

THE RHETORIC OF THE LOGOS

AND

THOMAS SHEPARD'S REGENERATION

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One of the major concerns of the Puritans of England and New England in the seventeenth century was the problem of determining the nature of regenerative grace (Holifield 140-41; Miller, The Seventeenth Century 281, 284, 287-90, 292-99; and Pettit). Grace, by definition, was a supernatural experience, and so there were no empirical proofs possible, in the modern sense of observing and analyzing phenomena. But the age was not without resources. By dividing the concept of grace into logical parts, the arrangement and sequence of these parts supposedly provided credible knowledge. That is, the Puritan theologian could demonstrate the presence and action of grace based on rhetorical considerations of argument, terms, and arrangement of the terms (White 75-94; Miller, The Seventeenth Century 340-45). There was a formal neatness to the experience of grace, as one key term balanced another, and each term modified the one idea of grace. On the one hand, grace was said to "justify" a man by giving him faith in Christ's Crucifixion when by nature a man did not have such faith; on the other hand, grace was also said to "sanctify" a man to do God's will in this world when most "natural" men would refuse it. The connection between justification and sanctification was apparently unified, as "justifying" faith made all acts and works attest to one's sanctification. Moreover, in inverted fashion, the good acts and works of sanctification confirmed the reality of the prior experience of justification. Puritans, however, were aware that even a damned sinner could do good acts and works, since a

sinner would do such acts and works in a vain attempt to bribe God to save his soul. Thus, justification, despite being the more indefinite state in the process of mankind's regeneration from the natural to the spiritual, was considered the central stage of the drama of salvation, for in that particular experience a blitheful, self-centered sinner was suddenly altered in his nature and adopted God's will for his own. In effect, the experience of "justifying" grace was cataclysmic even though the subsequent acts of "sanctifying" grace reflected a resolute, though calm spirit which was considered to be appropriate to the Elect. The point is, only the rhetoric of a logical arrangement could control this implicit dialectic of terms.<sup>1</sup>

There was a further complication for the Puritans of New England. For them, the determination of the experience of "justifying" grace was closely bound to one's articulation of the experience of justification to other persons. Peculiar to the New England churches was the ritual of public confession in which applicants for church membership had to present themselves to a congregation of God's Anointed to be certified that they indeed had had such an experience.<sup>2</sup>

This ritual was not known to the Puritans in England possibly because the Puritans there continued the practice of the established Church whereby baptism at birth made every person a church member, and one's faith was to be increased successively through each of the sacraments (Holifield 28-38). In New England, however, the void of an established church was filled by the Puritan covenanted church which made persons test their faith publicly before being admitted to membership, and this public confession was a ritualized means to be sure that only the Elect would govern God's mediation with his people (Miller, The Seventeenth Century 439-40). Historically,

such persons initially would come together and relate their experiences of regeneration, but by 1636--just six years after the founding of the Massachusetts colony at Boston--the General Court of the colony gave legal sanction to the prescription of Governor John Winthrop and the Reverend Thomas Shepard to have all applicants screened by the elders and minister in a preliminary interview (Morgan 101). Shepard was a major theologian of the colony who fostered this ritual of the so-called New England Way, but when he heard applicants ramble at length and search for words to describe their experience of justification, he was amazed that candidates made grace seem so indefinite:

I confess . . . it is not fit that so holy and solemn an Assembly as a Church is, should be held long with Revelations of this odd thing and tother, nor hear of Revelations and groundless joyes, nor gather together the heap, and heap up all the particular passages of their lives, wherein they have got any good; nor Scriptures and Sermons, but such as may be of special use unto the people of God, such things as tend to shew, Thus I was humbled, then thus I was called, then thus I have walked, though with many weaknesses since, and such special providences of God I have seen, temptations gone through, and thus the Lord had delivered me, blessed be his Name etc.<sup>3</sup>

Shepard's sense of necessary concision makes the public confession into a symbolic act that might affect the audience rhetorically; but it has already been suggested how demanding it was to combine a notice of the cataclysm of "justifying" grace with the quietness of sanctification, which--in Shepard's words--is actually marked by special providences of God, such as recovery from illness, good harvests in bad climatic conditions, and an escape from danger. The point is, Shepard sought in the

ritual the equanimity of the two parts of regeneration which only rhetorical control might offer. In effect, Shepard believed that men who lacked the rhetorical graces might well be unconscious but dangerous hypocrites who would "defile a whole Church" as surely as the cunning hypocrites who sought church membership to gain social approbation and status.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, he encouraged and instituted the preliminary screening of a candidate by the elders and minister who would test him on church doctrine and query him about the specific experience which evidenced God's intervention of grace into his life. Of course, such a screening would filter out persons of known immoral behavior as well as persons who could not comprehend the articles of faith (Morgan 88); however, it did give a "dry run" rehearsal to the presentation of "justifying" and "sanctifying" grace before the entire congregation, and did thereby contribute to the concision that Shepard sought. Some historians might argue that only the better educated, and thus the social elite, could pass such a test. But the fact is, the test was hardly so rigorous, nor was meant to be; for if a candidate was hesitant or incoherent before the congregation, the minister would generally assist him by relating on his behalf what was told in the preliminary interview (Morgan 89). It was clear that although the entire congregation was the nominal jury, it was the minister and elders who wielded power. The conclusion comes to mind that if the candidate was acceptable in the preliminary interview, the presentation of the candidate before the congregation had a greater ritualistic and rhetorical purpose than historians hitherto have assumed.

Indeed, as we remember Shepard's objections to unscreened candidates, it would seem that the minister and elders welcomed individuals who could make the church's beliefs about grace be demonstrated in a direct

experience of "justifying faith." The ritual of public confession, by its rhetorical structure, was a form of Aristotelian "spectacle," "demonstration," or theatre. As such, its rhetoric held together justification and sanctification, and it prompted all uninitiated persons to examine their lives to find an occasion of "justifying" grace and instances of "sanctifying" grace. Because such able individuals could be found, the practised ritual gave empirical support to the reality of grace, the specific doctrines of the church, and--perhaps most important--the hierarchy of the church, especially the positions of the minister and the elders.

Thomas Shepard's attitude toward public confession, however, is intriguing for two reasons. Shepard had had his own experience of regeneration at Cambridge University in 1624, and yet had never participated in a public confession; as a minister in New England, he was called to witness the confession of laymen who either formed new congregations or were taken into existing churches. Further, the rhetorical arrangement and balance of purely personal experience that Shepard suggested for the ritual of the applicants of Massachusetts was strikingly absent from his awareness when he recorded his experience of "justifying" grace in his Autobiography written in 1646, three years before his death in the colony. True, the Autobiography structures his entire life into two parts coming before and coming after his 1624 regeneration: prior to that experience, his life is portrayed as one of naivety, confusion, riotous behavior and recurrent anguish of conscience; afterwards, he speaks of his assurances about God's purposes, exemplified in that same anguished conscience. In his Journal, dated between 1640 and 1644 (thus predating the Autobiography), Shepard uses the phrase "God's plot" for the redemption of the world that is unfolding as foreordained despite his personal tribulations (119, 141). Even

so, despite the ambiguity of a cataclysmic change and continuity, Shepard never defined the specific moment of "justifying" faith nor made a bold claim as to his personal "sanctification." Indeed, especially in the Journal, Shepard's depiction of "sanctification" is completely untypical of a "saint" who was to enjoy a quiet spirit, for his personal consciousness is ever in turmoil; and he characterizes acts of piety in such an absolute manner that few persons could be sure of their Election.

This underlying doubt extends throughout his life and is crucial in understanding his circumspective articulation of his experience of regeneration. Early in his Autobiography, Shepard gave notices of his early life as an orphan, a situation seemingly allied to his sinfulness. Innocuous as this connection might seem, it is a major referent for the Puritan metaphor of God as a father, and suggests that having God as a father will end the temporal conditions that make sin possible. Being an orphan, for example, Shepard at Cambridge was a "Sophister" who was "foolish and proud" in disputing the existence of God and the nature of life. But the surprising fact is that despite this apparent enthrallment to an imperviously sinful nature, Shepard's conscience was jarred from time to time by the sermons and lectures on theology that he heard at Cambridge. He noted that he was "affected" by the preachings but invariably broke loose and deliberately sought sinful companions and activities--lusting, gambling, bowling, and drinking--in order to fend off the words of the preacher (40-1). Over and over, Shepard went through the same cycle of hope ending in sin until in 1624, at the age of nineteen, he had a spiritual crisis, which in retrospect was the decisive one. After one Saturday night when he drank so much that he awakened only late on Sunday, the sabbath, he became "sick with [his] beastly carriage." He continues:

And when I awakened I went from [my friend] in shame and confusion, and went out into the fields and there spent that Sabbath lying hid in the cornfields where the Lord, who might justly have cut me off in the midst of my sin, did meet me with much sadness of heart and troubled my soul for this and other my sins which then I had cause and leisure to think of. And now when I was worst he began to be best unto me and made me resolve to set upon a course of daily meditation about the evil of sin and my own ways. Yet although I was troubled for this sin, I did not know my sinful nature all this while. (41)

A modern reader notes that Shepard was not troubled by his lack of specific phenomenal details aside from those noting the time of day and the place; God was not visible despite the use of the word meet. Further, because Shepard was an orphan, as I noted earlier, Shepard's description of God as a loving but disappointed father is an effective rhetorical metaphor which hides the absence of God's physical features. Thus, God the father is the Platonic Archetype of which an earthly father is only a type. Thus, too, by diction and by structure, Shepard might well consider this experience as a typical parallel to how God chose his Elect before the creation: in a sense all history was recapitulated through words just as Christ recapitulated the drama of salvation in the logos of Scripture.

But the process of Shepard's regeneration was certainly not complete at this moment in the cornfield. That it was not is suggested by Shepard's statement that God's mercy was extended in return for his "resolve . . . upon a course of daily meditation about the evil of sin and my own ways." If mercy was the instance of "justifying" grace giving Shepard faith, then the "meditations" corresponded to the onset of "sanctifying" grace. In the

very next paragraph, Shepard showed exactly what "meditation" meant. It was, he implied, a way of reading or hearing the Bible so that it could at any moment compel an awareness of sin and a need for a change of heart that was virtually a reduplication of the direct, special experience of "justifying" grace.

The Lord therefore sent Doctor Preston to be Master of the [Emmanuel] College, and, Mr. Stone and others commending his preaching to be most spiritual and excellent, I began to listen unto what he said, and the first sermon he preached was Romans 12--to be renewed in the spirit of your mind--in opening which point, viz., the change of heart in a Christian, the Lord so bored my ears as that I understood what he spake and the secrets of my soul were laid upon [i.e., open] before me--the hypocrisy of all my good things I thought I had in me--as if one had told him of all that ever I did, of all the turnings and deceits of my heart, insomuch as that I thought he was the most searching preacher in the world. And I began to love him much and to bless God I did see my frame and my hypocrisy and self and secret sins . . . . (41-2)

To be sure, there was no end to "meditation" of this sort. Indeed, the passage concludes by noting that despite Dr. Preston's "boring," "I found a hard heart and could not be affected with them" (42). Even so, as the entire Autobiography shows from this point onwards, "sanctifying" grace was evidently present despite his apparent recalcitrance because its presence allowed Shepard to persist in such "meditations," all of which made him despair of acts of his personal will and thereby constantly threw him back upon the "justifying" mercy of God. Sanctification, in sum, was a cycle that began with the "meditation" of scripture--in this case, the text of



Romans 12, proceeded to a matter of doctrine--that is, that a Christian will have a "change of heart," and then led through an analysis of the text and doctrine to a direct application to the spiritual life of the listener--specifically, the complex spiritual status of Shepard himself, in which the need for a "change of heart" met the resistance of "a hard heart." Moreover, the cycle of sanctification reversed the pattern present in Shepard's life before regeneration, when the Bible's words drove him to seek sin: now Scripture was inescapable and so "bored" his ears that he persisted in studying Scripture in spite of his anguish.

But more importantly, the cycle of sanctification became wonderfully ambiguous: Scripture brought him to such despair for his soul that he often doubted, he said, "whether the Scriptures were God's word," and he would consider if he "had not committed the unpardonable sin" of ultimate despair (43). Over and over, the cycle repeated itself so that Shepard formulated a paradox that came to typify piety for later Puritans: in his Journal Shepard would assert that "God doth show his power by the much ado of our weakness to do anything" so that "the more weak I, the more fit I to to be used. . . . When I was most empty, then by faith I was most full" (117, 139). Thus, he concluded, God "brings contraries out of contraries; He makes darkness light Hell Heaven, guilt pardon, weakness strength . . ."<sup>5</sup>

The point is this: Shepard told his Massachusetts congregations not to recite phrases from Scripture and sermons when making a public confession that attested to one's "sanctification"; yet, as one recalls Shepard's "meditation," one must note that his "meditation" took its form from the sermon presented by Dr. Preston, and is virtually a mirror within the listener's spirit of the preacher's public words. The supposition in 1624 was that a Scriptural text leads to a doctrinal view of the text, and

the analysis that bridges the text to doctrine allows the words of the preacher to touch and stir the heart of a listener, to understand the logos of Scripture (see White 22). A knowing listener, such as Shepard, was familiar with the text and the doctrine, but like a layman, he was moved to understand the logos of the text by whatever application the preacher might make of the doctrine. In Shepard's case, Preston's doctrine of regeneration made the analytic awareness of a "change of heart" into an evidently urgent need for penitence by everyone, and Shepard was compelled to gauge how penitent he could be when his will was fully humbled. The sermon, in short, avoided the appearance of imposing external authority or dogma upon a text because it engaged both the logical and affective faculties of the audience; the doctrine ascribed to a text was valid partly because it was followed by a logical analysis of the terms of a text, focusing upon its linguistic and formal attributes, and partly because it then was capped off by the preacher's wit that surprised and engaged his listener in personal, common-sense experience.

Perry Miller has called this view of rhetoric "Ramist" because, as Petrus Ramus assumed, the rhetorical arrangement of arguments could suggest truths that the words individually could not convey (Miller, The Seventeenth Century 120, 132, 319-20. 328). A minister's sermon could artfully utilize the metaphors of experience to make spiritual sense to mortal man without insisting that such metaphors were Platonically "real," and so the sermon would not impinge upon the unfathomable sacred mysteries of God's mind. Such art was actually a paradox: the analysis of metaphoric language revealed God's truth through Scripture to all men, and yet such analysis presumed that only the Elect could have their ears "bored" by the words so as to pass beyond words to share God's mind and purposes. That

is, although the Bible was said to be the logos--the primal Word of God made flesh--it was, after all, the logical arrangement of the sermons which unlocked the doctrine contained within the Word for the Elect. In this art, sermons actually mirrored, duplicated, and ultimately replaced the primal logos itself, making the "application" to personal experience into the validation of doctrine. Consequently, as shown by Shepard's experience, it could be said that "sanctifying" grace drove a man to Scripture, but Scripture was revealed only through a personal experience of the "heart" engineered by the rhetoric of the sermon. One might further say that the art of rhetorical arrangement practiced by the preacher was as necessary as the raw logos of Scripture, and what was art in the hands of the minister was also a form of "sanctifying" grace by which God made the logos clear to the Elect: in this view, rhetoric provided "the keys of the Kingdom."

In conclusion, one might see the purpose of Thomas Shepard's prescription for the public confession despite his personal experience of regeneration. Life as a "saint" might seem lean fare after a meeting with the Divine, for it is hard for us today to imagine that Scriptural exegeses in the sermons could be a worthy substitute for a direct experience of the Holy. But one must remember that for the New England Puritans of the first generation, the sermons pointed to Scripture, and to comprehend the logos directly was virtually the same as meeting God. Indeed, the Puritans did not distinguish between the metaphoric and the phenomenal because they began with the authority of the Word of God which transcended all phenomena. Thus, as Scripture led one to the "meditation" on the "contraries" of doubt and assurance, the individual's response of piety virtually repeated and even enhanced the original moment of justification:

the experience of the Word recapitulated and clarified all experiences in time.

As a subtle contrast, however, the formal rhetoric of the public confession was intended to join the experience of "justifying" grace with the later experiences of "sanctifying" grace, and the confession was to demonstrate in a specific experience this union of time in a brief moment in the present, perhaps no longer than a quarter of an hour (Morgan 89). Shepard possibly thought that the demonstration of a public confession was the equivalent of his own experience of the cornfield and of his subsequent piety based on a "meditation" of Scripture. At bottom, the ritual of public confession prepared a member for Communion just as a sermon based on the Word prepared a member for Communion; but the ritual of confession had the extra dimension of making the individual relive his meeting with God, and this aspect by-passed the need to meditate on the logos and made the ritual into an instrument to evidence "a change of heart" directly.

The unity of God and the Elect was Shepard's pious endeavour. In reality, the ritual of public confession converted the metaphoric usage of the meeting with God into a specific experience of time and space, and such a shift in time altered the nature of sanctification for most men. As Shepard indicated, men from the very start of the practice were not sure if they had experienced a genuine "change of heart." Therefore, in their confessions they "heaped" in everything just to be inclusive of details. However, instead of being better prepared to hear the logos of Scripture or the logos of the sermon serving Scripture, such men could only take heart in the specific experiential acts that might demonstrate the metaphoric. This is not to say that they did not anguish over their doubts, but that

they experienced only rarely the subtle piety of belief and doubt that Shepard thought essential for salvation.

The result was that the ritual of public confession undermined the goals it initially was called upon to support. By 1662 there was a wholesale reduction of candidates willing to present themselves, as few could attain Shepard's anguish of piety. To prevent the total collapse of membership, as the first generation of "saints" died off, the churches adopted the compromise measure of the so-called Half-Way Covenant (Miller, From Colony to Province 95-104). By this Covenant, children of the Elect were baptised at birth as members and could later, in their early teens, enjoy the right to Communion even if they did not have an experience of "justifying" grace, provided that they evidenced good moral conduct in their daily lives. As a consequence, in those later confessions moral testimony encroached upon the testimony of grace, and the nature of the accompanying sermon was induced to change. The developing sermon might touch upon Scripture, but the key was to make Scripture underwrite moral behavior or the self-examination through which men chose personal beliefs. The first change led to the sermons of the faction of the "Old Lights" who saw Scripture as a handy-guide to daily living; the second change led first to the affective sermons of eighteenth-century Revivalism which sought spontaneous regeneration and then to the sermons of nineteenth-century Unitarianism whereby the audience self-created their own spiritual identity, doing thereby the work of the Holy Ghost.<sup>6</sup> By all measures, however, these factors undermined the unique status of Scripture as the logos; and sermons, fully realizing their new power, virtually became a substitute for the original logos. At that stage, sermons were not directed to explicating the doctrine that made the logos of Scripture authoritative but

to making doctrine reasonable in the light of phenomenal experience, particularly as the listener might inwardly consent to grace and regeneration. At that stage, when reason replaced authority, the sermon has been irreversibly altered by the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century; that is, the religious revivalism of the Great Awakening (c. 1734-1742) accorded perfectly with the rise of ideological rationalists, for both streams would topple the citadels of tradition and external authority, either promulgated or enforced by institutions, and would make the affective responses of the audience confirm visionary perceptions of validating experiences. For both revivalists and ideologues of the age, experience would confirm the vision of those chosen men who knew the secrets of God or nature.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One of the most common metaphors to describe this ambiguous process of abrupt change into equanimity was that of the "birth" of the concerned self and the subsequent "weaning" of the self from the world (Caldwell 8-14).

<sup>2</sup> The chief source of such recorded confessions is Thomas Shepard's "Confessions"; Morgan 88-93 gives the formal stages of a typical conversion; Caldwell 163-84 analyzes numerous specific confessions.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Shepard, The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied (London, 1660), 2.200, qtd. in Morgan 92.

<sup>4</sup> Parable 2.198, qtd. in Morgan 114; see Morgan 93.

<sup>5</sup> Parable 1.145, qtd. in McGiffert, "Introduction" 24.

<sup>6</sup> Aspects of these two changes are found in Miller's three classic essays, "Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening," "The Rhetoric of Sensation," and "From Edwards to Emerson."

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