

# Recycling a Colonial Puritan Sermon: A Case Study

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## Recycling a Colonial Puritan Sermon: A Case Study

David M. Powers

Can an old sermon, especially one from the distant past, ever live again?

My own experiences of recycling historic sermons, which I have done a handful of times, have offered some insights. But beyond those observations, as well as what I have heard from others who have done the same, I have found very little guidance on re-presenting sermons from previous eras. I am not really surprised at this, considering the admittedly valid hypothesis that sermons, at their best, are original presentations of faith messages. Re-presenting somebody else's sermon suggests laziness at best, or stealing, or maybe something worse. The scant references to the practice in printed resources generally counsel against using somebody else's sermons.

Yet some have excused the practice under certain circumstances. The Episcopal Bishop Arthur C. A. Hall pointed out in 1913 that people "have no further use for [someone] whom they think is passing off as his own what is really another's thought or language." But Hall also remarked, in one of a very few sources which support the practice of borrowing sermons, that one could "frankly read another's sermon. That will not be preaching, but it may be an excellent substitute for it." Douglas Horton, onetime Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, commended a beleaguered ministerial student for choosing to share with his small congregation sermons from classic preachers, which the student carefully credited, rather than struggling to produce a modest and possibly inadequate message of his own.<sup>1</sup>

In any case, I believe there are compelling reasons for choosing to preach historic sermons in the course of contemporary worship. Marking a noteworthy anniversary is one. Sermons from Martin Luther and other of his contemporaries, for example, seemed particularly appropriate for celebrating the Protestant Reformation's 500th anniversary. Acquainting present-day worshippers with an important strand of their denominational history is another good reason. An instructive sermon which dates from a time of doctrinal controversy in the past might accomplish this. Commemorating a particularly notable member of the clergy might be a third reason. Adding to this list, celebrating continuity in worship over the decades—what has remained—could also be a possibility; and that would inevitably highlight the opposite, namely, more recent innovations, or what has changed.

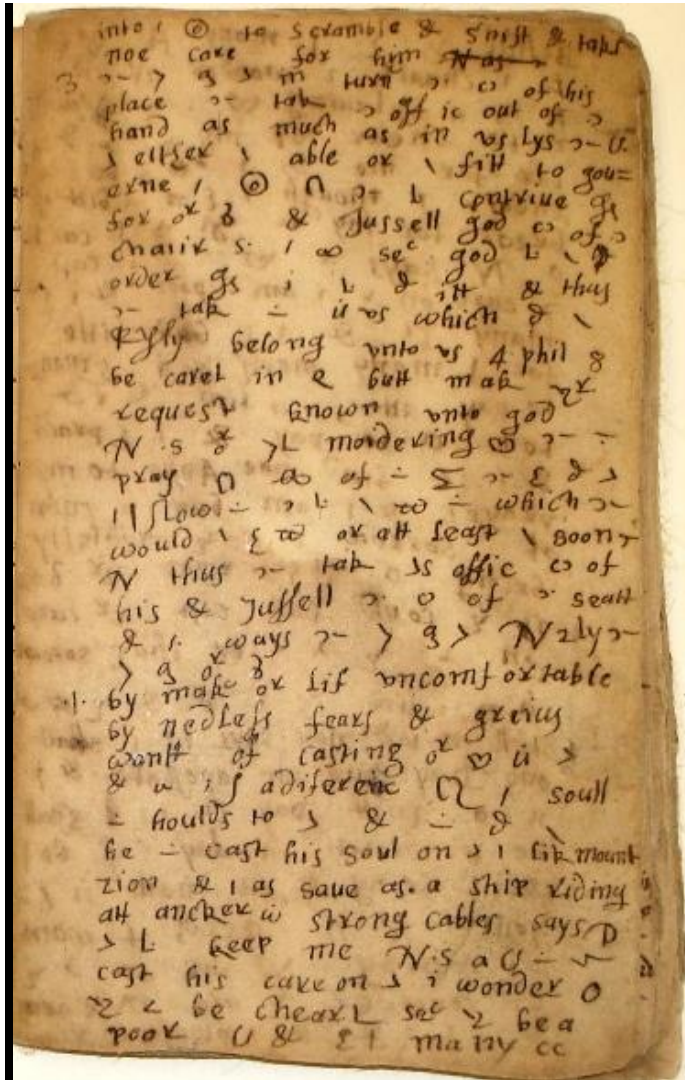
This case study reports the step-by-step efforts involved in bringing a seventeenth-century sermon to life, from an unstudied coded manuscript to a presentation before a congregation at worship more than 375 years later. My efforts in recycling a colonial Puritan sermon provide an example of the necessary steps involved in moving from text to performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. A. Hall, *Preaching and Pastoral Care* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1913), 43, 44; Douglas Horton, in a conversation with seminarians, Pine Mountain, NH, August 1966.

## A Mysterious Manuscript

This experiment began with a manuscript mystery. The original looks like this:



Except for a couple of pieces of household hardware and a couple of letters, the earliest English (that is, non-Native) artifact from Springfield, Massachusetts, seems to be this small booklet of eighty pages, held by the Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History. It is catalogued as [“John Pynchon Moxon Sermon Notes 1640.”](#)

Two people were involved in creating it. One was the Rev. George Moxon (1602–1687), who came in late 1637 to be Springfield’s first minister. Moxon was born in Wakefield in the north of England.<sup>2</sup> Baptized on April 28, 1602, he graduated in 1624 from Sidney Sussex College at Cambridge, the school which Oliver Cromwell had attended. Moxon was reputed to be so skilled linguistically that he could imitate the Latin poetics of Horace.<sup>3</sup> He was ordained to Christian ministry in 1626.

<sup>2</sup> For more on George Moxon, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 39:601-602.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Calamy, *An Account of the Ministers . . . Ejected or Silenced after the Restoration in 1660* (London: J. Lawrence, 1713), 128.

After serving for a time as chaplain to Sir William Brereton of Handfort, Cheshire, Moxon became a curate at the village of St. Helen's in Lancashire.<sup>4</sup> But his service there was cut short when he intentionally omitted some *Book of Common Prayer* ceremonies. That irritated John Bridgman, the Bishop of Chester, so sometime early in 1637 Moxon found the Bishop's citation against him attached to the St. Helen's chapel door. He fled south in disguise to Bristol, where he and his family are said to have embarked as refugees for New England.<sup>5</sup> Upon arriving in the Bay Colony the Moxons went first to Dorchester; but at William Pynchon's invitation within a matter of months they moved to Springfield. When Moxon arrived in the fall of 1637 Pynchon's plantation was only a little more than a year old. Beginning with eight settlers in 1636, by January 1638 there were perhaps twelve heads of family who were taxpayers residing in the village.

The other protagonist in creating this manuscript was John Pynchon (1625?-1703). As the only son of William Pynchon, John arrived in the Connecticut River Valley when his father established a plantation and trading post there in 1636. Four years later John recorded the notes on Sunday sermons mentioned above when he was fourteen or fifteen years old. He would have done this in the largest room of his family's home on Fort Street, where the small community gathered for civic and church meetings until a meetinghouse could be built in 1645.<sup>6</sup> John probably took these notes as a homework assignment of sorts. The exercise would help him to learn to listen to others and remember what they said, to understand and embrace the Puritan theological outlook, and to develop a convincing style of speaking, modeled on the efforts of George Moxon, who was an experienced and accomplished orator. Such a skilled mentor could prepare him for the role he would eventually inherit, following his father's return to England in 1652. John went on to serve as a political, military, and business leader in Massachusetts, and especially the Connecticut River Valley, over many decades.

The MS includes notes on eight sermons, dated from January 26 through March 16, 1640. Six are complete, while the first and last are only partial because the booklet's cover sheet is missing.

### A Decoding Challenge

John's manuscript poses a substantial puzzle. His booklet consists of twenty sheets of paper, each of which measures about 18.5-19 cm. by 15.5 cm. (7 3/8 by 6 1/8 inches) before being folded in half. It was sewn in a couple of places along the fold, creating two fascicles of nested sheets. John wrote in what was then called "short writing," namely, shorthand; but it was in a script of his own invention. What do all his symbols and squiggles mean? How to figure it out?

Keeping verbatim records, for sermons and for legal and business purposes, was a widespread fad toward the end of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth. That period marked a revival of shorthand writing, which was initiated in England by Timothie Bright's *Characterie; An Arte of shorte, swifte and secrete writing by Character* (1588). Several

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<sup>4</sup> William Brereton (1604-1661) was a Puritan opponent of episcopacy and a successful military commander on the Parliamentary side in 1642-44, during the First Civil War. <http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/biog/brereton.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Gordon, "George Moxon," *Dictionary of National Biography* (1894), 39: 241. I have been unable to corroborate that any passenger ships sailed to New England from Bristol between 1635 and 1637.

<sup>6</sup> The Springfield meetinghouse, described in Henry Martyn Burt, *The First Century of Springfield* (Springfield, MA:1898), 1:176-177, had turrets atop both ends, and (though it was of English style half-timbered construction) probably roughly resembled the replica meetinghouse in Simsbury, Connecticut: <http://www.simsburyhistory.org/buildings/meetingHouse.html>.

other systems soon emerged, some of them extraordinarily complicated. One developed by John Willis was called *The Art of Stenography* (1602); it was inspired by the principles of Ramistic philosophy, which divided everything into two. So, stenography consisted of abbreviations of 1. words or 2. sentences; sentences in turn could be simplified 1. wholly or 2. in part; when in part, it could be 1. by words, or 2. by clause. And so on. True to Peter Ramus's system of dyads, the volume itself included a second brief section on "Steganographie," or "secret writing" in codes which others could not read.

The system which John's work most resembled was invented by Thomas Shelton and described in his pamphlet *Short-Writing, the Most Exact Methode* (1626), entitled *Tachygraphy* in later printings. John did not actually follow the Shelton method. He adopted some of the symbols Shelton had devised for common beginnings and endings for "long words," but John gave them his own meanings. And he seems simply to have made up many other symbols.

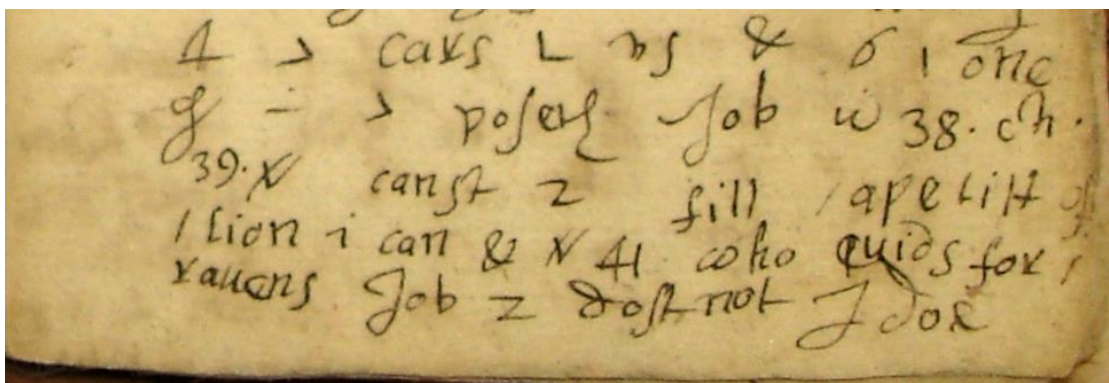
Why did John encode his notes? The advantage of keeping records in shorthand is easily understandable. John was not motivated by secrecy, though what he wrote would prove difficult for others to read. Rather, by using symbols he could write quickly and pack a longer text into a smaller space. Thus he wrote in code not to conceal ideas, but to conserve paper. The following made-up sentence illustrates his system at work. Both the line of John's symbols and the transcription below it have an identical (though not particularly profound) meaning. The economy of John's code is obvious:

N o b .s O | σ \ / R L >

"Now he sometimes says, 'How is this not the reason for sin?'"

Through trial and error, I was able to interpret the meaning of many of the words and some of the symbols as I leafed through the pamphlet. On one page I was able to read: "and [unknown symbol here] as save [=safe] as a ship riding att ancker w[ith] strong cables." Soon some of the most common symbols made sense because of the ways they fit the context to create complete sentences. So |, the unknown symbol mentioned above, means "is," \ means "not," and / represents "the" (and, as it turns out, "thee"; John worked by sounds, leading to a lot of homonyms).

But my most encouraging breakthrough at the beginning of the decoding process came from a section which included discernible Bible citations. Find the verses, and at least a word or two of text will emerge. And so, I began with those fixed points. I became confident that the code could be broken, and the document read, when I discovered a section that yielded more meanings and a solid sermonic point:



39 v. canst Z fill the appetitt of  
 the lion i can & v. 41 who provides for the  
 ravens Job Z dost not I doe

Job 38:39 reads, “Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions . . .”  
 Job 38:41 reads, “Who provideth for the raven his food?” Thus I discovered Z means “thou.”  
 “Job, thou dost not; I do!”

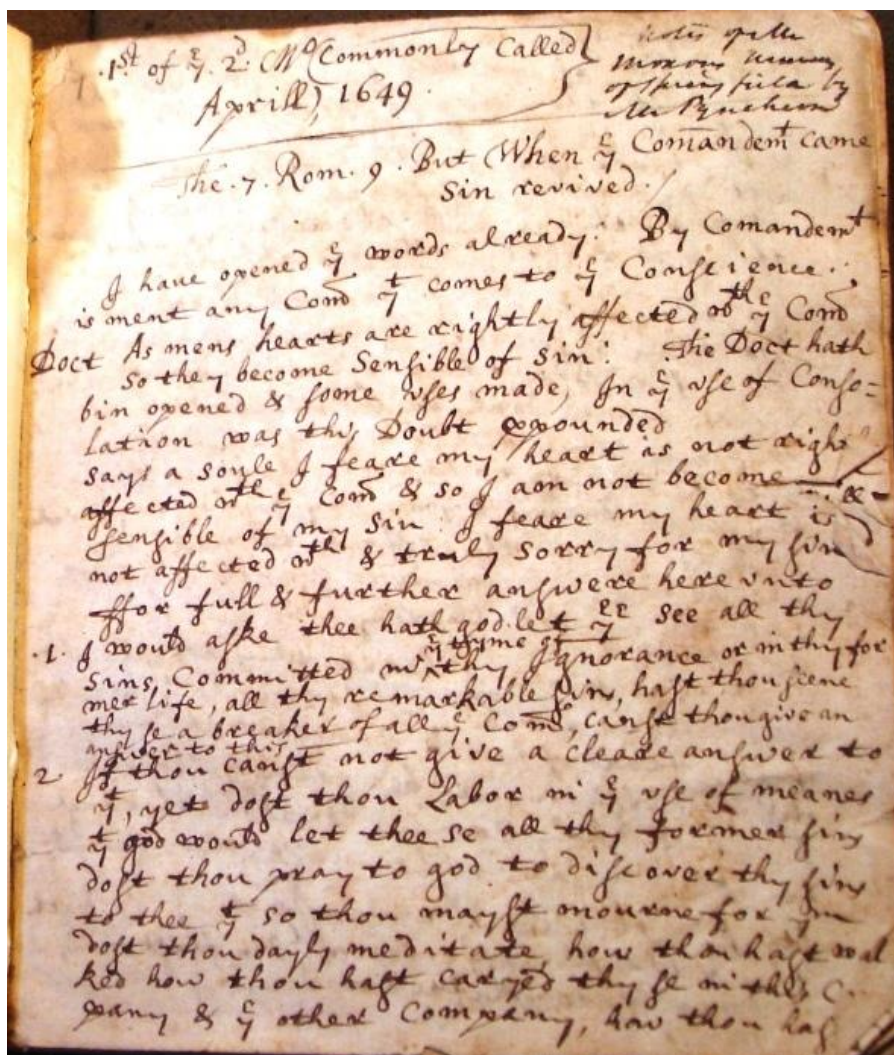
The connotations of more and more symbols became clear as I proceeded to test various possible meanings. Even a dash or dot on the paper could represent a word. John seems to have chosen some of his symbols according to a certain logic. One symbol, which at first seemed to mean “opposite,” turned out to mean “ungodly”—which is actually opposite, in a way. His symbols for “God” and “sin” are almost the same—but the one representing “sin” was written at a cockeyed angle. Another, which I originally thought meant “et cetera” (I called it “blah, blah, blah”), turned out to represent “through”—also “though” and “thorough.” In all, I have been able to decipher 125 or so symbols, which in turn made it possible to create a rather complete transcription. (Even so, a very few symbols remain elusive, because John used them only once in the extant manuscripts.)

JOHN PYNCHON - SHORT WRITING SYMBOLS (1640)

∞	according	D	doctrine	[word],	-ness	∴	that
A	affliction/s	∂	down	n	never	/	the, thee
g	against	7 <sup>c</sup>	duty	\	not	o	them
o	all	E	earth	e	nothing	ω	there, their
A a	also	ε	else	N	now	/.	these
∧	among	T	enough	@	origin	∂	they
π	another	e	ever	∞	out	∂	thing
∪	because	e.	every	A	part	4	think
∅	before?	f	faith	∂	people	6	this
B	believe	ff	father	ffn	person, -s	o.	those
Q	between	L	for, -ful	o	point?	Z	thou



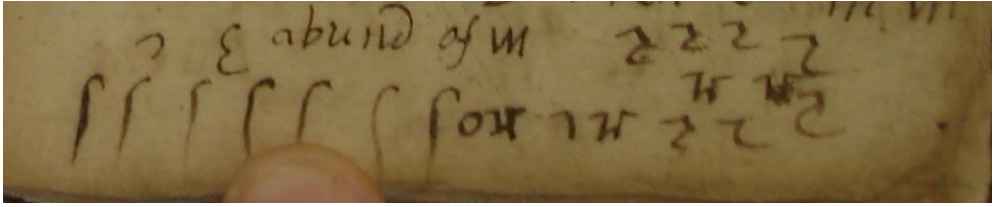
Society in Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> These notes are written in a more mature hand, and they sport a more formal title: “Notes of the Rev. Mr. Moxon’s Sermons by the Hon. John Pynchon of Springfield (1649).” They lack almost all of John’s original symbols, which consequently makes them far easier to read. They are also much briefer. While the 1640 notes, when reshaped into English, average 2,460 words each for all the complete sermons (that is, those where no pages are missing), the 1649 notes, which are all in English to begin with, average only 1,590. The adult John Pynchon was more proficient at taking notes.



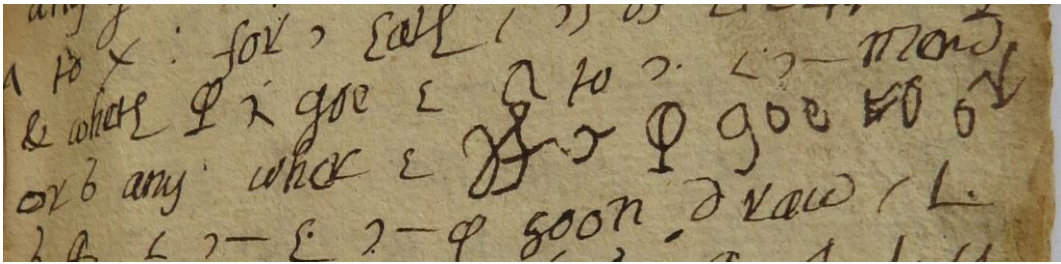
There are a number of amusing peculiarities here and there in John’s notes. I found instances of pen tests, which are simple scratchings made to break in a quill pen.

<sup>8</sup> Michael P. Winship, “Contesting Control of Orthodoxy among the Godly: William Pynchon Reexamined,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 54.4 (1996):795-822. The notes are catalogued as John Pynchon, “Notes of the Rev. Mr. Moxon’s Sermons by the Hon. John Pynchon of Springfield (1649),” unpublished manuscript, Simon Gratz Collection, Box 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

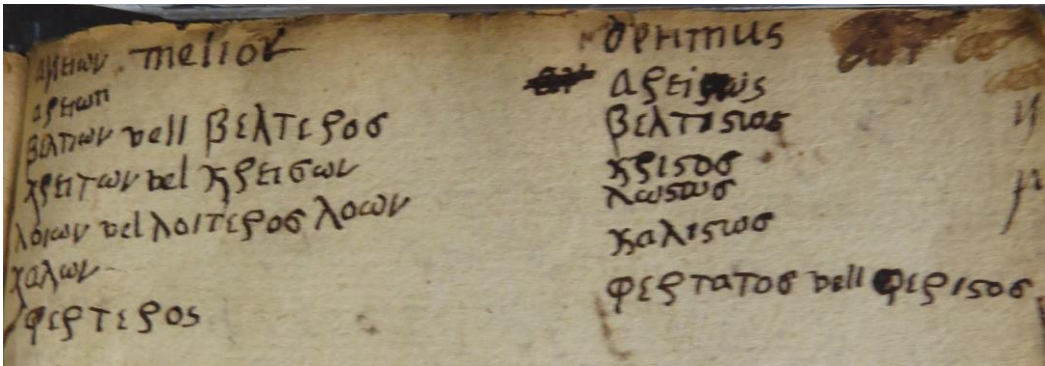




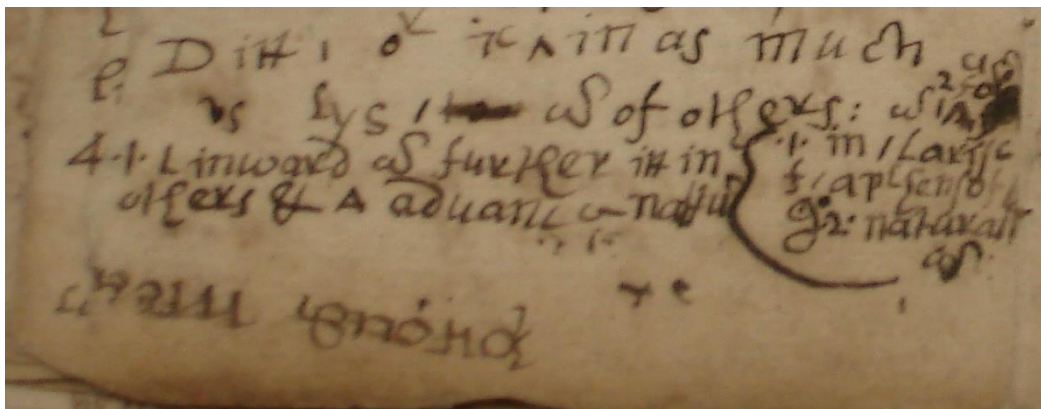
Sometimes John attempted to write in a fancy script of his own devising. There's one place where I believe John's squiggly penmanship shows that he was attempting to write with his non-dominant hand.



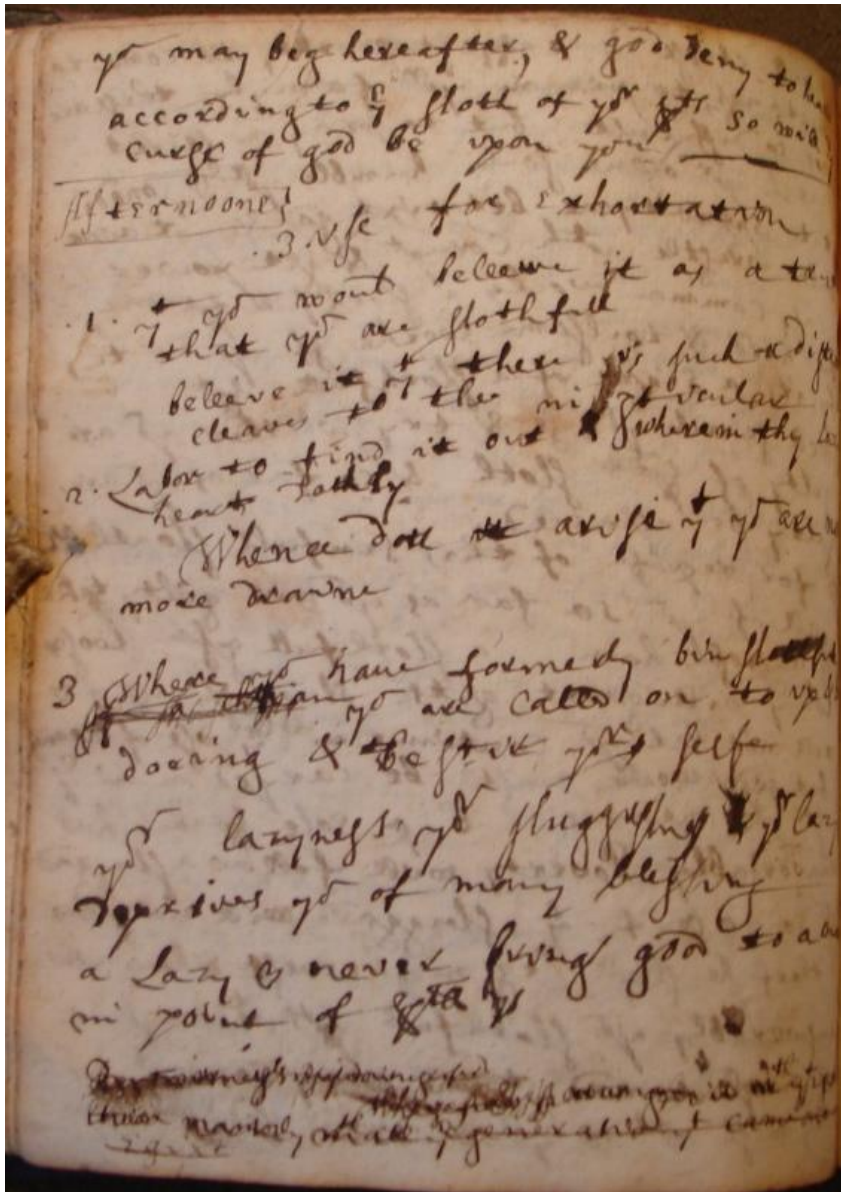
There's a snippet of John's homework in Greek (the comparatives and superlatives of some manly adjectives intended to mean such things as "braver" and "more war-like" and "better, best").



And there are a very few extraneous comments written upside-down. In one place he clearly wrote upside-down, at the bottom of the page, "proud men"—which did not happen to be the topic of the sermon that day.



And on a couple of Sundays in May and June, 1649, when John was twenty-three or twenty-four years old, his handwriting became such a scrawl in the notes which begin with his label “Afternoone” that I have to wonder if he might have had one too many ales at lunch.



How reliable are John's records of Moxon's sermons? How close are they to the minister's actual words? It is improbable to claim that an amateur notetaker could approximate the skill of a well-trained stenographer. But some indications suggest that John produced a faithful record as he made every effort to write down the minister's exact words. John was what Meredith Neuman calls "aural auditing."<sup>9</sup> He recorded the words he heard as he tried to capture what was said. Sometimes his spelling reveals the preacher's Yorkshire accent: "together," "Benjamean," "steeps" (for "steps"). He captured the minister's careful oratory, with its skillful use of synonyms. In 1640 he recorded words that he as a teenager did not recognize, mentioning at one point being "guilty of communication"—possibly the minister said, "contumation"? That mistake suggests a high likelihood that Moxon did use terms which John did not understand.

<sup>9</sup> Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes*, 61-62.

One other detail indicates the seriousness with which John approached his task. On July 8, 1649, Pynchon wrote, and Moxon must have said, “Only, by the way, one thing I forgot from what I said before. . .” So on the basis of John’s phonetic spelling, his occasional mistaken substitutions for words he did not understand, and his conscientious recording of a “by the way” comment, I believe we can place a high degree of confidence in the accuracy of John Pynchon’s sermon transcriptions.

From the original manuscript I created an unpunctuated, word-for-word transcription that followed the exact order, symbol-by-symbol, of John’s shortwriting. Carefully retaining this original order, I then created a punctuated text, using contemporary documentary editing practices for unreadable or unknown or uncertain words; that reworked text, plus a forty-page introduction, provided enough material for a 200-plus page book providing the transcriptions of thirty-six sermons in *Good and Comfortable Words: The Coded Sermon Notes of John Pynchon and the Frontier Preaching Ministry of George Moxon*.<sup>10</sup>

### **Bringing the Sermon Back to Life**

But, sermons are meant to be heard. They are meant to be preached! So, I resolved to preach one of the decoded Moxon sermons in a regular Sunday morning worship service in a church. I accomplished this by preaching a sermon from February 1640, in Coventry, Connecticut, in July 2017.



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<sup>10</sup> Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017.

I had done something like that before. I presented a sermon by Martin Luther twice: once, for a Reformation Sunday celebration, and on another occasion during a church's centennial year. In the sermon I took from 1521, Luther said, "Here I stand." (Actually, he said, "That's why I'm standing here – and not taking any money for it, either.")<sup>11</sup> I have presented other historic sermons as well. One was by a predecessor of mine in Dennis, Massachusetts, the Rev. Nathan Stone (1737-1804), whose partial manuscript for a sermon was left in a book which somebody gave to the recycling exchange at the dump in a neighboring village.<sup>12</sup> That really was a recycled sermon! I have also presented a sermon by Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan;<sup>13</sup> another by the Swiss reformer Martin Bucer (1491-1551);<sup>14</sup> and one by the Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson (1575-1625).<sup>15</sup> Those last two were developed from essays which, while not strictly sermons, appear to have been based on sermons.

### A. Problems

Regarding the wider subject of presenting historical sermons, namely, the exercise of bringing words and ideas from the past into the present, several important considerations seem to be absolutely essential for undertaking such an experiment. The following suggestions are intended to help to navigate the inevitable tension between the language used by the sermon's originator and language in use today, the thought-world of the sermon's original setting and the corresponding situation today.

1. One consideration is *Legitimacy*. How fitting is a particular historic sermon as a vehicle for a meaningful message which can be received by a contemporary congregation? A sermon must at its core serve as a "word from the Lord" for current worshippers. Preaching which originated in the past may have performed that task admirably, yet fail to connect appropriately with a congregation today. For example, if the message will evoke a response of cultural superiority, or if what it communicates will be dismissed because the intervening years have made it irrelevant or comical or inauthentic for sociological reasons, it will fail as a sermon, and must not be presented as a part of contemporary worship. So not every historic sermon available for performance today bears repeating in a worship setting. If the sermon to be presented is against smoking or drinking, be very sure that the presenter shares that passion! It simply is not valid to play-act a sermon in church. In addition to feeding an impression of contemporary moral superiority, pretending inauthentically would seriously short-change people who have come to worship God.

2. Another closely related consideration is *Theology*. Sermons call those who hear them to a faith commitment before God. So, a sermon's legitimacy depends on the accessibility of its theology. Its claims about faith must ring true. Responsible theology is crucial. Consider, for example, a Thanksgiving sermon from December 29, 1860, preached in New Orleans, Louisiana, and entitled "[Slaves a Divine Trust](#)" (subtitled, "The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the Institution"). While that text potentially could be studied for the nature of its arguments about slavery in a particular time and place, it cannot possibly be entitled to a hearing

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<sup>11</sup> Presented October 30, 1983, Dennis, MA, and April 14, 1996, Briarcliff Manor, NY.

<sup>12</sup> Sermon # 437, November 6, 1791, on Acts 13:23. Presented October 17, 1982, Dennis, MA.

<sup>13</sup> Presented October 3, 1982, Dennis, MA, and February 4, 1996, Briarcliff Manor, NY.

<sup>14</sup> From "That No One Should Live for Himself but for Others, How to Attain to This Ideal" (1523). Presented October 10, 1982, Dennis, MA.

<sup>15</sup> Presented September 22, 1996, Briarcliff Manor, NY, and November 25, 2012, Orleans, MA.

in worship today. It simply does not rise to the “Now hear this!” level of truth-telling required of contemporary preaching.

3. Another consideration involves *Minding the gap*. The distance between past and present can prove very difficult to navigate. It must be made clear how the history under consideration connects to present worshippers. For example, sharing the same tradition or geography as the sermon’s original setting provides obvious possible links from past to present.

Yet no matter how much theologies, hermeneutics, and rhetorical fashions evolve over the course of time, I remain convinced that the core message of faithful preaching can hold up over the centuries. The crux of the historical sermon may offer an instructive perspective which illumines a contemporary issue. Thus, re-presenting historic sermons can actually prove encouraging as well as enlightening, compelling as well as curious, inspiring even if idiosyncratic for worshippers in subsequent centuries.

## B. Principles

Therefore, I propose the following principles and steps for presenting historic sermons.

1. *Establish the text*. Anything other than recordings (which simply do not exist throughout most of history) is a deduction, an inference, even an invention. There are drawbacks to every source of historic preaching. The most readily available sources for historic sermons are published texts, which were often edited by the preacher or someone else, but they could prove to be sterile as well as inaccurate. Other rarer sources are handwritten notes made by the minister; but those may or may not represent what was actually said. Even rarer sources are, like the Pyncheon MSS, notes by one or more individuals; but those will inevitably be filtered by the interests and the “hearing” of the notetakers.

Yet even though ultimately all sources are at best only approximations, I believe it remains possible to replicate vocabulary, tone, and ideas from historic sermons, and to do that profitably for contemporary congregations. Even approximations offer a taste of the real-life circumstances which gave birth to the original message.

2. *Create clarity in the script*. Once a text has been established, it needs to be examined very carefully for words or phrases which may escape modern understanding. Intelligibility requires assistance. (Further suggestions for accomplishing this all-important step may be found in the section below on “Preparation.”)

3. *Frame the performance*. An intentional introduction before the service begins, or careful program notes to alert the congregation about what to expect as the service proceeds, or both (which is probably best), can address the distance between the “then” when the sermon was first presented and the “now” when it is heard anew. In addition to providing basic information about the original preacher and the era in which he or she lived, as well as hints of what to expect from the historic sermon experience, notes that invite the congregation to engage their imaginations may be very helpful in encouraging a receptive mood.

4. *Respect the tone*. The tone of the original sermon, whatever it may be—whether proclamation of dogmatic propositions, or exposition of Biblical interpretation, or presentation of denominational teachings, or raising questions about the hearers’ spiritual conditions, or a combination of all of those, and more—needs to be carefully identified and valued by the presenter. And, if at all possible, it should be replicated by echoing the original emphases in the modern performance.

5. *Debrief*. For maximum impact, some opportunity for reaction and response following the experience can provide a valuable opportunity for discussion. This will enable the presenter

to address questions that may have arisen from the presentation, which can help to underscore the significance of the exercise. (In the case of the Moxon sermon, the Puritan practice of a time for questions following the sermon built this opportunity into the experience).

### **C. Preparations**

There remains the question of how best to achieve clarity across the gap from then to now. I suggest several possible solutions, all of which require careful preparation.

1. *Amend*. If the text needs to be developed from an unedited MS, like the one I worked with, I suggest first making any necessary corrections in a minimal way. Supply words which are obviously missing (because of the haste required in taking notes). Smooth the language by aligning numbers (singular and plurals) so they are in agreement, and by modifying tenses which do not match. Such alterations seem the least intrusive way of amending the text where needed for greater clarity.

2. *Add*. In addition to minimal corrections in the text, it will probably be necessary to supplement archaic terms with modern words for the presentation's script. For instance, adding the more contemporary term "application" in apposition to the original "use" clarified an important category used throughout Puritan preaching.<sup>16</sup>

3. *Annotate*. To keep amendments and additions to a minimum, it may help to provide written explanations in contemporary terms for words or phrases which are no longer readily understood. The 1640 sermon I delivered required a dozen or so such clarifications. Thus Moxon's "pitch upon" is more clearly interpreted as "settle on," "challenge" as "lay claim to," and "unbottom" as "stop depending on."

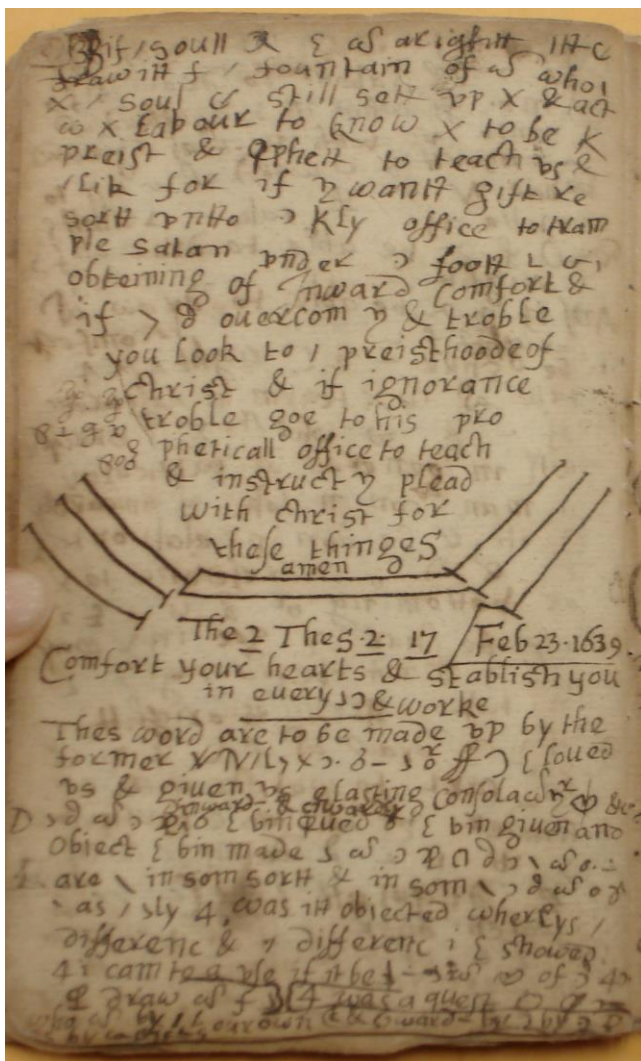
I did not make use of two further possibilities. One would involve simply replacing problematic words with modern equivalents. But I feel that tinkering with the text in that way is disrespectful toward it. Furthermore, though changes which modernize the text may create greater clarity, they inevitably distance the message from the world in which it originated, which seems to me historically insensitive.

Another possibility would be to supply a printed script of the message to all the hearers, including footnotes for words which have evolved in meaning since the original sermon. But I expect that would result in the congregation's eyes being glued to the printed form throughout the presentation.

By way of preparation for presenting a 1640 sermon in 2017, I looked for a message which would remain applicable today. I found that message in Moxon's February 23 sermon, the first page of which looks like this:

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<sup>16</sup> For more about the structure of Puritan sermons, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939. Reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1961), 332-333; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 32-49; Lisa M. Gordis, *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13-36; Neumann, *Jeremiah's Scribes*, 14-15.



In keeping with Moxon’s theme I titled it “Drawing Comfort From God.” Moxon’s bold words of encouragement found near the conclusion of his message seem appropriate to both the struggling community of Springfield in the 1640s, and to people today:

God does sometimes withdraw his spirit, and then you be off and on: “I have no grace,” you say. This is not the way in the days of old. If you ever have the spirit, then you shall have it ever after, though you have not always the manifestation. If a man comes into his orchard in the winter and seeth the trees have no fruit, shall he therefore think they will not bear in summer? Yet these earthly things might decay – but not the Spirit. Now if once thou hast the Spirit thou hast it still. . . .

Truly God does afford many precious providences to us, and if we could but believe God in his providences we might have as much comfort as the world can afford. . . .

Near the conclusion Moxon remarked,



God would have us live comfortably and rejoice. Now we should labor not to be so sad, because God would comfort our hearts. We should not make others sad when God would have them not so. When we have saddened our own hearts heretofore, now we should labor to reform. God would have us live comfortably, and truly the want of comfort puts you upon many distrusts of unbelief. When God affords you comfort, take it . . . .<sup>17</sup>

#### **D. Performance**

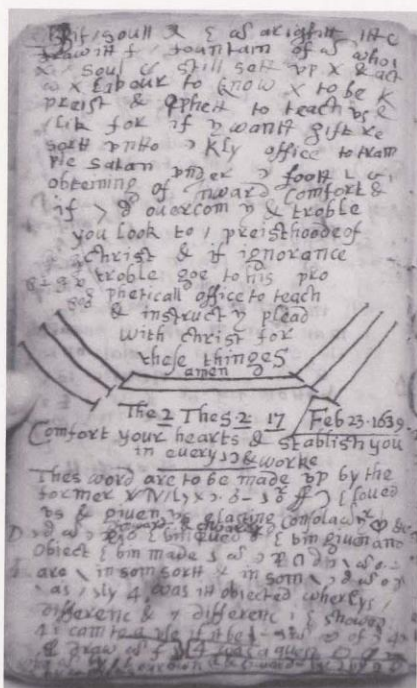
The decoded notes provided material for about twenty minutes of preaching. Clearly John Pynchon did not catch every word of what could have been a message lasting an hour or more; but twenty minutes suits a contemporary service much better! To make the message even more intelligible I added a few sentences from Moxon's subsequent sermon of March 2, 1640. That sermon extended the same theme in a seventeenth-century week-to-week preaching practice called a *continua*, and was in fact, like five sermons from February 16 through March 16, based on the same Bible verse.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, I developed a worship bulletin insert which included a couple of visual illustrations, a little background information, and a glossary to help with unfamiliar vocabulary. Unusual words were listed and defined in the order in which they occurred in the sermon.

How was this experiment experienced? Everybody took it in stride. Some expressed difficulty in bridging the gap from then to now. It took them a while to catch onto the basic mannerisms of seventeenth-century speech, including the original sentence structures with their sometimes unusual word orders; but I felt it was important to retain linguistic features of the original sermon in my performance. Others asked appropriate questions during the sermon response time included in the service, which indicated to me that they had followed the message and engaged with it. Several worshippers reported that they found the insert and its glossary clear and helpful. And several gave written feedback on a brief form I distributed as people left the sanctuary at the end of the service.

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<sup>17</sup> Powers, *Good and Comfortable Words*, 71, 74, 75.

<sup>18</sup> Neumann, *Jeremiah's Scribes*, 107.



The opening paragraphs of John Pynchon's notes, sermon of February 23, 1640. (The date in the manuscript is according to the Julian calendar then in use, when the old year ended on March 24.)

### ARCHAIC WORDS AND PHRASES

Almost all the words in Moxon's sermon mean today what they meant when he originally preached it. The following are expressions which may puzzle modern hearers. They are listed here in the order in which they are used in the sermon:

**pitch upon** = settle on

**write upon** = make a record of

**justify** = confirm by evidence

**testimony** = evidence

**sum up** = summarize

**unbottom** = stop depending on

**challenge** = lay claim to

**church condition** = being bound together in covenant as church members

**close with Christ** = confess faith in and reliance on Christ

**providences** = instances of God's intervention (in one's life or in the world)

**comfortable issue** = good outcome, positive result

From the feedback responses I discovered that it is vital to focus on preparing the congregation for the experience, which some found challenging. I also discovered I will need to adapt a bit further for any future presentations, particularly by adjusting a few places which sound like duplications in the original (though they actually are not), and which gave the hearers the impression that the message was more repetitive than it actually is.

What I discovered in re-presenting a 1640 sermon in 2017 reaffirmed my conviction: that with careful preparation, paying attention to creating a clear text and interpretive materials designed to enhance the worshippers' grasp of the message, and offering an opportunity to debrief in order to understand the experience better, an historic sermon can be preached in a contemporary context profitably and with integrity. My experience was such that I am certainly encouraged to try again.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to the people of First Congregational Church UCC in Coventry, Connecticut, and their interim minister, the Rev. Stephen Washburn, for the opportunity to preach a sermon from February 23, 1640 on July 9, 2017.