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**“Holy Love, and Sober Studie”:  
John Donne and the Scriptures**

Although many readers when considering John Donne think first of all of his poetry, especially his *Songs and Sonnets*,<sup>1</sup> the writer himself did not publish most of his poems, but carefully worked to prepare his sermons for publication.<sup>2</sup> Modern readers' evaluation of his works thus seem to differ from Donne's own. However, since the completion of a modern edition in 1962, the sermons have not only continued to be admired for their literary qualities, but are increasingly studied.

Anyone who spends time reading Donne's sermons or other religious prose is soon aware of the immense importance to Donne of the Scriptures. For this Dean of St. Paul's as for 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."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly every one of Donne's sermons not only begins with a scripture text, but actually adheres to that text and focuses on it, drawing as well on many more biblical passages. But 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, Donne challenged his hearers to find the promise of their being filled with the

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<sup>1</sup> See David Colclough, ed., *John Donne's Professional Lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 2.

<sup>2</sup> John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. G. R. Potter and E.M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 1.46

<sup>3</sup> *Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson, corr. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 228.

Holy Spirit "in your holy love, and sober studie of the Scriptures."<sup>4</sup> Donne practised what he preached.

Why does Donne value the Scriptures so highly? While writers on Donne have of course noticed this feature, what they have *not* noticed or mentioned until recently is that he participated wholeheartedly in a church, the Jacobean Church of England, whose leadership accorded Scriptures such an eminent position.<sup>5</sup> Historian Peter Lake describes the dominant Calvinist church view of the later Elizabethan church as "word-centred" rather than "sacrament-centred,"<sup>6</sup> and that was a view that historians have been showing prevailed until at least 1625, when the Laudians started to gain control of the church.

To be "word-centred" meant an emphasis on the Bible and preaching, and in recent essays I have demonstrated that unlike Lancelot Andrewes, Donne identified strongly with the Jacobean Calvinist church leadership.<sup>7</sup> While a biblical preacher himself, Andrewes with his relatively few fellow Arminians decried the current dominance of preaching, and sought church unity not so much in doctrine and preaching as in outward conformity to church rituals.

Donne has often in the past been labeled "Anglo-Catholic," an anachronistic term originating with the nineteenth-century Oxford movement. Though born a Roman Catholic, Donne underwent a carefully weighed but thorough conversion to the clearly Protestant stance of the Jacobean (and even the Caroline) Church of England. His sermons make his position vis-a-vis Rome unmistakable. A loyal churchman,

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<sup>4</sup> John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. Potter and Simpson, 8.268. Parenthetical references to this work will be by volume and page number.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel W. Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkins, "Introduction" in *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way*, ed. Doerksen and Hodgkins (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 13-27.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Doerksen and Hodgkins, 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> "Preaching Pastor versus Custodian of Order: Donne, Andrewes, and the Jacobean Church," *Philological Quarterly* 73 ((1994), 417-29; "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), 12-34.

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eventually Dean of St. Paul's, Donne should be called not "Anglican," a term that came into use after his death, but perhaps "conformist," to indicate that unlike even the moderate or conforming puritans with some of whom he associated, he had no misgivings about disputed rituals - those unauthorized by the Scriptures, such as making the sign of the cross in baptism, or compulsory kneeling at the receiving of communion.

What did unite the Jacobean Church of England was the Thirty-Nine Articles, on which all but heretics or Roman Catholics were in agreement. 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 the Book of Common Prayer, fully shared those views, and reflected that difference even in a sermon defending church rituals.<sup>8</sup> A simple but telling measure of Donne's values is that he mentions the Book of Common Prayer only about nine times in his ten volumes of sermons, while his references to Scripture are countless and continual.<sup>9</sup>

But respect is not the same as love, and Donne loves the Scriptures. It is characteristic of Donne to associate study of the Scriptures with love. In a sermon dealing with love of purity, he says love "is so noble, so sovereign an Affection, as that it is due to very few things, and very few things worthy of it." 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," (1.184, 198) says Donne, and this passionate man, who elsewhere confessed to a "hydroptique" love of learning,<sup>10</sup> reveals in his religious writings a passionate love for the biblical Word.

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<sup>8</sup> See Articles 6 and 34; Donne, *Sermons*, 7.433.

<sup>9</sup> Potter and Simpson estimate over 7000 references (10.295).

<sup>10</sup> 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), 129.

Donne reflects both his esteem and his love in the language he uses to describe Scripture, as when he speaks of the "rich, and sweet promises" of the Gospel, or "that sacred Treasure, the Scriptures," or of discovering "the beauty and the glory of those books" by gaining knowledge of its languages (2.220, 4.219, 6.56). Such expressions describe the Scriptures, but they also reveal their author's attitude. Again, Donne relishes the completeness, the satisfying quality of the Scriptures as he experiences them, to such a degree that he likens them to Paradise:

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 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.

Donne sees the Bible as Christ-centred, but also as a book of love:

His *Booke is Euangelium, Gospel*; and *Gospel 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 enamoured.

What especially delights Donne in the Bible is its eloquence, so that he often remarks that "there are not so *eloquent* books in the world, as the *Scriptures*" (10.103). 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 he liked best,

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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.

Calvin had early published a humanist commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* which gave signs of his lifelong interest in language and its literary and historical contexts.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

Donne delights in the literary patterns he finds in the Scriptures. In accounting for his own "spirituall appetite" for the Psalms of David in the Old Testament for a first course, and the Epistles of St. Paul for a second in the New, 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).<sup>13</sup> Speaking here as one who knows how poems are put together, Donne suggests that such intricate ["curious"] and carefully made works as the Psalms, while bringing pleasure, also call for an equally considered, thoughtful response (2.50; cf 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" (2.170-72). In calling for "sober" study,

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<sup>11</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study of the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 60-62.

<sup>12</sup> See Troy D. Reeves, *Index to the Sermons of John Donne* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1980), Vol. 2, Index to Proper Names.

<sup>13</sup> 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*, 107.

Donne cautions readers perhaps against the intoxication that might result from hastily imbibing such heady stuff as the Scriptures. 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, felt to be both useless and dangerous, and in favour of practical divinity.

In proposing such an approach Donne is taking into account the *purpose of the biblical study* he envisions for his lay auditory and the *nature of the Scriptures*, including the advice that they themselves offer for their reading. Donne is not addressing theological scholars, but intelligent lay people whose needs he sees as 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) are in danger of forgetting what Donne did not forget: that abstract study can 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 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.<sup>14</sup> But 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 *variae lectiones*, controversies and perplexities, undo us; the Will, the Testament of God, enriches us, the Schedules, the Codicils of men, begger us." As an erstwhile law student<sup>15</sup> and current

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<sup>14</sup> See Potter and Simpson edition, 345-401

<sup>15</sup> See Jeremy Maule, "Donne and the Words of the Law," in David Colclough, ed.,

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lecturer to lawyers (though this sermon was delivered before the King at Whitehall), 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.

One of the faults Donne sees in biblical scholarship is needless controversy. He loves to quote lively helpful images from the Fathers, such as Chrysostom's calling the Scriptures "a Sea, in which a *Lambe* may wade, and an *Elephant* may swimme" (9.124). This emphasizes the approachability of the Bible for a variety of people. Elsewhere Donne, using a different 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 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." 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).

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 (1 Pet. 3.16), scriptures wrested by the unlearned and unstable to their own destruction. 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

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*John Donne's Professional Lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 19-36.

satisfaction therein, from them, who are thereunto authorized by God in his Church" (7.401; compare 4.221).

Donne 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. Though all people are called to "search the Scriptures," Donne echoing legal language claims 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).

Donne also examines the role of reason in approaching Scripture, and argues against an unreasoned faith. He says it would be wrong of Christians, or even of God, to require faith without some measure of understanding. 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; compare 1.298-99).

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 *four 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 believe of our Bible ..." (358-59).

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



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*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).

Humility is an essential quality for the study of Scripture, says Donne: "come humbly to the reading and hearing of the Scriptures, and thou shalt have strength of understanding" (9.123).

Elsewhere 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" (9.95).

Where does "holy love, and sober studie" of the Scriptures lead? As in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, or in Paul's challenge in Romans 12, 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).

Throughout his sermons, John Donne encounters a remarkable book on its own terms. In a book manuscript left incomplete at the time of her death, Ruth Wallerstein recognized in Donne an excitement that grew from the "meaning he found in the Bible as the core of essential knowledge about man, the heart of man, and human life."<sup>16</sup> The doctrine of "unified sensibility" in Donne has been debated, but certainly his attitude toward the

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara H. Davis, "Studies in Donne by Ruth C. Wallerstein" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1962), 196.

Scriptures fully involved both heart and mind, both knowledge and faith. Though Wallerstein claimed that what Donne sought in the Bible was "not in any temporal sense a knowledge of this world or even of its expected ends," but a "larger reality and purpose,"<sup>17</sup> the practical note in all 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. The liveliness and the vigour in Donne's sermons is there for the same reason.

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<sup>17</sup> Davis 196.