Chapter 1

Creating Authority in the Pulpit

In Chapter 8 of Moby-Dick, Ishmael sits in the Whaleman's Chapel and eyes the bow-front pulpit with the jutting fiddlehead scrollwork. How full of meaning, he thinks: “For the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. [. . .] Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete, and the pulpit is its prow.”

The pulpit is the world’s prow? One hardly expects this pious declaration from a melancholy ex-schoolmaster on his way to sea. Such rhetoric belonged to the clergy, as when Ralph Waldo Emerson told the Harvard Divinity School seniors preparing for the ministry, “The office is the first in the world,” or when New York Presbyterian Gardiner Spring wrote in The Power of the Pulpit (1848) that the pulpit “has power above the field of battle, above the Forum, above the Senate-house.” Antebellum sermons resounded with the idea that the Protestant ministry was the most exalted calling known to humanity—that it was the “highest office God allows to man,” that this “sacred office” was the “chief instrument of glorifying God,” and that there was “no higher honor to which man may aspire on earth.” Orville Dewey, a leading Unitarian and a minister with a strong connection to Melville’s family, described the elation that came from addressing the assembled masses:

[W]ho that stands, though as the humblest teacher, amidst the crowded throng, of the young and the old, the strong and the weak, the joyous and the sorrowful, can help trembling and exulting at the same time, at the
greatness of his sublime vocation? Who can help feeling that the place whereon he stands is holy ground; that the spot to which a thousand eyes are directed for consolation, for guidance, and holy impulse, is a spot where one of the noblest actions of life is to be performed, where the noblest work is to be done, for time and for eternity.  

Here Dewey claimed not only a supreme moral significance for the preacher, who did the world’s “noblest work,” but also cultural preeminence, as the preacher drew together hundreds of diverse individuals in a collective spiritual experience.  

Melville likely intended Ishmael’s mimicry of this rhetoric to be ironic, at least in some measure. It is consonant with the naïveté Ishmael displays in many of the shore chapters, like his ridiculous efforts to avoid sharing a bed with a cannibal or his expostulations against Queequeg’s “Ramadan.” Pertinent to the irony is Melville’s implicit jab at the political uselessness of the clergy. When most Northern ministers responded equivocally to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, opponents of slavery were indignant that the self-proclaimed guardians of American morality had so little to say against racial injustice. To say in 1851 that the pulpit led the world was to many a bitter joke. Yet Moby-Dick is always teetering between sobriety and jest, and Ishmael’s proclamation is more than, as Lawrance Thompson put it, a “sarcastic sneer.” In announcing the sermon’s authority, however naïvely, Ishmael establishes the standard of moral and cultural leadership to which Moby-Dick aspires. Like so many other antebellum novelists, Melville wanted fiction to stand in the same high place as the sermon, and fiction writers, to enjoy moral and professional equality with preachers, the supposed “leaders of the world.”  

This chapter traces how antebellum preachers created the moral authority that novelists envied. Certainly ministers could not take their authority for granted. The disestablishment of religion, which began with the Revolution and was completed by 1833, meant that ministers faced new pressures to prove their worth to congregations. No longer quasi-magisterial figures allied with the civic order and attached to a community for life, they now belonged to a private profession accountable to a changeable and demanding clientele. With congregations paying pastors directly, church members were more inclined to delay inviting licentiates to take on full pastorates, to dismiss ministers who displeased them (or some faction of the congregation), and to keep salaries as low as possible. Ministers typically served many different communities over their lifetimes, a result either of being forced out or of climbing the career ladder to better positions. They also
occupied an ambiguous position within the public sphere. Many state constitutions prohibited them from filling political office, and after Republicans protested the Federalist clergy’s preaching against Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800, preachers tended to keep partisan politics out of their sermons—at least until the late 1840s, when the political issues at the center of national life, slavery above all, increasingly overlapped with the pulpit’s moral purview.⁹

Faced with these new conditions of professional mobility and political marginality, ministers had to take responsibility for producing their own moral and cultural authority. Bald assertion of the nobility and sacredness of their work furthered this end, as did more tangible efforts. New seminary curricula focused on subjects that “enhanced the minister’s expertise and professional credentials,” such as classical languages, theology, and sacred rhetoric.¹⁰ Once employed, many ministers abided by new rules of pastoral decorum, such as gravity and social aloofness, that safeguarded their dignity; the newly professionalized minister was “the spiritual friend of all and the social friend of none.”¹¹ Ministers also increasingly defined themselves as members of a national profession, a process facilitated by growing networks of reform societies and benevolent associations that gave them opportunities to exercise influence beyond their local congregations. But nothing mattered more than how one preached. Delivering the morning and afternoon Sunday sermons was a minister’s paramount duty, his most visible public act, and the most obvious arena in which he competed with his fellow clergy for tithe-paying, pew-renting church members.¹² As Andover Theological Seminary President Ebenezer Porter declared in his influential textbook, Lectures on Homiletics and Preaching (1834), “If a minister would maintain the respect of his hearers, it is a maxim which I have no fear of repeating too often, ‘whatever else he does or neglects to do, he must preach well.’”¹³

What did it mean for a minister to “preach well”? The question is vast. A Kentucky Methodist hollering about damnation at a camp meeting looked and sounded very different from a New York Unitarian reminding parishioners of their familial and civic duties in a neoclassical church, or from a Pennsylvania Lutheran following communion with a homily in a country chapel, or from a Baptist slave exhorting his peers on a Virginia plantation. Below I trace several of the defining norms and ideals of antebellum preaching, focusing on educated ministers in the elite, predominately white denominations of the Northeast, as it was these ministers who enjoyed the greatest cultural prestige in antebellum America and with whom the novelists discussed in later chapters primarily competed for moral and cultural authority. Distinguishing as necessary between theological conservatives and
liberals, I explore how ministers reflected on their practice. Although I give significant attention to the liberals because of their outsiz e influence on ante-bellum American literary culture, it is worth remembering that conservative theology had far greater purchase on the culture as a whole. I discuss first how ministers symbolically constructed their relationship to their congregations, then how they created authority through the rhetoric and performance of preaching.

A father, friend, or foe?

Ministers laid the groundwork for their preaching by schooling church-goers in the nature of ministerial authority. Karin Gedge has described the relationship between ministers and their congregations as undergoing a decisive shift in the antebellum period from paternal to fraternal: “no longer a stern gatekeeper and lawgiver, [the minister] must now serve as a confidant, loving friend, and a counselor.” While this generalization has a good deal of truth, theologically conservative ministers were reluctant to abandon a paternal notion of ministerial authority. They were also much more likely than liberals to adopt an authoritarian stance and to claim a divine commission for their work. An ordination sermon by David D. Field, minister of the Congregational Church in Stockbridge from 1819 to 1837, reveals certain foundational assumptions about ministerial authority that persisted throughout the antebellum period. Field admonished the congregation that the minister was “over you in the Lord” (1 Thes. 5:12)—a position that entailed numerous solemn responsibilities, from administering ordinances to censuring church members to preaching the “whole system of faith,” which meant not shir king disagreeable doctrines like eternal damnation. Although the minister was supposed to exercise his office with appropriate humility, the bottom line was that he was a representative of Christ whom the congregation was obliged to hold in high esteem. The minister’s proper relationship to his peo ple, Field wrote, “is paternal, or rather it is pastoral; a government in which, by instruction, kindness and example, the flock of God are to be led on to peace, safety and glory.” Both of Field’s primary figurations of authority—the “paternal” and the “pastoral”—encoded the idea that the laity needed the minister’s superior wisdom. Spiritually, the minister was first among equals.

As a democratic ethos reshaped the clerical profession, conservatives increasingly balanced their call for hearers to respect the minister’s authority with an emphasis on the minister’s weighty obligations to his hearers. New York Episcopalian Samuel Seabury engaged in this high-wire act when
preaching on the relationship of the clergy and laity in 1844. Making the case for ministerial authority, he stressed that as ministers of Christ, the clergy represented Christ, just as a government’s ministers represented the government. The Christian minister’s primary obligation was thus to Christ, not to the people—or, put plainly, a minister was not bound to seek to please the congregation that paid his salary. At the same time, though, Seabury held up as an example Paul, who made himself “a servant to all” that he might gain some, an especially challenging example to ministers since, as Seabury acknowledged, the Greek *doulos* meant not simply servant but “slave.” Without mentioning Southern slavery, Seabury clarified that ministers, following the example of Paul and Christ, should gladly serve their people through any humble labor necessary.16

But such gestures of humility were seldom the minister’s last word. Seabury’s peroration returned to the main task at hand—exhorting listeners to grant their ministers all due authority:

And I warn you, brethren, against being led astray by the clamors that are raised about priestly authority and tradition, and the specious claims that are set up for liberty of thought and unlimited private judgment; and I ask you to consider seriously whether the real end of all this clamor be not to oppose the just authority of Christ’s ministers; to unsettle your creeds, to disparage your standard of faith; to undermine the Christian laws and safeguards of sound public opinion; to erect private fancy in the place of collective wisdom, and in short to deprive you of the liberty of law only to enslave you to the bondage of anarchy.17

To question the minister’s “just authority” was to risk one’s faith, to abandon the guidance of collective wisdom, and to enter the “bondage of anarchy.” Such rhetoric made the real “slave” of this address not the minister, but the too-independent-minded listener who undermined law and order by failing to respect the minister’s superior moral and religious judgment. Like Spring in *The Power of the Pulpit*, Seabury drew a bright line connecting ministerial authority and social order.

A corollary of the conservatives’ emphasis on ministerial authority was the idea that humanity’s stubborn sinfulness and innate resistance to saving truth required ministers to approach their hearers as antagonists. Indeed, a rhetoric of violence pervaded descriptions of preaching centered on the traditional drama of Christian redemption. Finney described the preacher’s mission with characteristic force: “Ministers should never rest satisfied until they have ANNIHILATED every excuse of sinners.”18 Drawing more explic-
Chapter 1

Chapter 1

itly on biblical images of warfare, Porter primed his students for their first pastorates by urging them to use their sermons as weapons: true pulpit eloquence “makes even the stripling warrior, ‘valiant in fight’; and enables him to cut off the head of Goliath, with the sword wrested from his own hand.”

Similarly, Amherst College president and Presbyterian minister Heman Humphrey told young men entering the ministry that they needed a stock of sermons written beforehand, as “A soldier should have a good supply of cartridges, or at least should learn how to make them with facility, before he approaches the enemy's lines.”

Philadelphia Reformed Dutch minister George Bethune summoned much the same militaristic language in warning young pastors against announcing the heads of their sermons: “What would we think of a general, who should advise his adversary of his plan of attack? Yet the hearts of those we address are naturally at enmity with the truth.”

Even Henry Ward Beecher, who famously championed a God of love, told ministers in his *Yale Lectures on Preaching* that their job was to assimilate Christian truth to their own lives and “with that, strike! with that, flash! with that, burn men!”

To a certain extent, violent metaphors came with the territory in conservative preaching; Puritan preachers had sought to convey spiritual power in this way, too, in particular the idea that the “sword of the Spirit” could take the form of a sermon. Yet the frequency of such language among antebellum ministers may also have reflected the new professional realities. The harsh truth was that post-disestablishment ministers had a newly adversarial relationship with their congregations. A congregation dissatisfied with its minister felt within its rights dismissing him and calling a new one, and a minister who wanted to keep his job had to proceed cautiously and not get too comfortable. Those who managed to secure a pastorate had to preach consistently satisfactory sermons while negotiating relentless demands for pastoral care—prayers and comfort at sickbeds and deathbeds, the officiating of funerals and marriages, personal counseling and afternoon visits. Again and again the pastoral literature warned ministers to safeguard their morning hours for sermon preparation and not to ruin their health through overwork. As Humphrey wrote to his son, and by extension to all young ministers, a congregation would never deliberately endanger a minister’s health but would make such persistent demands that the harmful effects would be “as injurious as if an enemy had done it.”

Despite facing the same professional pressures, liberals were much less eager than conservatives to portray ministers as battling their congregations, and they seldom figured the sermon as a valiant storming of obdurate hearts. Instead, they tended to frame the relationship between a minister and his
congregation in egalitarian or familial terms. We might take as a touchstone for this issue the series “On the Mutual Relations, Duties, and Interests of Minister and People,” which ran in the Unitarian Christian Register and Boston Observer from August through November 1841. The series made several points with which conservatives would have agreed, such as that the relationship between a minister and his people was not to be regarded as a financial arrangement and that the people should not value their minister for the prestige he lent their village or for the value his pastorate added to their real estate. But the series diverged from conservative sensibilities in its emphasis on the minister’s lack of authority: “The relation between a Minister and his People is one of equality. There is neither dominion nor servitude on either side.” More pointedly, the minister had “no authority nor command”; the relation between him and his congregation was “one of brethren.”

Or as Salem Unitarian John Brazer (whom Hawthorne praised in his youthful “Spectator”) had clarified the decade before, the minister is a “helper and friend indeed, but [. . .] is and can be nothing more.” Unitarians preferred to see ministers as gifted spokesmen for a common faith, not as men chosen by God to save sinners.

Yet a lingering sense that a congregation was bound to follow its minister’s guidance often undercut the liberal rhetoric of brotherhood. Boston Unitarian Henry Ware, Jr., for instance, wrote that a minister should speak with his congregation as “a friend with a friend, or a parent with his children”—an uneasy juxtaposition of egalitarian and hierarchical models of relationship. Moreover, when the pastor rose to speak, he was to remember both that he was “in the midst of acquaintances and friends,” and that although a few individuals in the congregation might resist his message, his hearers on the whole trusted him and had “put themselves in his power.”

The ideal minister thus bore something of a paradoxical relationship to his congregation—both brotherly father and authoritative friend. Some liberals suggested that the minister should play different roles to different parishioners depending on their age. The same Christian Register article that maintained that the minister’s relationship to his people was one of “brethren” also said that the minister should treat those more aged with respect, those his own age as brothers and sisters, and those younger than himself as children.

The congregation was to reciprocate this family feeling:

Children should fly to the arms of a faithful minister as to a father indeed, who is ready to aid them in all that is most conducive to their true happiness. Youth should unbosom themselves to him, with something of the freedom they would to a real brother; and the heart of age should grow
This familial model made the minister’s authority dependent not on due deference or on the public’s acquiescence to a divinely ordered state of affairs but on generationally defined sympathies. The result was that while the minister was clearly imagined as a moral guide to the young, his relationship to his generational peers and elders was less well defined. For a neighbor to regard the minister as a brother, or for the heart of the aged person to “grow warmer” in his presence, did not require attaching any special importance to his teaching. In emphasizing fellow-feeling, the egalitarian and familial models of pastoral leadership weakened the minister’s authority.

Sermonic discourse

Among the educated, predominately white congregations of the Northeast, the early nineteenth century saw a decisive shift in the conception of good preaching, from a scholastic emphasis on explicating the Bible and expounding correct doctrine to a new focus on the sermon as a practical discourse that moved hearers to right belief and action. A sermon was to be, the influential Edinburgh rhetorician Hugh Blair wrote, a “persuasive oration.” Or as Finney asserted, “To preach doctrines in an abstract way, and not in reference to practice, is absurd.” Antebellum preachers had, in a sense, rediscovered first principles, as Augustine’s foundational treatise on preaching, the fourth book of On Christian Doctrine (426), had insisted that the preacher’s ultimate goal in delighting, moving, and instructing hearers was to convince them to take action. The nineteenth-century move toward practical preaching arose from several converging and interconnected historical currents, including the evangelicalism that had entered American life with the Great Awakening in the 1730s and blossomed with the second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century; the Romantic emphasis on feeling as the linchpin of true religion; and the pervasive influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which maintained the accessibility of truth.

The shift in preaching from teaching doctrine to motivating personal change brought with it a looser, more essayistic sermon style. Ministers no longer depended on the backbone of exordium, narratio, partitio, refutatio, epilogus—the five-part, Ciceronian structure of many Protestant sermons in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Gone, too, was the dependable sermon form of the Puritans—text, doctrine, proofs (or reasons), and uses (or
applications), often further subdivided into “heads” that served as a guide to logic and memory for both minister and hearers. Antebellum preachers still began sermons with a text, or verse from the canonical scriptures, but spent much less time than their forebears explaining its significance within a theological system or correlating it with other passages in the Bible. Instead, the sermon now focused on the text’s moral and spiritual relevance, as the “application” gained new prominence and, in some cases, took over the whole. Heads were optional. Emerson celebrated this newly free-form style when he called preaching “the speech of man to men,—essentially the most flexible of all organs, of all forms.” Speaking in the early 1870s, Henry Ward Beecher could do no more than vaguely suggest that new structures might be emerging to replace the old ones. Old-fashioned, methodical textual explication was only one way to preach: “A descriptive sermon, a poetical sermon, and a sermon of sentiment, have, severally, their own genius of form.” But he did not describe what this “genius of form” might look like; apparently it was to come from individual inspiration and effort, not a new set of rules.

However loosely organized a sermon, its rhetoric was one of complete conviction, eschewing gestures of compromise, speculation, or ambiguity in favor of divine truths and moral certitude. It was, as Hortense Spillers has written of African American preaching, “the discourse of primary certainty that banishes all doubt to the realm of the inconsequential.” Whether an antebellum minister preached a judgmental Father or a loving Son, whether he dealt in syllogisms or anecdotes, he spoke from the pulpit with the authority of a seemingly unshakable faith.

This tone of conviction reached its climax in the peroration. There the minister had to drive home his point so that it touched his hearers’ hearts. As Porter exhorted his students, “[Y]ou must awaken feeling, especially in the close of your discourse, or you come utterly short of the great end of preaching.” To win this emotional response, a minister had to control his voice, raising it gradually in pitch and volume throughout the sermon. Starting with too much emotion was fatal. Porter warned, “The discourse that begins in ecstasy, to be consistent with itself, must end in phrenzy.” A respectable minister typically wanted to achieve not frenzy but something closer to the crescendo of a musical performance: “Be sure that the final sentence leaves every soul vibrating like a swept harp.”

Another constitutive feature of antebellum sermons—and perhaps, too, the sermons of most times and places—was their reliance upon redemption narratives. Liberal or conservative, rational or evangelical, preachers wrote listeners into stories in which divine grace and, often, human effort
repaired and redeemed human sins and shortcomings. Sermons might castigate, exhort, command, or rebuke, but their ultimate word to listeners was never one of condemnation. They offered, that is, what Edmund Arens has identified as a core element of communicative-religious praxis: “the dimension of promise,” or the guarantee of a “relieving and reconciling liberation from political, social, physical and psychic bondage and mortality’s grip.” Few if any sermons held out all these forms of liberation, but intimations of redemption defined the genre.

For theological conservatives, narratives of individual redemption typically centered on Jesus’ death as the atonement for human sin, or what ministers called “preaching the cross of Christ.” Effective preaching created in listeners a profound sense of dissatisfaction with their sinful condition (an earlier age had called it “sermon-sickness”), moved them to repent of their sins, inspired them to have faith that Christ’s sacrifice provided for their salvation, and brought them to submit themselves to the rule of a just and merciful God. Evangelicals elaborated on this paradigm by emphasizing the necessity of a dramatic, emotional “new birth” conversion experience that marked the beginning of one’s Christian identity. The pervasiveness of evangelicalism meant that even the orthodox, who supposedly believed that God had predetermined who would be saved, regularly connected individual redemption with repentance and reform. Whether or not conservative sermons focused on a conversion experience, they promoted, in effect, a version of the ancient redemptive structure that appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. Erich Auerbach has described this pattern as one of “humiliation and elevation,” in which a transcendent, majestic God lifts up those who have been dishonored and defeated. For antebellum theological conservatives, an individual’s humiliation lay both in the inescapable reality of human sin and in the sufferings and trials of existence itself, while the promised elevation meant spiritual renewal now and a glorious bodily resurrection at the Last Judgment.

Liberal preaching also offered its hearers a redemption narrative, though typically a less dramatic one. Often described by contemporary critics and later generations as dry and overly rationalistic, liberal preaching is better understood as pietistic, intent on transforming and purifying the inner life. As Boston Unitarian Francis Parkman put it in a seeming oxymoron, “Rational Christianity addresses itself to the heart.” For liberals, achieving a purified inner life depended not on a single, decisive moment of repentance and self-abnegation but on progressive religious illumination and the continual pursuit of Christian character. Unitarian George Putnam refuted the notion of a once-and-for-all conversion experience: “The true religious life
of the soul is a series of changes—new and repeated accessions of religious
light; the vision enlarged, the aim raised, the spirit renewed from time to
time.” Liberals also emphasized that salvation lay not in believing that Jesus
had died for one’s sins, but in doing as Jesus had taught. As Worcester Unitari-
ian Aaron Bancroft reminded his congregation, in a sermon that began with
the text, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling [ . . . ]” (Phil.
2:12–13), Jesus had “left traces of his footsteps, that you might follow him
to the gate of heaven.” Liberal preaching sought to inculcate the piety that
would sustain and guide the faithful on this heavenly pilgrimage.

Although liberal preaching rejected the “new birth” model in favor of cul-
tivating ongoing spiritual improvement, it resembled conservative preaching
in its attempts to prompt individual contrition. Rather than reminding lis-
teners of how they were inherently flawed or had transgressed God’s laws,
it sought to arouse their consciences. Daniel Walker Howe has traced the
importance of conscience for Unitarians, who regarded it as the highest of
the human faculties, the one that could not be “indulged excessively.” Unitar-
ians often centered preaching around this idea, reminding the most wayward
listeners that they had an innate moral sense, “quickening” the consciences
of others so that they could see the fine points of moral behavior, and show-
ing all how they could fulfill their daily moral obligations. An article in the
Christian Register rebuked those who shunned the challenging, conscience-
awakening sermons that might prompt real “regeneration”: a deep reforma-
tion not of action alone, “but also and above all [of] the habits of thought and
feeling, the sentiments, the principles, the motives of conduct.” The preach-
er’s task was to prompt transformations of character—to cause hearers “to
perceive, and feel, and confess to themselves, that they are not what they
ought to be and might be.” In effect, the article called for preaching to create
a distinctively liberal experience of humiliation—a sense of dissatisfaction
with oneself that faintly echoed the agonizing evangelical experience of “con-
viction of sin.” After creating this kinder, gentler conviction, preaching was
to show listeners how to sanctify themselves through prayer and self-disci-
pline. Focused on this process of sanctification as a form of redemption in
and of itself, liberals had much less to say than conservatives about rewards
in the afterlife.

**Ideals of pulpit performance**

Regardless of message, the antebellum sermon derived a great deal of its
authority from the performance of the preacher—how he used his eyes,
hands, body, and voice to carry his hearers through the hour. Ministers played their living presence as a trump card against the books, newspapers, journals, and other printed materials that competed for a congregation’s attention, declaring, “The press cannot be a substitute for the pulpit; no institution can supersede the necessity of preaching,” and “Nature demands the presence, the sympathy, the eye, the voice, the action, the expressive countenance of the living teacher.” Ministers, especially conservatives, called attention to the uniqueness and value inherent in preaching by bemoaning the chasm between the sermon as document and the sermon as event. Spring, for example, dedicated a chapter in *The Power of the Pulpit* to extolling the superiority of the “living teacher” over the printed page, stressing that the preacher’s “vividness of voice and gesture often tells even more than his words” and that the preacher’s “warm heart and glowing lips” appealed far more powerfully to reason, to conscience, and to the passions than did print on paper. He described his sense of dissatisfaction in being able only to read eighteenth-century sermons:

> When you read the discourses of Whitfield [sic], you can scarcely be persuaded that he was the prince of preachers; and that the author of those printed pages was the man who collected 20,000 hearers on the open field at Leeds; who fascinated all ranks of society; who held Hume in profound admiration; and who brought the infidel Chesterfield to his feet, with outstretched arms, to rescue the wanderer from the fold of God [. . . ]. You read his sermons, but the preacher is not there. That glance of his piercing eye that hushed thousands to silence in the open field, is not there. That voice, at a single intonation of which a whole audience has been known to burst into tears, is not there. That instant communication between the living speaker and his hearers, which creates so powerful a sympathy, is not there.

More than simply a paean to Whitefield or to the power of the performed sermon, Spring captured how preaching could draw its appeal from its status as communal event, when a listener joined “all ranks” in hearing and responding to the preacher’s voice.

In praising the living preacher so highly, ministers betrayed their anxiety about the ephemerality of their work. When, for instance, Congregationalist minister and Andover theology professor Edwards Park claimed, “[I]f the sermons preached in our land during a single year were all printed, they would fill a hundred and twenty million octavo pages,” he seemed to be straining to make the nation’s preaching a visible, tangible good.
Stowe, a professor of sacred literature at Andover and the husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe, lamented the sermon’s ephemerality in unusually pointed terms. Looking over the sermons of the late Congregationalist minister Moses Stuart, Stowe mourned their inability to represent the man at his best. They lacked the “kindling enthusiasm” that marked his spoken sermons, while abounding in the traces of orality that weigh down a book: “the digressions, the repetitions, the egotisms, the general want of compactness, which give vivacity to a lecture, rather deaden the impression of a book.” All too accurately he predicted that Stuart’s printed sermons would not outlive the man himself.

Although much about preaching is inevitably lost to us, ministerial writings reveal many of the qualities considered essential to good preaching. Rule one was sincerity, or the idea that preaching should reflect the minister’s piety. It was axiomatic that one could deliver convincing, inspiring sermons only if one believed one’s own message deeply. Good preaching welled forth from personal religious experience, especially prayer. Sermons found their source in, as conservatives put it, “lifting up [one’s] heart to God,” “constant communion with God,” and “living continually in the light of the burning throne.” Or as Humphrey misquoted Luther, Bene orasse est bene precasse—to have prayed well is to have preached well. An 1833 pamphlet, originally printed as an article in the Quarterly Christian Spectator, elaborated on this idea by listing the fourteen pious sentiments all preachers needed, from a “peculiar sensibility to the honor of God, and a desire for His glory, so strong as to amount to a RULING PASSION,” to a sense of personal responsibility for converting sinners. Regardless of denomination, ministers were supposed to feel their theological principles wholeheartedly.

But what if it came time to preach and a minister did not feel especially pious? The idea seems to have been virtually unspeakable in the ante-bellum period, but in a question-and-answer session following one of Henry Ward Beecher’s lectures on preaching in the early 1870s, one man asked this question. At first Beecher dished out the standard homiletic wisdom: that any minister who could not work up enthusiasm for the gospel should find another line of work. He then conceded that sometimes his own father would preach louder when his heart flagged, reporting (with, one suspects, a certain oedipal glee) that Lyman had once told him, albeit in self-rebuke, “I always holloa when I have n’t anything to say!” Henry Ward told the questioner that just as you should give to charity in order to feel more charitable, so you should “act as though you had the feeling, even if you had not, for its effect in carrying your audience whither you wish to carry them.” If you don’t feel it, fake it.
Piety, or the appearance thereof, was considered a *sine qua non* for good preaching but was by itself insufficient. The minister was also expected to draw upon more personal interests and feelings—something closer to the gritty, half-conscious selfhood we call authenticity. Addressing the Pastoral Association of Massachusetts, Presbyterian minister and Williams College president Edward Griffin advised against choosing subjects simply because they seemed popular or striking: “Consult your own joys or trials or necessities to know what to say and in what order. Copy your own heart and views. These are the most interesting sermons. Here heart answers to heart.” This was the Romantic sensibility in full flower: to engage hearers, a minister must reveal some intimate aspect of himself—his “heart and views.” Similarly, Henry Ware, Jr. counseled that a minister should “choose topics on which his own mind is kindling with a feeling which he is earnest to communicate,” and that “the most efficient speaker is he who throws his own soul into his eloquence.” Arguing for an even deeper personal investment in preaching, Dewey admonished, “Self-study is the secret of preaching.” He elaborated, “From the toiling brain and the beating heart, from the springs of original meditation, and from the fountain of tears, must every sermon be drawn.” Or as one old salt who went to hear Father Taylor opined, “What I likes along o’preachin’ [is] when a man is a-preachin’ at me I want him to take somert hot out of his heart and shove it into mine,—that’s what I calls preachin’.” Across denominations, the sermon was idealized as a personal, autobiographical utterance.

The desire for preaching that seemed to display the minister’s private feeling helped drive the rise of extemporaneous preaching, perhaps the most important development in Protestant preaching in the first half of the nineteenth century. Traditionally, the denominations that insisted upon an educated ministry, such as Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, produced ministers who wrote sermons during the week and read them from the pulpit on Sundays. To compose a sermon with care was to respect the sacred office and one’s hearers, as well as to enlighten the congregation with one’s erudition. But as the evangelical denominations that flourished during the Second Great Awakening increasingly drew in listeners with ministers who spoke not from a manuscript but “from the heart,” even preachers in the more staid denominations began to set aside their written discourses in favor of outlines, notes, and mental rehearsals.

One of the most influential calls to extemporaneity in nineteenth-century America was Henry Ware, Jr.’s *Hints on Extemporaneous Preaching* (1824), a slim volume widely cited by both liberals and conservatives. Well before Emerson critiqued Unitarianism as “corpse-cold” in 1846, Ware decried the
“constrained, cold, formal, scholastic mode of address” common in New England churches, the “cold reading” of sermons, and the “coolly” written discourse. What was needed instead was warmth: the “free, flowing, animated utterance” that pours forth from the heart “warm with love” and the spirit that is “warm and stirring” with joy, peace, faith, and hope.⁶⁹ A minister could achieve this warmth through a new method of sermon preparation. He was to choose a topic that mattered to him, study it, meditate on it, turn it over in the back of his mind during conversation, finish preparing by taking an hour to pull his thoughts together (though such efficiency took practice, Ware warned), and, once in the pulpit, speak with such single-minded focus that he forgot himself and was propelled forward by the current of his thought. Such extemporaneity produced a unique sympathy between a minister and his hearers—“a direct passage from heart to heart”—and a more kinetic, mesmerizing performance than manuscript reading:

There is more natural warmth in the declamation, more earnestness in the address, greater animation in the manner, more of the lighting up of the soul in the countenance and whole mien, more freedom and meaning in the gesture; the eye speaks, and the fingers speak, and when the orator is so excited as to forget every thing but the matter on which his mind and feelings are acting, the whole body is affected, and helps to propagate his emotions to the hearer.⁷⁰

Ware’s breathless periodic sentences mimic the energy of the extemporaneous preacher in action, whose passionate delivery of his sermon transmits the religious affections directly to his hearers. Content here matters less than the sheer spectacle of the exemplary man of faith in the pulpit—the excited preacher’s lit soul, free gesture, speaking eyes and fingers.

Not every minister was eager to try this experiment, and Ware deftly parried the objections of those reluctant to stand before their congregations unshielded by a manuscript. To those who protested that extemporaneous preaching promoted inaccuracies, he extolled the incomparable value of impassioned expression. To those who said it led to vague declamation, he distinguished between an extemporaneous sermon and an unpremeditated one and maintained the necessity of writing periodically to sharpen one’s mental discipline. To demurrals that not everyone was suited to extemporaneous preaching, he urged practice and more practice. His title page quoted Quintilian: “Maximus vero studiorum fructus est, et velut præmium quod-dam amplissimum longi laboris, ex tempore dicendi facultas,” or, “To speak well extemporaneously is truly the fruit of great study and ample labor.” To
those who complained that extemporaneity disallowed close reasoning, he argued that since few of a minister’s hearers were “thinkers or readers,” they should not be addressed with rigorous argumentation they were disinclined or unable to follow. Even educated hearers, he said, would sleep through a scholarly discourse presented from the pulpit since they could find better material of that sort in books. Moreover, extemporaneity could actually improve the sermon’s intellectual quality, as the situation of facing an audience from the pulpit forced a minister to think more clearly and creatively than he could in his study. As the preacher tried to impress his point upon his audience, apt illustrations and metaphors would flash upon his mind. Citing the French homiletician François Fénelon, Ware wrote that a speaker carried along with his discourse experienced “new views of a subject, new illustrations, and unthought of figures and arguments” that probably never would have occurred to him in his study.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Hints is how Ware made his case by acknowledging—and stoking—ministers’ fear of public humiliation. Allusions to this fear constitute a subtle, recurrent motif of Hints. Every preacher put himself and his authority on the line when he rose to address an audience, and a manuscript at least ensured the smooth flow of speech. If it risked putting hearers to sleep, it was a reliable hedge against pulpit catastrophe. Ware granted that preaching was an intimidating rhetorical situation, in which “the solemn stillness and fixed gaze of a waiting multitude, serve rather to appal [sic] and abash the solitary speaker.” He assured readers that many ministers succeeded in preaching extemporaneously only after long struggle and “mortifying failures.” He sketched, too, in Gothic detail, the horrifying prospect of that experience a later generation would call stage-fright: “the distress which attends the loss of self-possession, which distorts every feature with agony, and distils in sweat from his forehead”—or, yet more vividly, “that incubus, which sits on every faculty of the soul, and palsies every power, and fastens down the helpless sufferer to the very evil from which he strives to flee.”

A Methodist might war against Satan in the pulpit; for Ware, the real demon a minister battled was his paralyzing fear of his audience. The only solution lay within, in single-minded concentration on one’s message. Ware then turned the tables by warning ministers that they risked public humiliation if they did not preach extemporaneously. There might be occasions, he said, when “the want of this power may expose him to mortification.” Funerals, baptisms, Sunday mornings when public events demanded a last-minute topical sermon—all called for an ability to preach on short notice. Developing facility in extemporaneous preaching was worthwhile if it allowed one to avoid even once the “mortification of being silent when he
ought to speak, is expected to speak, and would do good by speaking.” He further warned of the embarrassment that came from writing a sermon and yet, despite time-consuming preparation, still making a poor showing in the pulpit. A preacher armed only with notes might on occasion limp through a sermon with “discomfort and chagrin,” but many manuscript preachers gave similarly disappointing performances with the “additional mortification of having spent a larger time” preparing them. 73 Ware’s obsessive recurrence to ministerial “mortification”—that embarrassment so intense it feels like death itself—indexes the anxiety that haunted the preacher’s seemingly routine performance of authority.

Over time, nineteenth-century homiletic literature increasingly endorsed extemporaneity, as churchgoers typically preferred to hear ministers speak than read. 74 One of the most prominent advocates of extemporaneity after Ware was revivalist Charles Finney, who cautioned that the “evil” of preaching from manuscript lay in how it fastened the minister’s eyes to the page, preventing him from gauging his audience’s response. By watching his hearers for signs of comprehension, a preacher could repeat his point through additional examples and explanations “until even the children understand it perfectly.” Like Ware, Finney stressed that the key to successful extemporaneous preaching lay in feeling one’s message deeply and that, however initially daunting, addressing a congregation without a manuscript was a skill that could be acquired through training and practice. Unlike some of his peers, he saw no need for preachers to write sermons for the sake of training their minds. Writing, he claimed, was mere “mechanical labor” that impeded actual reasoning, and a written sermon was a schoolboy exercise with nothing to recommend it. Only extemporaneous preaching could capture the crucial affective dimension of Christian teaching: “We can never have the full meaning of the gospel, till we throw away our notes.” 75 The minister who, shackled by a manuscript, could not communicate that the gospel felt like good news had failed in his mission.

Few ministers rowed against the tide by opposing extemporaneous preaching. Humphrey offered one of the more sustained defenses of manuscript sermons, arguing that it instructed listeners, rather than simply moving them, and insisting that the preaching style that worked best in Arkansas or Missouri was not necessarily the one best suited for New England or New York, or what would work best in Arkansas or Missouri fifty years hence. Better-educated audiences deserved more closely reasoned sermons. 76 Such objections may have held some truth, but they also masked anxiety about how extemporaneous preaching might corrode the ministerial profession. “Not one minister in fifty,” Humphrey said, “becomes so able a theologian as
if he had accustomed himself to preach, part of the time at least, from manuscript.” Losing theological rigor, which even supporters of extemporaneity agreed came with abandoning sermon-writing, meant losing the intellectuality and erudition that had long been a cornerstone of ministerial identity and status. Another minister with a good word for manuscript preaching was Henry Ripley, Professor of Sacred Rhetoric and Pastoral Duties at Newton Theological Institution, whose influential textbook, Sacred Rhetoric, maintained that ministers should gain proficiency in both manuscript and extemporaneous preaching, as writing would make a minister more precise and thoughtful; extemporaneity, more familiar and direct. Ideally the minister who preferred a manuscript would know his text well enough that he would be able to extemporize once the discourse was underway.

The shift toward extemporaneity also troubled ministers who worried that the practice would encourage them and their colleagues to work less and thus be less professionally respectable. Whereas those who favored extemporaneity pointed to the time this method freed for study, Humphrey objected that “every man is as lazy as he can be,” and that ministers who did not write their sermons were bound to procrastinate in their sermon preparation. Similar anxieties surface in Hints in Preaching without Reading, a Presbyterian pamphlet that followed up on the General Assembly’s 1841 resolution that ministers should no longer read sermons from the pulpit. Extemporaneity did not mean that ministers should “indulge themselves in loose extemporaneous harangues, nor serve God with that which cost them naught [. . . ] for our church in every age has insisted upon a careful, even laborious preparation.” Committed to a vocation of “constant and unremitted labor,” ministers were to spend just as long preparing their Sunday sermons even as they shifted from reading manuscripts to preaching from notes.

Whether a minister extemporized, read, or mingled the two modes, he had to perform his message with body and voice. One of the most comprehensive guides to sermon delivery was William Russell’s Pulpit Elocution (1846). This volume stressed that the preacher should move freely and naturally, with the “whole bodily frame” expressing his thoughts and feelings. Certain core principles should guide his movements, including force, since nothing was more contemptible in the pulpit than weakness; freedom, or ease and self-possession; and adaptation, or a congruence between the meaning of one’s words and the gestures and movements accompanying their delivery. More specifically, the preacher should stand up straight and well-balanced, ideally with his feet at a forty-five degree angle to each other, one slightly in front of the other, and gesture with “free and flowing movements.” He was not to slouch, stoop, stand with feet flat on the floor, bend both knees,
keep his arms at his sides, thump with his fist, hold his hand like a knife, motion too often with his left hand, or place his hand too often on his heart when not referencing his personal feeling (Dimmesdale, take note). Regional and national peculiarities were also frowned upon as reflecting local “habit” rather than the “perfect truth” of nature: the French and Italians were too gestural and grimacing; the English, either too rigid or too inclined to make hammering motions; Southerners, too “oratorical”; New Englanders, too stiff and angular; and Westerners, simply “grotesque.” Having studied and internalized the correct gestures and rhythms, the minister was to be, above all, unselfconscious. He was to retrain himself in private, then forget himself in the pulpit.79

Perhaps reluctant to draw attention to the similarities between preaching and secular oratory or, worse yet, acting, ministers seldom dwelled on such rules of gesture and movement in their sermons and textbooks. Advice to young preachers often mentioned the minister’s body only to deride thinking about it as sheer egotism. Humphrey scorned the young minister whom one might see “carefully adjusting his cravat and every lock of hair,” and Porter scowled that the minister’s “exhibition of himself, in any form, is so inconsistent with the sacred delicacy and elevation of his work, that it rarely fails to excite disgust.”80 Ministers who deigned to allude to the preacher’s body often did so rather abstractly. Sermons and textbooks praised ministerial “energy” or reminded young preachers to make eye contact.

Ministers had more to say about how one should sound in the pulpit. Listeners continued to value the combination of gravity and warmth known as unction, a metaphor for a holy anointing with oil that meant “deep spiritual feeling.”81 The preacher who spoke with unction projected a sense that he was “earnest and affectionate”—that he took his calling seriously and cared for his people.82 Such was the recommended baseline tone, to be embellished at rhetorical climaxes and in the peroration with bursts of animation or heightened pathos. Preachers could strike the wrong note in many ways. One commonly criticized mode of speech was a “pulpit tone,” or a solemn, soporific, or gloomy monotone—what Russell identified as a “hollow, sepulchral, morbid voice.”83 Also discouraged was yelling or any “displeasing loudness or violence of voice,” which could make the preacher sound like a “common crier.”84 Nor were preachers to grow angry or overly contentious as they spoke. Porter decreed that the principle of delicacy “absolutely forbids an angry, austere, or querulous manner of address,” and that though such luminaries as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield invoked terror and the threat of divine wrath, they never did so with the “unfeeling severity of denunciation” observable in the nineteenth-century pulpit.85 Even Finney
distanced himself from a too-vitriolic style by declaring that if a minister had to preach on divisive doctrinal points, “let him BY ALL MEANS avoid a controversial spirit and manner of doing it.” Unitarians objected not only to an openly contentious style, but also to one that was merely “too confident, too dogmatical, too oracular,” as such speech was perceived to betray a lack of respect for the congregation. Although some preachers used a confrontational style to their advantage—Theodore Parker, for instance—mainstream preachers generally avoided sounding polemical.

Also widely frowned upon was trying to get a laugh in the pulpit. In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), a landmark rhetoric textbook reprinted forty times in the nineteenth century and available in the United States through the 1840s, Scottish clergyman and rhetorician George Campbell cautioned that although ridicule might be an acceptable rhetorical tactic for legislators and lawyers, it was “utterly incompatible” with the seriousness of the ministerial office. Anything in a sermon that might provoke levity, jesting, or laughter amounted to “an unpardonable offence against both piety and decorum.” Following suit, Porter held that a “preposterous levity” degraded both the minister and his office, and Bethune explicitly denounced sarcasm, puns, quips, caricatures, “ludicrous acting of a story,” and “jocoseness of any kind.” At stake was not simply ministerial dignity but also the hearers’ personal piety: “Let once the boisterous laugh ring round a place of worship, and its echoes will disturb the meditations of the pious for many a long day.” Liberals, too, frowned on laughter in church. Unitarian F. W. P. Greenwood harrumphed, “It is unpleasant to see levity in a teacher of religion, even though he be young.” In the mainstream churches of the Northeast, the sermon remained a solemn event.

**How to listen to sermons**

“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,” Jesus concludes parables in the gospels. Such succinct and enigmatic counsel was no rule for antebellum ministers eager to guide the reception of their own words. Rather, they sought to maintain the authority of the pulpit by offering pointed instruction in how to listen to sermons.

Above all, hearers were to take the sermon to heart. On this point and many others, conservatives followed the principles George Whitefield had laid out in “Directions How to Hear Sermons.” There he had told Christians that they should listen to sermons not out of curiosity or a desire to have one’s “ears entertained,” but because they had a sincere longing to understand
“sacred truths.” Representative of mid-nineteenth-century conservatives, Humphrey denounced the public’s seemingly insatiable desire for sermons as a “morbid craving for excitement” and complained, “This is a bustling and hearing, rather than a thinking age. To hear, hear, hear, seems to be the all important concern, in the estimation of one half the Christians in the land. Multitudes would be glad to hear three or four discourses, every Sabbath in the year, and as many more on the intervening days of the week.” Humphrey argued that one should not preach three times on Sunday, no matter what the people thought they wanted. If the people heard and dwelled on the morning and afternoon sermons, it would be enough.

One bad habit ministers tried to prevent was that of applying the sermon’s message to one’s friend, spouse, or neighbor rather than to oneself. Whitefield had warned that when preachers were discussing a sin or urging a duty, listeners were not to search for the mote in their neighbor’s eye or cry, “this was designed against such and such a one,” but should rather “turn their thoughts inwardly, and say, Lord, is it I?” Recycling these injunctions, a New England Tract Society reprint of British Baptist minister Robert Hall’s sermon “On Hearing the Word of God” read: “Hear the word with constant self-application. Hear not for others, but for yourselves.” Finney expressed the same idea more vividly: “Beware, and not give away all the preaching to others. If you do not take your portion, you will starve, and become like spiritual skeletons.” Alluding to Jesus’ apothegm that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God,” Finney told listeners they could not mentally pass along their portion of the preached word without suffering themselves.

Ministers also warned listeners against apathy, which could hurt the quality of the sermon by discouraging the preacher. Nantucket Congregationalist John S. C. Abbott, Hawthorne’s and Longfellow’s classmate at Bowdoin, told his congregation to pay attention during the sermon, because if “lethargic fumes” filled the church, the minister “must inhale the drowsy influence.” Ministers could hardly be expected to preach fervently if everyone was falling asleep. A Christian Register writer told those who complained about their minister’s “coldness” that they had to take responsibility for the problem: “As the minister is to act upon the people, so the People are to act upon the Minister [. . .]. The fire will not burn on one side, if cold water be thrown on it from the other.” Here the threat of a “cold” Unitarianism came not from overly intellectual sermons or ministers clinging nervously to their manuscripts, but from torpid listeners. Whatever authority a minister commanded, the people exercised power, too, in their visible engagement or inattention.
Although conservatives and liberals agreed that listeners should follow up on the sermon by meditating on its application to their lives, conservatives were more intent on protecting the preacher from post-sermon criticism. The Hall tract, for instance, told Christians that if the sermon contained substantive instruction, the listener should “overlook imperfections” of form and delivery. Hall also dissuaded listeners from meeting afterward to discuss the sermon, urging them rather to treat the message as a “treasure” they were anxious to guard. The 1831 tract “On Hearing the Word” ended with a stanza from George Herbert’s *The Temple:*

Judge not the preacher; for he is thy judge.
If thou mislike him, thou conceiv’st him not.
God calleth preaching, folly. Do not grudge
To pick out treasures from an earthen pot.

The worst speak something good. If all want sense,
GOD takes a text, and preacheth patience.

Even mediocre sermons contained a core of divine truth that listeners were obliged to discover, and those worse than mediocre were to be heard respectfully nonetheless. To listen critically was to treat the sermon as if it were a profane entertainment. Urging listeners to be receptive rather than evaluative, Porter explained that a critic “comes from the Sanctuary, like worldly people from a tea party or the theatre. His conversation shows that his mind has been occupied by a literary or vagrant curiosity.” A sermon did no more for such superficially minded listeners than provide them with “religious small talk,” which, far from edifying them, led them “to profane the Sabbath, offend God, and harden their own hearts.”

Treating the sermon as a performance to be critiqued missed the point entirely. One nineteenth-century satirist catalogued the thirty-eight complaints a congregation had made about its minister’s preaching. The preacher’s sermons were too long, and too short; too loud, and too quiet; too personal, and too abstract; too focused on election, and too much on practical duties; too opposed to slavery, and not opposed enough.

Liberals were less adamant that listeners approach the sermon reverentially. Some sounded a good deal like the conservatives, as when Unitarian Samuel Osgood wrote that churchgoers should use the sermon as a “means of self-examination and worship” and not profane the sanctuary by turning it into “a theatre of flippant criticism.” Others, though, objected to stifling critical reflection on the sermon and framed preaching and listening as a more collaborative and democratic experience. The same *Christian Register*
writer who critiqued preachers who were “too confident, too dogmatical, too oracular” maintained that not only did hearers have a “right [. . .] to form their own judgment in respect to the doctrines delivered from the pulpit as religious truth,” they had the “duty” to exercise “an independent but candid judgment.” Lay people should think for themselves, neither rejecting doctrines without consideration nor swallowing them whole. If a minister had a duty to preach what he, after careful consideration, believed to be the truth, so too had listeners an obligation “to give him a candid hearing, to weigh his arguments, and allow them all the influence on their hearts and lives, to which they are entitled. It is not, however, their duty to take his word, or his arguments for more than they are worth.” Hearers were to try to follow the reasoning laid out in the sermon, check it against the Bible, and speak with the minister in more detail if a line of thought still seemed unconvincing.105 Articulating the implicitly dialogical nature of the sermon in more poetic terms, Henry Bellows, pastor of the Unitarian Church of the Divine Unity in Manhattan, where the Melvilles rented a pew in 1850, said, “Truth, especially moral truth, is, of its very essence, oracular. It issues from its shrine, to find the argument that upholds it in the hearts of its hearers.”106 That is, the sermon was to be a catalyst to a hearer’s own meditations. Or as Emerson put it in addressing the Harvard seniors, “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.”107 Though far more skeptical of straightforward moral instruction than his erstwhile Unitarian colleagues, Emerson spoke for the liberal sense that the preacher had a responsibility to set in motion the listener’s own moral reflection.

Liberal or conservative, sermons set the standard for morally and religiously authoritative discourse in antebellum America. Lacking political power, ministers claimed individual morality and religious truth as their rightful domain. As Unitarian George Burnap declared, ministerial “influence, withdrawn from secular channels, [is] only the more powerful for being confined to spiritual concerns”; ministers in the pulpit now spoke “with an authority which is conceded to no other mortal.”108 No other mode of public speech made larger claims for its own importance or insisted that hearers heed it more carefully. Yet if moral authority seemed the ministers’ to lose, it was also now a privilege to be earned, since in a democratic society under religious voluntarism, preachers had to turn their theological convictions and biblical learning into compelling, pew-filling performances. This destabilization of moral authority opened up the field to other contenders, including those most unlikely of upstarts, the novelists.