The Shape and Vehicle of Puritan Hermeneutics

ROBERT A. COUGHENOUR

INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics by present day definition is "the art of interpretation." The word is merely a transliteration of the Greek verb ἡρμηνεύω with the suffix necessary to make it a noun. The basic meaning in classical Greek was "to explain or interpret." ἡρμηνεύω did have a second meaning which was simply "to proclaim or discourse on." The words Biblical Hermeneutics can therefore mean either the art of interpreting the Bible or the proclamation of, or discourse on, a biblical text. Present day use of the word is often limited to the former. The Puritans in New England from 1630 to the end of the 17th century practiced the discipline in both senses. Whether they recognized these two meanings is not of importance to us. That they did interpret and did proclaim their interpretation is the subject of this paper.

In every historical period in which the Bible came under scrutiny special influences gave a certain cast to hermeneutical method. In the Old Testament we can already detect a certain attitude toward the written texts. The chronicler and the priests cast their own views into the traditions they had received and the result was an "idealized history." The rabbis of Talmudic times in an effort to find sanction for their laws conceived the Torah as already containing what they wished to promulgate. Philo and his cohorts in Hellenistic Judaism resorted to allegorical interpretation with a view to making the Old Testament palatable to the urbane Greeks. The church fathers continued in the same pattern, following Philo.

During each of the foregoing periods a literalist strand of interpretation insisted on a purer, more pristine, less fanciful approach to the Bible. This historical, literal interpretation captured the attention of the Reformers and for reasons so well known as to need no presentation of evidence here. The Puritans of New England in the 17th century also were influenced by a set of circumstances and ideas which inevitably gave shape to their hermeneutics. Part I deals with these factors: 1) the Puritan view of the Bible inherited from the Reformation; 2) their general theological framework which could be described as Calvinistic-with-a-twist; 3) the temper of the times; and 4) the individual interpreter, his background and his particular capacities and abilities. Part II treats of the Vehicle of Puritan Hermeneutics: The Sermon. Here the word hermeneutics is used in the second sense, the interpreted proclamation of a biblical text. This discussion will involve the preparation, form, style, delivery, and influence of Puritan sermons.

THE SHAPE OF PURITAN HERMENEUTICS

Possibly it would be helpful if each and every generation of men could come to a fresh reading and fresh understanding of the Bible unencumbered by the past. To do
so, however, would sever one from the insights of nearly two thousand years and compel again the painful stumbling of men in their efforts to get an initial "fix" on the truth. Moreover, it would be naive to suppose that such a condition would ever be possible, even if it would be desirable.

The Puritans, like every other group of believers in and after the first century, were the inheritors of the "truth" of the Christian faith. Also, like every other group of believers, they brought to the task of interpretation their own presuppositions, their own theology, their own needs. Present day scholars must attempt to understand their peculiar position and their prejudices in an effort to discard what seduces from the truth, and to emulate those things which did in fact lead to the truth.

The Puritan View of the Bible

While the Westminster Confession of Faith was not drawn up until 1643, some thirteen years after the Puritans settled in Massachusetts Bay Colony, there is no doubt that the original settlers would have subscribed to its statement concerning the Bible, as their descendants actually did.

The Holy Scriptures ... are the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.... The authority of the Holy Scripture.... dependeth not on the testimony of any man or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) and the author thereof.... Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness, by and with the Word, in our hearts.... Nothing is at any time to be added—whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.... The Church is finally to appeal to them.... The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself....

"If the word speak for thee, it is no matter though all men and Angels speak against thee: and if the word condemns thee, it is no matter who speaks for thee." The Bible is flat: it cannot be questioned: it alone is authority. Thus with absolute conviction the Puritans believed the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. The Bible is God's declared will for the world and for men's lives. Going beyond matters of faith and religious practice in the church, the Puritans believed that all matters of daily existence "ranging from a person's haircut to his choice of a ruler, could be established definitely by consulting God's Word." More importantly, it was only from the Bible that men could receive the assurance of salvation.

The teaching of the Bible was, therefore, of primary importance. It became a mine of all sorts of "substances" ranging from natural science to advice to the love-lorn. Any opinion on any matter, whether theological, moral, political, or practical, had value only in relation to its support by definite passages from the Holy Word.

The Puritan view is not simply a Bible fundamentalism. These men, standing as they did in the Reformed tradition, recognized the work of the Holy Spirit as interpreter of the Scriptures, as is indicated in the above statement from the Westminster Confession of Faith, "... the inward work of the Holy Spirit." Since the Bible is inspired by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is also its interpreter in the hearts of men.
In his sermon on *The Barren Fig Trees Doom*, Samuel Willard confirms this view when he speaks of the “Spirit of God often using resemblances such as this.”

Moreover, not only the Bible but “Whatsoever is drawn out of the Scripture by just consequence and deduction is as well the word of God, as that which is an express Commandment or Example in Scripture.” The Puritan view of the Bible as authority for man’s life might well be described not merely by the Reformation “Word-Spirit” designation but by a trilogy of “Word-Spirit-Logic” as the prime authority. This, of course takes the Puritan view somewhat beyond that of the Reformers whom they follow.

The Bible was, therefore, the book to be studied at great length and depth and propounded to the people on every possible occasion. The result was that every sermon, every lecture of the Puritan interpreter not merely quoted or alluded to the Bible but was based squarely upon and supported not from one but from many places within it.

The General Theological Framework of the Puritans

A common but erroneous historical judgment passed along to us is that New England Puritanism is merely American Calvinism. To be sure there are similarities of theological ideas which might give rise to this overstatement of the relation. The Puritans’ view of God’s sovereignty is surely Calvinistic, as was their view that infants ought to be baptized and their view of the Scriptures. Far more significant are the deviations from Calvin which the Puritans espoused. The Puritan form of church government was Congregational rather than Presbyterian. In Calvin there was less concern for personal salvation than we find among the Puritans. Some later Puritans qualified predestination with their doctrine of preparation which led inevitably to Arminianism. There was a wide difference in their views of the sacraments. Especially this is true of the Lord’s Supper. In Calvinism the real presence of Christ is affirmed. The Puritans took the view of Zwingli that the sacrament is merely a memorial of Christ’s passion. In Puritanism a closed communion was held for those who were “converted” and in the covenant of grace, while Calvin advocated communion for all who would come understandingly. Their millenial views were different. Puritans were largely pre-millenial while Calvin, following Augustine was, insofar as he taught about it at all, a-millenial. They differed also in their attitudes toward human reason, natural theology, and the ability to know of one’s own salvation. It is clear, then, that it is not accurate to say that the Puritans were merely American Calvinists.

These differences from Calvin do not remove the Puritans from a general Reformation background. Puritans did acknowledge and adopt much that the Reformers had taught.

The basic platform of both the religious and political structuring of their colony was what has been called covenant or federal theology. This theology, propounded by the teachers of the founders of the New England colony, William Ames, John Preston, William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, and others, was wrought out of controversy with Pelagianism and Rome on the one hand, and with Arminianism and Anti-
nomianism on the other, but its formulators "found it" ("invented" it according to Ramist logic?) in the Scriptures and from some hints in the writings of early reformers.

The following quotations will help clarify the meaning of covenant theology and especially the covenant of grace:

It has pleased the great God to enter into a treaty and covenant of agreement with us his poor creatures the articles of which agreement are here comprised. God, for his part undertakes to convey all that concerns our happiness, upon our receiving of them, by believing on him. Every one in particular that recited these articles from a spirit of faith makes good this condition.

God conveys his salvation by way of covenant, and he doth it to those only that are in covenant with him. This covenant must every soul enter into, every particular soul must enter into a particular covenant with God, out of this way there is no life.

As party to this covenant a man must be converted by hearing the word preached, show the evidence of his conversion, keep the law and thus receive the assurance of his salvation.

The Puritans brought this covenant framework to their task of interpreting the Bible. A clear example is found in Samuel Willard's book of sermons entitled The Barren Fig Trees Doom. Ostensibly this is a series interpreting the parable of Jesus recorded in Luke 13:6-9. Really, it is the extended presentation of the covenant of God, his visible church, the advantage of church membership, etc., all of which topics are components in the federal framework.

The major doctrines which appear again and again in the interpretations of the Puritans are the Federalist tenets: doctrine of God, doctrine of Jesus Christ (a one line summary of their presentation is "Preaching Christ by Christ to the Praise of Christ"), Doctrines of personal salvation, baptism, and hell and heaven.

The Temper of the Times

Perhaps overmuch has been written and said about the frontier aspect of New England history. Certainly the Pilgrims nearly a decade earlier had faced privations and difficulties more trying than those of the Puritans in the 1630's and following. The Jeremiads of the later period (1660's and 70's) recite long lists of their woes, set down to prove a point to be sure, that God had rained these upon them for breach of covenant, but the woes were concrete enough nonetheless: "crop failures, epidemics, grasshoppers, caterpillars, torrid summers, arctic winters, Indian wars, hurricanes, shipwrecks, accidents . . . ." All these were certain to make their impression on the lives of the interpreters and to wend their way into the interpretations they proclaimed, and inevitably they did.

The intellectual temper of the 17th century also had its influence on these men and what they wrote out of the Scriptures. As historians of the period show, the men trained in England and later at Harvard College were weaned on Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. The logic of Peter Ramus and the rhetoric of Omer Talon, a follower of Ramus, loomed large in the curriculum. Ramist logic can be briefly characterized by the two words dichotomous and utilitarian.
Samuel E. Morrison's *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England* offers great praise for the vitality of their intellectual traditions. A love of "humane letters" was fostered in the grammar schools and college: Cicero, Virgil, Terence, Ovid; Homer, Hesiod and Theocritus. The classics flourished in New England under Puritanism.¹⁷

The political concerns of establishing a "covenant people," framing its laws, conducting its General Court, all formed a background in which the interpreter gathered his tools around him and proceeded to his task. Much more can be and has been written on Puritan political doctrine.¹⁸ In sum, the political governmental situation contributes with the "wilderness" and the intellectual life to the temper of the times and together formed another factor giving the shape of Puritan hermeneutics.

**The Individual Interpreter**

It is axiomatic that each man is an individual: a person with his own temperament, likes, dislikes, attitudes, and abilities. Given a somewhat stereotyped, formalized education, similar financial circumstances, living conditions alike, individuality still asserts itself. It is true that there was a basic uniformity to Puritan hermeneutics, but within this there was possibility for individuality. The obvious need not be labored. The final product of the interpreter, his proclamation of the interpretation, bears the indelible stamp of the one who interprets.

These then are four of the configurations in Puritan New England which gave the Shape of Puritan Hermeneutics: a particular view of the Bible; a Federalist theology; a peculiar temper of the times including the rigors of living in a frontier situation, intellectual influences and political problems; and finally, the individuality of each interpreter.

**THE VEHICLE OF PURITAN HERMENEUTICS: THE SERMON**

The Importance of the Sermon

In the several periods of the history of biblical interpretation prior to the period of the Puritans in New England, there had been many literary and oral media through which the interpreters had conveyed their views. For Paul, the apostle, disputation in the synagogue was an important method and the epistle was his medium *par excellence*. For others the theological treatise formed the main way to inform and instruct. Poetic forms of one sort or another sometimes were used. The Puritans' interpretations of the Scriptures were displayed in the sermon. The sermon was not their invention, to be sure, nor were they limited to it for expression of their views, but sermonic form was the most important of all vehicles for the Puritan preachers. Samuel E. Morison puts it this way:

> With an intellectual class so largely clerical in occupation and a public keenly interested in religion, a preponderant part of the intellectual energy of New England was expended on sermons. Puritans cultivated pulpit oratory as a fine art...¹⁹

There was ample opportunity for the Puritan preacher to develop his "art of interpretation." Sermons were delivered twice on Sunday, at the Wednesday or
Thursday “lecture,” on election days for both civil and military offices, and on special fast days declared by the General Court of the colony. Morison observes, perhaps humorously or sardonically, “Throughout the century the New England people never seemed to have enough sermons.”

The Preparation, Form, Style and Delivery of the Sermon

How is a sermon conceived? What preparation is made? What sources are consulted? What options does the parson have in selection and arrangement of the materials? How does he gather his illustrations? Such are the questions which come to mind when dealing with this topic.

Let us take as an example, Samuel Willard. This gentleman was born in 1640 in Concord; educated at Harvard College; graduated in 1659. Later he became Vice President of the college. He served as parson in Groton for about twelve years and then served at Old South Church in Boston. He was third after the Mathers in production of printed sermons. Let us assume that his background was more or less typical of his colleagues. No doubt he had certain individual abilities which brought him to prominence and some measure of success in his endeavors. Let us assume further that without pressing the situation overmuch one should get some fairly accurate answers to our questions posed previously. I have chosen his Sermon I from the series of sixteen sermons entitled The Barren Fig Trees Doom, printed in 1691 by Benjamin Harris and John Allen in Boston.

Imagine that the scene is Boston, Old South Church. Parson Willard is about to launch into his preparation for the coming sermon. It is Tuesday, early in the morning. About him on the shelves in his study are various tomes. If one may judge from the libraries of others of his day, his library consists of between 450 and 600 books, pamphlets, and sermons. Among these are to be found Bibles in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and English; William Perkins’ Art of Prophesying, a handbook on preaching; Peter Ramus’ Dialecticae, the foremost book on logic of the day; Omer Talon’s Rhetoricae, the book on rhetoric based on Ramist logic; Alexander Richardson’s The Logician’s School Master; William Ames’ The Marrow of Sacred Divinity, a book on covenant theology; John Downname’s The Christian Warfare; commentaries on the Bible by Calvin and Luther; and other assorted works including college texts, classics and grammars, and perhaps a book on medicine.

He begins in lengthy prayer including intercessions for his people whose lives are in his care as well as petitions for his own preparation for the coming sermon. He reflects on a situation which has presented itself in his congregation. There are those, he has observed, who believe they are going to be saved because they are within God’s covenant but who are not really living up to the contract. He must warn them that the matter is not quite as simple as that. How does he proceed?

His reading in the New Testament brings him to Luke 13:6-9. Settling on this passage, he begins the study of it in detail. It would simply not occur to Parson Willard to preach extemporaneously on the passage. He would remember John Eliot’s words that sermons were “beaten oyl” for the sanctuary and thus, properly admonished, would prepare assiduously. He might also bring to mind William Perkins’ instructions
that he "proceed to the reading of the Scriptures ... using a grammaticall, rhetoricall and logicall analysis, and the help of the rest of the Arts." 25

Realizing from his detailed study that the passage is filled with difficulty but also with doctrine, Willard decides that the passage merits a series of sermons rather than one single sermon. Not perhaps so many as John Wareham's twenty-seven sermons on Romans 5:1 or Thomas Hooker's whole year of preaching on Acts 2:27, or certainly not as much as Thomas Shepard's four years on Matthew 25:1-13, 26 but a series, perhaps, of sixteen sermons. Willard might have chosen an Old Testament passage had he been inclined to. Many did apparently choose Old Testament texts more often than New Testament texts. The Old Testament was quoted far more often than the New in the body of the sermon. Thomas Shepard's sermon Wine for Gospel Wantons has a total of twenty-one quotations only three of which are from the New Testament, 27 and his text was from Jeremiah 13:12, 13. Increase Mather's sermon Solemn Advice, a sermon on Ecclesiastes 11:9, had a total of thirty-two quotations, twenty-four of which were from the Old Testament. 28

But having chosen the Lukan text, Willard finds it necessary to clarify it for his hearers. What would be most appropriate for this passage? He might set the sermon in its context. John Davenport did this when he identifies Acts 2:36 as part of Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Knowledge of Christ. 29 Or he might give a brief survey of the historical background as Samuel Hooker did on Hosea 10:12 in his sermon Righteousness rained from Heaven. Or he might simply "open" the meaning of certain words in the text.

Deciding on the first option, Willard writes, setting the parable in its context:

These verses are set down after the report brought to Jesus of a bloody act of Pilate's on some Galileans and that they were censuring others and not applying to themselves his words. Jesus instructs them about the proper use of such Providences—reproving (sic!) them for rash judgment in concluding those to have been unparalleled sinners... to consider themselves and how much they deserved it (the judgment of God)—to use it as a Call to Repentance—and if not ruin and destruction would ere long fall upon them... and farther to set forth the great peril they were under, he subjoyns this Parable—next it was meat to show Jews upon what a precipice they then stood—but because what is written is written for our instruction there is a profitable improvement to be made of it by us.

One might assume this to be a sufficient beginning, especially since we are told that Introductions are anathema in Puritan sermons. 30 But Parson Willard continues with a comparatively lengthy (covering pp. 3-6) instruction on how one ought to understand parables before he begins with Doctrines. He mentions in conclusion that what he has done is to give his hearers some "introductory glances" at the parable (p. 5).

Willard then proceeds to the next order of business, the "raising" of his doctrines from the text. Now he has a variety of ways in which he might do this if Babette Levy is correct in her analysis of Puritan sermonizing. 31

1) He might ignore the rest of the chapter and concentrate only on the text, as Samuel Danforth did in his sermon Cry of Sodom when he used only the charge of God to the Sodomites while ignoring Abraham's intervention and God's promised mercy:
or 2) he might simply reword the text to arrive at the doctrine; or 3) he might, had he used an Old Testament text, given it a New Testament sense as Richard Mather had done with Genesis 15:6 when he "gave the doctrine to be," "That is, by the Word and Promises concerning salvation by Christ..."; or 4) he might, if the occasion had warranted it, have chosen a line from Scripture (regardless of context) that suited the occasion as did Samuel Arnold on Acts 13:36 in his sermon *David Serving his Generation*.

What he does is to "raise" the doctrine thus: "The Visible Church is God's Vineyard," and to say,

The Spirit of God is pleased very often to use this resemblance to express it by. The word (vineyard) properly signifies a place where vines are planted and husbanded; but in the common usage of it, is extended to a place for Vines, Figs and Olives, all of which they were wont of old to Plant in their vineyards, and so hath God his; that is his Visible Church:

Here two things...

Willard now proceeds to take the parable allegorically using: vineyard for visible church; husbandman as God; manure for grace; winepress for judgment, and so on. This turn of events is rather surprising since we are thoroughly instructed that the Puritan minister "was interested only in the literal meaning of his text." 32

While Willard is still at work getting the doctrine "raised" out of the parable, let us take an "aside." Perry Miller asserts that Ramist logic is practically synonymous with Puritanism. In Ramist logic one presses quickly on to utilitarian matters. What is the "use" of the doctrine? If Willard had continued at this point to "uses," he might have left his hearers wondering about the appropriateness of his text or the truth of his doctrines. Perhaps he is influenced by teaching other than Ramus or Perkins, both of whom teach "Doctrina and Ue" as the form a sermon takes. Actually in selecting the form and style of his sermon, Willard has more choices than the two which Perry Miller would allow him.

Let us write first of style. One is tempted to suggest that Professor Miller succumbed to his own presentation of Ramist logic when he divided the possibilities for selection of preaching style into only two: 1) The Anglican (metaphysical), or 2) The Puritan (Plain Style). 33 J.W. Blench, in his study of English preaching, clearly notes three styles in use in England just before the Puritan era (1558-1603) naming them: 1) the plain, but uncolloquial, 2) the colloquial, and 3) the ornate style. 34 Further, he sub-classifies three types within the plain style for all of which he gives ample documentation.

Willard chooses the "plain style" and uses the barest, most austere form of it. He writes with conciseness and lucidity, showing he is well practiced and has developed his art.

God's tenderness hath been already declared to you in and of all that patience which he hath used with you, and the cost that he hath laid out upon you. God will for ever be acknowledged and you shall be enforced to confess, that he did not deal with you as he might have done, that he did not execute all the rigour of his Justice upon you which you deserved...

To return to the form Willard is giving his sermon, note that he does not go immediately to "Uses" from doctrine. There is a section on "Reasons or Proofs."
Perry Miller has taught us not only that this is a development from Ramist logic, but further that the form of Puritan sermons is derived de novo from Peter Ramus' logic.\textsuperscript{35} Perhaps Professor Miller had come too quickly to his conclusion. J.W. Blench's research has turned up Anglican sermons which use precisely the same form as those of the New England Puritans.\textsuperscript{36} Further doubt is cast upon Perry Miller's conclusion by the suggestion that John Udall, as early as 1593 in his "Commentary upon the Lamentations of Jeremy," had shown the necessity for including "Reasons."\textsuperscript{37} Thomas Fuller, in his Church History of Britain (London 1655), remarks of Udall that "he was the first who added reasons thereunto (i.e. to Doctrines and Uses) the strength and sinews of a Sermon."\textsuperscript{38} (Italics mine.)

For the sake of clarity, let us review what Willard has done in his preparation. He has first chosen a text, clarified it for his hearers, chosen an introduction on the meaning of the parable, and stated his doctrine. His next step is the "Reasons" or "Proofs" by which he shows the truth of the doctrine. In this section, Willard uses no less than thirteen Old Testament passages and eight New Testament passages. He followed the sure rule of interpretation that "Scripture interprets Scripture."

One is surprised to note that our parson uses what appears to be a catechetical form for his "reasons" section:

"2. On what account is the visible church said to be God's Vineyard? 
Answer: Not only on a general account, as the whole Creation is called his, but upon more special and peculiar reasons..."

Neither Parson Willard, nor any other Puritan, would be content to state doctrine without citing reasons, as he has now done, and the moving on to "Use." Dr. Chauney, Willard might remember, gave explicit instructions on the matter:

' \begin{itemize} 
  \item Explain the words of your text clearly; bring proof of parallel Scriptures; let your reasons be Scripture reasons, but be most in Application; which is spent in five uses, refutation of error, information of the truth, correctness of manners, exhortation and instruction in righteousness. All of which you will find in Tim. iii, 16, 17 and there is a fifth use, viz: of comfort, 1 Cor. xiv, 3.\textsuperscript{39} 
\end{itemize} 

Our parson decides on two Uses for this sermon on The Barren Fig Trees Doom, but note that he divides each use into four parts:

\textbf{USE I} For information: Learn hence:
\begin{enumerate} 
  \item That God is to be acknowledged in all the benefits which his Church partakes in. All that they are or have more or better than the World, they owe it to him... So Psalm 124 begins, \textit{Had not the Lord...} and 1 Sam. 12:22.
  \item That God is to been (sic!) seen and adored in all the Tribulations that come upon his Church at any time...
  \item How dangerous it is for any to go about to harm the Church. All the damage, mischief that is done to the Vineyard falls upon the Owner... Psalm 44:21; 74:22
  \item That Nothing is to be done in the Visible Church without God's Direction.
\end{enumerate} 

\textbf{USE II} For exhortation, these few Lessons may be here Learnt.
\begin{enumerate} 
  \item Are we not God's vineyard? Labour we then to bring forth our fruits unto God...
\end{enumerate}
2. Let us go to him for all the Manuring that we need at any time. Do we find Grace at a stay among us, and our fruitfulness impeded? Do our hearts grow hard? Are we barren?

3. Do we find the briars and thorns of carnal lusts growing up and beginning to stunt the graces of his Spirit in us? . . . Let it be for a Lamentation.

4. Let us tell him, and call earnestly for his help, when at any time the Church is under Oppression . . .

The generality of the application of our parson’s sermon is somewhat disappointing, but Levy shows this can be expected.\textsuperscript{10} Often the application was simply the following “solution”:

"Have faith in God; love God and your neighbor; and pray."\textsuperscript{11}

Parson Willard’s sermon has a notable lack of illustrations, except for the use of Scriptural illustrations and the general understanding that manure fertilizes gardens. Such was not the case in other Puritan preachers. Often the preacher would give ample illustration from man’s daily life and occupations, marriage, child-parent imagery, the mistresses’ duties at home, warfare, analogies to the human body: sometimes even the arts, music, architecture, and theater. Parson Willard chose the plainest of the plain style methods, and for that reason, illustrations were lacking.

Through our look at Samuel Willard and his task of interpreting the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, we have seen how the Puritan preacher chose his text, studied it, formulated his doctrine, gave his reasons and applied the truth to his hearers. One further item must be considered: the delivery of the sermon.

Samuel Eliot Morison tells us that the accepted method of preparing and delivering the sermon was to write the whole thing out but to deliver it from memory, without notes.\textsuperscript{12} Apparently this was taught as correct in Perkins’ handbook on preaching, the standard handbook until at least 1660.\textsuperscript{13} “The sermon was timed by an hourglass for minimum, not maximum length. A preacher who ended within the hour was considered deficient in his duty . . .”\textsuperscript{14}

Such then was the Puritan sermon, the vehicle of the Puritan preacher’s interpretation of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

Who can judge whether the Puritan method of hermeneutics was good or bad, useful or useless? By what standard could such judgment be made? The present theological debates on the question of how one correctly interprets the Scripture reflect the same basic concern of all men who have ever tried to read and proclaim what these books teach. History may pronounce harsh judgments upon the Puritans for the failure of the Massachusetts colony “experiment in Christian living,” and lay that failure at the feet of its interpreters of the Word, but present day interpreters have fared no better.

“Perhaps one “Use” which can be made of any study of the Puritan method and all that they brought to it, would be to learn hence: that any interpreter of any age is
conditioned, as it were, by the factors which shape his hermeneutics. He must learn to recognize them and to deal as honestly as is humanly possible with both aspects of hermeneutics, the explanation and the proclamation of biblical truth.

**FOOTNOTES**

5. Miller, op. cit., p. 204.
7. Ibid., p. 374.
11. Cf. Samuel Willard, *The Barren Fig Trees Doom* (Boston: Benjamin Harris and John Allen, 1691), especially Sermons II and III.
16. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England* (N.Y.: New York University Press, 1956, pp. 43, 163 and 166. Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was a logician and rhetorician who embraced the Reformation in c. 1562. His logic, in a vigorously anti-Aristotelian framework, attempted to simplify the complexity of logic current in his day. Logic is *inventio* (the discovery of arguments for any kind of discourse) and *indiciwm* (the arrangements of arguments). Basically, all reality can be divided dichotomously, and arranged in tabular form. One divided a subject into two parts, each of which part is also subdivided until the whole matter is understood. Ramist logic was particularly popular in Calvinistic secondary schools on the continent and in England and Scotland.
17. Ibid., p. 17.
23. All quotations from Willard in the following pages are from this series of sermons.
26. Ibid., p. 89.
29. Levy, op. cit., p. 89.

31 Levy, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 92.

32 Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 91. Also cf. J.W. Blench, *op. cit.*, p. 58, who quotes from William Perkins, "... there is only one sense, and the same is the literall."


38 Ibid., p. 284.


40 Ibid., p. 94.

41 Ibid., p. 56, 57.


43 Ibid., p. 166, note 16.

44 Ibid., p. 167.