In only two of the sermons does Donne speak of the understanding at any length; and in both of these he deals with much more than just rectifying the understanding. Nor do his sermons develop this theme in a sustained way. It is an overstatement, therefore, to say that the whole purpose of the series is to rectify the understanding. Donne's consideration of the understanding is there, but there is more.

The sermons on Psalm 32 deal above all with repentance. In his series Donne speaks of confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and blessedness. He tells his listeners

¹²³Timothy Scott Stevens, *Things That Belong To The Way: John Donne's Sermons on the Penitential Psalms* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1990).

why they should repent and what their reward will be if they do. He instructs them on how they should repent and how to express their repentance. He reminds them of the importance of confession. He assures them of the certainty of God's forgiveness while cautioning them not to take it for granted. And throughout the series on Psalm 32 he emphasizes the role of the ordinances of the church in the lives of believers. As he does throughout his sermons on the penitential psalms, Donne displays his belief in the sacramental character of his preaching. He tells his congregation how to repent, but he does not expect that they will be moved to repentance simply by listening to his words. What *will* move them, he believes, is God himself, who is present among the congregation as he preaches.

In the series on Psalm 6, Donne continually reveals his belief that preaching is a vehicle of God's grace. It is by attending church and by participating in one of the God-given ordinances of the church, the sermon, that believers can encounter the life-changing grace of God. In the series on Psalm 32, Donne displays that same line of thought, but he also goes further. Throughout these sermons, Donne attempts to deliver God to his congregation, much as in the Eucharist the priest, in some sense, attempts to deliver God to participants. The "Take, eat: this is my body," the words of consecration which are the essence of Holy Communion, finds its expression in Donne's preaching. As he preaches on Psalm 32, he imitates the Eucharist, offering to his congregation the gift of reconciliation. He says to his hearers, in effect, "Take, eat: fill yourselves with this sermon. It is the body of Christ. Through it you will be saved." Repeatedly he makes the offer to his listeners, and repeatedly he expects that they will accept it. He believes

that when they accept the offer, they will be changed. He does not preach merely to inform his congregation about the love and mercy of God; he preaches to deliver that love and mercy to them.

Psalm 32:1–2

Donne's first sermon on Psalm 32 treats the first two verses: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sinne is covered; Blessed is the man, unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquitie, and in whose spirit there is no guile." This sermon is an important expression of Donne's thoughts on repentance. He emphasizes the centrality of repentance in a believer's life and points to the end of that repentance, the state of blessedness. He tells his hearers what they need to do to make their repentance acceptable to God. And as he does in his whole series on the penitential psalms, he directs them to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to seal their reconciliation to God.

Donne begins by observing that the psalm is David's catechism,¹²⁴ and he divides the sermon into four parts. First, he discusses how David proceeds by way of catechism. Although David took care to use art and learning in all his psalms, he was primarily concerned with establishing Israel upon "fundamental doctrines" (9.11.94–95). Second, Donne discusses the goal of David's catechism, which is blessedness. In this life, he says, blessedness is reconciliation to God, while in the next life it is the sight of God (9.11.215–18). Donne regrets that we spend too much time speculating on that sight

¹²⁴The psalm bears the heading *Davidis Erudiens*, in Hebrew *Le David Maschil*, which means "David's Institution" or "David's Catechism."

of God which we can attain only in heaven, while here on earth we neglect our pursuit of reconciliation:

It is a lamentable perverseness in us, that we are so contentiously busie, in inquiring into the Nature, and Essence, and Attributes of God, things which are reserved to our end, when we shall know at once, and without study, all that, of which our lives study can teach us nothing; And that here, where we are upon the way, we are so negligent and lazy, in inquiring of things, which belong to the way.

(9.11.219–25)

In the third part of the sermon Donne outlines the components of reconciliation. They are the three acts of mercy set out in the text: forgiving transgressions, covering sins, and not imputing iniquities. The transgressions that are forgiven are the gravest sort of sins, Donne says:

When not onely the members of our bodies, but the faculties of our soul, our will and understanding are bent upon sin: when we doe not only sin strongly, and hungerly, and thirstily . . . but we sin rationally, we finde reasons . . . why we

should sin: We sin wittily, we invent new sins, and we thinke it an ignorant, a dull, and an unsociable thing, not to sin; yea we sin wisely, and make our sin, our way to preferment.

(9.11.275–82)

The sins that are “covered” in the next act of mercy are not so serious. They are more a deviation from the right path, sins of weakness, than they are the deliberate works of a hardened conscience. God covers these sins by applying his ordinances through his ministers. In the mouth of his minister God speaks to us, Donne says, and in the hand of the minister he delivers himself to us. He touches our conscience with his Word, and he touches our soul by assuring us that we have received him in the sacrament of Holy Communion (9.11.418–24).

In the last act of mercy, “not imputing iniquity,” Donne addresses the overscrupulous in his audience. These people impute to themselves things that God himself does not impute to them. They wrongly believe that any calamity that befalls them results from God’s anger at their sin. God might still punish us when we have repented, Donne says, but he does so out of love and for our correction, not because he holds us guilty for our sins.

Donne continues with the fourth part of the sermon. The blessedness and the fruits of blessedness of which David has been speaking, he says, grow only in those in whom there is no guile. To be such a person requires a perfect and entire repentance, which consists of contrition, confession, and satisfaction (9.11.576–77). And while it is

certain that confession to God is necessary, he allows that confessing to men is sometimes necessary too:

There may be many cases of scruple, of perplexity, where it were an exposing our selves to farther occasions of sin, not to confesse to man.

(9.11.588–90)

As for satisfaction, Donne states that a person has not properly done repentance without giving it—that is, restitution—to those one has wronged.

One who has not perfected his repentance still has guile in the spirit. He cannot hope to enjoy the blessedness of which David speaks. If a man confesses all his sins but one, Donne says, he is no better off “than if he were at sea, and he stopped all leaks but one, and perished by that” (9.11.629–30).

In the last pages of the sermon Donne uses wit, playing upon the word “cover,” to convince his hearers to confess to God. He tells them to uncover their sins so that God will cover them up again. To keep sins covered, he says, is to refuse the covering that God provides, which is the covering of the ordinances of his church. Donne forces us to track the word through the text, following it in all its senses, beginning with the obviously metaphorical sense and ending with the novel, even surprising metaphor of the church as covering.

Donne ends by emphasizing the place of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. While baptism washes away original sin, he says, we must mix our tears of

repentance with the wine of the Lord's Supper to perfect our reconciliation

(9.11.808–10). Then we may have the confidence that our sins are buried forever. Donne expresses this confidence in perhaps the most eloquent words of the sermon:

The Sun shall set, and have a to morrows resurrection; Herbs shall have a winter death, and a springs resurrection; Thy body shall have a long winters night, and then a resurrection; Onely thy sins buried in the wounds of thy Saviour, shall never have resurrection.

(9.11.836–40)

This is one of the most important sermons in Donne's series on the penitential psalms. He touches on some of the essential aspects of perhaps the most crucial area of a believer's life—the struggle to maintain a strong relationship with God. He cautions his hearers against complacency, he reminds them of the rewards that God offers to them in the ordinances of the church, and he assures them of God's faithfulness if they will repent. In our lives as religious people, he says, we waste far too much time inquiring into the nature and attributes of God and spend far too little time examining and rectifying our own behaviour. That behaviour is too often sinful, he says, and our sins fall into three categories: the serious sins, the less serious sins, and the acts that we wrongly think are sins. God's mercy, he assures his hearers, also falls into three categories: the forgiveness of the serious sins, the covering of the less serious sins, and the refusal to impute sins to us.

While Donne discusses all three forms of God's mercy, it is in his remarks on God's covering of sin that he is clearest about the sacramental nature of preaching. For it is by applying God's ordinances through his priest, Donne says, that God covers sin. God touches our conscience with his Word, and he does so to make us uncover our sins to him. When we uncover our sins to God, God covers them up again, makes them vanish, by using the covering of the ordinances of the church.

Thus for Donne the very means by which God's mercy is active in the lives of believers is in the ordinances of the church. God not only touches his followers by means of the sermon; he offers them forgiveness through the sermon as well. God says in his sermon, as he does in the Eucharist, "Take, eat." It is by accepting his offer in the Word that the believer receives the assurance of God's mercy. For the sermon, spoken by the priest, is the voice of God. As in the Lord's Supper, in which the priest offers and the recipient receives the body of Christ, so in the sermon the priest offers and the hearer receives the tongue of God. It is only in the church that the Lord's Supper can be received, and it is only in the church that the tongue of God can be received. By receiving the tongue of God sincerely and not refusing it, we receive the blessing of having our sins covered. Donne is thus emphatic that it is only in and by the church that God covers the sins of the people.

Psalm 32:3-4

Donne's next sermon on Psalm 32 continues his teaching on the importance of repentance and confession. The text is verses three and four: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old, through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was

heavy upon me; my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. *Selah.*” From our knowledge of Donne’s penchant for playing with words and images, we might expect him to expound on old bones, roaring, God’s heavy hand, and dried-up moisture. But he surprises us, for in fact most of the sermon discusses silence. This is one of Donne’s densest sermons, packed with ideas and images. There are three parts: a discussion of example as a means of instruction; the observation that David uses himself as an example; and an analysis of David’s confession.

In the first part of the sermon Donne states that all ways of teaching are by rule and example (9.12.1–4). He says that the rule in the first two verses of the psalm is that blessedness consists in reconciliation to God, and that no one with guile of spirit enjoys that blessedness. The example illustrating that rule, he says, occurs in verses three and four, which portray the person who refuses to uncover his sins in confession. His bones wax old; he roars; he feels God’s heavy hand on him; and his moisture dries up. In the second part of the sermon, Donne states, David uses himself as an example, bringing shame to himself but glory to God (9.12.150–53).

In the third part Donne analyzes David’s confession. It is from David’s silence that all the ill effects of verses three and four result. That silence seizes Donne’s attention. Silence is not all bad, he maintains. He mentions thirteen different types of silence. There is, for example, *silentium reverentiae*, a silence of reverence, a respect of the presence of God, and *silentium bonum*, a silence which is always and absolutely good, namely, the quiet contentment with all that God sends (9.12.266–67; 329–35). But David’s silence is neither of these. His silence is a “not Confessing, a not Repenting”

(9.12.537–38). If one does not confess, if one is unable to weep tears of repentance, then one will become irremediably obdurate:

If thou have frozen eyes, thou hast a frozen heart too; If the fires of the Holy Ghost cannot thaw thee, in his promises, the fire of hell will doe it much lesse, which is a fire of obduration, not of liquefaction, and does not melt a soule, to poure it out into a new and better form, but hardens it, nails it, confirmes it in the old.

(9.12.619–23)

Donne speaks briefly of some of the other effects of silence, including the consumption of one's physical and spiritual bones. For, as Donne is fond of saying, St. Basil says "the soule hath her Bones too," and those bones are our good works. But these works will do us no good if we do not confess (9.12.654–64).

The cause of the ill effects of silence, Donne states, is the heavy hand of God. Those who confess their faults feel God's hand, but they grab hold and do not release it until they have received a blessing from it. By contrast, those who remain silent feel the inescapable and oppressive weight of his hand (9.12.703–12).

Donne's sermon on Psalm 32:3–4 is, among other things, an exercise in wit. This is not to say that he intends it to be primarily a display of his wit; but upon reflection one cannot help noticing that he is playing, albeit in a sacred sense, with his text and with his audience. For this is a sermon about silence. Donne spends most of the sermon speaking

to his congregation about silence and tells them that silence takes good and bad forms. The worst form of silence, and therefore the silence that he speaks most about, is the silence of not confessing one's sins to God.

If believers refuse to confess their sins to God, Donne says, then God will refuse to offer them reconciliation. "If a man leaves out God all day," he warns, "God shall leave him out all night, all his everlasting night, in which he shall never see day more" (9.12.777-9). They should come to church, make their confession, and receive the consequent blessing of God. As we speak and confess our sins, however, we will receive blessings from God. And the place to make confession is in the church, for it is there that we receive the seal of reconciliation to God, the assurance, in the sermon and the Holy Communion, that God's absolution is effective.

Donne is here offering the grace of God to his hearers. He is telling them, in effect, "Take, eat: take the gift that God is now offering you through my mouth, through the medium of my words, make these words yours, obey them, and enjoy the blessing of reconciliation that necessarily results from doing so." He intends nothing less than that his hearers should actively and sincerely respond to his words and accept the offer that he holds out as God's representative. He expects that they will be changed by his words just as they are changed by participating in Holy Communion.

Psalm 32:5

Donne continues his discussion of confession in the sermon on Psalm 32:5. In this sermon Donne speaks more extensively on confession than in any of the other sermons. Given the text, this seems natural: "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and

mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confesse my transgressions unto the Lord, and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.” Donne makes clear to his hearers at the outset that little else is as important as a proper regard for confession:

The mystery of the Kingdome of heaven, is, That onely the Declaring, the Publishing, the Notifying, and Confessing of my sins, possesses me of the Kingdome of heaven.

(9.13.9–12)

Donne divides the sermon into two parts, David’s act and God’s act, confession and absolution. Donne shows the influence of Peter Lombard¹²⁵ when he calls David’s act *actus inchoatus* and God’s *actus consummatus*: “David did but say, I will confesse, and God forgave the iniquity, and the punishment of his sin” (9.13.84–86). But he spends most of his time on David’s act and very little on God’s, for he is trying to show his hearers how they can make a good confession, using David’s example.

David’s confession in Psalm 32:5 comprises three separate acts, Donne remarks. First David acknowledges his sin, then he does not hide his iniquity, and finally he

¹²⁵To Peter Lombard, contrition was so important that if one were truly contrite, and, significantly, intended to confess one’s sins, one could be assured of God’s forgiveness even before the priest had declared absolution:

Therefore the penitent ought to confess his sins if he have time: and yet, before the confession is in his mouth, if the intention be in his heart, forgiveness is accorded him. (Trans. Watkins, 2:745; Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum, Lib. IV, Dist. 17, § 2* (Migne, *PL*, 192.881)).

intends to confess. The acknowledgment of his sin is David's preparatory act. Until a sinner takes this first step, Donne contends, he lies like the slime of the Nile River, waiting for the sun to shine on it so that it can produce vile creatures (9.13.103–8). But once those beams of grace shine upon the sinner, he is able finally to see his sins.

Then, as the creatures in the Creation, then, as the new creatures at Nilus, his sins begin to take their formes, and their specifications, and they appeare to him in their particular true shapes, and that which hee hath in a generall name, called Pleasure or Wantonnesse, now calcs it selfe in his conscience, a direct Adultery, a direct Incest.

(9.13.110–15)

David's next step is to refrain from hiding his iniquity. Our hidden sins grow into larger sins, Donne warns, and therefore the sinner must have a stricter standard for himself than even the civil law has for wrongdoers. For although it is a legal maxim that *De minimis non curat lex*, the law takes no regard of trivial offences, the sinner must be concerned with even the smallest shortcoming. Donne explains:

As men that rob houses thrust in a child at the window, and he opens greater
doores for them, so lesser sins make way for greater.

(9.13.224–26)

David's third step attracts Donne's attention most. Donne explains every facet of David's determination to confess ("I said, I will confesse my transgression unto the Lord"), apparently so that his hearers can model the final part of their confession, the speaking, after David's. He breaks down this third step into further and still further categories, providing his hearers with a kind of step-by-step outline for confession. David's determination, Donne says, must be considered in three stages: meditation, resolution, and execution. First there must be meditation on the nature of confession and the gift of absolution. Then comes the resolution, the determination to make one's confession to God. And last, there is the act of confessing itself. Because this final act is crucial, Donne lingers on each of David's words. The sins that David confesses are *true sins*, Donne observes, that is, they really are sins, and not just the qualms of an overscrupulous conscience. And while one need not worry about things that are not sins, one must be sure to confess *all* one's sins. Then one must be sure to confess only one's *own* sins and not be concerned with the sins of others. Next, one must admit that one's sins are *against* the Lord. Further, confessions are properly made *to* the Lord: confessing to another person is insufficient without the intention to confess to God as well. And finally, one's confession must be a vilification of oneself, for thereby God receives more glory.

After discussing David's act, Donne turns briefly to God's act. God's act is his forgiveness, which is a perfected act. At the center of his forgiveness is his mercy, which he shows by promptly forgiving us once we have confessed our sins. However, this forgiveness occurs only in the church, for the church is the "way" to forgiveness:

The way is the Church; no man is cured out of the way; no man that separates himself from the Church.

(9.13.663-64)

No one is saved, Donne continues,

except he conforme himself to that worship of God, and to those means of sanctification, which God hath instituted in his Church, without singularities of his owne, or Traditions of other mens inventing, and imposing.

(9.13.667-70)

These statements on forgiveness are typical of Donne's teaching in his sermons on the penitential psalms. It is in the church that one encounters the saving grace of God. It is there that believers are gathered, and it is there that God visits them. He visits during the prayers, during the sermon, and during the Lord's Supper. And while he visits, he freely forgives and blesses his penitent people.

Donne concludes the sermon with an appeal to his hearers to pour their hearts out to God in confession. But he warns them not to presume upon God's mercy. Confession and forgiveness is not an automatic and inevitable process. Though God will forgive often, his hearers must "take heed of trusting upon it too often, but especially of trusting upon it too late" (9.13.703-5). Donne urges them not to defer their repentance, but to confess immediately, and receive Christ in the ordinances of the Church, the "earthly trinity" of the prayers, the preaching, and the Lord's Supper (9.13.707-9).

Of all Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms, none argues more strongly for the observance of church ordinances than this sermon. And as he does in the previous two sermons on Psalm 32, Donne in this sermon imitates the eucharistic invitation, "Take, eat." The sermon is a detailed analysis of confession, and in its step-by-step directions on how to conduct one's confession it is much like the medieval confessional manuals. As a challenge to his congregation the sermon is highly effective. Donne tells his listeners when to confess, what to confess, and why they should confess. But Donne's analysis of the process of confession is not the most interesting facet of the sermon. There is not much new in his discussion other than Donne's own turn of phrase. What is most interesting about the sermon is the concluding section, in which Donne offers the resolution to his hearers' confession.

After his listeners have decided to confess, Donne says, God will be merciful, and he will forgive them. But the milieu in which God will forgive them is only the church. For it is in the institution of the church, and only there, that God makes his will and his mercy known. The way that believers are to respond to God's mercy is by participating

in the activities of the church, for the church is the way to forgiveness: “no man is cured out of the way; no man that separates himself from the Church” (9.13.663–4). Further, he says, no one is saved “except he conforme himself to that worship of God, and to those means of sanctification, which God hath instituted in his Church” (9.13.667–70). As one conforms oneself to the divinely instituted forms of the church, one receives Christ.

In his other sermons on Psalm 32 Donne extends to his hearers the invitation “Take, eat.” In this sermon his invitation could not be clearer. God will forgive the penitent believer twice or thrice, Donne says, but

Whatsoever the Holy Ghost may meane by the twice or thrice, be sure to doe it once, doe it now, and receive thy Saviour there, and so as he offers himselfe unto thee in these his Ordinances his day, once, and twice, and thrice, that is, in prayer, in preaching, in the Sacrament.

(9.13.705–9)

Because the ordinances of the church are the medium by which God enters into and acts in the lives of believers, the faithful can receive Christ not just in the Eucharist, but in the preaching and prayers as well. Once again, therefore, Donne discloses his conception of the ordinance of preaching as special and sacramental in its working. God offers himself to the believer through his Word preached, and the believer can receive God in some fashion by receiving that Word.

Psalm 32:6

Donne continues to reveal his sacramental view of preaching and renews his invitation to “Take, eat” in the sermon on Psalm 32:6: “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee, in a time when thou mayest be found; surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him.” He also reiterates his emphasis on the timeliness of repentance and the centrality of the church and its ordinances. His first three sermons on Psalm 32 deal with the end of the faith, blessedness, and the means to that end, confession. In this sermon his themes are two: prayer and water. In order to take our legacy of heaven, Donne says, we must pray for forgiveness. And the waters of tribulation shall not overcome us, he assures his hearers, if we drown our sins in the flood of our tears, if we work out our salvation in the sweat of our labour, and if we refresh ourselves in the sacraments. In the first part of this sermon Donne considers the duty to pray. In the second he discusses the benefit that results from performing that duty.

In the first part Donne makes four statements about prayer: every godly one must pray; prayers shall be to God alone; prayers must be limited to requests for forgiveness and not for the fulfilment of fleeting wishes; and prayers must be in good time, while God is still listening, for there may come a time when God will no longer hear our prayers.

The “godly ones” that must pray are those who have been baptized, Donne says. God hears only their prayers. The house of God is the house of prayer, and the only way into that house is by the sacrament of baptism (9.14.102–9). He states:

As out of the Arke, whosoever swam best, was not saved by his swimming, no more is any morall man, out of the Church, by his praying: He that swomme in the flood, swomme but into more and more water; he that prayes out of the Church, prayes but into more and more sin.

(9.14.108–12)

Donne's emphasis on the sacraments is clear. To be godly, he claims, a person must be both baptized and a worthy recipient of the Eucharist. To have a portion in the legacy of the promised land, one must participate fully in the sacraments.

Next Donne stresses that it is to God that believers must pray, and no one else.

He denounces the practice of praying to saints:

Certainely it were a strange distemper, a strange singularity, a strange circularity, in a man that dwelt at Windsor, to fetch all his water at London Bridge: So is it in him, that lives in Gods presence, (as he does, that lives religiously in his Church) to goe for all his necessities, by Invocation to Saints.

(9.14.187–91)

Donne reasons that since David is praying for the forgiveness of sins and since God alone can forgive sins, it is only to God that one must pray.

Donne then considers the subject matter of prayer. The proper subject for prayer, he says, lies in the text of his last sermon, verse 5. We must pray for the forgiveness of

both the punishment and the iniquity of our sin (9.14.368–70). Donne enthusiastically describes the state of the penitent believer whose sins have been forgiven. This person's condition is better than it is following baptism or Holy Communion, he claims, although we enjoy a state of blessedness in each case. The soul of the person whose sins are forgiven experiences

the comfort of being presented to God as innocent as *Adam*, then when God breathed a soule into him, yea as innocent as Christ Jesus himselfe, when he breathed out his soule to God; oh how blessed is that soule that enjoyes it, and how bold that tongue that goes about to expresse it!

(9.14.403–7)

In his last comment on the duty of prayer, Donne tells his listeners not to delay praying for forgiveness. The proper time to pray is whenever God speaks to their conscience. He warns that although God has given us aids—the ordinances of the church—to gain access to him, we do not know how long they will be with us. Therefore, to delay praying for forgiveness is to risk losing the only means by which we have access to God (9.14.475–81).

In the second part of the sermon, Donne explains the reward of prayer. That reward, he says, is that the flood waters of tribulation shall not inundate the supplicant. Donne plays with the sense of the word “waters,” turning the word this way and that to derive a multiplicity of meanings from it. The waters in the psalm are afflictions, or

God's corrections, or temptations, and they are related to the waters of Jesus Christ (9.14.564–6). Christ's waters are the tears that he wept over Jerusalem, the sweat that he shed in the garden of Gethsemane, and the water mixed with blood that issued from his side in the crucifixion (9.14.719–23). These waters form the spring-head of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (9.14.724). And while God will not let the waters of adversity overwhelm us, Donne states, we must follow Christ's example by weeping for our sinful souls, by sweating in our daily work, and by refreshing ourselves in the sacraments (9.14.718–28).

Donne sounds a familiar note as he discusses prayer. All believers must pray for forgiveness, he maintains: this is a simple tenet of the faith. But Donne adds his own touch to this admonition when he states that believers should pray immediately for forgiveness. They must pray *now*, he urges. The reason is that prayer is one of the ordinances of the church that God has given human beings to gain and maintain access to him. However, Donne states, God never says how long the ordinances will be available to us. He may take them away, and therefore our means of access to him might be cut off. We cannot certainly know the mind or plan of God, but we can certainly know that he has given us the ordinances. Therefore since God has been gracious enough to give us those ordinances, we should not delay to use them.

As he speaks to his auditors, Donne is underscoring that the speaking in which he is engaged is itself a gift to the people from God. He is saying by his speaking, "Take, eat." He is offering his hearers an ordinance equal in stature to the sacrament of Holy Communion itself. He is giving them access to God by revealing to them the will of God

in the words he speaks. The very means of access to God, the best metaphor for which is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is made possible by receiving the preached Word. That Word, received guilelessly its by hearers, is an effective and crucial step in their salvation.

Psalm 32:7

Donne's next sermon in the series on Psalm 32 is on verse 7, "Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt preserve mee from trouble; thou shalt compasse me about with songs of deliverance." In this sermon Donne draws parallels between the church and the individual believer. He states that as God has preserved the church, he will preserve the individual as well. But he is careful to warn his listeners that they must not take God's mercy for granted. He implies that God will never abandon his true church, for that is where he reveals himself to the world. But he may abandon persons who fail to seek reconciliation with him.

Donne states that his scriptural text might be the utterance of both the corporate church and the individual believer, and in his *divisio* he sets out a three-part scheme to explore this idea. First he says that the early persecuted church and the individual timorous soul, the soul that is afraid to enter the world, both cry "Thou art my hiding place." Second, as the church gains freedom and thrives, it calls to God in assurance, "Thou shalt preserve me from trouble," as does the soul who becomes confident enough to step into the world and face temptations. Third, the church triumphant cries exultantly,

“God shall compass me with songs of deliverance”; this is the same cry of the soul that trusts in God’s continued provision.

In the first part of the sermon Donne briefly reviews the history of the persecution of the early church. Then he states that as the Reformed church grew under the corrupt Roman Catholic church, its position was the same as the ancient church. Thus the Reformed church could also say to God, “Thou hast been our hiding place” (9.15.140–187). And every timorous soul, Donne says, every person who is afraid to venture into society, to take up a vocation, and to face the temptations of the world, must utter the same cry. This soul is wrong, he says:

It is a snare cast by the Devils owne hand, If I be over-timerous, If upon pretence of hiding my selfe from tentations, I withdraw my selfe from the offices of mutuall society. *Tu absconsio*, The Lord will be my hiding place from tentations that attempt me in my calling, but not to hide me from a calling.

(9.15.218–22)

In the second part of the sermon Donne considers the early church, the Reformed church, and the individual soul as they become stronger. He attacks the Roman Catholic church again. God preserved the early church from trouble, Donne says; likewise, he preserved the Reformed church from trouble at the hands of “the putative Church, the specious Church, the Romane Church” (9.15.323–4). The Roman church may be a church, Donne allows, but

the Pest-house is a house, and theirs is such a Church; But the Pest-house is not the best ayre to live in, nor the Romane Church the best Church to die in.

(9.15.372–4)

Donne then discusses the timorous soul. He reiterates that we are each bound to join society and trust that God will hide us from temptations. Adopting a vocation does not compel us to sin (9.15.405–10).

In the third part of the sermon Donne discusses God's act of "compassing his people with joyful deliverance." He observes that God protected the early church and the Reformed church. And he says that every believer should have the same certainty, for they have "the faire assurance of his perpetuall residence with us" (9.15.535–6).

Donne ends the sermon ambivalently, for while he emphasizes that God is loving and faithful, he cautions his hearers, as he has done repeatedly in the sermons on the penitential psalms, not to presume upon God's patience:

How loving soever my soule be, it will not stay in a diseased body; How loving soever the Spirit of life be, it will not stay in a diseased soule. My soule is loath to goe from my body, but sicknesse and paine will drive it out; so will sinne, the Spirit of life from my soule.

(9.15.546–50)

Donne concludes ominously by saying that the “multiplicity and hainousnesse of our sins may weary even the incessant and indefatigable Spirit of comfort himself” (9.15.560–2). This is a common sentiment in Donne’s sermons on the penitential psalms. On the one hand, he is careful to tell his listeners of the abundant mercy of God; on the other, he is constantly cautioning them not to presume upon that mercy. He wants to assure them that they are not beyond redemption, but at the same time he wants to disturb them into making their peace with God.

In this sermon Donne again mirrors the offer inherent in the Eucharist. God is your hiding place, he assures his listeners, just as God was the hiding place of the ancient church and the church of the Reformation. God will preserve the congregation from times of trouble as he has preserved the church, Donne says, and he will encompass the listeners with joyful songs.

In assuring his hearers of God’s provision and protection, Donne is making an offer. He tells his auditors to receive the assurances that God makes in his Word and to base the dependability of those assurances on the lessons of history. In other words, they are to receive God’s word as it is offered to them by his minister, and they are to enjoy the gift of grace that comes with receiving the Word. But just as one should not receive Holy Communion and expect to receive a blessing from it without having first examined and prepared oneself, one should not expect to receive the blessing of the assurances contained in God’s Word without first repenting. Further, while hearers may depend on God to fulfill his promises, they must still do their part. For if they continue to sin,

believing that God will always forgive them, they may eventually wear out God's patience, and he might abandon them.

This sermon reveals Donne's clear sense of the urgency of the matters he is discussing. He is making to his congregation an offer of peace with God, and he expects them to accept that offer without delay, preferably even as he is speaking. One can never know when one has exhausted God's patience, he says, and therefore the need to repent and to appropriate God's promises could not be more pressing. In this sermon he is saying, in essence, "Take, eat—these are God's promises to you." He does not require mere intellectual assent from his auditors; he expects them to internalize the comforting words of his sermon. By doing so, Donne hopes, believers will be moved to repent so that they will be able to enjoy the blessings that God offers.

Psalm 32:8

Donne's next sermon in the series is on verse eight, "I will instruct thee, and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go, I will guide thee with mine eye." Here Donne once more tells his congregation about the fundamental importance of the ordinances of the church in their lives. God moves through the ordinances, Donne says, and never more than in the ordinance of the sermon.

Donne splits his sermon into three parts, according to the three actions of God in the text, "I will instruct thee," "I will teach thee," and "I will guide thee." First he explains that the instruction is from God himself. God sends his Spirit, and his Spirit works in God's ministers, and the ministers work in the church, preaching to God's

people. God's instruction aims at the understanding of hearers, Donne claims, for God first makes us understand, then makes us believe (9.16.176–7). Further, he states, God does not cause understanding merely to fall upon us; he makes us agents in our own salvation (9.16.219–20).

In the second part of the sermon, Donne argues that God's action of teaching is more than his action of instruction. God teaches us not only the way, Donne says, but what is to be done in the way and how to walk in the way. This teaching

intimates a more frequent recourse to us, and a more studious care of us, and a more provident vigilancy over us, and a more familiar conversation with us.

(9.16.385–6)

The way is the church, which is like the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night by which God led Moses and the Israelites through the desert (9.16.465–6).

What is to be done in the way is to walk circumspectly, Donne says (9.16.79–80). Believers might be in the right way, but they can still be tempted. They must therefore resist the temptations toward the superstitions of other churches, the temptations toward the particular sins of evil persons, and the temptations within themselves (9.16.495–503; 535–8). Finally, Donne says, God teaches believers to *walk* in the way. There is no rest and no loitering:

A Christian hath no Solstice, no highest point, where he may stand still, and goe no farther; much lesse hath hee any Æquator, where dayes and nights are equall, that is, a liberty to spend as much time ill, as well, as many houres in sinfull pleasures, as in religious exercises.

(9.16.561–5)

In the third part of the sermon Donne considers the promise, “I will guide thee with mine eye.” He thinks that this means that God will personally provide for believers in his church. He says that the “Ordinance” in the church, the service, the sermon, and the sacraments, is God’s face. The eye in that face is the Holy Spirit, by which God makes his grace “effectuall” upon Christians (9.16.630–8). Donne elaborates:

The whole Congregation sees God face to face, in the Service, in the Sermon, in the Sacrament; but there is an eye in that face, an eye in that Service, an eye in that Sermon, an eye in that Sacrament, a piercing and an operating Spirit, that lookes upon that soule, and foments and cherishes that soule, who by a good use of Gods former grace, is become fitter for his present.

(9.16.638–43)

God’s “piercing and operating Spirit” moves through the congregation as they listen to the sermon. The sermon is therefore not just a recitation of a collection of words: it is the medium by which the Holy Spirit moves and operates.

Donne ends the sermon as he often does, urging his hearers to examine themselves and to refrain from presuming upon God's goodness. God may take his eye from us, Donne warns, and when he does, we will see him only in his judgments (9.16.712–21). But that we might know what to believe, and what to do, and how to return to him when we have gone astray, God gave us the text of this sermon (9.16.729–32).

In this sermon Donne once more offers to his listeners, in a sacramental fashion, the promise of God's blessing as they receive his words. God instructs us in the way of salvation, he says, but even more than that, he guides us in the way. The means that he uses to guide us is by the ordinances.

God sends his Spirit to us through the mouth of his minister, Donne asserts. That Spirit brings us the gifts of understanding and belief. Further, the Spirit gives us the conviction to be active in our own salvation. The way to salvation is through the church, Donne argues; the church is a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It is within this pillar that God shows his face, he maintains, alluding to the occasion on which God revealed his face to Moses on Mount Sinai.¹²⁶ Donne states that "God's face is his whole Ordinance in his Church:" the service, the sermon, and the Lord's Supper (9.16.633). God's Spirit is "piercing and operating," and it settles upon the auditory as they listen to the sermon.

¹²⁶Exodus 19.

Clearly, though, God's piercing and operating Spirit does not enter merely the understanding of listeners as they attend to the words of the sermon. Donne views the sermon as a sacred event, not as a moment at which he attempts simply to reach the conscious understanding of his hearers with certain facts about God. The event is the descent of the Holy Spirit to God's people. That Spirit moves among them and operates within them as they remain in the presence of the uttered Word of God. Again, in this sermon Donne reveals his belief that the Word of God, spoken by the priest and revealed to his gathered auditors, is the avenue by which the Spirit travels to move among believers. Just as the Lord's Supper is a conduit through which God instills the blessing of reconciliation into the faithful, so the sermon is the conduit through which the Spirit moves into their hearts and minds.

Donne does not elaborate on what he means by stating that the ordinances are the face of God. It is clear, however, that by calling the service, the sermon, and the sacrament the face of God, he intends his auditory to understand that God is very near to them, indeed, he is moving among them, while the ordinances are being performed. Donne is implying that God is present in the Eucharist and the sermon in a similar way. Thus as he says "Take, eat" in the Eucharist, intending that communicants will receive Christ, he intends that they should likewise receive Christ in the sermon. He has no doubt that God is operative in the Lord's Supper; neither does he doubt that God is operative in the sermon.

The penultimate sermon in the series on Psalm 32 is on verse nine, “Be not as the horse, or the mule, who have no understanding; whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come neere unto thee.” The sermon deals with a number of topics: pride and lust, the interplay between God’s grace and our understanding, and confession. Donne states that God has foreseen that human beings might descend so far below their nature as to be incapable of seizing the promises set out in the psalm. Therefore God warns humankind with the words of the text.

The sermon has two main parts. In the first, Donne declares that God has forbidden human beings generally to descend to a lower nature. In the second, he cautions his listeners that God has forbidden particularly the descent to the nature of the horse and the mule, which not only have idiosyncratic vices but also have no understanding. Lacking understanding, they are incapable of faith.

First, then, God forbids us to descend to a lower nature. Donne says that we have taken away the jewel of the chain of creatures, man himself, by grovelling upon the earth and neglecting God (9.17.96–8). But as we descend to a lower state, we shall never be content:

If thou depart from thy nature, from that susceptiblenesse, that capacity of receiving Grace, if thou degenerate so from a Man to a Beast, thou shalt not rest there in the state and nature of a Beast, whose soule breaths out to nothing, and vanishes with the life, thou shalt not be so happy, but thy better nature will remain, in despite of thee, thine everlasting soule must suffer everlasting torment.

(9.17.120–6)

In the second part of the sermon Donne laments about how far human beings have fallen. He argues that our state is worse than that of the fallen angels. The angels had no law and no examples; by contrast, we have a revealed law and many examples. Further, they remain obstinate while God casts them from him; we are obstinate while God calls us to him. Moreover, they are obdurate when God turns away from them and glories in their destruction; but we are intractable though God approaches us, humbles, and empties himself (9.17.176–85).

Donne then discusses how human beings have become like the horse and the mule. The horse is pride, he says, and the mule is lust. For us to desire a better state, or to desire riches and honour and preferment, is not pride; pride is desiring those things by bad means or for evil ends (9.17.247–50; 297–302). The mule is lustful and can carry any burden, Donne states. Similarly, lustful men and women submit themselves to any burden of labour, of danger, or of dishonour to indulge their lust (9.17.321–7).

Donne argues that men and women who behave like the horse or mule lose their understanding. This is not the understanding in the first verse, the knowledge that blessedness lies in the remission of sins. Rather, it is the natural faculty with which God enlightens every human being (9.17.421–8). If a person descends to the nature of the horse or mule and has no understanding, Donne says, then there is no foundation on which to build the edifice of faith:

He hath forgot his letters, his Alphabet; how he was spelled and put together, and made of body and soule. You may as well call him an Anatomist, that knowes

how to pare a naile, or cut a corne, or him a Surgeon, that knowes how to cut, and curle haire, as allow him understanding, that knowes how to gather riches, or how to buy an Office, or how to hurt, and oppresse others, when he hath those meanes.

(9.17.533–7)

Donne then discusses how God restrains those who become like the horse and mule. God bits and bridles believers who become fools, Donne says, and he whips and scourges us with affliction and calamity so that our desires do not lead us astray. If we stray, he leads us back with bridle and bit. As for those who are enemies of God and of believers, God bits and bridles them so that they cannot harm the faithful (9.17.591–605).

Donne ends the sermon with a warning to his hearers. It is possible, he says, to persist in and increase our sins so that God will bit and bridle us, turning us away from the means of access to him: prayer, preaching, sacraments, and absolution (9.17.707–12). Donne becomes obviously emotional as he considers the extent of God's anger when he told Moses that he was going to destroy Israel for their sin.¹²⁷

Interestingly, however, Donne does not reflect upon the nature of God's wrath so much as he does on the sin that precipitates it. Similarly, he says, unless believers today confess and repent immediately, they risk sparking God's wrath again. God has given us access to him in the ordinances, Donne says, but the gravity and the number of our sins very seriously threaten to close off that access unless we honestly beg God's pardon:

¹²⁷Exodus 32:10.

Deliver me, O Lord, from my sins, pardon them . . . my illness came not from thee; but may be so multiplied by my selfe, as that thou mayest bit me and bridle me so, as that I shall not come near thee, in any of those accesses which thou hast opened in thy Church: Prayer, Preaching, Sacraments, Absolution, all shall be unavailable¹²⁸ upon me, ineffectuall to me.

(9.17.700–6)

The sermon, therefore, together with the other ordinances, is a sacred gift from God. It is to be cherished as “available” and “effectual”; it is a means by which God and his people draw near together. But it is also to be cherished, Donne says, because there is no guarantee that we will always have the sermon and the other ordinances with us. This is a foreboding statement by Donne: perhaps he fears a time when the church will be unable openly to conduct its worship. He does not elaborate. What he is clear about, however, is that believers should not delay to use the means by which they can encounter God. As he does in other sermons on the penitential psalms, he expects his hearers to confess and plead for God’s forgiveness immediately, while God is still listening. Again, therefore, we see Donne extending the invitation, “Take, eat”: he tells his auditors in the

¹²⁸The sense of this word should be understood in light of two alternatives provided by the *OED* for “available”: 1. Capable of producing a desired result; effectual or efficacious; or 2. Of advantage; beneficial, profitable.

sacred moment of the sermon to approach God by using the ordinances that God has given them.

Psalm 32:10–11

The last of Donne's sermons on Psalm 32 deals with verses 10 and 11: "Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; but he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about. Be glad in the Lord and rejoyce yee righteous; and shout for joy all yee that are upright in heart." Donne contends that the sorrow of which the psalmist speaks is the sorrow of the heart, from which there is no relief. The promise that the wicked shall know this sorrow suggests to Donne the two central ideas of the sermon: *persons* and their *portions*. The *persons* are all the world's people, Donne claims, and they are either wicked or righteous. Their *portions* are what they receive in this life or hereafter, either sorrow or joy. Donne divides the sermon into two parts, first, the sorrow that is to the wicked, and second, the joy that is to the righteous.

In the first part of the sermon Donne makes three comments about the portion, that is, the *sorrows*, that the wicked shall encounter: they are *many*, they are *great*, and they are *eternal*. They are so many that "every place, and every part of time, and every person buddes out a particular occasion of sorrow" to the wicked man:

He can come into no chamber, but he remembers, In such a place as this, I sinned thus . . . he cannot heare a Clock strike, but he remembers, At this hour I sinned thus . . . he cannot converse with few persons, but he remembers, with such a person I sinned thus.

(9.18.160–6)

Sorrows are great to the wicked man because he suffers alone, refusing to seek God's help, and because they finally destroy him. Finally, the sorrows are eternal, Donne argues: "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, Sorrowes upon them, and upon them for ever" (9.18.228–9).

Donne next speaks of the person who will receive these sorrows, *the wicked*. He argues from scripture that the wicked is an adulterer, and states

In the covenant of God you were betrothed, and affianced for that marriage; In the Sacrament of Baptisme you were actually, personally married; and in the other Sacrament there is a consummation of that marriage; And every departing from that contract which you made with God at your Baptisme, and renewed at your receiving the other Sacrament, is an Adultery.

(9.18.287–92)

Donne senses that such strong words might distress his congregation; and thus he is quick to comfort them. The *wicked* in the text, he assures them, is not the murderer or the adulterer, not one who has fallen into a particular sin, no matter how great, or one who has continued his great sins, no matter how long. No,

it is *the wicked*, he that runnes headlong into all wayes of wickednesse, and *usque ad finem*, precludes, or neglects all wayes of recovery: That is glad of a tentation, and afraid of a Sermon; that is dry wood, and tinder to Satans fire, if he doe but touch him, and is ashes it selfe to Gods Spirit, if he blow upon him; That from a love of sinne, at first, because it is pleasing, comes at last to a love of sinne, because it is sinne, because it is liberty, because it is a deliverance of himselfe from the bondage, as he thinks it, of the law of God, and from the remorse and anguish of considering sinne too particularly.

(9.18.347–55)

In the short second part of the sermon Donne considers the other persons and their portion in the text, *the righteous* and their joy. Donne's fondness for symmetry shows here. As he divides a sermon into main parts, he tends to divide those parts into an equal number of parts and those further into equal parts. His decisions, however, are not always obvious. At times he clearly stretches to find an equal number of points in each subsection. In this sermon, having divided his discussion into two, the persons and their portion, he divides each of those two into three. The righteous, Donne states, bear three marks: they trust in God, they deal righteously with other people, and they are upright in heart. Their portion is joy, or, more precisely, mercy (9.18.490–1).

That mercy is threefold: it shall cause them to be glad, it shall cause them to rejoice, and it shall cause them to shout for joy. There seems at first scant difference among these three facets of mercy, but Donne manages to find some distinction. The

gladness is a joy in the love of God's law. To rejoice is to go cheerfully and joyfully forward in our various callings. And, finally, to shout for joy is to declare our joy to other people, telling them that God has made peace between himself and us (9.18.703–38).

Donne ends his sermon in the imperative mood, echoing the last verse of the psalm: "*Declare thy joy*," Donne encourages his audience; "*Tell the sons of men what God has done*"; "*Be content to tell whose son thou wast*"; "*Smother not God's blessings*"; "*Hold up a holy chearfulness in thy heart*"; "*Goe on in a chearfull conversation*"; "*Let the world see that this growes out of a peace betwixt God and thee*" (9.18.732–42). He assures his hearers that if they do these things they need not fear God's judgment. They will be *the righteous*, and mercy shall encompass them. Donne's use of the imperative makes his conclusion a powerfully stirring call to the holy life. The series which has emphasized the solemn and contemplative themes of confession and repentance therefore ends on a triumphant note. If one pursues one's reconciliation with God through confession and repentance, one will experience joy. One will know the blessing of being surrounded by the mercy of God. But the only way to know that blessing is by meeting God in church.

This sermon concludes the series on Psalm 32. As is fitting for a conclusion, Donne here sums up the essence of what he has been saying in the other sermons on the psalm. Donne has been urging his hearers throughout his sermons on Psalm 32 to grasp the offer that God makes to them in the sermons, the "Take, eat" that inheres in the preached Word. He warns them repeatedly that while God has opened a means of access

to him, that means might someday close. Those who wish to be saved should therefore take God's offer immediately and thereby ensure for themselves a state of blessedness.

As a conclusion to his series, Donne provides a final word of incentive to his hearers. He warns them what sorrows they will face if they do not accept God's offer, and he describes in detail the characteristics of the sorrows that they will encounter. By contrast, he sets out the nature of the joys that will be theirs if they repent, and he assures them that they will be unable to refrain from shouting for joy as they begin to comprehend and experience the profundity of the joys with which God will encompass them.

For all the discussion of sin in the first half of the sermon on Psalm 32:10–11, then, Donne manages to make the sermon a profoundly uplifting one. For while he sets out in the first part of the sermon the nature of the ills that an unrepentant sinner will encounter, this part of the sermon serves as a foundation on which he builds the edifice that he really wishes to focus upon: the rewards and benefits of being saved by God.

In his conclusion, Donne reveals again his understanding of preaching as sacramental. In both dominical sacraments, the end of each is to provide believers with the assurance that they are reconciled with God. Among their many functions, the sacraments are consolatory. At the end of this sermon Donne imitates the effect of the sacraments. He has warned and informed his hearers, he has attempted to move them, he has invoked God's presence throughout the sermons, and he believes that God has been present, moving among them as he preaches. Now, at the end of his series, he attempts—and undoubtedly succeeds in some of his hearers—to provide his congregation

with the blessing of reconciliation. If they have followed his admonitions, they will have made their confession, and they will receive their absolution. As he concludes this sermon, he tries to infuse in his hearers the belief that they are at peace with God.

Summary: The sermons on Psalm 32

In his series of sermons on Psalm 32, Donne discusses the essentials of the faith. He talks about the ultimate goal for humankind: a state of blessedness, or peace with God. He talks about the barrier preventing people from achieving that goal: their sinfulness. He speaks of the way to overcome that barrier: God's mercy and forgiveness. And he discusses the means by which God extends his mercy and forgiveness to us: repentance and the implementation of the ordinances of the church. Granted, it is not particularly remarkable that a preacher should speak about blessedness, sin, mercy, forgiveness, and repentance. Donne does, however, impress his discussion of these issues with his own peculiar stamp. But by far the most significant aspect of the sermons on Psalm 32 is Donne's clear belief that God has given human beings certain means of access to him, and that by following those means we will come as close to God as we can on this earth. Those means, Donne repeats throughout the series, are the ordinances of the church: the worship service, the sermon, and the sacraments.

While the sacrament of the Lord's Supper has long been regarded by the church as a way of drawing near to God or as a seal of reconciliation to God, the sermon itself has seldom been granted that status. In the sermons on Psalm 32 Donne very clearly regards the sermon as an institution that has the power to bring people near to God because God himself moves and operates through the delivery of the sermon. For Donne, the

Eucharistic invitation of Christ, "Take, eat: this is my body," has a parallel in the sermon. Since God is operative in his preached Word, God offers himself to his people not only in the sacrament but in the sermon itself. Donne believes that in the sermon God extends to listeners the invitation to take and ingest the Word of God, which works powerfully in them. God covers our sins by applying the ordinances, which include the sermon, Donne says. God visits his people in Church, and therefore Donne tells his hearers to receive Christ in the ordinances. The access to salvation, he says, is through the church ordinances. God's very face is his ordinances, Donne says, and in those ordinances he is therefore present with his piercing and operating Spirit. Finally, Donne assures his auditors of the blessings that are theirs by pronouncing and conferring reconciliation to them in the closing words of the series.

Donne's series on Psalm 32 reveals that he believes the sermons to have an effect that is very close to that of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The sermons, or more precisely God working through the sermons, actually confer grace upon the listeners. As he shows in his sermon on Psalm 51, his words are sprinklings of grace: his hearers actually benefit from hearing the Word of God as the words of the sermon fall upon them. The sermon is a sacred event, an occasion upon which God moves and works among his people in a special, sacramental way.

The Sermons on Psalm 38

There are only six surviving sermons on Psalm 38 by Donne: one sermon on verse 2, one on verse 3, three on verse 4, and one on verse 9. That there was at least one more, on verse 10, is clear from the sermon on verse 9, in which Donne mentions “the 10 verse, which we have handled” (2.6.7–8). And it seems reasonable to assume that Donne would have started his series on Psalm 38 with a sermon on the first verse, “Put me not to rebuke, O LORD, in thine anger; neither chasten me in thy heavy displeasure.” Moreover, it is difficult to conceive that the preacher who wrote three separate sermons on verse 4, “For mine iniquities are gone over my head, as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for mee,” would have passed over verses 5 through 8:

My wounds stink and are corrupt, through my foolishness. / I am brought into so great trouble and misery, that I go mourning all the day long. / For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no sound part in my body. / I am feeble, and sore smitten; I have roared for the very disquietness of my heart.

It is possible, then, that Donne preached a whole series on Psalm 38. Nevertheless, no more than six sermons on the psalm have come to light.

Dating

The sermons on Psalm 38 are undated, but since they each bear the heading “Preached at Lincolns Inne,” it is reasonable to conclude that Donne delivered them during his years there, between 1616 and 1622. Simpson dates the series to 1618, before Donne’s travel with Doncaster in 1619 (2:13–14). Stanwood concurs that he likely preached them before 1619, but he suggests that they might have occurred as early as 1616.¹²⁹

Themes

Donne further reveals his understanding of preaching as effectively sacramental in his series of sermons on Psalm 38. The sermon on Psalm 51 and the series on Psalm 32 are particularly hortatory, encouraging the congregation to see and experience the mercy and forgiveness of God. The series on Psalm 6, while assuring hearers of God’s effectual grace, is perhaps less overtly reassuring, but remains consolatory. The series on Psalm 38 probably sets the gravest tone of all, as it addresses in detail the nature and effects of sin. Nevertheless, the series provides believers with the assurance that as they attend to the Word of God, God is at work among them to bring them into a close and stable relationship with him.

Thus Donne’s sermons on Psalm 38 are very clearly a series on repentance and reconciliation. Throughout these sermons Donne focusses on the miserable state of the sinner who refuses to confess his sins to God. When this sinner breaks his silence, God

¹²⁹Stanwood, “Donne’s Earliest Sermons,” p. 366.

instantly responds with forgiveness. God is constantly reaching out to us through the ordinances of the church, Donne argues, but if we do not grasp them we will remain in our misery. Donne believes that there is saving power in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but he also plainly believes that there is saving power in the other ordinances, prayer and preaching. All of his sermons on Psalm 38 convey this belief. As in his other sermons on the penitential psalms, Donne's sermons on Psalm 38 are bold confessions of faith. They proclaim Donne's conviction that as he speaks his voice is the voice of God. And when God speaks, people are changed.

Psalm 38:2

Near the beginning of his sermon on Psalm 38:2 ("For thine arrowes stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore.") Donne states, as he did in his sermons on Psalm 6, that the penitential psalms of David are prayers. "This whole Psalm is a *Prayer*," he says, "and a *Prayer* grounded upon *Reasons*" (2.1.43–4). And again he reveals his belief that the psalms are logically composed. Since the prayer is made to the Alpha and Omega, he says, it is also the alpha and omega of the psalm. That is, the first and last verses of the psalm make up the prayer, and the verses in between form the reasons on which the prayer is based.

At the *divisio* Donne divides the sermon in two. This is not surprising; but what is surprising is the site of the division. There is a natural break between the two clauses in verse 2, but Donne finds his partition in an unlikely place—after the "For." It is important to Donne that the psalmist is afflicted by the arrows and hand of God, but it is

just as important that a person might present reasons to dissuade God from his stated purpose. This fact, Donne says, is signified in the word “For,” a word of “*Connexion*” and of “*Argumentation*” (2.1.59). Moreover, as well as introducing the reasons in the text, the word “For” evidences the recalcitrance of human beings:

Such an impatience in affliction, as brings us toward a *murmuring* at Gods proceedings, and almost to a calling of God to an account, in inordinate expostulations, is a leaven so kneaded into the nature of man, so innate a tartar, so inherent a sting, so inseparable a venom in man, as that the holiest of men have scarce avoided it in all degrees thereof.

(2.1.96–101)

He cites Job, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, and Jeremiah as examples of men who, though strong, were impatient in adversity and asked God to end their lives. Donne’s audience might be tempted to feel that the example of the holy ancients justifies their own impatience. But Donne does not let them off so easily. He warns them that “there cannot be a greater unthankfulness to God then to desire to be *Nothing* at all, rather then to be that, that God would have thee to be” (2.1.153–5). The tribulations that we go through, Donne says, are sent from God as corrections to bring us back to him. Once we glimpse God’s purpose, we can ask him to remove his corrections and we can present reasons why he should do so (2.1.190–4).

In the second part of the sermon Donne discusses the reasons behind David's deprecatory prayer in verse 1. He considers separately the two clauses in the text, discussing the arrows that stick fast in David and the hand of God. He says that the arrows might be David's bodily diseases, or the sting of his conscience, or his sorrow at the death of Bathsheba's child (2.1.218–25). But he prefers to regard them as all those miseries that original sin has cast upon us. The miseries are everywhere, and so are the arrows. God's quiver, and the Devil's quiver, and our own quiver, and our neighbour's quiver, Donne says, all furnish arrows to wound us (2.1.232–50).

These arrows have three features: they are "*alienæ*, shot from others . . . ; *veloces*, swift and sudden, soon upon us; and *vix visibiles*, not discernible in their coming, but by an exact diligence" (2.1.273–6). The swiftest arrow is the arrow of original sin, Donne says, so swift that

God himself cannot get before it. In the first minute that my soul is infus'd, the Image of God is imprinted in my soul; so forward is God in my behalf, and so early does he visit me. But yet *Originall sin* is there, as soon as that Image of God is there.

(2.1.367–71)

While any one arrow would be dangerous, Donne warns, the text mentions a plurality: "A man is not safe, because one arrow hath mist him, nor though he be free from *one sin*" (2.1.417–8).

Donne also observes that the arrows are *fixæ*: they stick in us. The arrow of bodily sickness, for example, sticks in us by passing down through the generations like an inheritance (2.1.506). Not only do the arrows stick in us, he notes, but they stick *fast* in us. Our efforts to rid ourselves of the arrows of sin only fix them faster in us (2.1.543–7). Donne advises that we must be serious about pulling them out, for then God will accomplish his work in us. We may not be able to remove an arrow completely, but at least it will not “*gangrene*,” he states; “Thou shalt not be cut off from the body of Christ” (2.1.590–2). Finally, Donne states, the arrows stick fast “*in mee*,” that is, in the whole person. He remarks, “As thy soul is in every part of thy body; so these arrows are in every part of thee, body, and soul; they stick, and stick fast, in thee, in all thee” (2.1.641–4).

Donne next discusses the metaphor of the hand of God. God’s hand is upon the arrows, he remarks, but it is not just the hand of correction; it is the hand of comfort as well (2.1.652–4). Although bad men might shoot the arrows, God’s hand is upon theirs: “Though it may *hit* the mark according to *their* purpose, yet it hath the *effect*, and it *works* according to *his*” (2.1.676–8). God shoots arrow after arrow and permits sin after sin, “that at last some sin, that draws affliction with it, might bring us to understanding” (2.1.680–8). He sends his arrows out of profound love:

In every *tentation*, and every *tribulation*, there is a *Catechisme*, and
Instruction; nay, there is a *Canticle*, a *love-song*, an *Epithalamion*, a

mariage song of God, to our souls, wrapped up, if wee would open it, and read it, and learn that new tune, that musique of God.

(2.1.697–701)

Donne ends his sermon with what begins as a straightforward summary of his discussion of arrows. It is here that he clearly reveals his sacramental view of preaching. For halfway through his summary, and without any transition, he abruptly launches into a prayer:

And how far [God] was from sparing thee, we see in all those severall weights which have aggravated his hand, and these arrowes upon us: If they be heavy upon us, much more was their weight upon *thee* [God], every *dram* upon us was a *Talent* upon thee.

(2.1.768–72)

The prayer continues for another sixty lines in *Sermons*. It is unique in the sermons on the penitential psalms. Sixteen of the sermons end with closing words to the congregation; four end with a whole or partial benediction; but only this sermon ends with an extended prayer to God.

The nature of the prayer and the manner in which Donne so precipitously begins it tell much about his view of the ordinance of preaching. For he seamlessly turns from speaking to his auditors to speaking to God. The implication is that as Donne knows that

his congregation is present and attentive to his voice, so God is present at the gathering as well. By praying to God as though God is there among them at the service, he demonstrates to his listeners that all that he has said to them is not to be regarded merely as a lecture. He implies that God is present among them and has been present among them the whole time. Therefore, when Donne prays for God to deliver them all from sin, he is expecting his listeners to join with him and beg forgiveness as well. The prayer is not a separate part of the service, distinct from the sermon; it is an integral part of the sermon itself. By it Donne means to seal to his hearers the reconciliation that God offers to them if they will repent. He speaks for all of his congregation when he asks:

Lord, whilst we remain entire here, in body and soul, make us, and receive us an entire sacrifice to thee, in directing body and soul to thy glory.

(2.1.817–19)

His request echoes the words of the prayer after Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee.

(Booty, p. 264)

Donne thus sees this sermon as an occasion on which God is with his people, moving them by his Spirit to repentance. He seems to believe, judging from his allusion to the prayer after Holy Communion, that God has been among them during the sermon in the same way that he is present in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. As the Lord's Supper is an event that God honours with the presence of his moving, operating Spirit, the sermon too is such an occasion. God moves among them during the sacrament, shedding his grace on believers; God moves and works among them in the same way during the sermon.

Psalm 38:3

Donne's next surviving sermon on Psalm 38 is on verse 3: "There is no soundnesse in my flesh, because of thine anger, neither is there any rest in my bones, because of my sinne." The plan of this sermon is probably the least apparent of any of Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms. Donne opens by discussing the faculty of memory: "The art of *salvation*, is but the art of *memory*," he states (2.2.52). One simply needs to ask one's memory what God has done, and it will supply a ready answer (2.2.49–52). This thought provides a fine introduction, but Donne does not develop or even discuss the idea in the rest of the sermon.

Donne announces his intention to divide the sermon into three parts, following the traditional threefold method of scriptural exegesis. First he considers the text historically and literally as it applies to David, then allegorically as it applies to the human race, then “prophetically” or “evangelically” as it applies to Christ (2.2.113–19). Upon close examination it appears that the sermon follows this scheme, but Donne spends by far the most time on the second part, the text considered in light of humanity in general. As a result he treats the first part, his discussion of David, almost perfunctorily, giving only the barest literal explanation. And the third part, on the “evangelical” sense of the text, is little more than a brief concluding exhortation to his auditors.

In the lengthy second part of the sermon, where Donne focusses on the allegorical interpretation, Donne is at his best. Man is the receptacle, the ocean of all misery, he claims (2.2.229–30). And while man has several names in scripture, the one that serves Donne’s purpose best is *Enosh*, which “signifies nothing but *misery*” (2.2.261–5). *Enosh*’s misery results from sickness, and that fact provides Donne with an ingenious conceit for this part of the sermon, which is an anatomy of the sick sinner.

God created man in health, Donne states, but now man is sick, and his sickness is greater than all other miseries combined. It is the “immediate sword of God,” he claims, and it is the direst of circumstances: “In *poverty* I lack but other things; In *banishment* I lack but other men; But in *sickness*, I lack my *self*” (2.2.286–8). The sickness in the text is worst of all, he argues, for it is *non sanitas*, no health in any part of the body.

There is no Health, in *none* of us¹³⁰ . . . it is upon us all, *at all times*, and so *Non sanitas*, there is *never* any soundness in us: for, *semper deficiamus*; we are *Borne* in a *Consumption*, and as *little* as we are then, we grow less from that time . . . Before we can craule, we runne to meet death.

(2.2.313–17)

Further, he explains, the sick soul lacks what it most needs, rest. As a result that soul is unable to reflect on its sin and consider how to regain its health:

He shall not get to that good trouble, to that holy disquiet of a conscientious consideration, how his state was got; and, it shall be a greater trouble then hee can overcome, how to dispose it.

(2.2.427–30)

Donne continues his anatomy by observing that it is the bones of the sinner that lack rest. He quotes Basil: “The soule hath Bones, as well as the body, and there shall be no Rest in those Bones” (2.2.439–40). The sinner shall begin to suspect his religion, Donne warns, his repentance, the comforts of his minister, the efficacy of the Sacrament,

¹³⁰The General Confession in the Order for Morning Prayer reads, in part, as follows: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us.” *The Book of Common Prayer 1559, The Elizabethan Prayer Book*, Folger Shakespeare Library Edition, ed. John E. Booty (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 50.

and the mercy of God himself (2.2.456–8). Despair shall suck out all the marrow of his spiritual bones.

The cause of all this calamity, Donne claims, is the anger of God. In one of the most vibrant passages in all of his sermons on the penitential psalms Donne articulates the workings of God's anger and his mercy:

Honour not the malice of thine enemy so much, as to say, thy misery comes from him: Dishonour not the complexion of the times so much, as to say, thy misery comes from them; justifie not the *Deity* of Fortune so much, as to say, thy misery comes from her; Finde God pleased with thee, and thou hast a hook in the *nostrils* of every *Leviathan*, power cannot shake thee, Thou hast a wood to cast into the waters of *Marah*, the bitterness of the times cannot hurt thee, thou hast a Rock to dwell upon, and the dream of a *Fortunes wheel*, can not overturn thee. But if the Lord be angry, he needs no trumpets to call in Armies, if he doe but *sibilare muscam*, hisse and whisper for the flye, and the Bee, there is nothing so little in his hand, as cannot discomfort thee, discomfit thee, dissolve and powr out, attenuate and annihilate the very marrow of thy soul.

(2.2.512–24)

Donne frightens his hearers with the prospect of raising God's anger. But then he speaks of the face of God's anger, and he is consolatory. God manifests his anger to us in

many useful and medicinal ways, Donne states, and we should therefore be glad that he shows us the face of his anger (2.2.536–44). He argues that by showing his anger, God wants us to know that it proceeds from our own sin. We are wrong to blame God for our misery. “My miseries are the *fruits* of this Tree;” Donne states, “Gods anger is the arms that spreads it; but the root is sin” (2.2.596–8).

Donne summarizes his anatomy and then moves on to the third part of the sermon, in which he discusses the “prophetical” or “evangelical” interpretation of the text. The text perfectly describes Christ’s passion, he argues. Christ was all misery, he says; affliction was upon him, even upon his bones. The cause of the affliction was the anger of God, which was itself caused by sin: Christ carried the sin of the entire world upon himself (2.2.737–53).

Donne concludes his sermon with a call to repentance. He cautions his auditors not to think that they are well or that they need not come to church for “physick.” God’s physick, Donne claims, is to come to

a remorsefull sense, and to an humble, and penitent acknowledgement,
that you are sick, and that *there is no soundnesse in your flesh, because of
his anger, nor any rest in your bones, because of your sins*, till you turn
upon *him*, in whom this anger is appeas’d, and in whom these sins are
forgiven.”

(2.2.801–10)

If they fail to acknowledge their sickness, they will never become well, Donne says.

Therefore his listeners must heed his call and repent if they are to recover. Sinners must “turn upon God,” he tells his congregation, and the way they do so is by participating in the ordinances of the church. The ordinances are God’s “physick,” he says; the prayers, the preaching, and the sacraments are the balm with which God salves the sinner’s wounded soul. This “physick” is available only in church.

Donne is speaking of the effectiveness of preaching here as he does in his other sermons on the penitential psalms. The sermon is the vehicle, as are the other ordinances, by which God touches and heals sinners. It is a conveyance of grace, and not just a way to convince hearers of the veracity or reasonableness of the Bible. As believers listen to the Word preached, Donne says, and as they are open to God’s working, God heals their illness of sin. As he ends the sermon with a call to repentance, Donne expects God to fulfill the promises of scripture and restore the repentant listeners to a state of reconciliation with him. The end that Donne expects as a result of the sermon is therefore the same that he expects in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Psalm 38:4

Donne preaches a series of three sermons on the next verse of Psalm 38, verse 4: “For mine iniquities are gone over my head, as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for mee.” He sees in this verse a twofold description of David’s sins: they are many, and they are heavy.

Donne's first sermon on verse 4 considers the multiplicity of David's sin and of ours. In David's life, he says, we need only to look at the episode of Uriah to see that an apparently single matter can comprise a whole catalogue of sins. David wronged a loyal servant; he corrupted a faultless woman; he defrauded his wife; he made his enemy blaspheme God's name in his battle victory over Israel; and he turned Joab, a man of honour, into an instrument of murder. And while David speaks personally of his own sin, Donne says, he speaks prophetically of ours.

Donne's consideration of David as prophet makes up the bulk of the sermon. He ponders the text one word at a time. First, he points out, these were *sins* that had overwhelmed David. Then he attacks the Roman Catholic church's teaching on venial sin. The Roman church, Donne claims, teaches that since God is charity, and since not every sin can extinguish charity, then not every sin is a wounding of God. But Rome errs by making too many sins only venial, he argues, "so that, at the last, nothing shall be sin with them, except it *kill God*; that is, nothing" (2.3.194-5).

Donne then discusses the fact that David calls the sins *his*. Sins are proprietary, he observes, "we are all born to a patrimony, to an inheritance . . . of sin How naked soever we came out of our mothers wombe, otherwise, thus we came all apparell'd, apparell'd and invested in sin" (2.3.232-7). Yet, paradoxically, by confessing our sins to be ours, we divest ourselves of them:

By confessing and appropriating of those sins to my selfe, they are made the sins of him, who hath suffered enough for all, my blessed Lord and Saviour, *Christ Jesus*.

(2.3.259–63)

Donne says further that we must not foist the responsibility for our sins on others:

It is . . . not the sinne of thy *Father*, not the sinne of the present *times*, not the sin of thy *years*, and age, nor of thy *calling*, nor of the *Magistrate*, nor of thy *Pastor*, nor of *Destiny*, nor of *decrees*, but it is *peccatum tuum*, thy sin, thy own sin.

(2.3.385–9)

Donne then moves to the plurality of sin. We do not simply repeat one kind of sin often, he says; we sin all kinds of ways. There is in our souls a “spunginess,” an aptness “to receive any liquor, to embrace any sin, that is offered to it” (2.3.451–2), until finally we become proud of our sins (2.3.454–5).

Next Donne explores the image of sins having gone over our heads. “Beloved,” Donne warns, “if we fear not the wetting of our foot in sin, it will be too late, when we are over head and ears” (2.3.510–11). When we have given ourselves to sin, however, and it has gone over our heads, our brain and memory are drowned. Then we can neither reason against sin nor remember that repentance is possible (2.3.564–70).

Sin remains over our heads in a number of senses, Donne says. It is there as a roof or separation between us and God (2.3.572–3). Donne tells the story of his stay in a German boarding house that was full of quarrelling Anabaptists. Each family of Anabaptists lived on separate floors, and although many were blood relatives, they never met together. Donne quit that house, he says, and as he did, he reflected:

How many roofs, how many floores of separation, were made between God and my prayers in that house. And such is this multiplicity of sins, which we consider to be got over us, as a roof, as an arch, many arches, many roofs: for, though these habituall sins, be so of kin, as that they grow from one another, and yet for all this kindred excommunicate one another . . . yet it is but going up another stair, and there's the tother *Anabaptist* All the way, they separate us from God, as a roof, as an arch; and then, an arch will bear any weight; An habituall sin got over our head as an arch will stand under any sicknesse, any dishonour, any judgement of God, and never sink towards any humiliation.

(2.3.656–68)

Sins are also above us as a clamour, Donne continues. Our sins cry out in heaven and drown out our prayers, he says. But when we bring our sins back to earth and confess them to Christ in the church, then upon absolution their cry is silenced (2.3.670–89).

Our sins are also over our heads as waters, Donne says. When we are underwater, he states, our eyes and ears see and hear nothing aright. Likewise, the habitual sinner sees and hears nothing properly. He sees a judgment of God and calls it an accident. He hears preaching, which is for salvation in the next world, yet he calls it an invention of the state for subjection in this (2.3.697–703). Moreover, just as things underwater appear distorted and crooked to us, so we who are submerged in our sins appear distorted to God.

Finally, Donne says, our sins are over us as a tyrant. God allows this dominion to remain over us because we have been rebellious to our true sovereign (2.3.834–6). Donne concludes, however, that Christ has established his church and its ordinances so that the most oppressed soul may escape the thrall of sin.

After a brief summary, Donne mentions that his second sermon on the text will discuss the weight and burden of sin. The second sermon focusses on the second part of verse 4: “as a heavy burden, [mine iniquities] are too heavy for me.” Again, he pauses at each word as though in meditation. First, he notes, the sins are *heavy*; then they are *too heavy*; then they are too heavy *for me*; then they are too heavy because they are a *burden*. Finally, Donne considers the burden of sin and how to rid ourselves of it.

Sin is heavy, but the habitual sinner does not find it so, Donne observes. A man who lies under water does not feel its weight, he says, until he emerges from the water and tries to carry a small amount of it (2.4.27–30). Likewise, a sinner submerged in sin does not feel its weight until God’s grace raises him out of it.

Donne next notes that David complains of his sin being *too* heavy for him. He warns his auditors not to presume upon God's forgiveness by wrongly assuring themselves

Can any sin be too heavy for *me*, can I doubt of the execution of his *first purpose* upon me, or doubt of the efficacy of his *ordinances* here in the Church, what sin soever I commit, can any sins be too heavy for me?

(2.4.191–4)

In the sea of life, Donne cautions, God holds us up by the chin, but if we sin confidently, presuming upon his support, we will sink (2.4.195–6).

Donne then remarks that sin is a burden. The burden that all sinners carry, he asserts, is made up of a number of things: a calamity, the indignation and anger of God, and the weight of our own sins (2.4.241–6). We do not feel the weight of sin on us, he argues, until a heavy load of calamity and anger have gone before. We can rid ourselves of this burden only by removing our sin by repentance. Then,

As if I would lift *an iron chain* from the ground, if I take but the first linke, and draw up that, the whole chain follows, so if by my repentance, I remove the uppermost weight of my load, *my sin*, all the rest, the

declaration of the anger of God, and the calamities that I suffer, will follow my sin, and depart from me.

(2.4.281–5)

The weight of the burden of sin is great, Donne states:

Weigh sin in *heaven*; heaven could not *beare* it, in the *Angels*; They fell:
In the *waters*; The Sea could not *beare* it in *Jonas*; He was cast in: In the
earth; That could not *beare* it in *Dathan*, and *Abiram*; They were
swallowed.

(2.4.298–301)

There is nothing lighter than a grain of sand, but nothing heavier than all the sands of the sea, Donne remarks. Likewise, one sin may seem light, but there is nothing harder to divest than a sin that becomes customary or entangled with other sins (2.4.334–8).

Donne concludes the sermon with a warning to his Lincoln's Inn audience against placing confidence in wealth and prestige. Honour and riches are a burden, he states, and they produce many ill effects. Those who have acquired wealth and position fear that they will lose them; those who hold them face a plethora of related duties and obligations; and those who have cheated to gain them will suffer everlasting torments (2.4.378–82).

At last the burden follows people into the next world and “clogs their souls” there (2.4.395–6).

In the final lines of this sermon Donne introduces the subject of his third sermon on Psalm 38:4, which is a discussion of “some particular inconveniences” that a burden brings. As he begins third sermon, he is apologetic about preaching yet again on the same verse, but he proceeds nonetheless.¹³¹ He divides his sermon into four parts, “those four mischievous inconveniences” tied to the metaphor of the burden (2.5.36–7). They are *Inclinat*, *Fatigat*, *Retardat*, and *Præcipitat*.

First, Donne asserts that every inordinate love of a creature is a descent from the dignity of our creation. That descent is “a stooping, a declination, an incurvation” of man away from God. If someone packs a burden of habitual sin upon himself, then he has chosen to stoop under that burden, and nothing, not preaching, not sacraments, and not judgments will be able to erect him again (2.5.82–5).

Next Donne argues that sin is wearying: “Every way, that is out of the way, wearies us” (2.5.130). He cites some examples:

Hilly ways are wearisome ways, and tire the ambitious man; Carnall pleasures are *dirty ways*, and tire the licentious man; Desires of gain, are *thorny ways*, and tire the covetous man; Æmulations of higher men, are *dark* and *blinde ways*, and tire the envious man.

(2.5.126–30)

¹³¹“Perchance your *patience* which hath already been twice exercised with the handling of these words, may be too near the bottom to afford much. And therefore much I have determined not to need” (2.5.5–8).

Further, he argues, as long as any cherished and habitual sin hangs upon us, it slackens our pace in the ways of godliness (2.5.145–6). And so we appropriate neither the promises of the Gospel in hearing sermons nor the merits of Christ in taking Communion as we should (2.5.146–50).

As for the final “inconvenience,” Donne says, the man who has long borne the burden of a customary sin constantly meets stones that can cause him to stumble and bogs into which he might plunge. Just as one who has had a fever walks weakly and has an “inclination” to the side of the bed or to a chair, he argues, so is one subject to relapses who has long practised but has given up a customary sin (2.5.183–8).

Donne ends the sermon with a conclusion that links all three of his sermons on Psalm 38:4. He has discussed the verse in literal terms as it applied to David, he says, and in moral terms as it applies to all of humankind. He now considers how the verse relates to Christ himself, commenting briefly on the multiplicity and the weight of sins that lay upon Christ (2.5.196–378).

At the end of his series of three sermons on Psalm 38:4, in which he has discussed the dizzying multiplicity, the unbearable weight, and the crippling consequences of our sin, Donne tells his audience how to find relief. It is only Christ who can take the burden of sin from us, Donne says. Paradoxically, Donne says, in that “unburdening” he burdens us still: for in taking off the obligation of sin, Christ lays upon us the obligations of gratitude, retribution, and repentance (2.5.380–1). The way in which Christ disburdens us of our sins is by reaching out his hand in the ordinances of the church, in the Word and sacraments (2.5.420–1). It is to his hand that we pass our burden of sin, and then we can

ascend to heaven. Donne could hardly be clearer: Christ is there among his people, in the sermon just as he is in the Lord's Supper, extending his liberating hand.

In his three sermons on Psalm 38:4, Donne addresses the problem of sin and the means ultimately to escape its consequences. The three sermons form a unified whole, and in joining them together Donne imitates the process of confession itself.

The first part of confession is the examination of conscience, after which one concludes that one has sinned. Then comes a desire to confess those sins to God, followed by the confession itself, in which one enumerates one's sins. Finally, there is absolution, where the sins and their concomitant penalties are no longer imputed to the sinner.

In Donne's first sermon on verse 4, he enters a prolonged discussion on sin. He tells his congregation how diverse and manifold their sins are and that they must themselves bear responsibility for them. They are no one else's but theirs, he asserts. He thereby lays the groundwork for his listeners to examine their consciences. Such a good man as David committed many sins, and so have they, he states. But at the end of the sermon he hints about the topic upon which he will speak further in a later sermon on this verse: there is a way to escape sin's thrall, and that way is the ordinances of the church.

In the second sermon on Psalm 38:4, Donne attempts to bring his congregation to a desire to confess their sins by outlining the weight and burden of unrepented sin. He speaks not only of extremely serious sins, but of the many sins that weigh down a sinner. By arguing that the whole heavy burden of sin is made up of several smaller sins, Donne

encourages his hearers to confess all of their sins, to search their consciences for any sins that they have not identified or admitted.

Finally, in the last sermon on verse 4, Donne shows his listeners what will be their reward when they have received absolution. He details the “inconveniences” that attend sin, thus revealing to his congregation how their lives will proceed unencumbered by those inconveniences. They may lead such unencumbered lives, he assures them, but only if they find the relief that is available to them through Christ. Christ alone is able to lift the burden of sin from their shoulders.

At the conclusion of this sermon, Donne offers absolution to his auditors. God is ready to remove their burdens with his hand, he claims. And then Donne makes a remarkable statement. The hand of God, he asserts, the means by which God lifts the burden of sin, is the ordinances of the church—the Word and the sacraments. In these ordinances God reaches out his hand and extends to believers the gift of reconciliation. One does not confess one’s sins and receive absolution in the privacy of one’s closet; nor does one observe the formal rite of penance. One comes to church, receives the preached Word, and receives the elements of the Eucharist. God’s grace is therefore effective to save sinners in both the sermon and the Lord’s Supper. Certainly, one must observe the steps of confession—the examination of one’s conscience, the desire to confess, the enumeration of sins, and confession to God—but in order to be assured of reconciliation to God, one must come to church and observe the ordinances, for it is in them that God works.

Psalm 38:9

The last of Donne's existing sermons on Psalm 38 continues his emphasis on the ordinances of the church. His text is verse 9, "Lord all my desire is before thee, and my groning is not hid from thee." This sermon was apparently not published in the seventeenth century but exists in four manuscripts from Donne's period.¹³² It begins in precisely the same way as Donne's sermons on Psalm 6.¹³³ However, the similarity of these openings does not provide reliable evidence for their relative dates of composition. Donne may have written all the sermons roughly contemporaneously, or he may have written an introduction for one sermon and used it years later for another. There is no compelling stylistic reason to think that Donne wrote the sermons on Psalm 6 and Psalm 38 at the same time.

In his sermon on verse 9 Donne sets out to discuss the "extrinsecall" reasons, reasons residing outside of David, that motivate his prayer. He divides the sermon into three parts, the first of which considers that God does not immediately remove our afflictions when we penitently pray for deliverance. God answers us in his own time. We should see the adversities that God sends as corrections, Donne says, and be thankful that by continuing us in one calamity God protects us from a greater (2.6.177-80).

In the second part Donne discusses the assumption behind his text, that God sees everything. As a corollary, Donne reasons that if God sees all things, then he must

¹³²See the comments of Simpson at 2:16.

¹³³See p. 97, *supra*.

foresee all things too: “He sees as God and therefore he allwayes sawe all” (2.6.244–5).

Thus God knows our sin before we commit it or even before we exist. However, this foreknowledge of sin is not the *cause* of sin, Donne warns:

Gods knoweledge of sinne prints not a necessity of sinne. An Astrologers
knowledge of an Eclipse causes not that Eclipse; my knowledge that he
that will fall from a steeple will breake his bones, did not thrust him
downe, nor precipitate him to that ruine.

(2.6.287–90)

In the third part of the sermon Donne considers the meaning of each word in his text. First he discusses the word “desires.” In doing so he does a curious thing. He begins on a consolatory note, saying that it is not David’s purpose to trouble us into thinking that God watches only our ill desires and waits to punish them. God sees our worthy desires too. However, Donne undoes the comforting effect of those words by arguing that the verse principally refers to the diverse desires, or “imaginationes,” of sinners. And although the text says that all desires are before God, Donne states that it really means that our “imaginationes” are before him. Our “imaginationes,” he claims, are “only evill continually”:

If any good be mingled with them, yet it is soe little, as that *denominantur*
à maiori, they are evill, because they are evill for the most part, but it is

worse then soe, for they are only evil, noe dramme, noe tincture of good in them; all evill and only evill and this continually, evill in the roote, in the first concupiscence, and evill in the fruite, in the growth and in the perseverance.

(2.6.352–7)

The desires in the text are therefore our evil and sinful imaginations, and they are always in God's sight (2.6.357–9). Thus Donne reinforces the image of the watchful, vengeful God that he seems initially to dispel.

Donne then discusses *groaning*. As he does, he both instructs and consoles his hearers. The groaning of which David speaks, he says, is a spiritual, not just a vocal, groaning. That is, we must lament not our worldly losses so much as our distance from God. As God drowned the sinful world in the flood, Donne says, so we should drown the world of our sins in repentant tears. But once we have done so, we must not doubt God's goodness. We should remain hopeful that God will forgive our sins. He illustrates his point with David's example:

When the child was dead, *David* arose from the ground and eate bread;
when the sinne is dead by thy true repentance, rayse thy selfe from this sad

dejection, and come and eate the bread of life, the body of thy Saviour for the seale of thy pardon.

(2.6.431–4)

Donne then stresses the fact that the groans of which David speaks are *sua*, or *his*: they are David's. We must not become preoccupied with the wrongdoing or miseries of others, he warns; we must attend to our own desires so that God will stop them and to our own groanings so that God will comfort us (2.6.459–61)..

Next, in the most interesting part of the sermon, Donne points out that David's desires are before God and that his groans are not hidden from him. That is, he says, David intends that we should bring our desires and groans to God in confession. Until we confess to God, he says, God will not stop our desires or complete our repentance (2.6.512–4). Our confession must be pointed and specific:

Thy tellinge to God that he knowes all thy desires and all thy groanes, this is an easy matter for any man, it is a word soone sayd. But bringe all these before him, shewe him where and howe when by neglectinge his grace thou hast strayed into these and these desires, and where and howe and when thou hast taken light at his visitation to returne towards him, and then he shall overthrowe thy worke, and build up his owne, extinguish thy desires, and perfect thy repentance.

(2.6.525–32)

While it is remarkable that in the third sermon on Psalm 38:4 Donne states that confession and absolution are found in the ordinances of the church, it is no less remarkable that in this sermon he strongly endorses the practice of auricular confession. In the last sermon on Psalm 38:4 Donne encourages his parishioners to come to church and participate in the ordinances to be reconciled to God; in this sermon he recommends that they make formal confession to a priest for the same end. He cites the objections of those against it, who say that we must confess to God alone, and he responds:

All power of remission of sinnes is in the Lord, but in the Lord in his Church. And therefore since that Church in which God hath sealed thee to him in both sacraments, accordinge to the direction of the Holy Ghost, hath ordayned that sick persons shall make a speciall confession, yf they feele their consciences troubled with any weighty matter,¹³⁴ and that after that confession, the priest shall absolve them, let noe man thinke himselfe wiser then the Church, and for the abuse of a thinge in a corrupt Church, goe forward in an ignorance of what the true Church holds in that point.

(2.6.589–98)

¹³⁴Cf. the Order for Visitation of the Sick. One of the rubrics reads, in part, as follows: “Here shall the sick person make a special confession, if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which confession, the priest shall absolve him after this sort.” Booty, 303.

Donne warns his hearers not to think that they are out of God's presence when they confess to one of his ministers, or to doubt that the priest's absolution is from God. And in his boldest statement of the sermon he warns:

Let noe man deale so niggardly soe penuriously with his owne soule, as to contract this ease and discharge of his conscience only to the point of Death because it is not literally expressly appointed to others, but let us all thinke ourselves deadly sicke, whensoever we are under the burden of any deadly sinne.

(2.6.606–10)

In short, Donne supports and recommends auricular confession of "deadly sinne" throughout the life of a believer, not just in physical sickness. Donne does not oppose the term "deadly sinne" to venial sin, "that frivolous and yet impious doctrine of the *Romane Church*" (2.6.611–12). Deadly sin is, rather, any sin which, if not rooted out, destroys the conscience and impedes the working of God's grace in us (2.6.615–18).

Donne concludes his sermon in a manner that he uses in his other sermons on the penitential psalms. He has considered the text in a historical light, as it applies to David, and in a moral or allegorical light as it applies to humankind. Now he deliberates, although rather hurriedly, on the text in a typical or prophetic light as it concerns Christ. Christ prayed to be delivered from affliction, he says, but God's deliverance was in his own time (2.6.628–46). Further, God foresaw the crucifixion of Christ but was not

the cause of it (2.6.647–63). And when Donne considers the individual words of the text as they apply to Christ, he asserts that Christ too had desires and uttered moans. But his desires were not sinful, and his moans were calmed when he surrendered himself to God's will (2.6.673–8). Finally, Donne states, Christ knew that God had established a "church" upon earth, and he obeyed its dictates: he was circumcised and presented in it, his mother was purified according to its law, he sent his disciples to be instructed by its teachers, and, finally, he honoured with his presence the feast of the dedication, a feast established not directly by God but by the church (2.6.693–703).

There Donne abruptly ends the sermon, without any recapitulation, exhortation, or prayer. It is not a typical sermon in this respect, for we are accustomed to a more polished and comprehensive conclusion. But in an important sense the sermon is highly typical of Donne, for it emphasizes the fact that God's church is the proper setting for our devotion. Moreover, it reveals Donne's bold and characteristic catholicity in opinion on church practice. God has instituted his earthly church, and he expects us to follow its tenets and practices, as Christ himself did while he was on earth. Confession of our sins, he says, is to be in the church, and, if necessary, to a priest in the church. When one confesses to a priest, God is present, hearing that confession. And the absolution that the priest pronounces comes from God himself.

Donne's series on Psalm 38 is a strong statement of support for the ministry of the church in the life of the believer. Christ himself reaches out his hand to the congregation in the sermon and in the Lord's Supper, Donne maintains. God is present during the prayers, during confession, during absolution, and during Holy Communion. And God

speaks in the sermon to the hearts of the congregation to bring his people to reconciliation. For Donne there is no such thing as the solitary believer; a Christian can be a Christian only in the company of other believers in church. It is there that God showers us with his mercy.

Donne is always prepared to accept and implement the good traditions of the church. Throughout his body of sermons he decries the wholesale abandonment of church rituals and practices. In the first sermon on Psalm 38:4 he pleads the case for maintaining the proper perspective on variations in church practice:

And truly it is a lamentable thing, when ceremoniall things in matter of discipline, or problematicall things in matter of doctrine, come so farre, as to separate us from one another, in giving ill names to one another.

(2.3.589–92)

Donne recognizes that disputes over ceremonies, rituals, and the physical fabric of the church are destructive, and he asks that Christians pull their focus away from incidental matters and place it instead on the essential Christ:

God set up a wall, which God himself meant should be demolish'd again .
 . . . Such another wal, the Devil hath built now in the Christian Church;
 and hath mortar'd it in the brains and bloud of men, in the sharp and
 virulent contentions arisen, and foment in the matters of Religion. But

yet, says the Spouse, *My well beloved stands behind the wall*, shewing himself through the grates: he may be seen on both sides. For all this separation, Christ Jesus is amongst us all, and in his time, will break downe this wall too, these differences amongst Christians . . .

(2.3.608–17)

It is against the background of this sentiment that Donne speaks out for the practice of auricular confession in the Church of England. Auricular confession has been abused by a “corrupt church,” Donne allows; but the abuse of something does not make the thing itself bad. Donne believes that in the rush to divest the reformed church of all Roman accoutrements, Protestants made the church poorer. Although the Book of Common Prayer retains a special provision for auricular confession in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick, Donne argues that all Christians who are troubled by sin may use the practice with good effect. Believers should therefore confess to a priest any sin that burdens their conscience and prevents the working of God’s grace in them (2.6.615–18).

In addition to advocating auricular confession, Donne argues once again that believers ought to submit to the church and its ordinances. Christ himself obeyed the tenets of Jewish worship, Donne claims; by doing so he honoured God’s wish that his people act in accordance with the prescribed ordinances for his church on earth (2.6.693–703). As he does throughout his series on Psalm 38 and the series on Psalm 32, therefore, Donne emphasizes the critical role that the ordinances play in the life of the faithful.

In the previous sermons on Psalm 38, Donne's discussion of sin mirrors the process of confession. He has discussed the need for self-examination and for identifying and enumerating sins, and he has shown believers how to find a way out of sin and back to a proper relationship with God. In this sermon, he tells his congregation specifically how they can find the relief that they seek: through auricular confession. Once sinners have searched their conscience, found their sins, and resolved to confess, they must come to church for reconciliation. They can find that reconciliation through the ordinances, but as Donne makes clear in this sermon, they may be absolutely sure of reconciliation through auricular confession.

Summary: The sermons on Psalm 38

Donne's series on Psalm 38 might well be titled *Handling Sin*. He discusses all aspects of sin, from original sin to the various kinds of intentional and thoughtless sin. He attempts to convince his hearers that everyone is guilty of sin whether they are willing to admit as much or not. He shows them the "inconveniences" and results of sin and tries to make them see that until they deal properly with their sins, God will shut them out of his presence. The way to deal with sins, he says, is by using the ordinances of the church. The ordinances are the means by which God offers reconciliation to his people and effects reconciliation in them. The ordinances—the Word, the sacraments, and, it appears, even auricular confession—are effective and essential. They cannot be jettisoned from the life of a believer without the gravest consequences.

Conclusion

In his sermons on the penitential psalms Donne repeatedly highlights the place and the role of the ordinances of the church. He always links the Word and the sacraments together. Although baptism and the Lord's Supper have the status of sacraments, for Donne their position is no greater than that of the preached Word. The sacraments have a different role from the Word, but for Donne that role is not superior. Although the Word and the sacraments fulfill somewhat different functions, they depend one another for their efficacy. In the Word the believer hears God's voice and is brought to repentance; in the Lord's Supper the believer is sealed in reconciliation to God. Donne does not stress the significance of one at the exclusion of the other.

Throughout the sermons on the penitential psalms Donne reveals his view that the preached Word has special effectiveness upon its auditors. The Word and the sacraments are given to us by God himself, Donne says, and in them God meets believers gathered in church. The Word is a "holy Charme" that touches and changes the hearts and souls of Christians (5.17.222). The Word and the sacraments are a medicine: "The Father sends, The Son makes, The Holy Ghost brings, The Minister laies on the plaister" (5.17.435-6). God "sheds the promises of his gospel" upon the congregation in his ordinances, Donne states; and he "returns" to believers in the sermon and in the Lord's Supper (5.18.148-50; 162-3). God makes his means and offers of grace in the Word and the sacraments "powerfull, and effectuall" upon us (5.18.211-2). He speaks to us in the mouth of his minister and delivers himself to us in the hand of his minister (9.11.418-20). Prayer, preaching, and the Lord's Supper are a "trinity upon earth, that must bring thee to the

Trinity in heaven” (9.13.708–10). The face of God is in the ordinances, Donne says; God’s eye is in the sermon and in the Lord’s Supper, and that eye is “a piercing and an operating Spirit, that lookes upon the soule, and fomentes and cherishes that soule (9.16.638–42). The Word and sacraments are the means that God has instituted for our “reparation,” and they are the “meanes and seals of our reconciliation” (2.4.55–8). In the ordinances God delivers himself to us (2.5.210); he reaches out his hand in the Word and sacraments “by which we may be disburdened of all our sins” (2.5.419–21). And the ordinances are the *aspergillum*, the blood-sprinkler, by which the faithful are purified in church (5.15.520–6).

Theologians have long debated how to view the nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some see Christ really physically present in the elements of the bread and wine; others see Christ really present among the gathered believers; still others see Christ as being no more specially present among the congregation than anywhere else, the Eucharist being simply a commemoration of Christ.¹³⁵ Less has been made of the nature of the presence of God in the sermon. Donne’s sermons on the penitential psalms reveal his belief that there is not much difference between God’s presence in the Eucharist and his presence in the preached Word. He appears to believe that as God is present in a particular way in the sacraments, he is similarly present in the sermon. And if the sacraments have a special efficacy, then likewise does the sermon.

¹³⁵For a thorough discussion see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 3 vols. to date (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–).

Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms are stunning and innovative accomplishments. As I have argued in this chapter, they work on a number of levels. Donne intends his sermons to communicate truths of the Christian faith to his congregation, to inform them of the obligations and rewards that are part of the religious life. But they also communicate truth in a more profound way than addressing the rational understanding of the individual. They attempt to make the truth a real and vital presence in the hearts and minds of believers. Donne never shies away from reaching the intellect of his listeners, as he believes that God always speaks to our understanding. He claims that God's truth is intelligible. But he also attempts to make the sermon a significant occasion in the life of his parishioners, one from which they derive the profoundest of blessings—an encounter with the Eternal. By mirroring in his sermons the process that occurs in the sacraments and other church ordinances, Donne attempts to synthesize a unity in church worship. That is, he tries to demonstrate that when God acts in the lives of humankind, he acts in a consistent way, visiting his people in all areas of church worship and showering his blessings and grace on them equally in the sacraments, the prayers, and the preaching.

Conclusion

John Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms stand among the most remarkable achievements in English literature. They are astoundingly complex in their form and their function, weaving together strands of meaning and modes of expression in a rich fabric of prose. Donne's topics are as old as Scripture, and they recur throughout the long tradition of penitential literature. But his treatment of them is unique. And while the formal practice of penance had declined by his time, he knew that the issues at the core of penance remained as crucial as ever.

As is true of all penitential literature, Donne's sermons are pragmatic. They are intended to stir their auditors to action. Authors of penitential works understand that their writing is essentially about movement. Their goal is to induce their listeners to move from a place distant from God to a place near him. Penitential literature is therefore fundamentally opposed to stasis: it refuses to accept the initial attitude of listeners and does not allow them to rest until they have become reconciled to God. It constantly prods, provokes, and cajoles its hearers. Further, as well as concerning itself with the inward, spiritual movement of believers, penitential works deal with literal, physical movement. The underlying principle of this literature is that in order to effect the spiritual movement towards reconciliation with God, repentant sinners—except

invalids—must move physically to the church itself. It is there that they encounter and employ the mechanisms that will ultimately bring them reconciliation.

Donne is acutely aware of the movement that is the focus of penitential literature. He also knows that his obligation as God's minister is to try to bring that movement about. In his sermons on the penitential psalms he succeeds resoundingly in fulfilling his duty. But to say only that Donne fulfills his duty in these sermons is to understate grossly his accomplishment. For these sermons are the work of one of the finest minds of the period, and with unparalleled skill and inspiration they present old topics in fresh and arresting ways.

One way is by appealing to his congregation's sense of history. While his auditors might have lost the tradition of sacramental penance, Donne believes that they still need the benefits that come from it. Therefore, as priests had done for hundreds of years, he turns to the penitential psalms when he wants to lead his listeners into repentance. Donne knows that these psalms had always been a part of penance in the church, and by choosing to speak on them he identifies his seventeenth-century English listeners with believers in the early church. The problem of sin confronts Christians of the English church just as it had the early Christians: despite the fluctuations in the fortune of the church and the wars of doctrine that raged over the centuries, sin and how to deal with it remain both crucial and thorny issues. Donne thus ties believers of his time with their predecessors, and by doing so he consoles them. They have the assurance that although the faithful have always struggled with sin, they will still enjoy blessedness after death.

Thus by the very fact of preaching on the penitential psalms, Donne takes the first step in leading his people to repentance. When David wearied of his sin and wished to restore his relationship with God, he uttered the words of the penitential psalms. When a sinner in the early church entered into formal penance, the penitential psalms figured prominently in the liturgy. Writers of confessional manuals in the middle ages and devotionals in later times invariably included the penitential psalms in their works. By his preaching on the penitential psalms himself, then, Donne indicates to his auditors that they are following in the footsteps of the Christians who preceded them over the centuries. His sermons say that when one is serious about engaging in repentance, one turns to the penitential psalms, and there one will find the key to repentance.

As Donne preaches on these psalms, he attempts to fulfill the two primary goals of preaching: to instruct and to move his auditors. A discussion of Donne's ability to instruct his hearers is relatively straightforward. He tends to follow a certain rhetorical style, probably influenced by Keckermann but also showing signs of classical method. He relies heavily on the learned reference, appealing to the church fathers—most often Augustine and Tertullian—both to emphasize a point and to give credibility to his words. He uses ingenuity to dissect a text and present it to his congregation in a memorable way. And he is innovative, sometimes startling, in his diction.

But a study of Donne's attempts merely to instruct his hearers in repentance misses much—indeed, the most important aspect—of Donne's achievement in his sermons. For when he sets out to preach his series on the penitential psalms, Donne is not just trying to teach his hearers about repentance. He knows that repentance ultimately

involves more than the understanding or memory; it involves the will. The will is central to repentance, and therefore Donne's job is to change the will of his listeners, to give them the desire to move from being separated from God to being reconciled with him. Thus the study of Donne's efforts to reach the will of his hearers proves most complex. For by analyzing these efforts, we may draw three conclusions about Donne's remarkable sermons.

First, in his sermons on the penitential psalms Donne reveals his belief that preaching is a sacramental art. That is, he views preaching as a means by which God conveys or "derives" his saving grace to his gathered hearers. The sermon itself, Donne believes, is a vehicle of grace, and it operates as the dominical sacraments do. By participating in the sacraments, believers receive the benefit of an effectual and operative grace; by attending to the sermon, listeners receive the same. When believers listen to a sermon, they open themselves up to the working of the Holy Spirit, who moves in and among them. As believers receive Christ in the Eucharist, so they receive him in the Word preached through the priest's mouth, because Christ is that Word. The visible signs in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are water, bread and wine; the visible sign in the sermon is the word of the preacher. The grace conveyed in the sacraments is at some level efficacious; likewise, grace is conveyed in the sermon to those who receive it as the Word of God. The modern Jesuit scholar Grasso puts it this way:

In preaching, just as in the Eucharist, there is an element which strikes the senses, an object of experience, and a suprasensible element, which is not seen but believed. What man listens to in preaching is the human word, but faith tells him that this word which calls him is the Word of God and that it demands an answer. It is the same with the Eucharist: one sees the bread and the wine, and one believes that under these visible forms there is the Body and the Blood of Christ.¹³⁶

Informing and infusing his sermons on the penitential psalms, then, is Donne's conviction that preaching is a sacramental activity. For him it is also incarnational, for he is trying to bring the very person of Christ to his hearers. Donne believes that in his preaching, to use Grasso's words, "What is transmitted and what one seeks to have accepted is a person. And the goal to be obtained is adherence to a person."¹³⁷

The second conclusion that we can draw about Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms is that in them Donne employs a sophisticated form of metaphor to convey the person of Christ to his hearers. Donne's sermons both mimic and enact their subject matter. As I have shown, when Donne preaches on Psalm 51, about David's plea for spiritual cleansing at God's hand, he wants his congregation to understand that they are being cleansed by God's grace even as they are listening to the sermon. When he

¹³⁶Domenico Grasso, S.J., *Proclaiming God's Message: A Study in the Theology of Preaching*, Liturgical Studies (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 72.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 21.

intends his hearers to understand the reconciliation that can be theirs through repentance in his sermons on Psalm 32, he imitates the eucharistic invitation of Christ—"Take, eat: this is my body"—whose acceptance brings reconciliation. When he wishes to lead his listeners to a contrite consideration of their sins in the sermons on Psalm 38, he constructs his sermons to reflect the process that a sinner goes through in repentance and absolution. And as he emphasizes the role of the ordinances of the church in the lives of believers in the sermons on Psalm 6, he argues that the very words of the sermon are charged with the power to bring salvation to them. Therefore, through his words Donne tells his hearers the truth as it has been revealed to him, but he also delivers to his hearers the truth in a kind of sacramental mimesis. In this process of mimesis the sermons enact the very matters of which they speak. In so doing they bring grace to the listeners.

The third conclusion that we may draw from Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms is that he profoundly and fundamentally endorses the use of the traditional ordinances of the church: the worship, the prayers, the preaching, and the sacraments. Donne clearly states throughout these sermons that the way God has chosen to act in the lives of his followers is through the institution of the church. In order to participate in the community of God, believers must come to church and must participate in the ordinances. It is in the ordinances that God is active, and it is through them that believers come to salvation. These ordinances, Donne believes, are gifts from God and are therefore perfect in their conception. Some of them have been corrupted by abuse or misapplication, but the ordinances themselves are both honourable and essential. Preaching, as one of the ordinances, is therefore just as critical to the life of the believer as are the sacraments.

Donne believes that participating in the sacrament of the Eucharist is the most complete and sublime form of expression that believers can attain in this life, but in order to reach that point they need to be prepared by the Word. The Word and the sacraments therefore stand side by side as the armature of the church.

These conclusions help us to view Donne and his sermons in a new light. For while we can justifiably call him extraordinarily innovative as a preacher, we can also label him, perhaps surprisingly, conservative as a churchman. He tries to bring the old message of the church to people in old ways. Again and again he warns his listeners to avoid following new practices, advising them instead to adhere to the proven methods of the church. And yet upon examining his sermons on the penitential psalms, it becomes evident that Donne never ceases to meditate the ineffable complexities of the Word of God. He is as tireless as he is peerless in his efforts to find new and dignified ways to make that Word a real presence in the lives of his parishioners.

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Appendix: An Overview of Penance and Penitential Literature

Penance in the Church from the First Century to A.D. 400

Early Views of Penance

The *Pastor* of Hermas, written sometime between 100 and 140 A.D., is one of the earliest works on penance. Regarded by Hermas and much of the early church as a revelation from God through an angel, the *Pastor* holds that sin after baptism normally could not be reconciled in this life. The angel reveals to Hermas, however, that in an extraordinary dispensation of mercy God has appointed a special limitation date by which time those who have committed post-baptismal sin may repent and be forgiven. Those who miss that date can not be reconciled.¹³⁸ For centuries, the church followed this precept and held that this repentance, or penance, was available only once in the lifetime of a baptized Christian.

Clement of Alexandria agrees with Hermas in his *Stromateis*, which appeared at the beginning of the third century. The repentance, or *μετάνοια*, that is open to sinners, he says, is normally only the repentance of baptism. However, like Hermas, Clement states that because God is exceedingly merciful, he has allowed a second repentance,

¹³⁸Hermas, *Pastor*, *Mand.* iv. 3 [Funk, I. 396 (Tübingen, 1887)].

μετάνοια δευτέρα, to the baptized Christian who falls.¹³⁹ No other repentance is available.

For Tertullian, baptism is available to pardon all sins that a person has committed; but after baptism only lesser offences can be remitted. Graver offences, mortal sins, cannot be remitted in the present life, only by God in the life to come. Tertullian allows only one penance after baptism,¹⁴⁰ and even that reluctantly, because he does not want to appear to be giving Christians licence to sin.

As to the nature of the penance that believers were to undergo, Tertullian is particularly informative:

The more straitened then the work of this second and only remaining repentance, the more laborious its proof, so that it may not be only borne upon the conscience within, but may be also exhibited by some outward act. This act, which finds better and more frequent expression under its Greek name, is *Exomologesis* [ἐξομολόγησις], by which we confess our sin to the Lord, not because He knoweth it not, but inasmuch as by confession satisfaction is ordered, from confession repentance springeth, by repentance God is appeased. Wherefore exomologesis is a discipline for the abasement and humiliation of man, enjoining such conversation as inviteth mercy; it directeth also even in the matter of dress

¹³⁹Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 2.13 (Migne, *PG*, 8.993).

¹⁴⁰Tertullian, *De Pœnitentia*, c. 8 (Migne, *PL*, 1.1241).

and food, that (the penitent) should abide in sackcloth and ashes, should disfigure his body by filthy attire, should cast down his spirit with mourning, should exchange the sins which he has committed for severe treatment: for the rest, to use simple things for meat and drink, to wit, not for the belly's, but for the soul's sake: for the most part also to cherish prayer by fasts, to groan, to weep, and to moan day and night unto the Lord his God; to throw himself upon the ground before the presbyters, and to fall on his knees before the beloved of God; to enjoin all the brethren to bear the message of his prayer for mercy. All these things doeth exomologesis that it may commend repentance; that by fearing danger it may honour God; that itself pronouncing judgment on the sinner, it may act instead of God's wrath, and that, by means of temporal affliction, it may—I will not say frustrate, but—discharge the eternal penalties. When therefore it casteth down a man, it rather raiseth him up: when it maketh him filthy, it rendereth him the cleaner: when it accuseth, it excuseth: when it condemneth, it absolveth. In the measure in which thou sparest not thyself, in the same, be assured, will God spare thee.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹Trans. Watkins 1:115–116. The Latin text is as follows: "*Hujus igitur pœnitentiæ secundæ et unius, quanto in arcto negotium est, tanto operosior probatio, ut non sola conscientia proferatur, sed aliquo etiam actu administratur. Is actus, qui magis Græco vocabulo exprimitur et frequentatur, Exomologesis est, qua delictum Domino nostrum confitemur: non quidem ut ignaro, sed quatenus satisfactio confessione disponitur, confessione pœnitentia nascitur, pœnitentia Deus mitigatur. Itaque Exomologesis prosternendi et humiliificandi hominis disciplina est, conversationem injungens misericordiæ illicem; de ipso quoque habitu atque victu mandat, sacco et cineri incubare, corpus sordibus obscurare, animum mœroribus dejicere, illa qua peccavit tristi tractatione mutare; cæterum pastum et potum pura nosse, non ventris scilicet, sed animæ caussa: plerumque vero jejuniis preces alere, ingemiscere, lacrymari, et mugire dies*

Tertullian is not so much prescribing the outward form of penance as describing it as it had evolved by the beginning of the third century. The characteristics of the *exomologesis* that he describes remain remarkably consistent in the ensuing centuries, right up until the English renaissance.

Origen, writing in his *Homilies on Leviticus* near the middle of the third century, distinguishes between the *culpam mortalem*, the deadly fault, which is remissible, and the *crimen mortale*, the deadly crime, which is not.¹⁴² In the second *Homily*, Origen prescribes seven means by which a sinner might obtain remission of his sins: baptism, martyrdom, almsgiving, forgiveness of the brethren, conversion of a sinner, abundant love, and penance. Serious sins may be remitted by penance, but mortal sins must await God's own judgment in the hereafter; they cannot be remitted on earth.

St. Basil the Great of Cæsarea (A.D. 329–379), writing in his three canonical epistles, was the first to record the duration of penance for offences. Basil works within the graded system of penance; and therefore for a specified offence he stipulates the period that a penitent is to remain at each stage. One guilty of murder, for instance, must spend four years as a mourner, five as a hearer, seven as a faller, and four as a bystander.

noctesque ad Dominum Deum tuum, presbyteris advolvi, et charis Dei adgeniculari, omnibus fratribus legationes deprecationis suæ injungere. Hæc omnia Exomologesis, ut pœnitentiam commendet, ut de periculi timore Dominum honoret, ut in peccatorem ipsa pronuntians pro Dei indignatione fungatur, et temporali afflictatione æterna supplicia non dicam frustratur, sed expungat. Cum igitur provolvit hominem, magis relevat: cum squalidum facit, magis mundatum reddit: cum accusat, cum condemnat, absolvit. In quantum non peperceris tibi, in tantum tibi Deus, crede, parceret.” De Pœnitentia, c. 9 (Migne, PL, 1.1354–55).

¹⁴²Origen, *In Leviticum, Hom. 15* (Migne, PG, 12.560).

After this twenty years' penance, he may join in communion.¹⁴³ Significantly, however, Basil also provides that where a penitent fulfills his penance particularly ardently, the priest who had the power to bind and loose may demand an easier penance.¹⁴⁴ By ceding this discretion to the person who imposes penance, Basil set the stage for the private confessor, whose role, centuries later, was to weigh the sincerity of each confessant and order an appropriate penance.

Despite the prevalence of the rigorists in the first three centuries, there was another strong school, less widespread, that of the lenient group. These were the teachers who believed that penance was available to the baptized believer more than once, and that it was available to reconcile the Christian who had committed a mortal sin. The chief laxist was Callistus, Bishop of Rome between A.D. 218 and A.D. 223. In an edict of around A.D. 220, Callistus decreed that the believer guilty of fornication might be reconciled through penance. He drew the mordant criticism of Tertullian, who saw the relaxation as a harbinger of leniency toward the other two irreconcilable sins of idolatry and homicide. Tertullian was, in fact, astute: for eventually the church would hold that penance could reconcile a person who had committed any sin except the so-called "unforgiveable sin" mentioned in the gospels of Matthew and Mark.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³Basil, *Epistola canonica secunda*, Can. 56 (Migne, PG, 32.797).

¹⁴⁴*Epistola canonica secunda*, Can. 74 (Migne, PG, 32.804).

¹⁴⁵"Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy *against* the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come."

In A.D. 250 the persecution of the church under the Roman emperor Decius commenced, and it had an important effect on the development of penance. Decius issued an edict in around A.D. 249 commanding all subjects of the Roman empire, including Christians, to sacrifice to the gods and to his genius, with severe penalties for failure to comply. The Decian measures produced significant numbers of Christian martyrs, but they also caused widespread apostasy among the more timorous in the church. Eventually, many of those who had renounced Christianity relented and sought reconciliation to the church. The church then faced the problem of restoring those who had been guilty of another of the mortal sins, idolatry, or, as it was more commonly interpreted by this time, apostasy. Again, the rigorists thought that apostasy was beyond the church's power to loose. But just as Tertullian had argued against reconciling adulterers on the grounds that the church did not reconcile murderers and idolaters,¹⁴⁶ so Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, argued for the reconciliation of the apostate on the grounds that the church already restored adulterers.¹⁴⁷ The church at Rome agreed with Cyprian; the churches at Alexandria and Antioch soon followed suit. After A.D. 252, the position of the eastern and western churches, the Spanish church alone demurring, was that the church could restore penitents who had formerly renounced their faith.

(Matt. 12:31–32; see also Mark 3:28–30).

¹⁴⁶*De Pudicitia*, c. 5 (Migne, *PL*, 2.989).

¹⁴⁷*Epistula* 52.20 (Migne, *PL*, 3.810).

Within seventy-five years of the Decian persecution, the question of the extent of the church's authority to remit sins had been settled. The Council of Nicæa resolved in A.D. 325 that anyone near death who asked for the *viaticum* might receive it. In other words, a person who had committed even mortal sin could be restored to the communion of the church. There was no offence for which the church could not grant reconciliation.

John Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407) was a priest and preacher at Antioch before becoming Bishop of Constantinople. He was a more lenient disciplinarian than many of his contemporaries; eventually his laxity would lead to his deposition as bishop and exile from Constantinople, so strong was the rigorist influence there. His writings on penance were extremely important for both the eastern and western churches, because they embody what was to become a central tenet of the church's doctrine on reconciliation. Chrysostom rejects the notion that true penance is effected by adhering to specific periods of time and says instead that the state of mind of the penitent is what matters to God¹⁴⁸.

Chrysostom, like Origen, proposed a number of ways that people might have their sins remitted; but unlike Origen, Chrysostom set out various means by which any class of sin, venial or mortal, might be remitted. For Origen, penance had been reserved for serious sins, less than capital but graver than trivial. Further, while Hermas had allowed only one penance after baptism, and most later writers concurred, Chrysostom saw no such stricture: sinners could obtain reconciliation for their sins however many times they engaged in the various forms of penance. In time the whole church, not just the eastern,

¹⁴⁸John Chrysostom, *Ad Theodorum lapsum*, 6 (Migne, *PG*, 47.284).

would adopt his views—the many means of expressing one's sorrow for sin and the iteration of penance—as the universal custom.

A feature of eastern penitential practice that would eventually find expression in the West was the office of the priest penitentiary. This office had its origins after the end of the Decian persecution in the areas around Constantinople and found a place in that city in the second quarter of the fourth century. The priest penitentiary was given charge of those who had sinned and who wished to be reconciled to the church. He heard their confessions privately and supervised their penances, which they carried out privately. There was no public, graded system of penance in place in Constantinople; the priest penitentiary evaluated the sincerity of each person who petitioned to be admitted to penance, and he prescribed a fitting penance. Further, he was empowered to grant absolution to the penitent. The western churches, by contrast, uniformly reserved the power of absolution to the bishops for centuries. Although the office of the priest penitentiary was abolished by the end of the fourth century in the East, it would reappear in much the same form centuries later in the West.

The eastern churches by the fourth century had developed a complex system and theology of penance; but no less had the churches in the West. There were, however, several significant differences between the two. The western churches never accepted the graded system of penance, and they were nearly unanimous in prohibiting the repetition of penance in a believer's lifetime. Eventually, the weight of Jerome's and Augustine's writings to the contrary notwithstanding, the churches in the West adopted a more lenient position, and by the mid-seventh century the rule against iteration of penance had eased.

A further difference between East and West was that western penitents, or, more accurately, penitents in Rome, after fulfilling the term of their penance laboured under severe disabilities that were usually lifelong. Reconciled penitents could not engage in military service, could not attend or partake in public games, could not marry, and could not resume living with their spouses.¹⁴⁹ By the middle of the fifth century, these disabilities were still in place and had been augmented by others, such as the exclusion from engaging in commerce and the prohibition from bringing lawsuits. Given the serious penalties facing persons who underwent public penance, it is not surprising that fewer and fewer people should wish to subject themselves to penance during their lifetime. Increasingly, Christians who had sinned after baptism postponed seeking reconciliation until they were on their deathbed so that they might avoid a lifetime of misery.

While Jerome was helping to settle the doctrine of penance in the Roman church, Ambrose was leading the church in Milan. In his *De Pœnitentia* he argues convincingly against the Novatianists, the sect that traced its roots back to the Decian persecution and that denied the availability of penance to Christians guilty of mortal sin. While the Novatianists claimed that the church had power to bind a person who had committed mortal sins but no power to reconcile that person, Ambrose countered that the church could not exercise one power, the power to bind, without exercising its complement, the power to loose. Further, he argued, God had given his priests the power of remitting all

¹⁴⁹Siricius, *Ad Himerium episcopum Tarraconensem*, c. 3 (Migne, *PL*, 13.1136).

sins, even mortal ones. Finally, if sins could be remitted by baptism, a sacrament which required the agency of a priest, then it was untenable to argue that ministers of the church could not remit a person's sins through penance.¹⁵⁰ Ambrose is careful to qualify the power of priests, however, and in his later *De Spiritu Sancto* he states that priests do not remit sins in their own name but in the name of the Trinity. The priest asks; God grants.¹⁵¹ And while a sinner might have the benefit of penance for any sin after baptism, penance was available only once: "As there is one baptism, so there is one penance."¹⁵²

Meanwhile, in Africa Augustine delineated three forms of penitence: the penitence that befits those who are about to be baptized, the penitence that is the daily duty of all Christians for the forgiveness of small sins, and the formal penitence for the remission of the serious post-baptismal sins. This formal penitence, he says, is a sorrowful one, and a grave injury; perhaps the person has committed adultery, or homicide, or sacrilege.¹⁵³ In other words, Augustine links the need for formal penitence with the commission one of the traditional three mortal sins. And this penance is available only once.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰Ambrose of Milan, *De Pœnitentia*, 1.ii. (7) (Migne, *PL*, 16.468); 1.iii (10) (Migne, 16.469); 1.viii. (36) (Migne, 16.477).

¹⁵¹*De Spiritu Sancto*, 3.xviii. (137) (Migne, *PL*, 16.808).

¹⁵²*De Pœnitentia*, 2.x. (95) (Migne *PL*, 16.520).

¹⁵³S. Augustine, *Sermo* 352 (Migne *PL*, 39.1558).

¹⁵⁴"*In tantum autem hominum aliquando iniquitas progreditur, ut etiam post actam pœnitentiam, post altaris reconciliationem, vel similia vel graviora committant . . . Et quamvis eis in Ecclesia locus humillimæ pœnitentiæ non concedatur; Deus tamen super eos suæ patientiæ non obliviscitur.*" *Epist.* 153.7 (Migne *PL*, 33.655).

With a single penance available in the western church, and that to be carried out publicly for very serious sins, there developed the common practice among the faithful there to defer their baptism until late in life. Ambrose himself had been baptized only eight days before becoming installed as bishop of Milan.¹⁵⁵ Since baptism covered all sins without enquiry into the nature of specific offences, believers who postponed their baptism could obtain the double benefit of having their sins remitted and avoiding the humiliation of public penance. Further, since there was allowed only one penance after baptism, a sinner who wanted the comfort of reconciliation might not want to use his single opportunity prematurely. Thus if he had committed a number of sins and was finally moved late in life to be baptized, those sins would be remitted; and he could always have another chance at reconciliation, through penance, if he lapsed again. A person who was baptized young, however, and who underwent his sole penance midway through his life faced the prospect of several years in which he might commit sin that could not be remitted in his life. Thus as a result of the rule that penance was available only once, postponed baptisms and deathbed penances became common.

Augustine, however, urged believers not to defer their penance or, by implication, their baptism. He was not confident that the reconciliation of a person who sought penance only on his deathbed was equal to the reconciliation that someone willingly

¹⁵⁵Watkins, 1:430.

sought during his lifetime. Believers who wished to be certain of their reconciliation, wrote Augustine, ought to do penance while they were healthy.¹⁵⁶

In Spain at this time St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona, was contributing to the body of penitential doctrine. In his *Exhortation to Penitence*, Pacian writes that only the three mortal sins, idolatry, homicide, and fornication, are the proper subjects for public penance. At first Pacian's rule seems both traditional and narrow in scope. However, Pacian broadens the application of penance by stating that a person may commit any of the three mortal sins not only by outward deed but internally, in his heart.¹⁵⁷ Pacian thus echoes the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁵⁸ But by restating Christ's pronouncements on committing sin in the mind and heart, Pacian opens—indeed orders—penance for those who have sinned in thought and word, and not just in deed. Further, Pacian prescribes the conduct befitting penitents: they should weep in view of the church; they should lament their lost lives in filthy clothing; they should fast, pray, and prostrate themselves; they should decline the delights of the bath; and they should

¹⁵⁶“*Vis te de dubio liberare? vis quod incertum est evadere? Age pœnitentiam, dum sanus es.*” *Sermo* 393 (Migne *PL*, 39.1714).

¹⁵⁷St. Pacian, *Parœnesis ad Pœnitentiam* (Migne *PL*, 13.1084).

¹⁵⁸“Ye have heard that it was said . . . Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment; But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment . . . Ye have heard that it was said . . . Thou shalt not commit adultery; But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” (Matthew 5:21–22; 27–28).

refuse invitations to banquets. They should do all sorts of works of mercy, try anything, he says, rather than perish.¹⁵⁹

By the fifth century, a number of differences had developed in the penitential practice of the eastern and western churches. While the western church limited formal penance to a single instance in a believer's life, the eastern church allowed repeated penance. In the East, at least until the end of the fourth century, a sinner commenced his penance by making private confession to a priest penitentiary, who would privately pronounce absolution upon the completion of penance. Rome had created the office of the priest of titles; these priests heard the confessions of the penitents and admitted them to penance, but absolution was the duty of the bishop, who administered it in a public ceremony on the Thursday before Easter. Throughout the West absolution was publicly solemnized by the bishop in a ceremony of laying on of hands. In the East, penitents underwent the laying on of hands sometimes for absolution but more commonly as an acknowledgment that they were believers undergoing penance. Western churches imposed severe disabilities after penance, and as a result the deathbed repentance became commonplace. In the East there existed the system of graded penance, in which penitents served lengthy terms of public humiliation. In both the East and the West, the penitent was expected to conduct himself in appropriately abject fashion.

Thus in the relatively brief period of some four centuries the practice of penance in the Christian church had seen significant change. From first being seen as an

¹⁵⁹*Parænesis ad Pœnitentiam* (Migne *PL*, 13. 1088).

extraordinary concession to allow baptized sinners to become reconciled to the church, penance became a common and even prudent practice for Christians at the point of death. At first closed to anyone who had committed one of the three mortal sins of idolatry, fornication, and homicide, penance opened to include persons who had committed any sin. Indeed, in some places penitential status was granted only to those who had committed one of the three capital sins. Greater changes lay ahead for penance, however, perhaps none more significant than the revision of the rite from an exceptional, regrettable, public event to a regular, mandated, private sacrament. The church in Britain would play a crucial part in changing forever the nature of penance.

Penance in the Church from A.D. 400 to 800

The prevalence of deathbed penance forced the western church to reformulate its doctrine on the nature of penance. Augustine had expressed his doubts as to the efficacy of deathbed reconciliation and had cautioned believers to be admitted to formal penance while they were healthy. Later writers went farther than Augustine by arguing that deathbed reconciliation was not as effectual as the reconciliation that a believer sought in health. Faustus (d. 492 A.D.), bishop of Reii in modern Provence, writes that sinners who seek reconciliation when they are near death have no assurance that they will obtain absolution. In order to be certain of absolution, a penitent must perform the acts of penance; a penitent who cannot do penance because of frailty does not truly go through

penance. The penance that is sought in infirmity, he says, is itself infirm.¹⁶⁰ By contrast, Gennadius (d. A.D. 496), a priest of Marseilles, believed “without doubt” that penance, even the penance into one was admitted in the last breath of life, abolished all sins.¹⁶¹

Caesarius (c. A.D. 468–542), bishop of Arles, discerned, however, that not all deathbed penances were alike. There were, in fact, three. The first two are the penances of saintly or genuinely repentant believers who forgive those who have wronged them and who make restitution on their deathbeds. The third is that of the person who has long lived badly, hoping that all his sins will be remitted in one sudden repentance at the end of his life. He does not forgive his enemies, does not resolve to do penance with compunction and humility should he recover, and does not restore what he has wrongfully gained.

These sinners have no fruit of repentance, Caesarius says; therefore we must believe that they do not pass well from this life.¹⁶²

By distinguishing between types of deathbed penance, Caesarius helped legitimate the practice of postponing one’s penance until the end of life. Since he had condemned one form of deathbed penance and defended others, the logical step in the development of penitential practice was to regard his first two types as not only defensible but prudent. Provided that one did not sin repeatedly and without remorse,

¹⁶⁰Faustus of Reii, *Sermo 255 in appendice tomi quinti operum S. Augustini* (Migne, *PL*, 39.2216).

¹⁶¹Gennadius Massiliensis, *De ecclesiasticis dogmatibus liber*, c. 80 (Migne, *PL*, 58.998).

¹⁶²St. Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo 256 in Appendix to the works of S. Augustine* (Migne, *PL*, 39.2217).

one was able to obtain remission of one's sins—even mortal sins—by entering into penance at the close of life. So long as penance was available only once in a lifetime, and deathbed penance might be as effectual as penance sought in health, deathbed penance would find wide favour among believers.

Deathbed penance became so prevalent that it threatened to supersede public penance by the fifth century. And there was another practice developing which, like deathbed penance, was proving more palatable to sinners than public penance, namely, private penance. For while Caesarius had said that public penance was necessary for the remission of capital sins, he also allowed that a sinner—even one guilty of the serious sins—might conduct the whole course of his penance privately, and not under church cognizance at all.¹⁶³

Public penance still had not disappeared, at least from church dogma, in the West. From the middle of the fifth century to the middle of the seventh, penitents continued to practise and theologians continued to justify public penance. While ecclesiastical councils in Spain ruled out the iteration of penance, more writers argued for a second penance after baptism. Sinners who voluntarily sought admission to penance were still expected to conduct themselves in the traditional lowly manner befitting *exomologesis*. And in an important development, the first day of Lent was moved to Ash Wednesday, so named because it was the day on which the church officially and publicly admitted sinners to penance, who clothed themselves in sackcloth and ashes. The move gave

¹⁶³Watkins, 2:556.

public penance a niche within the regular liturgical calendar. The church had always tied penance to its calendar by receiving penitents on the Thursday before Good Friday; but by establishing a day each year on which sinners were to come forward for admission to public penance, the church acknowledged that serious sin and its penitential treatment, though perhaps inevitable, were far from exceptional. They were fixtures of church life.

Thus the institution of public penance was still in place in the western churches at the end of the seventh century. But increasingly the practices of private and deathbed penance were undermining it. And there was no stronger force behind the spread of private penance than the penitential system of the British church.

Developments in Penance from A.D. 800 to 1215

Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the system of private penance continued to establish itself throughout northern Europe and, with some opposition, in Italy. Thomas Tentler has noted that during this period the practice of penance underwent four major changes. First, penances were lightened and made arbitrary; second, the essential element for the penitent became contrition, and penitential exercises receded into a subservient position; third, private confession, already accepted as a necessary part of the forgiveness of sins, was declared universally obligatory by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215; and fourth, the priest's role was more carefully defined and its importance radically enhanced.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 16.

As individual priests were able to exercise their own discretion more and more in assigning penance, it was natural that penances should become lighter and more arbitrary. Alain de Lille (*ca.* 1110-1203), writing in his *Liber Pœnitentialis*, argues that in order for penance to be medicinal and not merely punitive, the penalties must be made lighter than those of the early church.¹⁶⁵ Further, the reality in Europe at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century seems to have been that there were simply fewer people willing to assume the burden of harsh penance. At the beginning of the thirteenth century Robert of Flamborough recommends that priests negotiate with confessants until both parties agree upon a suitable penance.¹⁶⁶

As penances became less onerous, there was a shift from the position requiring acts of penance for the expiation of sin; instead, the state of mind of the penitent—his remorse for his sin and his desire to be reconciled—became the central feature of penance.¹⁶⁷ We recall the early debate about the efficacy of deathbed penance: the principal argument of the rigorists was that a dying penitent could perform no acts of penance, and since his repentance therefore had no fruit, his reconciliation was suspect. But the old stance of the laxists—that the intentions, not the actions, of the sick penitent were determinative—emerged dominant in the thirteenth century.

¹⁶⁵Tentler, 17; Alain de Lille, *Liber pœnitentialis* (Migne, *PL*, 210.293).

¹⁶⁶Tentler, 17; Robert of Flamborough, *Liber pœnitentialis*, 5.12–16, pp. 273–77.

¹⁶⁷See Tentler, 17–18.

The second major change that Tentler has noted in this period, that contrition became the principal part of the forgiveness of sins, is a vast area of inquiry. For while his observation is accurate, we need also to consider that penance became regarded more as the means to forgiveness of sins than as the penalty that one paid to be reconciled to the church. This new formulation of penance led to an emphasis on the sacramental nature of penance, while the penal nature of penance became less prominent. Lea has pointed out that in this period reconciliation becomes absolution: where formerly the purpose of penance was to reconcile the penitent to the church, now the practice of penance, commencing with private confession to a priest, is increasingly regarded as a way to be absolved of sin, and thus to be reconciled to God.¹⁶⁸ There had been traces of the sacramental in penance since the early days of the church; but now penance would develop into one of the seven sacraments of the church. And as penance becomes established as a sacrament, the absolution that the priest pronounces to a penitent within the form of the sacrament acquires the utmost importance.

A consequence of the establishment of penance as a sacrament was that attention turned to the confessant's state of mind. For while the priest might pronounce absolution, was that absolution effective if the confessant was unrepentant? In order to involve penitents in the work of absolution, it was necessary to ensure that they were fit to receive absolution. And the way to be sure was to determine whether confessants were truly contrite. In fact, some writers argued, notably Peter Lombard, contrition was so

¹⁶⁸Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers, 1896), 1:466, 494.

important that if one were truly contrite, and, significantly, intended to confess one's sins, one could be assured of God's forgiveness even before the priest had declared absolution:

Therefore the penitent ought to confess his sins if he have time: and yet, before the confession is in his mouth, if the intention be in his heart, forgiveness is accorded him.¹⁶⁹

The priest's role in Lombard's conception is therefore declaratory rather than efficacious. As Lea has pointed out, the belief that the sinner could be justified by contrition and faith was an obstacle both to the development of the priest's individual power to bind and loose and to the necessity of confession. So long as believers could deal directly with God, they did not need the priest as an intermediary.¹⁷⁰

After the middle of the eighth century no penitential would achieve more widespread recognition or exert greater influence than the *Penitential of Theodore*. English missionaries took the *Penitential*, along with a penitential attributed to the venerable Bede, to Frankish and German territories and established there the private penance that the *Penitential* espoused alongside the existing system of public canonical penance. More and more penitentials developed throughout Europe, and with them grew the practice of private penance. By the ninth century penitentials were being severely

¹⁶⁹Trans. mostly by Watkins, 2:745; Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum, Lib. IV, Dist. 17, § 2* (Migne, *PL*, 192.881).

¹⁷⁰Lea, 1:211.

criticized, some justly so, for being arbitrary, error-ridden, and of dubious authorship. The Council of Chalon-sur-Saône in 813 called for priests to base their penances solely on the ancient canons, on scripture, and on ecclesiastical custom and altogether to “banish and repudiate” the penitentials.¹⁷¹ In 829 the Council of Paris condemned the use of penitentials, stating that priests who used the books did not “heal the wounds” of sinners with canonical penance, but “caressed and inflamed” them. The Council resolved that bishops must collect the penitentials and burn them.¹⁷²

The rise of the penitentials brought to the laity the practice of repeated private confession, repeated penance, and repeated reconciliation. Although the private system had become widespread on the European continent, the ancient system of canonical penance, which was concerned with very grave sins, still stood in opposition. Clearly, though, the canonical system had to make some accommodations to the private system; most sinners seeking reconciliation would choose a lighter, private penance over a heavier, public one for the same offence. The church attempted to establish authority, and one way of doing so was to have a standard penitential in general use. At the beginning of the tenth century, Regino, abbot of Prüm, directed visiting bishops to ensure that their parish priests were using either the penitentials of Theodore or of Bede.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹Watkins, 2:704.

¹⁷²Ibid., 2:707. *Council of Paris*, c. 32.

¹⁷³Regino, abbot of Prüm, *De synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis*, cl. 96, ed. Wassersleben, Lipsiae, 1840, 26, Watkins, 2:684. Reference is in Watkins, 2:713.

During the tenth century the fight against the penitentials north of the Alps ended, and the more reputable penitentials acquired general acceptance there. Priests might use canons, scripture, church custom, or penitentials to impose penance. And since they had discretion to choose which of the many, often conflicting, authorities to follow, the judgment of the priest himself on appropriate penances became authoritative. Eventually the priest's own judgment would become the sole arbiter of penance.

The development of the church's view on confession between the ninth and thirteenth centuries followed naturally from the acknowledgment of contrition as the principal part of penance. If repentance was primarily about contrition, then a new definition of repentance had to emerge if confession to a priest was to be indispensable. Richard of St. Victor provided that definition:

True repentance is the detestation of sin with a vow of amendment, of confession, and of satisfaction; it needs therefore the intervention of the priest when one can be had.¹⁷⁴

Although this definition did not find immediate acceptance everywhere, it eventually became the prevalent view. In time it was ratified by the Council of Trent.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴Lea, 1:212. R. a S. Victore *de Potestate Ligandi* c. 5.

¹⁷⁵Lea, 1:214 C. Trident. Sess. 14. *De Pœnitentia* c. 4, can. 4,7.

Contrition, then, was more than simple remorse for one's sins. It included the desire to confess one's sins to God and to a priest. By the twelfth century, confession had become so commonplace that Alain de Lille cautioned the faithful to confess even if they could not recall any specific sin: even the just man falls seven times a day, he writes, and therefore believers should make a general sort of confession to a priest and ask for acts of satisfaction to perform.¹⁷⁶ Finally, in the monumental Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, confession was made mandatory for every believer at least once a year on pain of excommunication. The faithful were to perform their penance as diligently as they could and were to take communion at least at Easter.¹⁷⁷ The practice of frequent confession had been well established before the Fourth Lateran Council,¹⁷⁸ but Canon 21, known by its first three words, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, marked the first time that the practice was officially granted papal approval. And with the salvation of believers at stake if they failed to heed the decretal, penance came to be regarded as sacramental.

If the church was to consider penance as a sacrament, and if a component of that sacrament was confession to a priest, then the role that the priest played in the sacrament had to be defined. There were three strands of thought on the priest's role.¹⁷⁹ First was

¹⁷⁶Watkins, 2:747; Alain de Lille, *Liber Pœnitentialis*, *Analecta Mediaevalia Namurcensia* 18, 2 vols. (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1965), vol. 2, book 4. c. 1, pp. 161–62 (Migne, *PL*, 210.299).

¹⁷⁷Watkins, 2:748. *Concilium Lateranense IV*, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, c. 21 (Mansi, 22.1008).

¹⁷⁸See Tentler, 21.

¹⁷⁹See Tentler, 23–25.

that of Peter Lombard, who saw contrition as the foremost part of the sacrament. If God forgave the truly contrite penitent even before he had confessed to a priest, then all the priest did was to declare God's forgiveness to the repentant sinner. Second, there was the view of St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Thomas, the absolution that the priest pronounced—*ego te absolvo*—applied Christ's atoning work to the benefit of the penitent. Without the priest's sacramental absolution, the contrition of the penitent was insufficient to produce forgiveness. The partaker of the sacrament did not receive grace by virtue of his own deeds but by virtue of the sacrament itself.¹⁸⁰ But a penitent generally still needed to be contrite for his sins to be forgiven. In rare instances the confessant needed not to be perfectly contrite, that is, sorry for his sins because they offended God, but attrite, or sorry for his sins mainly because they were distasteful. The absolution of the priest gave to the attrite penitent the extra grace that he lacked and thus justified him. The third school of thought on the role of the priest in the sacrament of penance was that of Duns Scotus. For him a sinner might be forgiven by being perfectly contrite or by being attrite. The perfectly contrite penitent was a person of extraordinary piety, such as a saint. The contrite person intends to confess his sins to a priest but receives God's forgiveness even before he has made his confession. Perfect contrition is rare, however, and most people are justified by being merely attrite. The attrite person resolves not to continue sinning and is afraid of the punishment that his sins demand. It is the priest's absolution that is the efficient cause of God's forgiveness of the attrite

¹⁸⁰That is, not *ex opere operantis*, from the work of the worker but *ex opere operato*, from the work worked. Tentler, 22–25.

penitent. The priest's pronounced words "efficaciously signify by divine institution the absolution of the soul from sin."¹⁸¹ The sacrament itself, then, or more precisely the words that the priest pronounces, bring salvation to the sinner.

The Development of the Literature of Penance

The Celtic Penitentials A.D. 400 to 900

The uniquely British penitential system had its origins in the monasteries of Wales, Ireland, and England, possibly as early as the fifth century and certainly by the sixth. Penance was entirely private: penitents, whether monks or laypeople, confessed secretly to a priest, who assessed the nature of the sin and imposed an appropriate penance. As in formal penance, penitents did not participate in the Eucharist for the season of Lent, but there was no public expulsion from or reconciliation to the church community. None of the disabilities that were common in the rest of the western church attached to penitents after their term of penance. And penance was repeatable. All of these features are remarkable in their dissimilarity from those of the older form of penance that was losing sway in the West. But most important, and at the center of the British system, were the books known as penitentials.

Penitentials were compilations deriving from many sources: the canonical letters of the Greek fathers Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neocaesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and

¹⁸¹Tentler, 27, from Michel, "Pénitence," *Dictionary of Catholic Theology*, 12¹, 1027–29; Teetaert, *La Confession aux laïques*, 393; Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones in quartum librum sententiarum*, dis. 14, q. 4, 2, *Opera omnia*, vol. 18 (Paris, 1894), 139.

especially Basil the Great; borrowings from other church fathers, including Augustine and Origen; conciliar and synodical decisions and papal decretals; and works of such scholars and compilers of canon law as Caesarius and St. Eligius of Noyon.¹⁸²

The first penitential materials are contained in the canons of synods of the church in Ireland¹⁸³ and in Wales at the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth. These early penitential canons, while not precisely in the class of penitentials, set out a number of offences and attendant penances. The prescribed penances are generally more lenient than those of later penitential literature.

The earliest penitential is probably the *Book of David*, or, more accurately, *Excerpta quaedam de libro Davidis*, dating from c. A.D. 500–525. The *Excerpta* total sixteen clauses and deal with the offences of the clergy, monks, and laity. Notably, the work provides that while the penances prescribed by “the saints of old” were severe, the penances are now far lighter.¹⁸⁴ None of the penances requires the offender to conduct penance in the public eye.

¹⁸²Thomas Pollock Oakley, *English Penitential Discipline and Anglo-Saxon Law in Their Joint Influence*, Columbia Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, vol. 107, no. 2; whole no. 242 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 23.

¹⁸³*The Second Synod of St. Patrick*, dated around A.D. 475 (Watkins, 2:603) and, in Wales, *The Synod of North Britain* and *The Synod of the Grove of Victory* (McNeill, 169–72).

¹⁸⁴John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, eds., *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, Columbia Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies, no. 29 (1938; rept, New York: Octagon, 1965), 172–74.

Another early penitential has been attributed to Gildas (possibly c. A.D. 493–570), the *Præfatio de Penitentia*, dated around A.D. 560. The *Præfatio* deals solely with the penances of monks and clergy. It is a short but diverse work: the penalties range from that imposed on a presbyter who commits fornication to that on a monk who breaks a hoe.¹⁸⁵ Like the *Excerpta*, the *Præfatio* tells the reader that its provisions are laxer than those of former times: the sanctions of the “ancient fathers” were much more onerous.¹⁸⁶

The first major penitential, a work whose influence would spread throughout Ireland and Britain and over to the continent, was the Penitential of Finnian, the *Pœnitentiale Vinniai*. McNeill dates the work to c. A.D. 525–50 and attributes it to Finnian of Clonard, a distinguished Irish monastic founder and teacher who died around 550.¹⁸⁷ Over half of the *Penitential of Finnian*’s 53 clauses deal with sins of the clergy, while the rest concern the laity. The *Penitential* does not attempt to be exhaustive, and it is not a systematic treatise on the nature of sin and penance. However, but it tells us a number of things about penitential practice in Ireland in the sixth century. We learn, for instance, that a higher standard of conduct is expected of the cleric than of the layman, and as a result the clerics’ penances are harsher than laypeople’s for the same offence. A

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 174–78.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 176.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 86.

layperson's penance should be less "since he is a man of this world and his guilt is lighter in this world and his reward less in the world to come."¹⁸⁸

As to the conduct of penance, which consists largely of abstaining from wine and meats and maintaining a diet of bread and water, it is to be done completely in private: "For, we say, sins are to be absolved in secret by penance and by very diligent devotion of heart and body."¹⁸⁹ Further, as we might expect, penitents could not receive Holy Communion, but on completing their term of penance they would be "reconciled," "joined," or "restored" to the altar.¹⁹⁰ Near the end of Finnian's code there is the assertion, actually an aside, that "there is no crime which cannot be expiated through penance so long as we are in this body."¹⁹¹ There is here no trace of the early church's debates over the remissibility of the three mortal sins. And remarkably the penances that the *Penitential of Finnian* prescribes for those mortal sins are incomparably lighter than those of the early church. Where once the church deliberated over whether an adulterer might even be reconciled on earth, the *Penitential of Finnian* states that if a married man commits adultery with his neighbour's wife ("double adultery," and therefore doubly heinous in the ancient church) or virgin daughter, he has only to do penance for one year

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 88.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 89.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 88–90, 92, 94, 97.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 96.

on bread and water, refrain from sexual intercourse with his wife during that time, and give alms for his soul.¹⁹²

Finnian states at the end of the *Penitential* that he has based his work on scripture and on the opinion of some very learned men, who Watkins posits are British teachers, such as David and Gildas.¹⁹³ Finnian has omitted references to other authorities, he says, in the interest of brevity, but he invites others who have searched the scriptures to write better works than his, and he will follow them. The implication is that if one wishes to understand the nature and effect of penance and wishes to know what penances are appropriate for given sins, one needs simply to read the Bible and the authorities, the “very learned men.” This is a solitary process: no council or synod is necessary to formulate correct penitential doctrine. Thus even as the conduct of penance has become a private undertaking, so the study of penance has become private. In a trend that will bear important consequences for the doctrine of penance in the coming centuries, penance is becoming irrevocably withdrawn from the public purview.

The next important penitential is the *Penitential of Columban*, dated about A.D. 600. St. Columban received his training in an Irish monastery and later founded monasteries in France and Italy. While he was in France he wrote his penitential, which owes much to the *Penitential of Finnian*. Just under half of the provisions of Columban’s

¹⁹²Ibid., 94.

¹⁹³Watkins, 2:609.

penitential have been borrowed from Finnian's. One of the most significant features of the *Penitential of Columban* is its concluding paragraph, which states

But it is commanded to make confessions very diligently, chiefly regarding the motions of the mind, before one goes to mass, lest perchance one approach the altar unworthily, that is, if he has not a pure heart. For it is better to wait until the heart is whole and a stranger to vexation and envy than boldly to come to the judgment of the tribunal; for the altar of Christ is the tribunal, and his body thereon judges with blood those who approach it unworthily.¹⁹⁴

Two points arise here. First, the penitential commands that monks make confession diligently before going to Mass. In other words, they are regularly to acknowledge that they are guilty of sin that would bar them from the Eucharist. Sin that once was so extraordinary as to close the Eucharist to sinners is now held out as being commonplace. Whereas confession was once the regrettable first step in assuming the status of penitent, now it is a wise precaution for all those who wish to join in communion. Second, as was evident in the *Penitential of Finnian*, the altar remains the focus of the penitent's relation to the church community. While the clergy had always banned penitents from approaching the altar and receiving communion, now the altar

¹⁹⁴McNeill, 257.

itself acts as a tribunal judging the hearts of those who approach it. Formerly, God's ministers judged whether a person was fit to take communion; now, God himself is the judge.

The influence of the *Penitential of Columban* extended to the many monasteries on the European continent that Irish monks and their imitators established in the seventh century. The popularity of penitentials was spreading, and since they could never be exhaustive, they were continually being added to. In the eighth century, however, there appeared a penitential whose authority and importance would be unequalled. This was the *Penitential of Theodore*, and it was a product of the English church.

Theodore was archbishop of Canterbury from A.D. 668 to 690 and is distinguished for having united and organized the English church. The penitential that bears his name underwent a number of revisions and additions until it reached its final form about the middle of the eighth century. The work purports to be a record of Theodore's responses to a presbyter's questions on penance and is by far the lengthiest of any penitential up to its time. The *Penitential* clearly shows that Theodore had adopted for England the penitential system of Ireland. The 310 clauses in the *Penitential of Theodore* not only provide penances for specific sins but also set out tenets for Christian life and directives for the administration of the church. The *Penitential* states that only bishops are to reconcile penitents in the administration of the Lord's Supper, but then immediately concedes that if that duty is difficult for the bishop to perform, he may

delegate his authority to a presbyter. Neither reconciliation nor penance, apparently, is a public affair.¹⁹⁵

Penitential Literature from 1215 to the Reformation

Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council made confession obligatory at least once a year for all believers of discerning age. But as Leonard Boyle has noted, the effect of *Omnis utriusque sexus* was more than to make official what had become common practice: it was to redefine the nature of the role of the priest. For rather than being a simple dispenser of penances according to the old canonical or penitential codes, the priest became a counsellor of souls.¹⁹⁶ The canon stated that in conducting his confessions the priest must be discreet and cautious, so that

. . . in the manner of the skillful physician (*periti medici*) he may pour wine and oil upon the wounds of the injured, diligently searching out the circumstances both of the sinner and of the sin, that from these he may prudently understand what manner of advice he ought to offer him and what sort of remedy he ought to apply, employing various measures in order to heal the sick. Further, he is to give earnest heed that he does not

¹⁹⁵McNeill, 195.

¹⁹⁶See Leonard E. Boyle, "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, edited by Thomas J. Heffernan, Tennessee Studies in Literature, 28 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 32.

in any wise betray the sinner by word or sign or in any other way; but if he needs more prudent advice he shall seek this cautiously without any divulging of the person, since we decree that he who shall presume to reveal a sin made known to him in the adjudication of penance, is not only to be deposed from the priestly office but also to be thrust into a strict monastery to do perpetual penance.¹⁹⁷

A priest who was commanded to act like a skilled physician, enjoined to be discreet and cautious, ordered to enquire diligently into the circumstances of the sin and the sinner so that he might determine the proper counsel and remedy, and warned not to break the confessional seal would doubtless have appreciated some advice on precisely how he was to fulfill his mandate. That advice was forthcoming in the form of a huge body of literature on pastoral care, which Boyle has called *pastoralia* (p. 31). By *pastoralia* he means any literature that assisted a priest in the cure of souls, whether for his own education or that of the people in his care. The works composing the *pastoralia* are numerous and diverse: there are the academic *summae confessorum* and *summae de casibus conscientiae*, practical manuals of confession, collections of exempla, books of vices and virtues, *artes moriendi*, penitential poems, and bishops' books, to name but a few.

¹⁹⁷McNeill, 414; *Omnis utriusque sexus*, c. 21 (Mansi, 22.1007–10).

Summas

The encyclopedic *summae confessorum* and *summae de casibus conscientiae* were compilations of established teachings and cases of conscience concerning sin, confession, and the role of the priest. *Summas* were enormously popular and went through many editions up to the Reformation.

Early *summas*, the thirteenth-century works of Raymond of Peñaforte and Monaldus de Capo d'Istria, were influential not only for their content but also for their form, which was convenient for reference. The *Raymundina* was arranged in books, chapters, and sections, while the *Monaldina*¹⁹⁸ was novelly organized alphabetically. A handful of *summas* in addition to the *Raymundina* and the *Monaldina* stand out as the most popular of the genre. There was the *Summa confessorum* of John of Freiburg at the end of the thirteenth century; the *Astesana* or *Summa de casibus conscientiae* of Astesanus de Ast at the beginning of the fourteenth; and then two prominent works, the *Summa angelica* of Angelus Carletus de Clavasio, printed first in 1486, and the *Sylvestrina*, or *Summa summarum, que Sylvestrina dicitur*, of Sylvester Prierias Mazzolini, first published in 1514.

Confessional manuals

Another extremely popular form of confessional literature following *Omnis utriusque sexus* was the manual of confession. Unlike *summas*, manuals of confession

¹⁹⁸The *Monaldina*, the work of Monaldus de Capo d'Istria, a Franciscan.

were above all practical handbooks for confessors that contained instructions on how to conduct confessions. Some obviously successful manuals were published throughout Europe in many editions. For example, there were the two brief portions of a longer work by Andreas de Escobar in the fifteenth century: the *Modus confitendi*, which comprised a form of confession, a list of sins, and reflections on repentance and forgiveness, and the *Interrogationes*, or *Interrogations and Teaching by Which a Priest Ought to Question His Penitent: Modus confitendi . . . Interrogationes . . . Canones penitentiales . . . Casus papales et episcopales* (Nuremberg, 1598). A manual by Antoninus of Florence, the *Summula confessionis*, also known as the *Confessionale—Defecerunt* (Strasbourg, 1499) was widely published throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. A collection of works by Jean Charlier de Gerson entitled the *Opus tripartitum*, which included a treatise on confession, was translated into several languages and published with widespread acceptance throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries *LInstruciton des curez pour instruire le simple peuple . . . Opusculum tripartitum* (Paris?, 1510?). From Germany at the beginning of the sixteenth century came Engelhardus Kunhofer's *Confessionale continens tractatum decem preceptorum* (Nuremberg, 1592); Johannes Romming's *Penitentiarius, in tres parteis, contritionem, confessionem, et satisfactionem discretus* (Nuremberg, 1522?); Jodocus Winshemius's *Instituiones succincte in rite faciendam . . . confessionem sacramentalem* (Erfurt, 1516); and the anonymous works, *Peycht Spiegel der sündler* (Nuremberg, 1510) and *Manuale parrochialium sacerdotum* (Nuremberg, 1512). Then there were, among many other works, including various anonymous treatises and manuals, the following: Bartholomaeus de Chaimis,

Interrogatorium siue Confessionale (Valdarfer: Milan, 1474); Jehan Columbi, *Confession generale avec certaines reigles au commencement tresutile: tant a confesseurs que a penitens* (n.p., 1520?); Antoine Faren, *La Pratique de soy bien confesser* (Guillaume LeRoy: Lyon, 1485?); Olivier Maillard, *La Confession generale de frere oliuier maillart* (G. Le Roy: Lyon, 1485?); Jacobus de Clusa, *Confessionale compendiosum et utilissimum* (Nuremberg, 1520); Jacobus Philippus (Bergomensis) Foresti, *Confessionale seu Interrogatorium* (B. Benalium: Venice, ca. 1497).

Assorted Penitential Literature

In addition to the *summas* and manuals of confession, which Boyle calls the first wave of *pastoralia* following the Fourth Lateran Council,¹⁹⁹ there came in the later part of the thirteenth century the second wave, the extremely disparate and broadly based literature whose focus was on the penitent, both clerical and lay. Tentler includes all this literature—poems, sermons, handbooks, and treatises—within the general term “devotional literature” but admits that sharp divisions between pastoral and devotional literature are artificial (pp. 46–47). Rather than divide works artificially between the pastoral and the devotional, it is perhaps more helpful to dispense with any such division.

All of these works served to educate the clergy, the monastic orders, and the laity both on penitence and the sacrament of penance. Following the Fourth Lateran Council, the church had to standardize the practice of the sacrament of penance. The matter of

¹⁹⁹Boyle, 40.

jurisdiction, for example, was of central importance: for if confession was compulsory, who had the authority to hear a sinner's confession? And how could a priest know whether the souls under his cure were making a good confession? Canon 21 of the Council had touched on the matter when it stated as follows:

But if anyone for a right reason wishes to confess his sins to a priest who is not his own, he shall first ask and obtain permission from his own priest, since otherwise the other priest cannot loose or bind him.²⁰⁰

The canon raises a number of questions. What is a "right reason," for example? And who is one's "own" priest? Further, is it mandatory for a priest to grant his permission on hearing a right reason, or is the grant still discretionary? A priest facing a parishioner's request to confess to another priest had scant resource in the canon to make his decision. He needed help. And for that help he could turn to a *summa*, such as the *Sylvestrina*. There he could learn, for instance, that the proper confessor for the king was the bishop of the city in which the seat of government rests. Government officials, by contrast, were to make their confessions to a bishop or curate of the diocese they frequented most often. And townsfolk and other laity confessed to the curate of their domicile.²⁰¹ Further, a priest could turn to the *Supplementum* of Nicolaus de Ausino to

²⁰⁰McNeill, 413.

²⁰¹Tentler, 62–63; *Sylvestrina*, "Confessor I," q. 3, par. 3, I, 153.

find that when a parishioner has asked to confess to a different priest he ought to grant his permission readily, since the person's motives were likely sincere.²⁰² And to determine whether a person's reason for confessing to someone else was right, a priest could find in John Mirk's English verse *Instructions for Parish Priests* (pre-1450) or other confessional handbooks lists of good reasons for the request.²⁰³

Canon 21 also directed the priest to carry out his confessions in the manner of a skilled physician, searching out the circumstances of the sinner and the sin. But physicians do not become skilled in treating disease simply by being told to inquire carefully of their patients. Similarly, a priest does not become an adept confessor by trying to adhere to the general direction of the canon. He needs specific training and concrete counsel on conducting confessions. For assistance he could consult a practical treatise such as Jean Gerson's *On the Art of Hearing Confessions*,²⁰⁴ which would provide him with twenty-five "considerations" to follow. Or, if he were to go about the apparently sensitive business of conducting the confession of a woman, he might follow Mirk's *Instructions*:

²⁰²Nicolaus de Ausimo, *Supplementum summae pisanellae* (Venice, 1489), "Confessio 3," 5, "Confessio 1," 15.

²⁰³John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests* (pre-1450), ed. Edward Peacock, EETS OS no. 31 (London: Kegan Paul, 1868; rev. 1902). *Peycht Spigel*, B8b-C1a; [Poeniteas cito], *Libellus de modo poenitendi*, A6a-b; and [Poeniteas cito], *Confessionale pro scholasticis et aliis* (Cologne, 1490?), A6a. Cited at Tentler, 63–64.

²⁰⁴Jean Gerson, *Tractatus de arte audiendi confessiones*, in *Opera* (Strassburg, Martin Flach, 1494).

But when a wommon cometh to þe,
 Loke hyre face þat þou ne se,
 But teche hyre to knele downe þe by,
 And *sum*-what þy face from hyre þou wry,
 Styllle as ston þer þow sytte,
 And kepe þe welle þat þou ne spytte.
 Koghe þow not þenne, þy þonkes,
 Ny wrynge þou not with þy schonkes,
 Lest heo suppose þow make þat fare,
 For wlatynge þat þou herest þare,
 But syt þou styllle as any mayde
 Tyl þat heo haue alle I-sayde. . . .

(pp. 24–25)

Mirk even provides a script for the priest to follow for the confession.

One of the most important duties a priest had in instructing people on penance was to tell them clearly when they needed to repent. A number of literary devices assisted him, including the important genre known as the manual of vices and virtues. These works were complemented by long penitential poems, such as the Anglo-French *Manuel des pechiez*, often but probably erroneously attributed to William of Waddington; and an English rendition of the *Manuel*, *Handlyng Synne* by Robert Mannyng of Brunne.

Many thirteenth-century English bishops, concerned about the lack of education among the clergy, included in their diocesan statute books instructions to help confessors teach their parishioners in the vernacular the basics of the faith. These bishops' books focussed on preparation for confession and covered the same ground as the manuals of vices and virtues. The manuals, poems, and bishops' books typically expounded on the Ten Commandments, the articles of the Creed, the seven deadly sins, the Pater Noster, the seven sacraments, the seven deeds of mercy, the seven virtues, and the sins of the five senses, a format that continued in penitential treatises well past the Reformation.²⁰⁵

Boyle has suggested that from the late thirteenth century the tendency to concentrate upon vices in penitential literature gives way to an emphasis on the nurturing of virtues for the edification of the individual soul (p. 37). Certainly an expansion of view is evident among the writers of penitential literature, as the flourishing of new genres attests. It seems reasonable to posit, as Boyle does, that the effect of *Omnis utriusque sexus* and of the changed relationship between priests and their penitents was an increasing emphasis on interior penitence, rather than on exterior penance. The complex internal state of a believer is a much richer field for writers than penance, which is outward, physical, and limited. That all sorts of penitential literature should flourish after the institutional emphasis on the believer's inner life is not surprising.

²⁰⁵Lawrence Vaux (1519–1585), *A brief fovrme of confession, instructing all Christian folke how to confesse their sinnes* (Antwerp: I. Foulurum, 1576), STC no. 24625; William Warford, S.J. (1560–1608), *A Briefe Treatise of Pennance With necessary Instructions of rthe due preparation to that Sacrament,, by making of a Generall Confession . . .* 1633, STC no. 25071; Bruno, Vincenzo, S.J. (1532–1594), *A short treatise of the sacrament of penance* (Douay? 1597), STC no. 3942.

There arose in England in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a number of different types of devotional and instructional works touching on penitence, including collections of homilies and sermons, poems, and treatises. These are the forebears of John Donne's sermons on the penitential psalms. Ultimately they are the reason behind his decision to preach on the psalms. These works are fairly narrow in focus but diverse in form, ranging from straightforward exhortations to more colourful songs and lyrics. At times their imagery is memorable, such as in the thirteenth-century homily, *Sawles Ward*, which warns the faithful to guard their souls, their treasures from God, from ghostly thieves, "vnseheliche gasttes wið alle unwreaste þeawes."²⁰⁶

Manuals of vices and virtues

The first and most influential of these manuals was the *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* of Guillaume Peyraut ("Peraldus"). Originally in Latin and intended for the clergy, Peyraut's *Summa* was published in the late 1240s and soon translated into vernaculars across Europe. Other manuals shortly followed, the most enduring of which was the *Somme des Vices et de Vertues*, or the *Somme le roi*, of Laurent of Orleans, confessor to Philip III of France. The *Somme le roi* was adapted into several versions, including the English (Midland) *Book of Vices and Virtues* and the (Kentish) *Ayenbite of Inwyt* of Dan Michel.

²⁰⁶"Sawles Warde," In *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, edited by Richard Morris, EETS OS no. 30 (London: Trübner & Co., 1868), 247.

Sermons and Homilies

In the mid-fourteenth century Dan Jon Gaytrige translated into English a sermon by then Archbishop of York John Thoresby. The translation, which was probably originally in verse, is known either as *Dan Jon Gaytrige's Sermon or the Lay Folks' Catechism*, and "teches how scrite es to be made, and whare-of, and in scrite how many thynges solde be consederide."²⁰⁷ The work follows a familiar model, instructing hearers on the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the seven sacraments, the seven works of mercy, the seven virtues, and the seven deadly sins.

Of a more sophisticated cast is a sermon contained in MS. British Museum Royal 18 B. xxiii, delivered near the end of the fourteenth century to a congregation consisting partly of nobility.²⁰⁸ The preacher's theme is repentance, and he counsels his hearers to turn from their sins to God in true contrition. Three things, he says, hinder people from being sorry for their sins: enjoyment of sin, despair of the seriousness of their sin, and the hope of long life, for which they postpone repentance. But his auditors should not delay to be shriven, he says, for God is merciful. Further, they must ensure that they confess to the right priest, one with power to hear them, or their confession will be worthless. The preacher goes on to outline the manner in which the penitents should

²⁰⁷"Dan Jon Gaytryge's Sermon, that is, Archbishop Thoresby's instruction or catechism for his folk, Englisht," in *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, ed. George G. Perry, EETS OS no. 26 (London: Trubner, 1867; revised, 1889), 1.

²⁰⁸"Sermon No. 43," in *Middle English Sermons edited from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii*, by Woodburn O. Ross, EETS OS no. 209, pp. 261–85 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1940).

make their complete confession, according to the teaching of St. Bonaventure: confessions must be *pura*, that is, “pure, or clene, *with-owten* anny dowbulnes, *with-owten* anny exscuse”; they must be *vera*, true, with no superfluity; they must be *integra*, whole, not partial; and they must be *plena*, full, with all the circumstances surrounding the sins.²⁰⁹ Then, apparently sensing some resistance from his hearers about confessing to a priest, the preacher defends the “excellens of presthod.” He concludes his fourfold apology for priests with the statement that “þer is none erthly poure egall to þe powre of prestehod” (p. 281). He ends his sermon by exhorting his hearers to avoid deadly sin and to go to a priest for shrift.

In the early fifteenth century there was produced the only known manuscript of a collection of homilies known as the *Speculum Sacerdotale*.²¹⁰ The 70 pieces, varying greatly in length, are homilies set for Sundays and festivals throughout the church year. The *Speculum* was intended to provide priests with a store of narrative and expository material for the education of their congregations. Two important chapters, which are styled as an address by a learned priest to his fellow priests and curates, form a complete treatise on penance: Chapter 22, “Of Penaunce,” discusses the theory, Chapter 23, “Penances,” the practice. The speaker seems genuinely concerned about the welfare of the souls under the cure of his auditors. For example, he urges his hearers or readers not to delay in delivering the message of penitence: “ye bretheren *and* fellawes of myn,

²⁰⁹Ibid., 278–79.

²¹⁰*Speculum Sacerdotale*, ed. Edward H. Weatherly, EETS OS no. 200, 63–89 (London: Oxford University Press, 1936).

scilicet, prestis and curettis, e oweþ for to teche *and* infourme oure sugettis that they be no t founden vnredy in tyme of deþ, when-so-euer it comeþ” (p. 67). And he advises them to consider the peculiarities of each parishioner when they assign penances:

And when satisfaccion shal be inioyned, þou moste considre quantite of the synne, quantite of tyme, and how longe the synful hap duryd in his synne. And then worthely after these is satisfaccion to be ekyd or lassid. And it ther moste be considerid the gretnes of compuncion þat is in the repentaunt, for in some wan wyrkeþ more greue o compuncion then to many doþ grete fastyngis *with* some othur penaunce. And vs moste considre his age, his helthe and strengþe of his body *and* membres, and wheþer he be hole *and* laborious or no t, and his substaunce and hauyng, *scilicet*, wheþer he be riche or pore.

(pp. 73–74)

The reason for making such inquiries, it seems, is that not all parishioners cherish having to do penance:

But for in tyme þat is now ther be many that wol no t ne may no t bere so hye penaunce, therefore it behoueþ þe prest for to considre to mannes febilyns [sic] and to tempere here penaunce to be li tter or shorter so that they mowe bere it.

A major contribution to the literature of penance is the series of sermons on the seven psalms by John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. These sermons were first published in 1508 and went through eight editions to 1555. Twombly has commented on the influence of these sermons on Wyatt's work (p. 348). Perhaps the highly portable 1555 octavo edition, the last edition printed, found some currency among believers in Protestant England even though its author was Catholic. For regardless of his ecclesiastical affinity, Fisher was an effective preacher. His sermon on Psalm 51, for example, begins with the following arresting image:

That man were put in great peryll and Jeopardy that shoulde hange ouer a very depe pyt holden uppe by a weake and sclender corde or lyne, in whose bottome shulde be most wood and cruell beastes of euery kynde, abidinge with great desire his falling downe for that entent whan he shall fall downe anone to deuoure hym whiche lyne or corde that he hangeth by shuld be holden by & stayd onely by the handes of that man, vnto whome by hys manyfolde vngentelnes he hath ordred and made hym self as a very enemy. Lyke wyse dere frendes consyder in your selfe . . . under us is a horrible & fearful pit . . .²¹¹

²¹¹John Fisher, *This treatyse concernynge the fruytfull sayinges of Dauyd the kynge and prophete in the seuen penytenyall psalmes. Deuided in .vii. sermons . . .* (London: T. Marshe,

Fisher goes on to draw the parallel between the aggrieved man holding the cord and God, whom we have wounded and abused but who nevertheless holds us firmly by a cord, saving us from falling into the pit of hell. But God is an angry God, Fisher warns his hearers; and we must pacify him. How?

Therefore what shall we wretched sinners do of whome may helpe and succoure be hadde and obtained for us. By what maner of sacrifice maye the wrath and Ire of so great amageste be pacified and made easy. Truly the best remedy is to be swifte in doinge penance for our synnes. He onely may helpe them that be penitent. By that onely sacrifice his Ire is mytigate and swaged chiefly.

(sig. I3^v)

Treatises, Poems, and Hymns

Sermons and homilies were a common way of teaching both clerics and laypersons about penance. But there were other literary means of instruction, such as poems, hymns, books of hours, psalters, and treatises. One such treatise is fourteenth-century *Jacob's Well*, composed for "the cleansing of man's conscience." Although the substance of this work is not original, the central conceit merits attention. Man's body is a "schelde pytt of lust," and the task of the writer is to turn that shallow pit into a "depe

welle," holding sweet, pure water. The pit is now filled with the water of the original curse, and below that lies a deep ooze, the seven deadly sins. In order to turn the pit into a well, the reader needs to clean out the ooze with the "skeet" of contrition, the "skavel" of confession, and the shovel of satisfaction.²¹² The treatise has an earthy tone, as is illustrated by the author's simile regarding a person who flatters a fellow sinner:

whan þou flatryst an-oþer in his synne & in his euyl dede. þou faryst as an hounde, þat lyckyth an-oþer hound, whanne he metyth hum, be-hynde in þe ers, in þat unclene membre. vertewys arn be-forn, synne is be-hynde, & foulere þan þe ers, & þere þou, wyth þi flateryng, kyssest hym þat is in synne.²¹³

There were also the treatises of Richard Rolle, the hermit of Hampole (d. 1349). The hermit makes considerable use of exempla in his writing, admonishing his readers to make good confessions. He tells of the canon from Paris who made imperfect confession and was damned forever. By contrast, he tells the story of the sinful scholar, again from Paris, whose sorrow and shame for his heinous sins was so great that he could not bring himself to confess orally to his priest. When the priest bears a written list of the sins to

²¹²*Jacob's Well, an Englisht Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS OS no. 115, part 1 (London: Kegan Paul, 1900), 1.

²¹³*Jacob's Well*, p. 263.

his Abbott for counsel, the Abbott receives only a blank sheet, because God, accepting the scholar's contrition, had erased his transgressions.²¹⁴

In addition to treatises on penance there were the poems. The English penitential lyric gained currency beginning in the thirteenth century. Patterson has argued that the penitential lyrics arose out of the mysticism of the twelfth century, which had been a response to the dry scholasticism of earlier centuries.²¹⁵ The penitential lyric was simple, practical, direct, and free from abstract theological doctrines. The lyrics intended to address the heart rather than the intellect, and for that reason the French *chansons d'amour* and the narrative *chansons à personnages* were natural models for the English poems. "An Orisoun to our Lady" is an example of an English penitential lyric based on the form of the *chanson d'amour*. The first stanza runs as follows:

On hire is al mi lif ilong,
 Of hwam ich wule singe,
 And herien hire þer-among,
 Heo gon us bote bringe
 Of helle pine þat is strong,
 Heo brohte us blisse þat is long

²¹⁴*English Prose Treatises of Richard Rolle de Hampole*, ed. George G. Perry, EETS OS no. 20 (London: Oxford University Press, 1866; rev. ed, 1921), 6–7.

²¹⁵Frank A. Patterson, *The Middle English Penitential Lyric* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911; rept. New York: AMS Press, 1966).

Al þurh hire chilðinge.
 Ich bidde hire one mi song,
 Heo eoue us god endinge,
 Ðah we don wrong.²¹⁶

The end of the fourteenth century saw the production of four highly significant poems in the penitential tradition: Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" and "Parson's Tale," and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Each work provides us with a view of the sacrament of penance from a different perspective, and consequently each broadens our understanding of penance.

In the complex, shifting allegory of *Piers Plowman* we see a penitent turn his anger at an ineffective pardon into a search for true penance; in Chaucer there is the Pardoner, at once both despicable and pathetic, whose crooked ministry nevertheless manages to bring people to repentance, and the Parson, who hopes that his didactic and learned treatise on "the ful noble wey . . . cleped Penitence"²¹⁷ will lead men and women to Jesus Christ; and in the *Confessio Amantis* Gower employs the frame of a confession to illustrate, sometimes in unexpected fashion, the seven deadly sins.

²¹⁶Ibid., 95.

²¹⁷Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," *Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3d ed., general editor Larry D. Benson (paperback edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 288; ll. 77, 80.

Far from the stature of Langland, Chaucer, or Gower is the fifteenth-century cleric-poet John Audelay. Audelay's fifty-five didactic poems, written in West Midland dialect, include exhortations to follow the Ten Commandments, to keep the Golden Rule, to use one's five senses well, and to confess and be shriven in Lent:

Now e schul schryue oue, I wil oue telle,

Mekele to þe prest e knele adoune;

Hele no þyng bot truly spel

Hov *and* were þat e han done,

Hw[en], to hwom, ouþer God or mon;

Tellis forþ treuly ry t as hit is,

þen þis is treue confession.

*Nolo mortem peccatoris.*²¹⁸

A number of penitential hymns from the fifteenth century have survived in manuscript, including the Northern English hymn to the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus Christ. Throughout the thirteen stanzas of the work the writer begs forgiveness of his sins:

Fadir and Son and Haly Gaste,

²¹⁸*The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. Ella Keats Whiting, EETS OS no. 184 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 127.

Lorde, to þe I make my mone,
 Stedfaste kyng of myghtes maste,
 Alle-weldeand Gode sittand in trone.
 I praye þe, Lorde, þat þou þe haste
 To for-gyffe þat I hafe mysdone.

Lorde, hafe mercy of my syn,
 And brynge me owte of all my care!
 Euylle to doo I couthe neuer blyn,
 I hafe ay wroghte agaynes þi lare.
 Þou rewe one me bathe owte and in,
 And hele me of my woundes sare!²¹⁹

In his 1939 edition of religious lyrics of the fifteenth century Carleton Brown includes several penitential songs, assigning them such titles as "*Parce Mihi, Domine*," "All Ten Commandments I Have Broken," "I Have Lived After My Lust," and "Out of Sin My Soul Unbind."²²⁰ All of these lyrics are confessions to God and requests for

²¹⁹"Hymn to the Trinity, the Virgin, and Jesus Christ," in *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse, edited from Robert Thornton's MS. (cir. 1440)*, by George G. Perry, EETS OS no. 26, (London: Trübner, 1867; rev. 1889), 76.

²²⁰Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 210–30.

mercy, generally following a format that is summarized in the following lines from

“Though I have Been a Wretch, I Hope of Mercy”:

Nowe, lord, I haue shewed þe my freelte & synnes all;

To þe, crist, good ihū, wepyng I crye and calle.

Though thus falsely I haue lyuede, nowe me repent sore.

What I þe pray with sorouful hert, grawnt me nowe gostly,

ffor euermore, lorde ihū crist, trustly I hope in mercy.

(p. 220)

Commentaries On and Paraphrases of the Penitential Psalms

Of course no penitential lyric could ever have the authority or force of the seven penitential psalms. They were central in the religious offices for significant events in the lives of believers, such as the visitation of the sick and funerals. The penitential psalms had always figured in the conduct of penance: they were recited during the formal admission of penitent believers into penance, and confessors regularly prescribed that penitents say them along with the *pater noster* as part of penance. Since at least the eleventh century there had existed a tradition of commenting upon and paraphrasing the seven psalms.

The earliest commentary on the penitential psalms, *In Septem Psalmos Poenitenitales Expositio*, long misattributed to Gregory the Great, is the work of the

eleventh-century monk Héribert de Reggio Emilia of St. Vedasti.²²¹ Peter of Tarentasia, later Pope Innocent V, prepared a commentary on the psalms in the thirteenth century, which survives in a fifteenth-century manuscript.²²² Jean Gerson's works include a commentary on the seven penitential psalms, as do the works of his friend and teacher, Pierre d'Ailly.²²³ Dante paraphrased the penitential psalms in the vernacular, setting them in *terza rima*.²²⁴ And Petrarch paraphrased them in a popular Latin version.²²⁵

In the first decade of the fifteenth century Christine de Pisan completed a French paraphrase of the penitential psalms entitled *Les sept Psaumes allégorisés*.²²⁶ We might best describe Christine's work as an amplification of the psalms: her method is to write

²²¹Angelo Mercati, "L'autore della 'expositio in septem Psalmos poenitentiales,'" *Revue Bénédictine* 31 (1914-19): 250-57.

²²²Royal Library of Brussels MS 1392. See Ruth Ringland Rains, *Les sept psaumes allégorisés of Christine de Pisan* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 33.

²²³J. Gerson, *Opera Omnia*, opera et studio Lud. Ellies du Pin (Antwerpiae: Sumptibus Societatis, 1706), 4:1; Pierre d'Ailly, *Meditationes super Psalmos poenitentiales* [Cologne: Arnold ther Hoernen, 1472?]. Since the works are almost identical, Rains has observed that one of the attributions must be erroneous. Rains, p. 33.

²²⁴"I Sette Salmi Penitenziali trasportati alla volgar poesia," *Opera Minori di Dante Alighiere*, annotato e illustrato da Pietro Fraticelli, Sesta edizione (Firenze: Barbera, 1902), 1:335-74.

²²⁵Petrarch's paraphrase went through six editions in the sixteenth century and was translated into Danish and Icelandic in 1593. See Cornell University Library, *Catalogue of the Petrarch Collection bequeathed by Willard Fiske*, compiled by Mary Fowler (London: Oxford University Press, 1916), 59-61.

²²⁶For a modern edition see Ruth Ringland Rains, ed., *Les sept psaumes allégorisés of Christine de Pisan* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1965).

out a text from the psalm and follow it with a prayer that elaborates the thought in the text. Her treatment of Psalm 6 begins as follows:

I. Sire, ne m'argues en ta fureur, et ne me corriges en ton ire.

Comme je congnoisce que la multitude de mes tres orribles peches
a desservi la punicion de ta justice! Mais tu, Sire, qui ne veulx la
mort du pecheur, ains te plaist que il se convertisse et vive,
regardes de l'ueil de ta pitié ma miserable fragilité, et me rejoings a
toy par l'integrité de ta sainte misericorde: si ne me seuffres perir,
mon doux redempteur en qui est m'esperance.²²⁷

At roughly the same time as Christine's paraphrase there appeared in England an English paraphrase of the penitential psalms. The poet Thomas Brampton has traditionally been regarded as the author of a metrical paraphrase of the penitential psalms dating to 1414. This work, though somewhat like Christine's in the way that it amplifies the psalm text, is closer to what we might regard as a paraphrase than Christine's *Les sept psaumes allégorisés*. Brampton clearly does not let his passions run as free as does Christine, as we can observe in the following extract, again from Psalm 6:

Domine, ne in furore tuo arguas me: neque in ira tua corripias me.

²²⁷Rains, 84–85.

Lord! will thou no t me schame ne schende,
 Whan thou schalt be in thi fersnesse,
 To dredfull dome whan I schal wende?
 Helde no t thi wretthe on my frealnesse,
 Thi derworthi childeryn whan thou schalt blesse,
 And bydde hem come to blysse with thé:
 Mi synfull werkys more and lesse,
 “Ne reminiscaris Domine!”²²⁸

The sixteenth century in England saw an unprecedented flourishing of renditions of all the psalms and, to a much less extent, of the seven penitential psalms. Psalters, the principal books of private devotion, appeared in all sorts of variations. There were psalters that contained only the text of psalms, psalters that included expositions on the psalms, psalters that came with prayers and meditations, psalters that comprised only metrical psalms, and psalters that included catalogues referring the reader to a specific psalm appropriate to the circumstances of his or her life.²²⁹ Above all there was the phenomenally popular Sternhold and Hopkins editions of metrical psalms, which saw over 160 editions in the ninety years following Thomas Sternhold’s first publication of

²²⁸[Thomas Brampton], *A Paraphrase on the Seven Penitential Psalms, in English Verse*, edited with notes by William Henry Black, in Percy Society vol. 7, *Early English Poetry, Ballads, and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages*, pp. 21-70 (London: Percy Society, 1842).

²²⁹See Helen C. White, *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 31–52.

nineteen psalms in 1549. But the psalter that broke the ground for all the various psalters of the sixteenth century was the first English version of the psalms, George Joye's 1530 *The Psalter of David in Englishe purely and faithfully translated aftir the texte of Feline*. Joye's translation was held out as being from "the Ebrue verite"; in fact, as he admitted, Joye translated the psalms from Martin Bucer's 1529 Latin translation of the Hebrew text. Apparently, however, this derivative rendering did not detract from the popularity of Joye's psalms, which went through four editions in their first decade of publication.

Rivkah Zim has noted that from the date of publication of Joye's translation in 1530 until 1601, more than seventy new English versions of the psalms were printed.²³⁰ Some of these were versions of the penitential psalms, which ranged from commentaries and expositions on one penitential psalm, usually Psalm 51, to treatments of all seven psalms.

There were several more paraphrases of the penitential psalms. For example, there was William Marshall's exposition "after the maner of a contemplacyon" upon Psalm 51 (1534); Wyatt's metrical paraphrase of the seven penitential psalms (1549); Francis Seager's selection of English metrical psalms, which includes three of the penitential psalms (1553); John Knox's exposition of a portion of Psalm 6, which contains a new translation of some verses of the psalm (1556); John Coxe's (or Cockis's) English translation of Wolfgang Musculus's Latin commentary on Psalm 51 (1565-6?); Thomas Becon's *The Pomaunder of Prayer*, a collection of the penitential psalms and

²³⁰Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer 1535-1601* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2.

prayers deriving from them (c.1567); Thomas Potter's translation of Luther's 1533 exposition of Psalm 130 (1576); Abraham Fleming's "augmented and amended" English version of Savonarola's exposition on Psalm 51 (1578); a translation, likely by John Stubbs, of Theodore Beza's French meditations on the seven psalms and Psalm 1 (1582); William Hunnis's metrical *Seven Sobs of a Sorrowfull Soule for Sinne* (1583); a collection of William Byrd's songs that included new metrical versions of the seven psalms (1589); Richard Verstegan's *Odes in Imitation of the seaven penitential psalmes* (1601); and two lost works, Spenser's *The seven Psalmes, &c.* and John Stockwood's 1586 translation of Wolfgang Musculus's *Exposition on the 51. Psalme*.²³¹

²³¹George Joye, *The Psalter of David in Englishe purely and faithfully translated aftir the texte of Feline: every Psalme havynge his argument before declarynge brefly thentente & substance of the wholl Psalme* [Antwerp, Martin de Keyser, 1530], *STC*² 2370. Other edns [1532?], *STC*² 2371, and [1542?] 2374. Joye, *Dauids Psalter diligently and faithfully translated by George Joye with breif Arguments before every Psalme declaringe the effecte therof* ([Antwerp], 'Martyne Emperowr,' 1534). English prose translation from Ulrich Zwingli's Latin (1532), *STC*² 2372.

[William Marshall], *An exposition after the maner of a contemplacyon upon the .li. psalme called Miserere mei Deus* (London, John Bydel for Wyllyam Marshall, 1534). Later editions: *STC*² 21789.6 (Rouen, 1536); *STC*² 21790 (Paris, 1538); *STC*² 21797; *STC*² 21789.3, formerly 21795. Variant titles (as *STC*²): *An exposytion upon . . .* [1535?], *STC*² 21789.4; *A goodly exposycyon . . .* (c. 1540), *STC*² 21793; *A meditacyon . . .* (1536), *STC*² 21799; *An other meditation* [1555?], *STC*² 21799.2.

Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Certayne psalmes chosen out of the psalter of David commonlye called thee .vii. penyentiaill psalmes, drawen into englyshe meter by Sir Thomas Wyat Knyght, wherunto is added a prologe of the auctore before every psalme, very pleasaunt & profettable to the godly reader* (London, Thomas Raynald and John Harryngton, 1549), *STC*² 2726.

Francis Seager, *Certayne Psalmes select out of the Psalter of Dauid, and drawen into Englyshe Metre, wyth Notes to euery Psalme in iiij parts to Synge* (London: William Seres, 1553), *STC*² 22134.

John Knox [*a percel of the .vi. Pssalme expounded.*] [London? John Day? 1554], Completed by 1556? and printed as *An exposition uppon the syxt Psalme of David, wherein is declared hys crosse, complayntes and prayers* (STC² 15074.6) Anr. edn. (rev.) *A Fort for the afflicted. Wherin are ministred many notable & excellent remedies against the stormes of tribulation*, ed. Abraham Fleming (London, 1580), STC² 15074.8; STC² 15074.4. Other edns. STC² 15074.6, STC² 15074.8, formerly 15072.

[John Coxe (Cockis)], *The Comentarye or exposition of Wolfegang Musculus uppon the li. psalme. Newlye translated out of Latine into Englishe the xii. of December* (London, R. Serle for W. Lobley, 1565-6?), STC² 18307.5.

Thomas Becon, *The Pomaunder of Prayer* (London, John Daye, c. 1567), STC² 1747.5 formerly 1745.

Thomas Potter, *An Exposition upon the Cxxx. Psalme, Setting forth the comfortable doctrine of our justification and peace in Christ. Written by M. Luther: and nowe newlye translated for the comfort of afflicted consciences* (London, Hugh Singleton, 1577), STC² 16979.3, formerly 20137.

Abraham Fleming, *A Pithie Exposition upon the .51. Psalme intituled, Miserere mei Deus, &c. also a godly meditation, upon the .31. Psalme, intituled, In te Domine speravi. Written by Hierome of Ferrarie: And now newly augmented and amended, by Abraham Fleming* (London, Thomas Dawson, 1578), STC² 21797, formerly also 14504.

[John Stubbs], *Christian meditations upon eight Psalmes of the Prophet David. Made and newly set forth by Theodore Beza. Translated out of Frenche, for the common benefite, into the vulgare tonge by I.S.* (London, Christopher Barker, 1582), STC² 2004. Anr. edn. [1583?] STC² 2005.

William Hunnis, *Seven Sobs of a Sorrowfull Soule for Sinne. Comprehending those seven Psalmes of the Princelie Prophet David, commonlie called Poenitentiall: framed into a forme of familiar praiers, and reduced into meeter by William Hunnis, one of the Gentlemen of hir Majesties honourable Chapell, and maister to the children of the same. Whereunto are also annexed his Handfull of Honisuckles; the Poore Widowes Mite; a Dialog betweene Christ and a sinner; divers godlie and pithie ditties; with a Christian confession of and to the Trinitie; newlie printed and augmented* (London, Henrie Denham, 1583), STC² 13975. Other edns. (1585, 1587, 1589, 1592, 1597, 1600 etc.), See STC² 13975.5ff.

William Byrd, *Songs of sundrie natures, some of gravitie, and others of myrth, fit for all companies and voyces. Lately made and composed into Musicke of 3.4.5. and 6. parts: and published for the delight of all such as take pleasure in the exercise of that Art. By William Byrd, one of the Gentlemen of the Queenes Majesties honorable Chappell* (London, Thomas East, 1589), STC² 4256. Texts and music reprinted in *The English Madrigalists*, ed. E.H. Fellowes, xv

Another significant prose work on the penitential psalms in the sixteenth century is Theodore Beza's *Chrestiennes Méditations* on eight psalms, first published in Geneva, in French, in 1582. The same year John Stubbs translated Beza's work into English under the title *Christian meditations upon eight Psalmes of the Prophet David*. The piece is reminiscent of Christine de Pisan's *Les sept psaumes allégorisés*: a portion of each psalm is set out (in the margin in Stubbs's translation), and accompanying it is a meditation on the verse. The meditation on Psalm 51:7— "Purge me with hyssope, & I shalbe cleane: wash me, & I shalbe whiter then snowe"—is as follows:

7. Behold on the one side a thousande maledictions, which I haue notably deserved: on the other part an infinite deapth of mercies, whereof thou hast giuen mee sure pledges in thy lawe [of] sacrifices. For it is not in wayne, nor by mans inuention, that in solemne sacrifices, blood is sprinckled with hysope. I haue bene wet therewith, O Lord, by [t]hy

(rev. P. Brett) (1962).

Richard Verstegan [Richard Rowlands], *Odes in Imitation of the seaven penitential psalmes, with sundry other Poems and ditties tending to devotion and pietie* ([Antwerp, A. Conincx], 1601), *STC*² 12407, sig. F1^r-H1^r; *STC*² 21359.

Edmund Spenser, "The seven Psalmes, &c." attributed to Spenser by his publisher and printer William Ponsonby in "The Printer to the Gentle Reader" included in Ponsonby's edition of *Complaints. Containing sundrie small Poemes of the worlds Vanitie . . . by Ed. Sp.* (London, 1591).

Wolfgang Musculus, *Exposition on the 51. Psalme*, translated by John Stockwood. Printed for John Harrison the younger, 1586. Title included in Andrew Maunsell's *The First Part of the Catalogue of English printed Bookes* (London, 1595), 75a.

commaundement, but returning to my foule uncleannesse, I am verely become leproous within: And therefore Lord, take that very hysope, which is the sacrament of the liuely power & force of that sacrifice so long looked for, and wash me with the true blood of Christ, which shalbe shedde in the ordayned time, for cleansing of all iniquitie. Wash me, sprinkle me, and rubbe me on all sides with this hysope & this blood, the alone very meane to doe away the loathsome and leproous blotte of sinne: so shall I become neate and white as snowe, whereas nowe I am thus vile and stinking before thee and the world.²³²

In “The Translatours Epistle” preceding the work, Stubbs explains why he chose to make Beza’s meditations available to English readers. Besides providing an exposition of the psalms, he says,

. . . it is singularly medicinable to wounded and cast downe consciences, who after their laborsome combate with sinne, and profitable humiliation

²³²[John Stubbs], *Christian meditations upon eight Psalmes of the Prophet David. Made and newly set forth by Theodore Beza. Translated out of Frenche, for the common benefite, into the vulgare tonge by I.S.* (London, Christopher Barker, 1582), sig. E5^v-E6^v. For attribution to Stubbs, see Halkett and Laing, *A Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publications in the English Language*, 3rd ed. 1475–1640, edited by J. Horden (Harlow and London, 1980)C148. *STC*² 2004; anr edn [1583?] *STC*² 2005.

therethrough, may againe by these sweete Meditations rise with joy,
 finding happie issue of there troubles.²³³

In other words, despite the fact that Protestants had rejected Roman Catholic teaching on penance in the sixteenth century, they still recognized the value of penitence. To spurn Rome's teachings on penance was not to spurn the requirement for penitence. Despite their differences with the Church of Rome, therefore, Protestants carried on the tradition of penitential literature. Their literature expresses a different understanding of repentance and reconciliation; unlike earlier penitential literature, for example, there is no constant admonition for Christians to be "shriven." But their work is still penitential.

Some treatments of the penitential psalms stand out from the rest. For example, many scholars have focussed on Wyatt's metrical seven psalms. Wyatt introduces each of his psalm paraphrases with a dramatic verse prologue that serves as a context for David's writing of the psalm. In the first prologue, Love touches David's senses and inflames his desire. The familiar story of his adultery with Bathsheba follows, but then Wyatt removes him to a "dark Cave / Within the grownd wherin he myght hym hyde." There, while playing on his harp, offering "his plaintes his sowle to save,"²³⁴ David pours out his psalms.

²³³Sig. A2^{r-v}.

²³⁴Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Collected poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, eds. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), 100.

Robert G. Twombly has called this work “the most dramatic and least dogmatic, most original and least sectarian religious poem of its age.” But Wyatt’s psalms, he writes, contain “disjointed and unfinished ideas” and are the “dramatic working out of stiff emotional and intellectual dilemma.” The poems are not didactic and display a “nonhomiletic intent.”²³⁵

Unlike Twombly, H.A. Mason and Barbara Lewalski have regarded Wyatt’s paraphrase as being a deeply personal work, written either while he was awaiting arrest or while he was languishing in prison. Mason is quite convinced that we must read the poem in the context of a personal crisis on Wyatt’s part: “no help has been forthcoming. . . to enable us to answer the principal question posed by these poems: what crisis are they a response to?”²³⁶ And Lewalski states that in the descants of complaints “Wyatt’s voice and situation merge with the Psalmist’s.”²³⁷

In contrast to all of these writers, Rivkah Zim maintains that Wyatt’s poem is didactic, “an exemplum for the instruction of his readers, not a model for their devotions.” And as for attempts to place Wyatt himself within the work, Zim states, “There is no evidence to suggest that Wyatt sought to identify himself with the persona of David. The poem is not presented by Wyatt as a vehicle for a personal statement of his

²³⁵Robert G. Twombly, “Thomas Wyatt’s Paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms of David,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12 (1970–71): 345–80. See pp. 346, 356–57.

²³⁶H. A. Mason, *Sir Thomas Wyatt: A Literary Portrait* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1986), 159.

²³⁷Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 237.

own, nor has it been preserved as such" (pp. 70–71). Whether or not we view Wyatt's work as didactic, or whether we contend that Wyatt identifies himself with David, Wyatt's paraphrase of the seven penitential psalms remains a major contribution to English penitential literature in the sixteenth century.