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"Holy Love, and Sober Studie": Donne's Approach to the Scriptures in the *Sermons*

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Anyone who spends time reading Donne's sermons is soon aware of the immense importance of the Scriptures to Donne. For this Dean of St. Paul's, as for his friend George Herbert's country parson, "the chief and top of his knowledge consists in the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort, the holy Scriptures. There he sucks, and lives."[1] Accordingly each of Donne's sermons not only begins with a scriptural text but also actually adheres to that text and focuses on it, drawing as well on many more biblical passages. And beyond that, Donne's high and loving esteem for the Bible is everywhere evident in his sermons. In his 1628 Whitsunday sermon preached in St. Paul's Cathedral, Donne challenged his hearers to find the promise of their being filled with the Holy Spirit "in your holy love, and sober studie of the Scriptures" (8:268).[2] As this essay will seek to show, Donne strove to practice

[1]*Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson, corr. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 228. Donne and George Herbert were friends, known to each other through Herbert's mother Magdalen Herbert Danvers. In 1624 the two writers were both staying at Magdalen's residence during a time of plague, on which occasion Donne was preparing some of his sermons for future publication. See John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 Volumes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 1:46. Parenthetical references to this work will be by volume and page number.

[2]Peter McCullough surmises that Donne as a preacher unfailingly preached Whitsunday sermons because he especially valued "Pentecost's

what he preached. We will also consider the strongly biblical ethos of the Church of England leadership in Donne's time, and the evangelical purposes shared by that leadership in its emphasis on biblical preaching. The essay will first set out the English religious milieu and how the Donne of the *Sermons* fits into it, and then consider features of the *Sermons* such as the evangelical impulse in many of them, Donne's love for the Scriptures and their literary patterning, and his approach to study of the Scriptures.

Why does Donne value the Scriptures so highly, in practical and not just honorific terms? While writers on Donne have of course noticed this feature, what has not been sufficiently seen or mentioned until recently is that he participated wholeheartedly in a church, the Jacobean (and Caroline) Church of England, whose leadership accorded Scriptures such an eminent position.[3] Not only that, but the clergy Donne associated with closely in the Church of England were among those in the mainstream leadership who can now be identified as moderate English Calvinists: Archbishop George Abbot, Bishops John and Henry King, Joseph Hall, Thomas Mountford,[4] as well as moderate Puritans such as Thomas Gataker, John Preston and Thomas Adams.

A highly individual writer, Donne nevertheless reflects the chief goals of that church leadership group, which has been called a "Calvinist consensus," bringing together evangelical bishops and moderate Puritan college heads.[5] Historian Peter Lake has described the dominant Calvinist church view of the later Elizabethan church as

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opportunity to extol divine inspiration and the gift of mighty tongues" (McCullough, "Donne and Andrewes," *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 185 n.

[3]Daniel W. Doerksen, *Conforming to the Word: Herbert, Donne, and the English Church before Laud* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), and Daniel W. Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkins, eds., "Introduction" in *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp. 13–27; especially n. 2, p. 26.

[4]See Jeanne Shami, "'The Stars in their Order Fought Against Sisera': John Donne and the Pulpit Crisis of 1622," *John Donne Journal* 14 (1995): 8–9; and Doerksen, *Conforming,* pp. 52–54.

[5]Peter Lake, "Calvinism and the English Church 1570–1635," *Past and Present* 114 (1987): 32–76; Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 82.

"word-centered" rather than "sacrament-centered,"[6] a view that historians have shown prevailed until at least 1625, when the Laudians began to gain control of the church. To be "word-centered" meant an emphasis on the Scriptures as the Word of God, as well as also on preaching and printed sermons; and in recent essays I have demonstrated that unlike Lancelot Andrewes,[7] Donne as preacher identified strongly with the values of the Jacobean Calvinist church leadership.[8] While a biblical preacher himself, Andrewes and his relatively smaller group of fellow Arminians decried the current dominance of preaching, and sought church unity not in doctrine and preaching but in outward conformity to church rituals.[9]

What the moderate Calvinists saw as uniting the Jacobean Church of England was the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, on which all but heretics or Roman Catholics were in agreement.[10] Donne, well aware of the essential place assigned by the Articles to Scriptural doctrine (and of the relatively less important role given in them to ceremonies), fully shared those views,[11] and reflected that difference

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[6]Cited in Doerksen and Hodgkins, 25–26. It was a matter of emphasis; the value and importance of Holy Communion was recognized by all.

[7]Peter McCullough, "Donne and Andrewes," *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 165–201, sensitively brings out many detailed differences between these two preachers.

[8]Daniel W. Doerksen, "Preaching Pastor versus Custodian of Order: Donne, Andrewes, and the Jacobean Church," *Philological Quarterly* 73 (1994): 417–29; *Conforming to the Word*, pp. 88–100; "Polemist or Pastor? Donne and Moderate Calvinist Conformity," in Mary A. Papazian, ed., *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 12–34.

[9]Kenneth Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor: the Episcopate of James I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 231–40.

[10]Daniel W. Doerksen, *Conforming*, pp. 71–83, especially p. 72, citing Thomas Rogers and King Charles I. Fincham names as another unifying factor a "broad hostility to Rome" (*Early Stuart Church,* p. 12).

[11]In a pastoral sermon touching on church discipline, Donne observes that church canons dealing with various offences distinguish between more or less serious ones, and treat "Impugners of the Common prayer Booke" and "Impugners of Ceremonies" as having less seriously offended than "Impugners of our religion declared in the Articles" (*Sermons* 3:310). Donne here implicitly accepts the correctness of such distinctions.

even in a sermon defending church rituals.[12] A simple but telling measure of Donne's values is that whereas he specifically mentions the Book of Common Prayer only five times in his ten volumes of *Sermons*, and sometimes echoes its phrases, his references to Scripture are continual.[13]

Donne has sometimes in the past been labeled "Anglo-Catholic," an anachronistic term originating with the nineteenth-century Oxford movement.[14] Though born into a Roman Catholic family, Donne underwent a carefully-weighed and thorough conversion to the clearly Protestant stance of the Jacobean (and even the Caroline) Church of England.[15] His sermons make his position vis-a-vis Rome

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[12]See Articles 6 and 34; Article 19 specifically calls for the Word "preached" as a criterion of the visible church. In a sermon preached at St. Paul's Cross in 1627, Donne sounds like a Laudian, as in quite uncustomarily asserting that the communion table is an altar (7:429). But before the sermon is over, Donne distinguishes clearly between "indifferent" if allowable matters such as pictures (i.e., stained-glass windows) in a church and essentials such as "the *fundamentall* Articles of our Religion" (*Sermons* 7:433).

[13]In the *Sermons* Donne clearly refers to the Book of Common Prayer by my count five times, at 3:310, 4:374, 7:61, 8:38, 90f. Elsewhere Donne echoes its phrases, or otherwise alludes to the Book: 5:273, 348, 9:303, 10:64, 77, 4:311.

[14]On the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement and Donne see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590–1640* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), rev. ed. vii–viii; Dayton Haskin, "John Donne and the Cultural Contradictions of Christmas," *John Donne Journal* 11 (1992), esp. 143–57.

[15]See Doerksen, "Polemist or Pastor: Donne and Moderate Calvinist Conformity," 12–34. As Anthony Milton says, "In the Jacobean church Donne's confessional identity was clear: . . . all his known theological contacts were with those of an emphatically Protestant confessional orthodoxy," *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 494. In his magisterial *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Milton uses the term "Calvinist" "in common with current historiography, to denote a general sympathy with the continental Reformed tradition in all its purely doctrinal aspects, and a sense of identification with the West European Calvinist Churches and their fortunes" (p. 8). This certainly fits Donne, who in 1622 preached a stirring missionary sermon to the Virginia Company (*Sermons* 4:10).

unmistakable.[16] A loyal churchman, eventually Dean of St. Paul's, Donne can be called a "conformist" (a term replacing "Anglican," which came into use after his death), to indicate that unlike even the moderate or conforming Puritans with some of whom he associated, he willingly conformed to English ritual, with no misgivings about disputed ceremonies—those unauthorized by the Scriptures, such as making the sign of the cross in baptism, or compulsory kneeling at the receiving of communion.

Although on a very few occasions Donne sounds like a Laudian,[17] he generally fits in well with the dominant group known as the moderate Calvinists.[18] It is fascinating that whereas Nicholas Tyacke (*Anti-Calvinists*, 1–3) paints an uninviting, repellent picture of Calvinism as offering people *no* choice for salvation, another excellent historian, Kenneth Fincham,[19] repeatedly equates English Calvinism of the same period with *evangelism* and therefore with an outreaching, welcoming approach to people in light of biblical teaching.[20] If we wish to understand why Calvinism attracted large numbers of intelligent people educated at England's universities, we must realize that Tyacke's formulation states only one side of a paradox by giving total significance to God's choice, and needs to be balanced by the many biblical invitations to *human* choice,[21] which are regularly affirmed by English Calvinists. In addition, Tyacke and other writers are incorrect in saying that predestination is *central* in Calvinism.[22] Instead, it is a

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[16]See also Evelyn Simpson's detailed note: *Sermons* 10:14 n. 32.

[17]McCullough points out one such occasion, Donne's 1626 Christmas cathedral sermon, which was marked by "extremely high" eucharistic theology, but McCullough correctly says, "the witness of Donne's collected sermons overwhelmingly emphasizes the minister as preacher over the minister of sacraments" (192–93).

[18]See Kenneth Fincham, ed., *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), "Introduction," pp. 6, 8–10.

[19]*Prelate as Pastor: The Episcopate of James I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1190).

[20]Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor*, pp. 2–6, 250–76. Elsewhere Fincham says "we should not conceive of English Calvinism as a set of rigid propositions, unresponsive to pastoral needs in the parishes" *Early Stuart Church*, p. 9.

[21]Daniel W. Doerksen, *Picturing Religious Experience: George Herbert, Calvin, and the Scriptures* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), pp. 165–66.

[22]Tyacke, p. 1; Doerksen, *Picturing*, p. 5.

distinctive feature, one based on paradoxical language in the Bible. Because such language can be misunderstood, English Article 17, which strongly affirms predestination as "full of sweet . . . comfort to godly persons,"[23] also gives pastoral cautions against harmful emphases by "curious and carnal persons."

Historians call the English Calvinists of this time "evangelical,"[24] probably because of their strong emphasis on the Scriptures and preaching. In this connection Fincham refers to the church of James I's time as "a generation schooled in literal-minded scripturalism."[25] But it is not necessary to deprecate the English Calvinist approach to scripture as "literal-minded." Barbara K. Lewalski rightly says the Protestant writers of Donne's time saw even the poetic language of Scripture as a

> vehicle of truth, validated by God himself who chose such forms for his revelation. This assumption promoted the closest attention to biblical images and figures in countless sermons . . . as a specially charged, significant language having the deepest, most personal, and most immediate relevance to the human world and human experience as well as to heavenly things."[26]

Although Donne upon occasion (as in preaching a 1618 sermon at Whitehall) goes so far as to say that the Word is "infallible" and "Cannot erre" (1:286), he more typically asserts just the faithfulness of the Word (1:295, 186). The youthful Donne who in a splendid poem challenged the would-be believer to "doubt wisely" has become in the *Sermons* a more mature searcher who after pursuing the "mind's endeavours" *keeps* the truth he has found.[27]

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[23]See also Leif Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590–1640* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

[24]Fincham, *Prelate*, pp. 2, 6, 250; Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed*, pp. 402, 531, 534.

[25]*Prelate*, p. 10.

[26]Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, pp. 83–84).

[27]Donne, *Satire III,* lines 77–89 in *Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John Shawcross (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967) p. 25.

Evelyn Simpson asserted that "Donne is first and foremost an evangelical preacher" (10:295), and Donne himself says that "A preachers end is . . . a gathering of soules to God" (7:329). Jeanne Shami puts it well, in more detail: Donne used his "unique resources in wit, learning, eloquence, and penetrating insight into human sinfulness and motivation—all in the service of edifying and ultimately converting his congregations to a personal experience of Christianity in a uniquely reformed English Church."[28] In all this Donne was inspired by the Scriptures, as he and his fellow church leaders read them.

Donne's sermons distinctly manifest this evangelical impulse. In early sermons like the one preached to Queen Anne in 1617 (1:236) and late sermons such as that for Easter Day 1629 (8.354), he clearly seeks to use the Gospel to win his hearers to a right relationship with God. In a 1618/19 Lenten Whitehall sermon Donne says that preaching must "apply . . . the comfortable promises of the Gospel, to all that grone under the burden of their sins," such comfort, or strengthening, ironically including "the denunciation of Gods heavy judgments upon the people . . . [as well as the proposing of] mercies. Good preachers must bind . . . up the broken hearted" but also break the stubborn heart:

> . . . wo be unto us, if we settle not, establish not the timorous and trembling, the scattered, and fluid, and distracted soul . . . to fix it self upon the Merits and Mercies of Christ Jesus; but wo be unto us much more, if we do not shake, and shiver, and throw down the refractory and rebellious soul, whose incredulity will not admit the History [of God's dealing with people], and whose security in presumptuous sins will not admit the working and application of those Merits and Mercies which are proposed to him. (2:164)

The alternation here between threats and promises is based on, and resembles, the writings of prophets like Isaiah. Here, as in Isaiah 1:18–

[28]Jeanne Shami, "The Sermon," in Shami et al, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 319.

19,[29] the good news of God's forgiveness is necessarily preceded by the announcement of the bad news (Isaiah 1:2–17). In this sermon with a text from Ezekiel 33:32 Donne likens the preacher to that Old Testament prophet, who is told that in spite of good efforts his message is heeded no more than an overheard love song. The music may be well played, but the hearers' response is not necessarily favorable. The word "History" [*OED* story, narrative] in the previous quotation can serve as a reminder that unlike some other religious writings, the Bible is full of stories and achieves some of its greatest effects through narration. Stories such as of the Exodus resonate through the Bible. Donne is well aware of this on the grand scale, but also of the encounters, the experiences of biblical characters. Some of Donne's most moving passages in the *Sermons* or *Devotions* (and certainly in his poetry) focus powerfully on human experience(s).[30]

Donne also sounds very evangelical in a sermon preached at the Hague in 1619 and later (in 1630), "digested" into two shorter sermons (2:269–310). The text itself involves Christ reaching out with the Gospel, "calling" the fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew to become "fishers of men." Donne pays close attention to the text in Matthew 4:18–20, noting first Christ's (= Wisdom's) "*delight . . . to be with the children of men*" (Proverbs 8:31) and his preaching everywhere, even by the seashore. Donne gives the story the kind of "close reading" that used to be taught in English graduate courses in the 1960's, attending to details such as that the disciples "left their nets" although not explicitly asked to do so, but did not destroy them, and explaining the geography of the Sea (really, lake) of Galilee. More significantly, he raises the question of why Christ chose unlearned fishermen, and by referring to a number of Scriptures shows that it is typical of the biblical God to work paradoxically through weak and unprepossessing means like the boy David (1 Samuel 16:6–12). Donne

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[29]Isaiah 1:18–19 (*King James Bible*): (18) Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (19) If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land.

[30]Daniel W. Doerksen, "Discerning God's Voice, God's Hand: Scripturalist Moderation in Donne's *Devotions*," *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way*, ed. Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkins, University of Delaware Press, 2004, p. 151.

does not hesitate to apply such paradoxical principles to his own situation as a preacher. Twenty sermons, he says, will not "edifie . . . so much, as if the Congregation might see one man converted by us" (2:275). Furthermore, he says: "That one man that would leave his beloved sinne, that one man that would restore ill-gotten goods, had made a better Sermon than ever I shall, and should gaine more soules by his act, then all our words (as they are ours) [an important qualification] can doe" (2:275–76). Donne is applying the measuring stick of change.

In this sermon, Donne keeps foremost the evangelical purpose of Christ's calling—the fulfilling transformation of the disciples, which he illustrates with an analogy to stone carving:

> In a rough stone, a cunning Lapidary will easily foresee, what his cutting, and his polishing, and his art will bring that stone to. A cunning Statuary discerns in a marble-stone under his feet, where there will arise an Eye, and an Eare, and a Hand, and other lineaments to make it a perfect Statue. Much more did our Saviour Christ, who was himselfe the Author of that disposition in them, (for no man hath any such disposition but from God) foresee in these fishermen, an inclinablenesse to become useful in that great service of his Church.

Evangelism as practiced by Christ himself is purposeful and produces comprehensive life changes:

> Therefore he tooke them from their owne ship, but he sent them from his Crosse. . . . Hee tooke them weatherbeaten with North and South winds, and rough-cast with foame, and mud; but he sent them back soupled, and smoothed, and levigated, quickned, and inanimated with that Spirit which he had breathed into them . . . Hee tooke fisher-men, and he sent fishers of men. Hee sent them not out to preach, as soone as he called them to him . . . He taught them, before they taught others. (2:276)

Here as elsewhere Donne is responding imaginatively as he retells the Gospel story. The disciples are transformed, but do not lose their

identity. Simon Peter continues to be a bold leader, Andrew a helper, and Thomas a rather skeptical enquirer.

In a second evangelical sermon on Matthew 4:18–20, Donne develops the idea of the world as a sea, and of the Gospel as our net for fishing in that world, while the "Devill angles with hooks and bayts," and deceives and wounds in the catching process (2:307). The Gospel net has leads ("the denouncing of Gods judgements") and corks ("application of the mercies of God)," but also "knots" (2:308; complications, discussed later in this essay). Further:

> A net is a large thing, past thy fadoming, if thou cast it from thee, but if thou draw it to thee, it will [accessibly] lie upon thine arme; The Scriptures will be out of thy reach, and out of thy use, if thou cast and scatter them upon Reason,[31] upon Philosophy, upon Morality, to try how the Scriptures will fit all them, and beleeve them but so far as they agree with thy reason; But draw the Scripture to thine own heart, and to thine own actions, and thou shalt finde it made for that. . . . With this net *S. Paul* fished all the Mediterranean Sea, and caused the Gospel of Christ Jesus to abound.
>
> (2:309)

Unlike the deceitful devil, Donne and the gospel are frank about what they are doing. And even in recounting the gospel story, Donne is openly evangelizing.

Donne frequently chooses biblical texts that lend themselves to an evangelical interpretation, texts such as: Psalm 51:7, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter then snow" (5:296); 2 Corinthians 5:20, "We pray yee in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (10:11); or Psalm 32:5, "I will confesse my transgressions unto the Lord" (9:296). Two of these texts are from the Penitential Psalms, on which Donne often preached, and out of which Lewalski claimed that Sir Thomas Wyatt in his verse translation had made "a Protestant cycle of spiritual

[31]As I point out later, Donne values reason; here he objects to what he sees as a misused appeal to it in a religious context.

regeneration."[32] Donne, however, preached from a great variety of biblical texts, ranging from Genesis to Revelation.[33]

Like most people in his church, Donne unhesitatingly recognizes and affirms the authority of the Scriptures, but more than that, he loves them. It is characteristic of Donne to associate study of the Scriptures with love. In a 1616/17 Paul's Cross sermon preached to the Lords of the Council on the topic of love of purity, he says love "is so noble, so soveraign an Affection, as that it is due to very few things, and very few things worthy of it" (1:184). Again, love "is not onely a contentment, an acquiescence, a satisfaction, a delight in [what is loved], but *love* is a holy impatience in being without it . . . a holy fervor and vehemency in the pursuit of it, and a preferring it before any other thing that can be compared to it: That's love" (1:198), says Donne, and this passionate man, who elsewhere confessed to a "hydroptique" love of learning,[34] reveals in his sermons and devotions a passionate love for the biblical Word.

Donne reflects both his esteem and his love for the Scriptures in the language he uses to describe them, as when he speaks of the "rich, and sweet promises" of the Gospel (2:220), or "that sacred Treasure, the Scriptures" (4:219), or of discovering "the beauty and the glory of those books" (6:56) by gaining knowledge of its languages. Such expressions describe the Scriptures, while at the same time revealing Donne's attitude, and affect the tone of his sermons. Donne relishes the completeness, the satisfying quality of the Scriptures as he experiences them, to such a degree that he likens them to Paradise, with its fruitful trees:

> As much as Paradise exceeded all the places of the earth, doe the Scriptures of God exceed Paradise. In the midst of Paradise grew the *Tree of knowledge*, and *the tree of life*: In this Paradise, the Scripture, every word is both those Trees; there is Life and Knowledge in every word of the Word of

[32]Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, p. 237.

[33]See Evelyn Simpson's discussion (10:295–300).

[34]In a 1608 letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, Donne admitted his "Hydroptique immoderate desire of humane learning and languages." Cited from John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 129.

> God. . . . [T]hat Bud, that Blossome, that fruit of God himselfe, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Redeemer, Christ Jesus, growes upon every tree in this Paradise . . . for Christ was the occasion before, and is the consummation after, of all Scripture. (8:131–32)

Donne here inventively combines tree and fruit imagery from Genesis 2–3 with a Christian view of the Bible as a Christ-centered book. Resonating with the church view of the Song of Songs as picturing the relationship of Christ and his church, he also sees it as a book of love:

> His *Booke* is *Euangelium, Gospell*; and *Gospell* is *good tydings*, a *gracious Messadge*. . . . God is *Love*, and the *Holy Ghost* is amorous in his *Metaphors*; everie where his *Scriptures* abound with the notions of *Love*, of *Spouse*, and *Husband*, and *Marriadge Songs*, and *Marriadge Supper*, and *Marriadge-Bedde.* (7:87)

Donne's response to that love is evident in his language; he is enamored and clearly hopes his sermons will win his hearers to a sharing of that ardor.

What especially delights Donne in the Bible is its eloquence, so that he repeatedly remarks that "there are not so *eloquent* books in the world, as the *Scriptures*" (10:103; 6:56; 8:147). Addressing the listeners at St. Paul's, he quotes Calvin to the effect that:

> The *Holy Ghost* in his Instruments, (in those whose tongues or pens he makes use of) doth not forbid, nor decline elegant and cheerful, and delightfull expression; but as God gave his Children a bread of *Manna*, that tasted to every man like that that he liked best, so hath God given us *Scriptures*, in which the plain and simple man may heare God speaking to him in his own plain and familiar language, and men of larger capacity, and more curiosity, may heare God in that Musique that they love best, in a curious [=intricate], in an harmonious style, unparalleled by any.[35]

[35]10:103. Donne at this point blends in some of the language of Wisdom 16:20–21. Calvin had early published a humanist commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* which gave signs of his lifelong interest in language and the literary

Donne delights in the literary patterns he finds in the Scriptures. In accounting for his own "spirituall appetite" for the *Psalms* of David for a first course, and the *Epistles* of St. Paul for a second course, he explains that besides sharing his love for the first with Augustine and the second with Chrysostom, he has a more particular reason, in that these biblical books are (respectively) *poems* and *letters*, "such forms as I have been most accustomed to" (2:49).[36] Speaking here as one who knows how poems are put together, Donne suggests that such intricate and carefully made works as the *Psalms*, while bringing pleasure, also call for an equally considered, thoughtful response (2:50; 2:170).

Which brings us to "sober studie." Regarding the Bible as in some respects a great piece of music by a master composer, Donne likens good preachers and readers of scripture to musicians who do their best to render faithfully both the matter and the manner of the original, and this clearly involves "such diligence, and such preparation, as appertains to the dignity of that employment" (2:170–3). In calling for "sober" study, Donne is perhaps cautioning readers against the intoxication that could result from hastily imbibing such heady stuff as the Scriptures.[37] But he is also opposed to freewheeling conjecture. Certainly he shares with Herbert, Milton, and other writers of the English Reformation a marked bias against abstract theological speculation,[38] (which is felt to be both useless and dangerous), and in favor of practical divinity, similar to what in another context Jeanne

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and historical contexts of a work. Donne praises this Reformer as a biblical commentator, in particular his lack of dogmatism (6:301, 10:128, 3:177), and mentions him a hundred times in his sermons. See Troy D. Reeves, *Index to the Sermons of John Donne* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1980), Vol. 2, Index to Proper Names.

[36]This sermon was preached at Lincolns Inn. Gardner and Healy write that "Far more of Donne's letters have been preserved than of any other English writer of his own or earlier ages." In *Selected Prose of Donne*, p. 107.

[37]Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution: A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-first*. New York: Harper, 2007.

[38]See Herbert's poem "Divinitie," in Herbert, *Works* p. 134.

Shami called Donne's "emphasis on teaching the processes of moral decision-making."[39]

In proposing such a practical approach, Donne is taking into account the *purpose of the biblical study* he envisions for his various auditory and the *nature of the Scriptures*, including the advice that they themselves offer for their reading. The Bible is full of symbolism, patterning which enriches the meaning. For example, Donne saw in Paul's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:4 ("that Rock was Christ") a scripturally authorized way of understanding the Exodus story of Moses striking a rock in the wilderness (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11). Donne understood this as a hint to explore various typological or symbolic instances of stone and rock throughout the Scriptures (2:188). Christians see biblical typology as a way of linking scriptures together and also of helping to justify the teaching that "*All* scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

In his sermons Donne addresses various public auditories, not necessarily theological scholars, but many of them doubtless intelligent lay people whose needs he nevertheless sees as ultimately more spiritual than intellectual. Those who weigh the scholarliness of Donne's sermons (some claim to have found him wanting, in comparison, say, to Andrewes) might be in danger of forgetting what Donne did not forget: that abstract study may be relatively useless as well as dull. He advises his hearers to search the scriptures "not as though thou wouldest make a *concordance*, but an *application*; as thou wouldest search a *wardrobe*, not to make an *Inventory* of it, but to finde in it something fit for thy wearing" (3:367). Donne's emphasis on the practical goes well with the simplicity here.

Because Donne seeks an accurate meaning of a Scriptural text, and recognizes that the original is always in another language, he regularly consults Hebrew and other sources. Evelyn Simpson pays attention to such matters in her treatment of Donne's sources (10:295–375). A recent scholarly investigation into one aspect of Donne's scholarliness examines his use of Hebraic materials in his biblical hermeneutics and

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[39]Jeanne Shami, "The Sermon," 319. On Donne and casuistry, see Meg Lota Brown, *Donne and the Politics of Conscience in Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

maintains convincingly that Donne is a "third-order Christian Hebraist," who has a "basic, lexical grasp of the Hebrew language while acquiring the more sophisticated semantic nuances from commentators such as Nicholas of Lyre."[40] According to Chanita Goodblatt, "Donne's use of exegetical sources is deeply invested in a religious [anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic] polemic," yet recognizes the authority of Jewish exegesis and effectively intertwines Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.[41] Good scholarship sheds valuable light.

Donne's sermons *are* scholarly in a good sense. If you stand on the shoulders of giants you can see farther, and Donne frequently cites Augustine and other church Fathers, as well as later biblical commentators.[42] But speaking before King James in a Lent sermon 1620/21, Donne makes the priorities clear for his hearers: "If I understand not [the commentators'] curious disputations, I shall not be esteemed in this world; but if I believe not Christs plain Doctrine, I am sure I shall not be saved in the next" (3:208). He goes on hyperbolically to demolish the commentators: "It is the Text that saves us; the interlineary glosses, and the marginall notes, and the *variæ lectiones*, controversies and perplexities, undo us; the Will, the Testament of God, enriches us, the Schedules, the Codicils of men, begger us" (3:208). As an erstwhile law student[43] and often a lecturer to lawyers, Donne is especially conscious of the deceits of "fine print," and wittily ends these remarks by calling the Serpent in Eden the first commentator on God's law (3:208).

One of the faults Donne sees in biblical scholarship is its sometimes needless and uncharitable controversy (6:318; 7:29), such as "riddling and entangling perplexities of the Schoole" (8:146) or "fomentors of frivolous disputations" (9:79). By contrast, Donne loves to quote lively helpful images from the Fathers, such as Chrysostom's

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[40]Chanita Goodblatt, "From 'Tav' to the Cross: John Donne's Protestant Exegesis and Polemics," in Mary A. Papazian, *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 224–25.

[41]Goodblatt, pp. 229, 227.

[42]See the discussion by Evelyn Simpson (10:295–401).

[43]See Jeremy Maule, "Donne and the Words of the Law," in David Colclough, ed., *John Donne's Professional Lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 19–36.

calling the Scriptures "a Sea, in which a *Lambe* may wade, and an *Elephant* may swimme" (9:124). This image pictures the approachability of the Bible for a variety of people. Elsewhere Donne,[44] using this time an image itself borrowed from the Gospels, refers to the Gospel as a net for the fishing of men: "Eloquence is not our net; Traditions of men are not our nets; onely the Gospel is" (2:307). But even with the benefit of the Scriptures some people have trouble because they misdirect their attention: "A net is *Res nodosa*, a knotty thing; and so is the Scripture, full of knots, of scruple, and perplexity, and anxiety, and vexation *if* [emphasis added] thou wilt goe about to entangle thy selfe in those things, which appertaine not to thy salvation; but knots of a fast union, and inseparable alliance of thy soule to God, and to the fellowship of his Saints, if thou beest content to rest in those places, which are cleare, and evident in things necessary (2:308). The important thing is to "draw the Scripture to thine own heart, and to thine own actions, and thou shalt finde it made for that" (2:308). Here speaks the practical pastor.

The greater availability of the Bible after the Reformation increased the danger of misreadings by unskilled readers. Even in the Bible itself Peter comments on the "things hard to be understood" in the writings of Paul, Scriptures the "unlearned and unstable wrest . . . to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Preaching at St. Paul's in 1622, Donne admits there are "dark" places in the Scriptures, citing Augustine and Gregory to the effect that these make the writings more challenging (4:220). Donne recommends that lay readers suspend interpretation of such passages "till they may, by due meanes, preaching or conference, receive farther satisfaction therein, from them, who are thereunto authorized by God in his Church," i.e., the learned clergy (7:401; compare 4:221).

Preaching at St. Paul's on Easter day 1628, Donne further compares the Church to a University, a school of higher learning (elsewhere he calls the Scriptures themselves a university; 3:264) and says this is the "ordinary place for Illumination in the knowledge of God" (8.226). The Scriptures, which are certainly to be read *at home*, should be interpreted in the context of the *church* (8:227). Though all people are

[44]In the same sermon previously mentioned, Donne here develops the knot imagery (2:308).

called to "search the Scriptures" (see John 5:39), Donne echoes legal language to claim that ministers have a special "warrant to search; A warrant in their Calling" (8:227). The Church is not above the Scriptures but "is a Judge above thee, which are the Scriptures, and what is the sense of the Holy Ghost in them" (8:228).

In his Christmas day 1621 St. Paul's sermon, Donne examines the role of reason in approaching Scripture, and argues against an unreasoned faith. He suggests it would be wrong of Christians, or even of God, to require faith without some measure of understanding (3:358–59). Donne proposes that even knowledge of the natural world points to a creator (the argument from design) and makes the Bible seem a reasonable way for God to reveal his will to people (3:358). He continues, however:

> God hath not proceeded in that manner, to drive our Reason into a pound, and to force it by a peremptory necessitie to accept these for Scriptures, for then here had been no exercise of our *Will*, and our assent, if we could not have resisted. But yet these Scriptures have so orderly, so sweet, and so powerfull a working upon the reason [that by] the Majesty of the Style, the punctual accomplishment of the *Prophecies*, the harmony and concurrence of the *foure Evangelists*, the consent and unanimity of the *Christian Church* ever since, and many other such reasons, [an objective person] would be drawn to . . . an Historicall, . . . Grammaticall . . . logical beliefe of our Bible. (3:358–59)

Donne argues in a christening sermon that once the Scriptures are accepted as the word of God, the believer finds reasons in them for the detailed matters he is challenged to believe in (5:102). God, who sometimes works through dreams and visions, "alwayes . . . workes upon our *reason*; he bids us feare no judgment, he bids us hope for no mercy, except it have a *Quia*, a *reason*, a foundation, in the Scriptures" (5:103).

Another essential quality for the "sober studie" of Scripture, maintains Donne in a 1629 Paul's Cross sermon, is humility: "come humbly to the reading and hearing of the Scriptures, and thou shalt have strength of understanding" (9:123). In another Paul's Cross sermon that year he quotes Augustine's remarks that point to a similar

attitude of submission to the Word and the Spirit: "let my conversation with thy Scriptures be a chast conversation; that I discover no nakednesse therein; offer not to touch any thing in thy Scriptures, but that, that thou hast vouchsafed to unmask, and manifest unto me" (9:94). Augustine's becoming humility leads naturally to a charitable allowance of different readings of difficult or obscure passages, provided they do not oppose "Fundamentall Truths," or as Donne says in the ensuing context, "violate no confessed Article of Religion" (9:95).

Where, therefore, do "holy love, and sober studie" of the Scriptures lead? As in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:21–27, or in Paul's challenge in Romans 12:1–2, no encounter with the divinely revealed truth is complete if it does not result in a changed life. Donne tells his listeners to:

> prove that thou hast accepted [the Gospel] by thy life and conversation: That as thy faith makes no staggering at it, nor thy Reason no argument against it, so thy actions may be arguments for it to others, to convince them that doe not, and confirme them that doe believe in it. (1:299)

Donne is a distinctive writer, uniquely gifted; it should also be recognized that he is significantly representative in sharing the biblical concerns of his church, the Church of England, and in particular his fellow moderates in what has been recognized as the "Calvinist consensus" of English church leaders. Like them, he is concerned to evangelize and to bring about transformed lives. Throughout his sermons, John Donne seeks to encounter a remarkable book, the Bible, on its own terms—as evangelical Christians of his time see it. Participating wholeheartedly (he might say "cheerfully") in a word-centered ethos, Donne loved the Scriptures and was concerned that biblical study be done intelligently, paying attention to literary artistry, and searching the Scriptures with appropriate humility. The recurring practical note in his sermons makes it clear that for Donne the love and study of Scripture was intimately involved with the coming of God's kingdom *on earth* as well as in heaven.

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