

BOOK EXCERPT

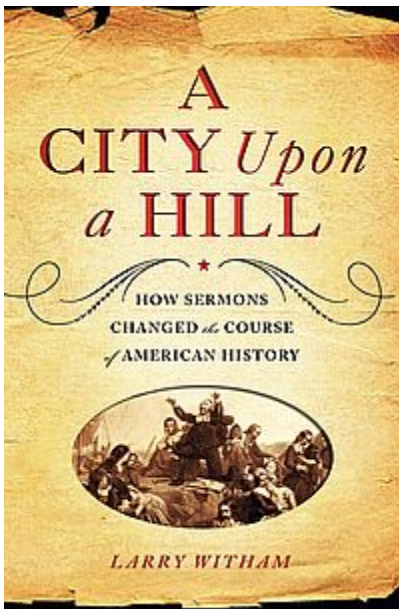
'A City Upon A Hill: How Sermons Changed The Course of American History'

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Chapter One

*Robert Hunt's Library
The Sermon Comes to America*

Robert Hunt looked over the bow of the creaking Susan Constant. The masts and ropes crackled as its sails caught a wind up the wide James River in a land called Virginia. Hunt had survived sea-sickness and scurvy on the open ocean in the great oaken ship, typical of its kind in 1607, and now he relished the bright spring morning, which revealed a landscape of dogwoods and redbuds in bloom.



Courtesy HarperOne

At age thirty-eight, Hunt had left a wife, children, and country church in England to make the Atlantic crossing. Soon after landing, he became the first Anglican minister to give a sermon in Jamestown, England's only permanent outpost on American shores. He had his health, his faith, and his library of religious books intact. The tribulations were finally over, or so it seemed. The Susan Constant and two other ships dropped anchor by a wooded prominence, easy to defend on all sides. Now the task of the roughly one hundred men and boys, a quarrelsome group already, was to colonize these woods and waterways for God and for King James I. They were there to bring wealth to the nation and convert the Indians to Christianity.

Hunt's first mission was to establish an English pattern of church worship. He began the day they landed by conducting a service under a sail strung in the treetops. His pulpit was a pole lashed between two trees, and on this he laid his Book of Common Prayer, which prescribed two sermons on Sunday and prayers twice a day. That first sermon is lost to history, but it is likely that Hunt, trained at university, had Puritan leanings in the Church of England and may have preached in their simpler style.

The short spring and humid summer gave way to winter, and then came the first cycles of disease and starvation. Eight months after the landing, a fire destroyed the settlement. In the ashes lay Hunt's library, the first American repository of resources--Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Christian--that produced the sermon. In fire and ash, Hunt's library christened the New World soil. Only a third of the original settlers survived the first year. Hunt was dead before he could begin his second year of preaching in the Virginia wilderness. "Our good pastor," as Captain John Smith called him, dissolved into the marshy riverbanks along with his library.

Jamestown holds a pride of place in America's founding. But like other early settlements, it was a transient affair. The English cultures that shaped colonial America were still to come. Before then, the Roman Catholic empires of Spain, France, and Portugal also sought a foothold in America. The late sixteenth century, thanks to the Protestant and Catholic reformations, was a golden age of preaching. It was expressed in men like Hunt, but also in the Catholic friars who pioneered New Mexico and Quebec.

By the time Hunt died, a wagon train of Spanish soldiers, colonists, and Franciscan friars had trudged north into the uncharted domain called New Mexico. They named their destination Santa Fe, where two rivers met in a high plateau ringed by mountains. Most of the friars were callow but rugged young men. The Catholic reformation had decreed that they learn to preach, attend seminary if possible, and carry new handbooks with sample sermons.

The French empire landed elsewhere, at a sharp turn in the frigid St. Lawrence River, and from the fort city of Quebec the royal mandate to "increase" Catholic dominions began. In those early days both Huguenot, or French Protestant, and Catholic ministers arrived, but only Catholicism had a mission. Quebec became the springboard for Franciscans and Jesuits to carry the faith along the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and down to the delta, to be called New Orleans.

European politics dictated the pattern of settlement as well as what kinds of sermons sank roots in America. Once England had defeated the Spanish Armada, for example, it was free to attempt commercial ventures such as Jamestown. As part of the spoils of the war between England and the Netherlands, the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam became New York. This opened the way for a century of warfare between England and France, the outcome of which gave the American colonies their boundaries. Through it all, the English sermon prevailed under English dominance.

All the New World empires were Christian, however, and the library of Robert Hunt reflected that basic heritage. Having studied Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, Hunt was exposed to all the ancient works on preaching. He saw that the Old Testament orators, more prophets than preachers, nevertheless remarked on how "pleasant speech increases persuasiveness" (Proverbs 16:21). When Moses shrank back because he stammered, the Lord assured him, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exodus 4:12). The New Testament preacher also believed that divine inspiration would come. "Say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit," Jesus told his disciples (Mark 13:11).

Early Christianity, moreover, borrowed heavily from the rhetorical tools of the Greco-Roman world, finally illustrated by the life of St. Augustine, who was not the only pagan professor of Latin rhetoric to convert to Christianity. Hunt's library may have contained Augustine's fifth-century work *On Christian Learning*, a synthesis of Christian preaching and classical oratory. The ancients had developed rhetoric to persuade in courts and legislatures and at ceremonies. It was an art for Everyman. But the philosophers, from Plato (in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*) to Aristotle (in *Rhetoric*), explained why rhetoric worked. The Roman statesman Cicero summed it up best in *On Invention* and *On the Orator*, works that Christians imitated for centuries.

Cicero said the duty of the orator was to prove, delight, and stir, depending on the circumstances. Plain speaking could prove. A middle style pleased the ears. But grand oratory was necessary to fire audience passions. As Hunt would learn, Cicero provided a checklist for speaker preparation. Once the speaker "invents" a topic, he must arrange it, pick an oratorical style, memorize the material, and then commence delivery. The "arrangement," or *dispositio*, of a sermon was key and fueled centuries of Christian debate. Again, Cicero's common sense shone through. The ideal arrangement was an attention-getting opening, narration of the topic, proof of its argument, and an epilogue to summarize and stir the audience.

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