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“WHOSO SHEDDETH”:
EXECUTION SERMONS AND NARRATIVES IN 18TH CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

By

ADRIENNE H. THORNBLOM

B.A., University of Alabama, 2002

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

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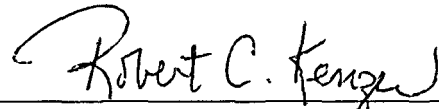
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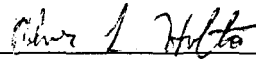
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APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert C. Kenzer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "R".

Professor Robert C. Kenzer, Thesis Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Abner Holton, III". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "A".

Professor Abner Holton, III

ABSTRACT

“WHOSO SHEDDETH”
EXECUTION SERMONS AND NARRATIVES IN 18TH CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

ADRIENNE H. THORNBLOM

CANDIDATE FOR DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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MAY 2006

PROFESSOR ROBERT C. KENZER

Murder, theft, and infanticide in eighteen-century New England were all treated with the same punishment, public execution. The executions were not just public displays, but also a time for sermons and life lessons to teach those who witness the criminal's death to refrain from sinful behavior. At the core of every sermon was the Biblical passages used to warn the onlookers to be careful in life and a plea for the criminal to repent. In addition to the sermons, some of the criminals provided confessions to their crimes and even indicated their newfound salvation for their sins.

This thesis closely examines the Biblical passages used by both the sermon writers and criminals. People at this time related much of their lives to Christianity and Biblical teachings. They relied upon ministers to deliver messages to them based in scripture to help them with their lives. Though the sermons were usually useful for the congregations hearing them, the criminals gained little benefit to apply to their lives. In addition, some of the passages have no clear connection to what the sermon writers tried to convey. Careful examination of these passages yield information concerning the importance of the law, gender interpretations, and general life advice.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 27, 1733 the printer Samuel Kneeland recorded Rebekah Chamblit's dying confession, read to a crowd prior to her execution. Chamblit, guilty of concealing and murdering her illegitimate child, realized her sinful nature and repented during her time in prison. Her own words urged everyone present at her execution to avoid her corrupt lifestyle and instead cling to their faith. She used her immoral life as an example of how not to live by warning: "Mind me, I first left GOD, and then He left me: I therefore solemnly call upon YOUNG PEOPLE to cherish the convictions of GOD's Holy SPIRIT."¹

Many convicted men and women in eighteenth century America used scripture to convince the congregation to follow God. Often times their views reflected their place in society, particularly their gender. However, there were instances when social expectations did not matter and the opposite of what one would expect was true. In general, all of the repentant criminals offered advice on how to live so society could possibly prevent more crime.

This thesis examines the scripture references found in twenty-five execution sermons and confession statements between 1713 and 1797. All of the executions took place in various parts of New England, and were researched based on their availability through the Early American Imprints Series. There were numerous other sermons available in the Early American Imprints, but the twenty-five used for this study were

¹ Rebekah Chamblit, *The Declaration, Dying Warning and Advice of Rebekah Chamblit* (Boston, Mass.: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1733). The exact publisher for all of the sermons is not specified.

chosen based on their readability and completeness. Many of the documents in the series are simply too worn to be readable, and some documents were incomplete. Often the same sermon would repeat later in the series, in which case the most legible document was researched. In general, the sermons employed verses that helped justify the criminal's death by providing instructions for how to treat violent criminals and publicly condemn their sins.² The sermons and the narratives also employed scripture to direct the criminals to salvation and provide some advice to the congregation. The sermons cited verses that condemned the guilty and urged the congregation to repent of their sins before they died. The criminals quoted scripture to compel people to live a good life and avoid sin altogether, thus offering a message that applied to their daily lives.

An examination of all scriptural references in the confessions and sermons, as discussed in this thesis, reveals the criminals' narratives were more likely than the ministers' sermons to quote scripture to encourage people to live a repentant lifestyle instead of just performing a repentant act. In addition, the female criminals were more likely to quote the Bible than the men. Interestingly, the criminals delivered the more practical message even though they had missed this message themselves.

Many of the terms necessary to discuss this material hold different meanings for different periods. For the purposes of this topic, the following definitions enable a

² Daniel A. Cohen, "In Defense of the Gallows: Justifications of Capital Punishment in New England Execution Sermons, 1674-1825," *American Quarterly*, 40 (June 1988), 149, briefly acknowledges the importance of scripture when he states that "legal theorists of the time saw biblical precedent as a necessary . . . ". Although Cohen finds the use of scripture less important in the sermons, he does not completely deny that certain verses appear more than once. He also fails to note how much of the scripture was potentially misused.

specific and relevant discussion of the men and women specific to the early to late eighteenth century. The “sermon writer” refers to the person who wrote and delivered the execution sermon, but was not necessarily the person who visited the criminal in jail. These sermon writers were men whose religious authority was respected by the community. Sermon writers provided regular Christian counsel to all members of the community, including criminals.

For the purposes of this thesis, “minister” refers to a legitimate religious leader in the community who attended to the wants and needs of others. Occasionally, the minister was also the sermon writer, but not always. Sometimes the sermons referred to the visits of a minister with the accused. These visits could vary in number, but seemed to occur several times a week during a criminal’s stay in jail. What is unique about the ministers is that unlike the typical sermon writer, there are records of women attending to criminals during their stay in jail prior to their execution.³ However, women did not deliver sermons. Clearly then, the term “minister” does not mean an ordained member of the clergy.

The “congregation” refers to the regularly attending members of the local church who either heard or read printed versions of the sermons. This term also includes the people who attended the execution, since these usually took place immediately following

³ Samuel Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson, Indian; Who on the 28th Day of August 1725 at Arandel in the County of York and Province of Main, in New-England, Shot His Fellow Soldier and Kinsmen, John Peter: So That He Died of the Wound in a Few Days*, (Boston, Mass.: S. Gerrish, 1726)

the sermon.⁴ The sermon writers did not specify the exact location of the sermon and execution, so the congregation could have gathered in a church or in the location where the hanging took place. It is important to note that the congregation was a subgroup of the community. No one could assume that everyone in a given community came to hear the sermons or regularly attended church.

The term “criminal” refers to the individuals who committed the crimes. Occasionally, the sermon writers referred to criminals as the “poor prisoner” or simply as the “prisoner.” The sermons intentionally termed the criminals as people who committed a crime against someone else and deserved to die.

A final term seemingly requires no specification, but based on the older definition of a child the word “infant” requires a proper definition. Due to the nature of the crime of infanticide allegedly committed by several of the women, an infant refers to a child ranging in age from the moment of birth to three months. Each of the women killed their children shortly after birth or after a few months. Anyone older than three months to age twelve was considered a “child.” Anyone from age thirteen to twenty-years-old was a youth. This age bracket could be higher, since many of the sermon writers directed their message specifically to the youth of the community even when the criminal was between ages twenty-one and twenty-seven. The common use of these terms provides the backdrop for discussion of the scripture usage.

⁴ Cohen, “In Defense of the Gallows,” 147, notes the timing of the sermon and execution. “Sermons dealing with capital cases were typically delivered on the Sunday preceding an execution and on the day of the hanging itself.” Even if the execution was not an immediate event, it followed the sermon within a day or two.

The Early American Imprints Series contains many sermons and narratives presented before the executions of men and women who committed terrible crimes. The key element of these documents is the scripture used by the sermon writers and criminals. Historians such as Daniel Cohen, Karen Halttunen, Roger Lane and Louis Masur seemingly exhausted the sermons and narratives, but largely ignored the hundreds of scripture references.⁵ These authors describe how the sermons intended to impact society, but their analysis lacks the scripture that provides a different glimpse into social standards. The scripture references enforce social standards that remain unchanged over time. Historians have previously ignored the Bible and its influence in the sermons and narratives. Scripture represents an important tool for understanding gender roles and the reasons for various social interactions of the period. The Bible deserves objective academic attention in this historical setting.

⁵ Cohen, "In Defense of the Gallows" 147-164; Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Roger Lane, *Murder in America: A History* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1997); Louis Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776-1865* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

CHAPTER 1: GENDER COMPARISON

Sermon writers used similar strategies in addressing the male and female criminals. The most basic strategy centers around the kind and amount of scripture verses used in their sermons. Sermon writers varied their use of specific verses among men and women and on the type of crime committed. Examining this strategy brings important issues to light within these different sermons. This study involves the use of twenty-five randomly chosen sermons, based on their legibility and completeness, found within the American Imprints Series. For comparison, the study also employs other randomly-chosen sermons that do not relate to execution sermons as well as several period newspapers specific to the criminals and their crimes.

Both the sermons for the men and women altogether quoted 320 verses: 196 verses out of eighteen sermons for the men and 128 verses out of seven sermons for the women. One would think that with a larger sample of men's than women's sermons that there would also be a significant difference in the number of scripture references between men and women. This difference is not especially significant when one considers the number of sermons representing each group. In spite of these numbers, the more important comparisons between the two groups are the specific scripture verses quoted in the sermons and confessions and the ideas represented in those verses.

Sermon writers referenced more Old Testament than New Testament verses in both the men and women's sermons. The Old Testament verses mentioned are generally less hopeful than the New Testament as they tended to condemn rather than encourage the prisoner. Overall, the Old Testament provides more information than the New

Testament about how to handle murderers as well as instructions for following the law. The sermon writers for the men and the women instructed the congregation how to treat murderers, quoting mainly the Old Testament to support their argument. It was important that the ministers be consistent in providing the same information about these instructions for both the men and the women as the social standards applied equally to everyone. The scripture in these documents worked in the same way. The following analysis examines these similarities.

The men's and women's sermons share only twenty-three common verses instructing people how to handle murderers, and the majority of these are from the Old Testament. The most common verse was Genesis 9:6: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed." Sermon writers quote Genesis 9:6 in five of the men's and three of the women's sermons.¹ Proverbs 28:17 provided hope to criminals through

¹ Cotton Mather, *The Sad Effects of Sin. A True Relation of the Murder Committed by David Wallis, on His Companion Benjamin Stolwood: On Saturday Night, the First of August, 1713. With His Carriage of Condemnation; His Confession and Dying Speech at the Place of Execution, etc* (Boston, Mass.: John Allen, 1713), iv; Aaron Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced. A Sermon: Delivered at Worcester, October 31, 1793 Occasioned by the Execution of Samuel Frost, on That Day, for the Murder of Captain Elisha Allen, of Princeton, on the 16th Day of July, 1793* (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1793), 22; Charles Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder. A Sermon Preached at the Thursday Lecture in Boston, November 19th, 1754. The Day of Execution of William Wieer, for the Murder of William Chism* (Boston, Mass.: Thomas Fleet, 1754) 16-17; Timothy Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield, on the 2d Day of November, A.D. 1786 on the Day of the Execution of John Jacobs, an Indian Native, Pursuant to Sentence of Death Passed Upon Him by the Hon. Superior Court, for the Murder of James Chockrer* (Hartford, Conn.: Green & Watson, 1768) 4 and 11; Samson Occom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, An Indian, Who was Executed at New-Haven on the 2d of September, 1772 for the Murder of Mr. Moses Cook, Late of Waterbury, on the Seventh of December, 1771* (Springfield, Mass.: S. and E. Hall, 1772), 20; Aaron Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Abiel Converse, Who was executed at Northampton for the Murder of*

several sermons: “A Man that doeth violence to the blood of any person shall flee to the pit; let no man stay him.”² Sermon writers also voiced hope for salvation with 1 Timothy 1:15: “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”³ Each sermon emphasized condemning the criminals and establishing the law. The sermons also emphasized scripture relating to salvation, but to a diminished effect. Every sermon quoted more verses that condemned the criminals than encouraged salvation. Only one of the men’s and one of the women’s sermons referred to Cain and Abel. The lack of attention to this story is surprising, as one would expect that the sermon writers would refer to this story more often because it

her Infant Bastard Child, July 6th, 1788 (Northampton, Mass.: William Butler, 1788), 14; Eliphalet Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion Of the Execution of Katherine Garret, an Indian-Servant (Who was Condemned for the Murder of her Spurious Child) on May 3rd, 1738* (New-London, Conn.: T. Green, 1738), 18; Henry Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London, December 20th, 1786. Occasioned by the Execution of Hannah Ocuish, a Mulatto Girl, Aged 12 years and 9 months* (New London, Conn.: T. Green, 1787), 6.

² Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 1; Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 6; Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, iv; Cotton Mather, *The Sad Effects of Sin*, 8; Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 5.

³ Patience Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life and Remarkable Conversion of Patience Boston alias Samson...* (Boston, Mass.: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1738), 19; Thomas Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day Sept. 23, 1733, Upon the affecting Occasion of An unhappy Young Woman present in the Assembly under Sentence of Death* (Boston, Mass.: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1733), 3; Mather, *The Sad Effects of Sin*, 20; Charles O’Donnel, *The Life and Confession of Charles O’Donnel, Who was Executed at Morgantown, June 19, 1797, for the Wilful Murder of His Son; Though He had Murdered a Woman About 27 Years Before That Time, Which was Not Discovered, Till He Made This Confession* (Philadelphia, Penn.: W & R. Dickson, 1797), 1; Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 13.

tells of the first murder.⁴ Only one of the men's sermons referenced the foundation to the law against murder, "Thou shalt not murder."⁵ The lack of this reference is also surprising because one would expect every sermon to quote the Ten Commandments more than once. There are also very few references to John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."⁶ There ought to be at least as many references to John 3:16, a verse that clearly explains salvation, as to Genesis 9:6 to balance the condemnation with salvation. Instead, there are fewer.

The previous comparisons uncover specific differences between the men's and women's sermons. When the different scripture categories are broken down, these comparisons bring to light many more differences than similarities. All of the sermon writers emphasized the importance of condemning the criminals. The writers directed ten condemning scripture verses toward the women and thirty-three toward the men. There is a greater difference between the instructional verses referenced throughout the sermons. The men's sermons referenced twenty-two verses providing instructions for handling murderers. The women referenced only six instructional verses, and half of those were to Genesis 9:6. The men also cited more verses specific to salvation,

⁴ Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 17; Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 10. Cain kills his brother Abel in Genesis 4:1-16.

⁵ Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 4. Genesis 20:13, King James Version (hereafter KJV).

⁶ Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 9, 14, 18; O'Donnel, *The Life and Confession of Charles O'Donnel*, 14; Samson Occom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, 19.

referencing forty verses; the women only referenced sixteen. Advice is the only category where the women used more scripture than the men did.⁷ The women's sermons referenced twenty-seven verses that provided advice of some kind. The men only referenced fifteen. The reasons for these variations are not clear, but they provide an interesting view of the types of scripture referenced in each type of sermon. Perhaps these numeric differences reflect the social standards of the time. One would expect the women's sermons to cite more "nurturing" verses because women in general tend to be viewed as the more gentle and nurturing of the genders. This explains the difference between men and women in who provided more advice to the congregation. However, this same expectation would lead one to believe the women's sermons quoted more salvation verses, but the opposite is true. As opposed to women, men often are perceived as less emotionally driven. The verses in their sermons feature a more educational and condemning purpose. This explains the difference in verses that instruct and condemn the criminals and congregation. These correlations show the gender differences in scripture usage, but gender differences also exist within the scripture itself.

The most important difference among the men and the women was their use of female characters in the Bible. Many would expect the women to quote other women in their confessions, and even for the preachers to be more likely to mention Biblical women when the criminal was herself female. One might also expect that the men would not refer to any women, yet both of these expectations prove incorrect. As it turns out,

⁷ Advice driven scripture appeared 8.3% of the time throughout the women's execution sermons and only 4.6% of the time in the men's. Advice was more prevalent in the women's sermons over half of the time.

none of the criminals, male or female, mentions a single Biblical woman in his or her confession. The few references to women in scripture appear only in the sermons specifically addressing the female criminals. It is not especially surprising that the men referenced no Biblical women, but it is surprising that the condemned women took no comfort in the lives, experiences, and failures of their Biblical counterparts. Even so, one of the men's sermons drew attention to a less visible Biblical woman who proved significant for her surroundings.

In the sermon presented before the execution of Levi Ames, Samuel Mather referenced 2 Kings 5:3: "And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! For he would recover him of his leprosy."⁸ This verse seems rather obscure, but draws attention to the story of a man named Naaman, a distinguished commanding officer in King Aram's armies who suffered from leprosy. Through his campaigns Naaman acquired a captive girl who served his wife. Being an Israelite, the servant girl recalled the work of the prophet Elisha and directed Naaman to him for healing, which he eventually received. Without the words and advice of this young girl, Naaman would have continued to suffer from a debilitating and disgraceful disease. Mather highlighted the servant girl to explain the spiritual healing still available for Ames. Mather described God as "a perfectly good and gracious Physician, he is therefore as willing, as he is able, to heal and restore all broken, diseased, and infirm

⁸ Samuel Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted, A Sermon Preached at the Thursday Lecture in Boston, On October 21st, 1773. When Levi Ames, a Young Man, Under a Sentence of Death for Burglary, to be Executed on that Day was Present to Hear the Discourse* (Boston, Mass.: William M' Alpine, 1773), 28.

souls, that are sensible of their want of him.”⁹ The same healing that Naaman received for his physical illness was readily available to heal Ames of his spiritual illness. Many parables in the gospel describe when Jesus healed men and women of different diseases and even brought people back from the dead, which explain the same idea. Similar tales in the Old Testament would also have sufficed. Why Mather chose to reference this particular story and this particular woman is not clear. What is more interesting about her is that she is the only woman that any sermon described who made a positive influence on anyone. The sermon simply urged people to take her advice and seek the one who could heal the soul, making her a valuable influence.

Not every female Biblical figure made such a lasting impact on her surroundings. The sermons usually told the stories of unrighteous and often wicked women. There are five different Biblical women mentioned in these sermons, and all of them portray similar characteristics. Of those five, two applied to Hannah Ocuish, two applied to Abiel Converse, and one to Rebeka Chamblit. It is surprising that the female criminals did not hear more about Biblical woman, especially because none of the Biblical women used as examples in these sermons had a positive influence on anyone. In addition, the majority of the Biblical women were nameless and known only for their wicked actions. The women who committed socially unacceptable acts were the focus of the sermons. What is clear is that even the female criminals could find no comfort in their Biblical counterparts because all of the sermonized women violated social standards.

⁹ Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted*, 28.

The only common characteristic between the female criminals and their Biblical counterparts was that each acted wickedly. In each scripture reference the sermon writers emphasized women whose actions did not correspond to the female prisoners' crimes. Hannah Ocuish, a twelve-year-old, killed her master's six-year-old daughter. In the sermon preached before her death Henry Channing noted two women, both of whom shared similar traits that did not relate to Ocuish. The sermon initially referenced Proverbs 7:27: "Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death."¹⁰ The theme of this entire chapter of Proverbs is devoted to teaching men the ways of the harlot. The author describes this woman as deceitful, cunning, flattering, and able to bring all men to ruin. She is evil and all men should avoid her or suffer severe consequences. What is particularly strange about this reference is that Ocuish was not a harlot. Her sin was simply murder and the child she murdered was not her own but her master's. Her story provided no indication that she had any children, being a child herself. The likely reason the sermon writer quoted this particular passage was to present a method for directing children to learn right from wrong. This same message is possible with a different Biblical comparison that was more applicable to Ocuish. The second reference was to Hosea 2:8-9: "For she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold, which they prepared for Baal. Therefore will I return, and take away my corn in the time thereof, and my wine in the season thereof, and will recover my wool and my flax given to cover her nakedness."¹¹ God previously

¹⁰ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 14.

¹¹ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 10.

commanded the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer and have children by her. Hosea complied, but Gomer continued her participation in prostitution. This was God's way of teaching Hosea about Israel's wandering away from God. In fact, all of their children's names represented Israel as well. One of their daughters' names was Loruhamah, which meant "I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel."¹² They next had a son named Lo-ammi, meaning "ye are not my people, and I will not be your God."¹³ These names carried with them a great burden and a curse, and Hosea's marriage helped him learn to understand it. The woman mentioned in Hosea 2:8-9 refers to either Hosea's wife or to Israel, both of whom wandered from the righteous path. The problem with quoting this passage of scripture seems unnecessary in relation to Ocuish because she was not a prostitute. Though Ocuish was wicked, the relationship between her and Gomer does not connect. Channing used this passage to refer to "family devotion, though very unfashionable, is however, a very important part of the Head of a family," implying that the woman described in the passage is Hosea's wife.¹⁴ The point of the sermon was that the family should always stand by its members even when they did wrong, doing whatever it could to stay together. This concept does not relate to Ocuish's crime or even her punishment. She did not have a family to rush to her aid, especially when she mistreated a member of the family that she served. Gomer is an odd

¹² Hosea 1:6, KJV.

¹³ Hosea 1:9, KJV.

¹⁴ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 9.

woman to reference before the execution of a young girl, particularly one who lacked any positive influence in society. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate for Channing to describe younger characters in the Bible that committed sins that were not of a sexual nature. Channing was not the only sermon writer to misinterpret the actions of a Biblical character in relation to the female criminals.

The wicked women mentioned in other sermons continued in the theme of sexual sins. Abiel Converse's sermon referenced two different women with very similar traits. One of these women, Potipher's wife, tried to seduce Joseph. When he refused her advances, she cried rape and had him thrown in jail. Aaron Bascom specifically referenced Genesis 39:9: "There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"¹⁵ This is the verse in which Joseph declared why he could not succumb to her sinful request, though the sermon only quoted its last quarter. Though referencing Joseph's reply to Potipher's wife does provide an example of how to avoid sin, there are still problems with the sermon writer's strategy. Not only does this verse not directly apply to a murderer, it implies that Converse was a seductress herself, which is not clear from her story. She was guilty of infanticide and of having an illegitimate child, but those charges alone were not enough to declare her a seductress. Aaron Bascom used Joseph's statement to emphasize the fact that all sin was against God, ". . . on account of the wicked being opposed to God, and unlike him, they are

¹⁵ Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, 15; Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 6.

often called ungodly in the holy word.”¹⁶ His example may hold true to using the actions of a woman to portray how terrible sin is to God, but nowhere does the sermon note how terrible a man’s sin is in the eyes of God. Channing’s argument is unbalanced. One cannot assume that Converse was a seductress and the representation of everything against God. Both of these arguments are unfounded. Her sin was grave and completely against God’s laws, of course, but that does not justify the labels that this verse clearly placed upon her. This was not Channing’s only misinterpretation.

Channing’s sermon also referred to Proverbs 5:5, the other major passage in Proverbs that refers to a morally vile woman: “Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.”¹⁷ This particular woman has no name and is simply known as an adulteress, making it easy for her to apply to anyone. Again, the story behind Converse’s crime is not clear as to whether or not the father of her child was married, which would make her actions adultery and this verse applicable. Because this detail is unclear, the verse is not useful to Channing’s argument. It seems that young members of the opposite sex spent time alone with each other without any plans of starting a family. Channing emphasized that this practice was not a good idea: “The practice of young people of both sexes keeping company together, with no view of entering into a family state . . . I think is a detestable practice.” Seeing this common practice as a problem for society, he took the opportunity to address it publicly. The young people’s actions were a problem for the people in this area, and Converse’s crime and punishment provided an easy method to

¹⁶ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 23.

¹⁷ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 23.

discuss it. In spite of such good intentions, the argument assumed too much about Converse. If the sermon writers provided some details about Converse's crime, then this argument would work. Channing's message is a useful one, but does not relate directly to Converse and her crime.

Rebekah Chamblit was the last criminal with a female Biblical figure mentioned in her sermon. Thomas Foxcroft referenced Deuteronomy 22:21: "Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you."¹⁸ The verse is located on the front page of the sermon so its only purpose was a quick, clear and Biblical justification for Chamblit's execution. This is the only instance where the verse truly related to the criminal and Foxcroft did not explain the connection. This was an opportunity for him to connect a Biblical woman to a criminal, yet Foxcroft made no effort to do so. Apparently, the sermon writers meant for the women to present a concept instead of connect to the criminal as one would expect. Ministers did not detail the lives and activities of these Biblical women, only the concept that they represented to the congregation. Naaman's servant girl was just a tool that directed people to the great physician. The writer did not emphasize a girl who cared enough about her master to direct him to the help he needed to live. Ministers did not describe the adulteress and the harlot, skipping the verses that provide such details. The ministers only intended to command people to avoid wicked women. Even the story of Gomer represented a

¹⁸ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach'd on the Lord's-Day*, front page.

wayward woman instead of presenting Gomer as herself. Since the women represented only concepts, it is not as surprising that the sermons did not use more of them. There are many more women in the Bible whose examples were just as useful to the sermon writers and convey similar messages to the congregation. Many of those women had a more positive influence over their surroundings and yet received no attention in any of the sermons.

The greatest surprise in the gender specific verses is the Biblical women the sermons ignored. Neither Ruth nor Ester received any attention, though the Bible devotes two books to their lives. Few sermons referenced Eve, who would seem to be the likely pick for condemning the women since she is credited with the fall of man. The closest reference to Eve is used in Genesis 3:17: “unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake, in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.”¹⁹ The verse refers to Adam listening to Eve’s argument to eat the fruit, and the sermon gave Eve no attention other than to note that “all creatures that God hath made for man are cursed . . . whatever God curses is a cursed thing indeed.” Some of the other seemingly less virtuous women are also absent from the sermons. Rahab was a prostitute, and yet was able to save all of her family in Jericho by providing aid to Joshua’s spies. Even though she was a wicked woman in the eyes of society, her influence saved the people closest to her.

¹⁹ Occom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, 10.

None of the criminals had an opportunity to make a positive influence on the people around them. However, their faith could have been strengthened through knowing about Biblical women with a strong faith. There is also no reference to Tamar, who became a prostitute to get even with her father-in-law Judah. Her sins were numerous, so one would think that she would offer a great example to compare to the criminals. She, however, was one of the early descendants of the line of Jesus Christ, so her sinful act had a positive outcome. Bathsheba received no print, although the sermons regularly mentioned her second husband David and his many sins. No sermon mentioned the Virtuous Woman described in the final chapter of Proverbs, neither did any sermon writer talk about Mary or Mary Magdalene. No one ever spoke of Deborah, a woman of great strength and one of the judges of the Old Testament. The sermons left out all of the women who were upright and blameless, and even left out the great majority of the sinful women of the Bible. The possible reason for this omission is that most of the sinful women served some benefit or purpose in spite of their sin. Whether or not this statement is true, such a presentation sent a confusing message. Even if the criminal could gain no benefit from the Biblical women's stories, surely the young women in attendance could use a good example to contrast with the bad example that they were witnessing. This was the outcome for which the ministers hoped.

These comparisons specified gender in one way or another. Men and women quoted different men and women through scripture, and sermon writers quoted more women in general. This was not the only approach that sermon writers took with the criminals and the congregations. The sermons used scripture for a broader purpose to

convince society to keep from wrong doing. Scripture was pivotal in justifying the criminal's death. Sermon writers and criminals approached condemnation and the law quite differently.

CHAPTER 2: FOLLOWING THE LAW

Scripture played an important role in ministering to society. The scriptural references reflected the social standards of the time and did not discriminate between men and women. Each sermon writer had a reason for choosing the verses for their sermon. In addition to condemning the criminals and trying to bring them to salvation, ministers first had to establish the Biblical principles behind what the law had already decided. Ministers also taught the congregation social standards through their choice of scripture. The first provided Biblical instructions for handling murderers. In this way, religion justified the court's decision to execute criminals. Such a tactic might be as necessary today, but in this period, it seems that the law and scripture needed to support each other. The ministers were responsible for bridging the gap between the two.

The most common verse used to make this point was Genesis 9:6: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man."¹ This verse indicates that the execution the congregation was about to witness was about justice, and the killing of these criminals was completely acceptable in the eyes of God.² Ministers' emphasis on this concept was different for men and women. Many of the women were very young, ranging in age from twelve to twenty-seven-years-old. Because the women were so young it is possible that the punishment was more difficult

¹ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 14; Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 18; Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 6. The ministers most commonly used only the first part of this verse, leaving out "for in the image of God made he man." This seems rather unusual for this part of the verse emphasizes the atrocity, because one is murdering something that resembles God.

² Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 6.

for the community to handle. The ministers quoted Genesis 9:6 to reinforce for the witnesses that God, not the earthly government, created the law. Carrying out the execution was essentially carrying out one of God's commands.

The men's sermons emphasized the totality of the law so that it was clear to everyone. Cotton Mather presented Genesis 9:6 before David Wallis and followed it by describing the law against murder as "A law anteriour and superior to all human law."³ Since the law against murder was a "Law of God, given unto man," this law was greater than man's law against it. Men refused to commit murder because murder is a sin against humanity and God. Though the crime affected both realms, the offense against God was greater. Aaron Bancroft presented the sermon before Samuel Frost and called the law against murder a "divine law to punish with death," also following this statement with Genesis 9:6.⁴ Timothy Pitkin called this a "statute of heaven, the law of God, that a murderer shall be put to death," following with Genesis 9:6.⁵ These statements implied that the law of God reached farther than just a basic premise or rule. The law against murder existed in the domain where God existed before creating the universe.

Remarkably neither the men nor women's sermons ever quoted the obviously relevant Ten Commandments, but did quote from the next chapter of Genesis: "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death."⁶ The ministers wanted to

³ Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted*, iv.

⁴ Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, 23.

⁵ Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 4.

⁶ Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 19. Exodus 21:12, KJV.

emphasize a productive way of life, but they also had to be explicit in enforcing God's laws to the letter and without exception. Pitkin called the law a "divine precept" and followed the verse with the only reference to Genesis 20:13, the basic commandment "Thou shalt not kill."⁷ Samuel Occum called for Moses Paul to recognize "This ancient decree of heaven."⁸ His use of the word "ancient" implied that this law was much older than the congregation could fathom. Murder as a crime was not something that changed since God punished Cain for the murder of his brother Abel. The unchangeable law also brought a permanent consequence for committing the crime, death.

The consequences for murder are just as unchanging as the law. There were times where the congregation had trouble accepting this standard. Katherine Garret provided a good example of following God's laws to the letter in spite of differing feelings about her punishment. Since God commanded the law against murder, no one could escape the consequences. Garret must have attempted some type of escape from her execution, because Eliphalet Adams spent several pages emphasizing Numbers 35:31, 33, 34. This group of verses commands people to "take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer," offering criminals no help or appeasement.⁹ The consequences for murder were final. Delivering an ultimatum from the pulpit surely convinced people not to defy God. The congregation accepted the execution no matter how they felt about the criminal. This

⁷ Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 4.

⁸ Occum, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, 20.

⁹ Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 13, 15-16.

seems a rather odd point to emphasize to a God-fearing crowd when one examines Garret's history with the church. Her involvement with the church after her conviction is why there must have been some opposition to her execution. She converted to Christianity while in prison and participated in the church for six months before her execution. She received baptism, communion, and attended services regularly. The congregation embraced and loved her and seemed upset to see her die. Church members must have either tried to prevent her from the assigned punishment or helped her attempt an escape. The minister responded to such efforts with "the putting to Death them that are Innocent" seemed like a terrible thing, but "suffering them to Escape . . . brings guilt and lays a land open to God's Judgments." In spite of her conversion and repentant state, she still had to suffer the consequences for her sins. Sermons enforced the courts' decisions by using religion because no person would want to bring God's judgment upon himself.

The only proper punishment for a murderer was death and this applied to both men and women. The instructions were the first tool in leading people to repentance, the minister's goal for the community. Bascom stated in Abiel's sermon that "The law of GOD and man, will not suffer them to live; but requires that they be immediately put to death."¹⁰ After quoting Genesis 9:6 he went on to claim that "the [criminals] might be brought to true repentance; have a new heart, and a new spirit." Explaining the proper punishment to the criminal who had committed a violent crime was a useful way to

¹⁰ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 14-15.

compel the criminal as well as other members of the congregation to repent of their sins before it was too late.

With the law established, there had to be something or someone to enforce the law. Murder was wrong according to God's laws and man's laws, but God's always superseded. The political undertones of the law and sovereignty appear in the men's sermons, but not the women's.¹¹ Bancroft called murder "A crime capital in all civilized government; a crime, which we are directed by the divine law to punish with death."¹² He declared that a governing body must enforce the consequence for all crime. God directed the earthly human government to create a law against murder, enforced on earth. The congregation should have had no trouble comprehending this standard. Charles Chauncey called God "the Supreme Legislator," a label to which many people could relate.¹³ Even though the secular government was not necessarily present during most of the sermons in this study, the congregation surely understood the concept of answering to a legislative body. God was the ultimate government even though it was the people on earth who enforced his laws. There was no mystery as to whom was really in charge. Pitkin referred to God as "their king, and political head."¹⁴ Politics was a secular concept

¹¹ Politically loaded passages and statements simply do not appear in the women's sermons. Such statement as "Supreme Legislator" or "divine law" were not common to the women's sermons. Both sermons dealt with the law, but the language differed.

¹² Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, 22.

¹³ Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 17.

¹⁴ Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 45.

to which the congregation could relate and was a more practical aspect of American life. By this time, people more than likely participated in several elections and were somewhat aware of the basic happenings of government. By no means did this apply to everyone, but one can assume that with politics more accessible, more people were involved.

God intended that the government on earth act in accord with the government in heaven and did not supersede it. Benjamin Coleman declared that “the government may not pardon this sin [murder], nor people intercede for it.”¹⁵ Prior to that statement, Coleman recalled Exodus 21:14, which describes this same concept.¹⁶ The government could do nothing contrary to God’s laws, and must enforce the death penalty for murder because there was no other allowable punishment. The only way to receive pardon from sin was through God. He granted power on earth to the government to enforce the law, but men were still incapable of pardoning each other’s sin.

In spite of the political jargon, some criminals remained defiant. The sermon regarding Hannah Ocuish indicated that she continued to defy God and refused to repent even up to her execution time. Channing described Ocuish to the congregation as having “no higher principle than the pleasure of gratifying her ungoverned passions. And so far from having the fear of GOD before her eyes.”¹⁷ As he directed his comments to her at

¹⁵ Benjamin Coleman, *The Hainous Nature of the Sin of Murder and the Great Happiness of Deliverance from it. As it was Represented in a Sermon at the Lecture in Boston, September 24, 1713, Before the Execution of one David Wallis* (Boston, Mass.: John Allen, 1713) 8.

¹⁶ “But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbor, to slay him with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die.”

¹⁷ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 6, 26.

the end of his sermon, he warned her that “you will know . . . either the joys of Heaven, or . . . the miseries of hell.” Channing could in no way tell what she finally decided. Similarly, no one seemed to be sure if Abiel Converse repented before her execution. To her Bascom declared, “You have been fond of entertaining GOD’s enemies, but would not entertain him.”¹⁸ Though he pleaded with her, she “hardened her heart against the LORD JESUS.” He left her in God’s hands “who will do you no injustice” and gave her a “long and mournful farewell.” These instructions helped justify the courts’ decisions as well as point fingers at the guilty, but none of the political discussions emphasized that society should avoid a life of sin and destruction.

The political nature of these particular verses only supported a concept. There was no spiritual direction through politics. Chauncey came close to connecting politics to religion when he referenced 1 John 3:4 in his sermon for William Wier: “All sin is immediately and directly an affront to God. For as the Apostle observes in 1 John 3:4, ‘Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.’ That is, all and every sin opposes and tramples upon God’s ruling authority. And all they that are guilty of it, set up themselves, more or less, against the Government of God.”¹⁹ His statement applied to any sin for anyone, including the criminal. This kind of language helped people realize their need to keep from sin and still made a political connection. Did the congregation really need a political explanation for how to live?

¹⁸ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 20, 22.

¹⁹ Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 6.

Probably not, but ministers felt compelled to establish an authority that could not be challenged.

The law established that the criminals be executed. Condemnation established what happened after the criminal's death. This task, judging a person for the wrong they committed, came easily for the ministers. Condemnation in these sermons not only acknowledged the sin and declared it against God's law, but carried the eternal consequences of the sin as well. For the thieves and murderers about to pay for their crimes, these consequences included death and possible eternal separation from God. Society called for condemnation and the scripture supported that demand. Ministers emphasized condemnation to all, both as a warning and a terrible promise. Scripture supported the minister's practice. Ministers continued to state, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" and "ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death: but he shall be surely put to death."²⁰ These already familiar verses supported the instructional and condemning purposes in men's and women's sermons.

Often the sermons writers listed condemning verses before anything else, as if declaring the criminals guilty was of the utmost importance. The front page of the sermon regarding Rebekah Chamblit noted Deuteronomy 22:21: "Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in

²⁰ Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 13, 18. See also Genesis 9:6 and Numbers 35:31, KJV.

her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you."²¹ This entire verse deals with what to do with an adulterous woman; however, Foxcroft cut out all of the references to adultery and kept the words that described her punishment.²² Removing the adultery references enabled the passage to have any meaning the minister wanted.

Chamblit was guilty of infanticide and fornication, but not necessarily adultery. By using only some of the verse, the minister had freedom to condemn her for her crimes.

Bancroft declared to Frost that God "knows the secrets of the heart and can duly estimate the merit and demerit of every principle of human action," following his statement with a paraphrase of Genesis 18:25.²³ Earlier in the sermon Bancroft spoke, "Your sins with all their aggravations are known to God. He can never be deceived, flattered, or diverted from his just and wise purposes."²⁴ Because God was well aware of the sins these criminals committed, the coming consequences were unavoidable. Therefore, condemnation was a state of hopelessness from which no one could escape.

²¹ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach'd on the Lord's-Day*, 1.

²² The usage of this verse on the title page of the sermon is "Then they shall bring out the damsel . . . and . . . stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel . . . so shalt thou put away from among you." He used no ellipses to account for the portions of the verse he removed.

²³ Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, 24. "That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Bancroft only cited the last sentence of this verse.

²⁴ Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, 23.

Even the ministers encouraged the congregation to feel no pity for the criminals. The consequences were final, as emphasized by Garret and Ocuish's sermons. Both ministers quoted Proverbs 28:17 to point out what happened to the guilty: "A man that doeth violence to the blood of any person shall flee to the pit; let no man stay him."²⁵ This verse not only indicated finality in what should happen to wicked people, but also identified them as wicked. Channing declared to Ocuish, "Justice forbids that she should live out half her days," thus condemning her to a deadly fate for the murder of her master's child. Chauncey addressed the congregation before Wieer concerning this topic when he said that "we may be disposed, from the working of natural pity, to wish he might be permitted to live, and not obliged to die."²⁶ He continued this statement with a recitation of Deuteronomy 19:13: "Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee." The minister commanded the congregation to have no feeling towards the criminals. Chauncey concluded this discussion by stating that pity "will not consist with the will of God, and those human laws which are founded therein as well as on the common Good of society."²⁷

These criminals received nothing from the congregation to help appease them of the punishment that was to come. The congregation could avoid the circumstances in

²⁵ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 5-6; Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 1.

²⁶ Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 18.

²⁷ Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 18.

which the criminals found themselves. There were warnings directly from God to help keep men from ever facing this condemnation. These warnings, of course, came rather late to the criminals, but society could still benefit. Samuel Moody quoted before Joseph Quasson, “Remember, tis God that warns us by Man, by dying malefactors; by living ministers, and by his lively oracles . . . how amazingly dreadful is that communication.”²⁸ There was no excuse for the condemned because God warned them all before to avoid such behavior or suffer the terrible consequences that would otherwise befall them. This same sermon quoted from Deuteronomy 29:19-20, which explains that men who feel that they are above God’s laws and cannot avoid condemnation. God declares, “The LORD will not spare him, but then the anger of the LORD and his jealousy shall smote against that man, and all the curses that are in this book shall lie upon him, and the LORD shall blot out his name from under heaven.”²⁹ The sermons also called out the women by declaring that they were in complete opposition to God and therefore warranted terrible punishment. Bascom noted with regard to Converse that “wicked people are insensible of what they are doing against God, and the dreadful mischief they are bringing upon themselves.”³⁰ If Converse only realized what she was doing to herself, perhaps she would have acted differently. Bascom described a vile woman as one living in such a way that she deserved punishment because her sin was in direct defiance to God’s commands, because “he that sinneth against me[God] wrongeth

²⁸ Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 38.

²⁹ Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 38.

³⁰ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 1.

his own soul: all they that hate me love death.”³¹ None of these condemning words were confined to one-half of the Bible.

The ministers carefully noted that the New Testament declared people wicked just as often as the Old Testament. The New Testament justified the old law because “the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners” and that “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”³² The New Testament is consistent in condemning murderers in that “he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son.”³³ If such a law appears in both sections of the Bible, then there truly is no escape from God’s justice. All of this information had to serve some beneficial purpose for those listening. The ministers seemed to indicate that eternal punishment should not surprise anyone. Many of the sermon writers promised vengeance from God for their crimes, some citing Psalms 66:18: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” John Webb spoke to John Ormsby and Matthew Cushing that such hypocrisy was “basely to play the hypocrite, and to date the Almighty to take vengeance upon us.”³⁴

³¹ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 5. Proverbs 8:36, KJV.

³² Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 19, 1 Timothy 1:9, KJV; Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 23, Hebrews 9:27, KJV.

³³ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 7. 1 John 5:10, KJV.

³⁴ John Webb, *The Greatest of Sin Improv’d by the Penitent as an Argument with God for a Pardon. A Sermon at the Thursday Lecture in Boston, October 17th, 1734. Preach’d in the Hearing of John Ormsby and Matthew Cushing, Two Condemned Malefactors on the Day of Their Execution, the One for Murder and the Other for Burglary* (Boston, Mass.: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1734), 10.

Ormsby and Cushing supposedly repented, but Webb's language indicates that perhaps they rejected God instead. Webb even contended that God would refuse Ormsby grace stating that "tis most likely God will deny you his grace at last and bring the Damnation of Hell upon you in the long run."³⁵ If one cannot have a chance of receiving God's grace, then one has truly lost all hope. No one in society could offer any assistance to these criminals.

The message of condemnation was graver than just some hopeless words. According to the ministers, condemnation was a place, specifically a place of death commonly known as Hell. Chauncey called murder a "wickedness punishable with Death that is here spoken of" and referred to Deuteronomy 13:11, which called Israel to cease their wickedness and follow God's laws.³⁶ Israel was to fear God instead of risking condemnation for their wickedness. The death to which Chauncey referred was not just the physical act of death as a part of life, but an eternal death that separated men from God for all eternity. This death is Hell, a place where all ministers wanted to keep their congregations from going. Mentioning the place often in these sermons served as a deterrent to keep people from condemning sins. Chauncey's sermon continued this theme by mentioning that murder was a "sin which is eminently hateful to God," and then

³⁵ Webb, *The Greatest of Sin Improv'd by the Penitent*, 23. He also cited Isaiah 65:20: "There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed."

³⁶ Chauncey, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 21.

followed this statement with Psalms 5:6 and Proverbs 6:16-17.³⁷ Psalms 5:6 declares, “Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.” These bloody and deceitful men were those guilty of murder and brought condemnation on themselves. One does not go to Heaven bearing the guilt of something God hates; instead, they spend eternity in Hell. There the man would suffer the consequences of his actions forever. Webb’s sermon described this scenario in contending that God would deny Ormsby grace. Webb offered that the greater the sin the “more aggravated will be his eternal damnation.”³⁸ He quoted from Isaiah 65:20: “the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed.” There was no escape from this condemned state. Perhaps the most vivid representation of this condemnation to death is Bancroft’s description,

Your sins, with all their aggravations, are known to God. He can never be deceived, flattered or diverted from his just and wise purposes. All his creatures are in his power, and he disposes of them, as to him it seemeth best. By his Son Jesus Christ he has declared that “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”³⁹

³⁷ Chauncy, *The Horrid Nature, and Enormous Guilt of Murder*, 10.

³⁸ Webb, *The Greatest of Sin Improv’d by the Penitent*, 21.

³⁹ Bancroft, *The Importance of a Religious Education Illustrated and Enforced*, 23.

This passage inferred that death would happen twice -- once by the hands of men and again in the lake of fire. The minister's tone in discussing condemnation was by far more intense than in discussing the law.

All criminals had a choice to either accept condemnation or follow God and repent. God warned everyone to choose either him or death and condemnation. The ministers often acknowledged God's mercy, but also his just nature and wrath, for it was his wrath that condemned people from his presence. Timothy Hilliard, who wrote the sermon given before the execution of Alex White, Richard Barrick and John Sullivan, noted that these men had "cast off the fear of God, and freed themselves from the restraints of conscience. With what quick succession does one crime follow another, 'till at length a capital offence brings them to an untimely end."⁴⁰ Prior to this statement Hilliard quoted Proverbs 8:36: "But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all that hate me love death." By choosing not to fear God and his ways, one chose to sin and be condemned. Occom's sermon noted that sin made people ignorant of God's laws, explaining why they instead chose condemnation. He held, "So poisoned are they. . . . Sin has stupefied mankind, they are now ignorant of God their Maker; neither do they enquire after him."⁴¹ Sin blinded men and women to the consequences of their sin, putting them in a position where they would easily fall into condemnation. Occom

⁴⁰ Timothy Hilliard, *Paradise Promised by a Dying Saviour, to the Penitent Thief on the Cross. A Sermon Delivered at Cambridge, On Thursday, the Eighteenth of November, Immediately Proceeding the Execution of Alexander White, Richard Barrick, and John Sullivan* (Boston, Mass.: John Mycall, 1785), 21.

⁴¹ Occom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, 8.

reinforced his statement with Isaiah 5:20: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet for bitter!” The ministers emphasized in their sermons with great urgency that there was hope for the criminal no matter how great their sin. Even though every accused criminal deserved eternal punishment in hell, grace and salvation from such a fate was still possible. Bascom’s sermon made this point clear: “He [God] also tells them what sinners they are -- that they have treasured up much sin . . . and deserve to be eternally banished from his presence . . . He also assures them that they are welcome to come to Christ by faith . . . and eternal life.”⁴² Within this quote, Bascom referred to Psalm 130:7: “Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption.” Even though it is clear that the people on earth no longer wanted Ocuish in their presence, God still did. The ministers instructed the criminals that God could change their heart, as Moody claimed, “But yet very sensible, that unless the Lord gave him an Heart thus to seek and wait, he could do neither, as the following discourse had betwixt the prisoner and one that visited him.”⁴³ Only repentance could lift the eternal condemnation that was ever before the criminals. The ministers certainly did not hold out much hope for this outcome. The criminals could choose salvation, but this required

⁴² Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 9.

⁴³ Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 11. Along with this verse is quoted Zechariah 9:11-12, KJV: “As for thee also, by the blood of the covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water. Turn you to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope: even today do I declare that I will render double unto thee.”

action on their part. God sanctioned condemnation, but people could avoid it. If criminals chose not to sin in the first place then condemnation would not be necessary.

Ministers spent the majority of their preaching time emphasizing the Biblical commands to condemn these criminals publicly and then provide the instructions for what to do with them. The courts already did both of these things, so why all of the extra public humiliation? The ministers sought to influence the congregation to realize the severe consequences they faced if they did not gain forgiveness for their sins.⁴⁴ Ministers also wanted to make sure the condemned felt guilty. It is clear from the narratives and dying speeches that the women in particular felt terrible about what they did. Elizabeth Wilson declared, “My sins are more in number than the hairs of my head.”⁴⁵ Patience Boston changed her trial plea from not guilty to guilty after realizing what she had done, being “pressed in my conscience to take the Guilt of Blood from the Land.”⁴⁶ The day of their executions, the ministers continued to declare how wicked the convicted criminals were. Once they received forgiveness the criminals were no longer wicked and sinful,

⁴⁴ Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 21, recognizes the importance of these situations over the rest of society when she states, “The printed confessions of condemned murderers were meant to serve as models for the rest of the sinful New England community to emulate. . . . Some elaborated on a particular sin such as drunkenness . . . thus reminding listeners and readers that their own mundane sins might also be paving the road to murder.” Ministers hoped to help the congregation realize that they too were capable of terrible sinful acts.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, *A Faithful Narrative of Elizabeth Wilson; Who was Executed at Chester, Jan. 3, 1786. Charged with the Murder of Her Twin Infants* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Ashbel Stoddard, 1786), 8. In the same sentence she declares that “but my Righteous Judge doth know my innocence in respect of that cruel murder.”

⁴⁶ Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 26.

but the ministers continued to treat them as though they never repented at all. These statements are absent from the men's sermons. In the end, the greatest urgency was for society to keep from sin and destructive life patterns. Channing demonstrated this in his warning to Ocuish to "repent of your wickedness: this is the only time."⁴⁷ Bascom urged Converse, "My earnest desire is now in this last important hour that you may be truly sensible of your sins."⁴⁸ Everyone was at risk for condemnation and should not wait until the last possible minute to receive salvation.

Criminals who were repentant admitted that they were guilty, but they did not call down God's judgment upon themselves. Instead, the criminals feared God and his power over their eternity. Apparently, the ministers' arguments had their desired effect. Any scripture that they quoted was not for the purpose of condemning themselves or establishing the law and Biblical principal. On many occasions, the criminals offered practical advice of their own to those who were listening. The criminals' narratives provided further warnings advising against living an evil life. The sermon writers also took this opportunity to offer some advice to the congregation to persuade them not to sin. Garret's sermon advised her that the guilt of her crime would haunt her forever. Adams described her as a person that would "start at their own shadow, Suspect every thing and are afraid of every one they meet."⁴⁹ Adams's sermon advised that hell was avoidable by not living as Garret lived. Why would someone want to live in such

⁴⁷ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 26-27.

⁴⁸ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 19-20.

⁴⁹ Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 17.

paranoia? The message Adams conveyed was that the guilt and paranoia of sin would ruin a person. Bascom described how Converse had lived as a method of advising everyone not to live sinfully. Converse's life experience revealed that "Sinners by their enmity against GOD . . . procure much mischief to themselves: for they greatly incensed the divine wrath."⁵⁰ The message is harsh, but clear.

The law was of the utmost importance and had to be followed or greater consequences would result. It did not matter if the criminals repented or refused salvation, sat in their cell or participated in the church. All criminals faced the same fate according to the ministers as well as the law, and the scripture the ministers chose reflected that fact.

⁵⁰ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 11.

CHAPTER 3: AFTER CONDEMNATION

There were many other uses for scripture other than establishing gender differences. Scripture was an important tool in explaining to the criminals and the congregations why the execution was to take place. Ministers and criminals looked at the situation differently, as evidenced through the scripture they chose. Though one of the main reasons ministers quoted scripture was to condemn the criminals, the narratives used scripture differently. The criminals did not condemn themselves in their narratives or their dying speeches, nor did they provide instructions for their punishment. Those who were repentant did admit that they were guilty and regretted their deeds, but they did not call down God's judgment upon themselves.

Criminals continually participated in society from their jail cells. Penelope Kenny, Sarah Simpson, Katherine Garret, and Patience Boston were all women who attended church services after their convictions in an effort to gain salvation before death. Several took communion and ministers visited them several times a week. Though the criminals were no longer active members of society, the church accepted them and encouraged their participation. The men's sermons and confessions do not indicate their church attendance, so whether or not they became as involved in the church as female criminals did remain unclear. Regardless of the criminals' social status, these men and women expressed that they wished they had lived differently and admitted that they must take responsibility for their sins.

The law was broader than what specifically was to happen to the criminals, and the ministers were ready to provide the instructions for how to carry out the law through

scripture. However, the sermon writers for the men used the same verses as the women in a slightly different manner as evidenced by how the writers described the same verse. The many writers used the verses in multiple ways to describe the same purpose. The female sermonizers used specific verses simply to provide instructions on how to treat the criminals, but the male sermonizers used the same verses to imply the sovereignty of government and intellectualism in addition to enforcing the law. The most important usage of verses like Genesis 9:6, Exodus 20:13, and Proverbs 28:17 was that the sermon writers emphasized the law to the people and the consequences.¹ The role of the minister was to ensure that their congregations knew and followed the laws of God, and criminals presented the perfect opportunity. The sermon writers directed these verses at the congregation rather than the criminal who had already violated the laws.

Ministers greatly emphasized Biblical commands condemning the accused criminals. These commands also provide the instructions for what to do with criminals, and ministers quoted these scripture passages in affirmation of social standards. The courts had already established both of these concepts, so why all of the additional public humiliation? The ministers wanted to scare people enough to make them realize the severe consequences for their sins, so this method was a service to society. Daniel Cohen notes one of the justifications for capital punishment as “suggested by seventeenth

¹ Genesis 9:6, KJV: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.”; Exodus 20:13, KJV: “Thou shalt not kill.”; Proverbs 28:17, KJV: “A man that doeth violence to the blood of any person shall flee to the pit; let no man stay him.”

century Puritan ministers was its value as a deterrent to others.”² Ministers also wanted to make sure the guilty felt guilty be they criminals or not. It is clear from the narratives and dying speeches that most of the criminals, particularly the women, felt terrible about their crimes as evidenced in their confessions. Levi Ames began his confession statement by admitting that “My conscience made me uneasy, I thought I had been so wicked that I should certainly go to hell. And when I considered how short my time was, I know I could not do good works to go to heaven. To hell then I was sure I should go.”³ He was plagued by his crimes and became so depressed that he began drinking because his “conscience became so uneasy, that I could have no rest.” Elizabeth Wilson, also citing her hurting soul, declared, “My sins are more in number than the hairs of my head.”⁴ Patience Boston changed her trial plea from not guilty to guilty after realizing what she had done, being “pressed in my conscience to take the Guilt of Blood from the Land.”⁵ Charles O’Donnel called his crimes “inhuman; I am condemned by the Laws of the land, and forsaken by men,” accepting his punishment.⁶ The sermon writer recorded that

² Cohen, “In Defense of the Gallows,” 150.

³ Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted*, 3.

⁴ Wilson, *A Faithful Narrative of Elizabeth Wilson*, 8. In the same sentence she declares that “my Righteous Judge doth know my innocence in respect of that cruel murder.”

⁵ Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 26.

⁶ O’Donnel, *The Life and Confession of Charles O’Donnel*, 14.

Richard Doane “acknowledged his sentence to be a just one.”⁷ Ministers desired for the criminals to recognize their sin and repent, but often would continue to condemn the criminals. These two conflicting concepts were frequently spoken in the same breath. Particularly with the women, the day of their execution the minister continued to declare what wicked people these convicted women were. Even when the women repented, the ministers continued to treat them as though they were just as wicked as the day they sinned. Ministers spoke in this way more often to the women than the men, who instead tortured themselves over what they had done. Joseph Quasson desperately desired to repent of his sins, but found in his heart that he could not. The writer who recorded Quasson’s feelings and discussions with ministers claimed that he finally repented. Some men did not repent, but they at least recognized that they were wrong and deserved the punishment they were to receive. The writer who recorded Levi’s Ames demeanor just before his execution noted that he “expressed much more of a spirit of thankfulness for what was done for the promising of his conversion and preparation for what was, now, just before him.”⁸ After some convincing, the criminals found themselves in agreement with society and willingly accepted their punishment.⁹

⁷ Nathan Strong, *A Sermon Preached in Hartford, June 10th, 1797, at the Execution of Richard Doane* (Hartford, Conn.: Elisha Barcock, 1797), 19.

⁸ Samuel Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 20.

⁹ Lane, *Murder in America*, 50, notes of the criminals who were hanged during this time that “few were defiant to the end.” However, that “few” accounts for those who continued to reject the minister’s message.

Not every criminal complied with spiritual justice. Some defied the rules of religion and society by admitting no wrong. Occom explained that Moses Paul resisted salvation when he said that “the living truth of our text, that the wages of sin is death . . . the devils are ready to drag your miserable soul down to their bottomless den”¹⁰ Ocuish and Converse both refused to repent of their sins as evidenced by their stubborn behavior. Channing warned Ocuish to “repent of your wickedness: this is the only time.”¹¹ Ocuish would only get this opportunity to repent, as reflected in Channing’s statements to her. Bascom urged Converse that “My earnest desire is now in this last important hour that you may be truly sensible of your sins.”¹² Converse needed to be aware of her sins so that she could repent, which apparently did not happen. The writers made this last attempt to urge the criminals to find salvation and some still rejected it.

In the process of scaring the criminals, the ministers hoped to frighten society into refraining from sin. Ministers seemingly anticipated that the congregation would flee from a life of sin if shown the possible consequences of their actions, both earthly and eternal. While there was nothing the criminals could do to escape the consequences of their crimes on earth, ministers also expected the criminals to take control of their eternal consequences. Apparently, not everyone was receptive to the minister’s message. Condemnation was a necessary aspect to achieving either of these goals, regardless of the outcome. The ministers honed in on the spiritual nature of the criminals in their sermons,

¹⁰ Occom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, 20.

¹¹ Channing, *God Admonishing His People*, 26-27.

¹² Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 19-20.

but usually refrained from the practical nature of the crimes. The sermons left out the often-unusual details of the crimes, as detailed in the next section.

CHAPTER 4: THE CONFESSIONS

As the sermon writers condemned the criminals, one cannot help but wonder about the specifics of the crimes. Surely, there was some indication of how and why the crimes happened. Such details remain a mystery within the sermons. The confessions however, provide much more information into what the criminals was thinking and their possible motive for committing the crime. Not every criminal revealed much about their crimes in their confessions or narratives, but the details found are important to learning more about who the criminals were and what exactly it was that they did. In addition to further details about the crime, the confession statements also reveal what the criminals felt prior to their death. The confessions disclose the doubts felt by several of the criminals, the scripture they clung to, as well as any advice and final requests. Both the men and women differed in what they focused on in their confessions.

Many of the criminals revealed the details of how the crime occurred in their confessions, including specific details of how they committed it and sometimes what they were thinking about at the time. Barnett Davenport, who murdered his entire family, described every step he took throughout the house, including the exact order in which he killed each member.¹ Chamblit only mentioned that she dumped her baby in a vault. Though this detail is seemingly small, knowing exactly what she did with her child provided more information than the sermon writer. Edmund Fortis disclosed his motives

¹ Barnett Davenport, *A Brief Narrative of the Life and Confession of Barnett Davenport, Under Sentence of Death, for a Series of the Most Horrid Murders, Ever Perpetuated in This Country, or Perhaps Any Other, on the Evening Following the 3d. of February 1780, is to be Executed at Litchfield, on the 8th of May* (Litchfield, Conn: Publisher unspecified, 1780), 10.

and thoughts when he described how he hid in the bushes along a road so that he could seduce the girl he eventually raped and murdered. He recorded vocally propositioning her on the road. When she refused him, he forced himself upon her in the woods. When he was sure that she would reveal to everyone what he did, he strangled her to death and hid her body near a log. What is interesting about his and many of the others' confessions is that the men revealed the specifics of their crimes instead of just declaring that they were guilty. Many of these details formed entire conversations. Since the sermons did not provide this information, those who wanted to know more had to read the confessions.

A difference between the focus of male and female criminals is that the women's sermons did not offer as much description of the crime as compared to the men's sermons, perhaps because infanticide was a simpler crime that yielded fewer details.² When such information was available, the women's descriptions were generally more plausible than were the men's. What is unrealistic about the men's confessions is that they provided the actual conversations they had with their victims.

Fortis and Halbert's confessions provide examples of how men's confessions often provided unrealistic information about their crimes. Fortis supposedly recalled exactly what his victim said to him. After approaching the girl in the forest she replied

² Unfortunately, there are no percentages or quantities to back up this statement. The evidence is simply from the text of the sermons in which the crimes either are or are not described.

that “no I was not brought up to do such things.”³ Henry Halbert murdered the son of his master, Jacob Woolman, killing the boy as he slept. As he was cutting the boy to death with a knife, the child cried out, “O Henry! Don’t kill me!”⁴ It seems rather fantastic that a small boy would be able to cry out in such a way as he died. Had the boy realized what was about to happen before Halbert began to kill him, such a cry would seem natural. When Charles O’Donnel murdered his son, he claimed that the boy requested his burial site as his father was killing him. As unreal as these statements seem, the criminals used this same method in their confessions when describing the details of their sins. The congregation may have desired these types of details. It would be boring for the criminal to simply state, “Yes, I murdered her in the woods,” and leave out any further specifics. Such lurid details were lacking in the women’s sermons and confessions perhaps because the emphasis was more on their conversion than their crime.

Conversion was the point of the sermons, but sometimes the act of repentance was more difficult than necessary. Many of the criminals doubted their newfound salvation, and the confession statements provide the evidence about their doubts as well as how the criminals felt. Without the confession, it is difficult to glean from the sermons whether or not the criminals repented. The sermons tended to speak harshly to everyone,

³ Edmund Fortis, *The Last Words and Dying Speech of Edmund Fortis, A Negro Man Who Appeared to be Between Thirty and Forty Years of Age, but Very Ignorant* (Exeter, New-Hampshire: Publisher not specified, 1795), 6.

⁴ Henry Halbert, *Last Speech and Confession of Henry Halbert, Who was Executed at Philadelphia, October 19, 1765, for the Inhumane Murder of the Son of Jacob Woolman. To Which is Added, A Letter from the Criminal to the Father of the Murdered Son* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Anthony Armeruster, 1765), 6.

regardless of their spiritual state at the time. In spite of the seemingly callous tone of the sermon writers, their arguments usually convinced the criminals to repent. But even in their repentant state, these criminals had incredible doubts about their salvation. Perhaps these doubts helped persuade the congregation to avoid sin, but the criminal's doubting was beneficial to no one else.

In spite of these great doubts, there was hope for the prisoners in knowing that their salvation would be instant. Foxcroft urged Chamblit in their conversations to understand this concept. However, his previous teachings caused her to wonder if God might still refuse her, despite Foxcroft's encouraging words. She claimed her "hope is in the infinite mercy of GOD thro' JESUS CHRIST," and yet she also added, "GOD might justly refuse to hear me."⁵ Foxcroft urged her to ask for and receive "a new heart also will I [God] give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh." She responded, "O if God would do this for me I could be happy."⁶ Though he preached to her that salvation would be instant, she still had trouble believing this to be true. Even after she repented of her sins, her doubting attitude remained.

The cover of Edmund Fortis' confession statement and sermon referred to him as ignorant, but Fortis was not ignorant of the state of his soul. He doubted his salvation so much that after his salvation experience, Fortis declared that his prayers were mocking God instead of appealing to him. He stated that he "tried to pray, but all my prayers

⁵ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach'd on the Lord's-Day*, 63, 66.

⁶ Ezekiel 36:26, KJV.

rather made me worse than better.”⁷ Even when he worked up enough courage to pray again, he “got up and endeavored to pray, but my heart was hard as a stone, and it seemed bound up; still I thought I would keep praying to the Lord whether he had mercy on me or not.” Even in his troubled state, he persisted in his prayers, hoping that he would finally receive salvation. Once he was ready to receive salvation, he “was doubtful whether it could be true that the Lord had mercy on me, and wanted to see the light again.” Finally, his stone cold heart melted away and “immediately the same angels began to sing again; and I believed in the Lord, and loved every body.” His doubts turned to trust so that he could “trust my soul in the hands of the Lord, and am willing to do, or suffer anything God shall lay upon me.” These two messages of salvation and condemnation are puzzling because they interfered with each other.

The women tried to hold out more hope. Patience Boston was quite comforted by John 3:15: “That whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal Life.” Her narrative revealed how excited and relieved she was at reading this verse. Boston sought encouragement when “these Words came fresh into my Heart, ‘Weeping may endure for a Night, but joy cometh in the Morning.’”⁸ Someone led her through different portions of the Bible, the New Testament in particular. She discovered Psalms 30:5 and John 3:15 on her own with no help from a minister. She also found the next verse, John 3:16, which continued to comfort her before her execution. She grasped the New Testament passages about salvation quite easily.

⁷ Fortis, *The Last Words and Dying Speech of Edmund Fortis*, 8.

⁸ Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 33, 12-13; Psalms 30:5, KJV.

Ames found comfort in Ezekiel 36:26-27: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.”⁹ After quoting this passage, he declared that he wanted “this new heart.” It was at this moment that he regained confidence in his faith and was saved. There was also no minister mentioned in his confession, though chances are that someone did visit him on a regular basis to help him along his way to repentance. Some of the criminals overcame their doubts to have faith that they were saved.

Scripture was not necessarily useful to all of the criminals for finding salvation. Scripture was most often quoted by the minister rather than the criminal, and even then the women were more likely to quote scripture than men. While all of the criminals seemed to make religious references, almost half of the women quoted actual verses while only one of the men did. This is rather surprising since often scripture provided great comfort and confusion for both genders. Because the men did not quote as many verses, it is difficult to tell if they were as confused by scripture as the women. For example, John Ormsby spent most of his confession revealing his former life and the details of his crime rather than quoting the Bible. His only declaration revealing anything about his spiritual state was at the close of his statement: “I resign my soul into the hands of him who bought it . . . I do really hope that my Pardon may be found with the great

⁹ Fortis, *The Last Words and Dying Speech of Edmund Fortis*, 35.

God, for the offence came by him that swore against me.”¹⁰ It seems that Ormsby was repentant, but his statement lacks emotion. Instead of showing any remorse for himself, he conveyed a sense of apathy toward his fate.

Many expected women to show emotion, a socially applicable trait. Men traditionally did not show as many feelings about their situations, but not all of the men were as apathetic as Ormsby. Solomon Goodwin was a murderer whose only spiritual statement throughout his confession was “I know I must answer it at the bar of God,” referring to his ultimate fate of appealing to God for repentance and salvation.¹¹ It seemed as though he was going to wait until his death to appeal to God, at which point it would be too late. His doubt was so great that he said, “. . . I am in the presence of God begging for mercy and hope to obtain, my conscience is clear of that sin”¹² The picture of his begging and pleading for a clean conscience reveals more emotions than society would normally expect from a man.

One of the men did use scripture to convey his feelings about his situation.

Joseph Quasson was a particularly doubtful man who apparently sought scripture for

¹⁰ John Ormsby, *The Last Speech and Dying Words of John Ormsby, Who was Appointed to be Executed on Boston Neck, the 17th of October, 1734. Written with His Own Hand, the Day Before He was to Suffer* (Boston, Mass.: Thomas Flect, 1734), 1.

¹¹ Ephriam Clark, *Sovereign Grace Displayed in the Conversion and Salvation of a Penitent Sinner, Set Forth in a Sermon Preached Before the Execution of Solomon Goodwin, Who was Executed at Falmouth, November 12, 1772; For the Murder of David Wilson, on the 25th of May Last. Published at the Desire of Many Who Heard It* (Boston, Mass.: John Boyles, 1772), 23.

¹² Clark, *Sovereign Grace Displayed in the Conversion and Salvation of a Penitent Sinner*, 24.

comfort. In his search he declared, “I found many places of scripture that encouraged me to be seeking: However, I found my heart continued so hard, that I could not repent.”¹³

He described his spiritual state with more emotion than the other men. As much as he claimed he read and prayed, all he felt was that “I find my heart is very bad: I have no good in me.”¹⁴ There is evidence in the sermons that ministers visited him on a regular basis, but none of their encouraging words provided him much relief. Quasson’s confession did not reveal the exact details of his meetings with the ministers, so there is no way to know what the ministers told him.

Some men quoted from more unusual sources in their confessions. John Young, a murderer who used no scripture at all, quoted Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “I pass hence into eternity, ‘from whose bourne no traveler returns.’”¹⁵ His acknowledgment of *Hamlet* might reveal that Young was better educated than the other criminals. He seemed to quote from this play to emphasize what was going to happen to him. With his recent exposure to the Bible it is interesting that he would cite from a play rather than scripture. He personally did not record if he was repentant or not, but others did record his feelings and several hymns that he wrote.

Examination of the minister’s choice in scripture reveals their attitudes about the criminals. Many of the verses the ministers used had a gender-specific agenda. The

¹³ Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 6.

¹⁴ Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 8.

¹⁵ Christopher Flanagan, *Narrative of the Life, Last Dying Speech and Confession of John Young, Condemned to be Executed This Day, for the Murder of Robert Barwick, One of the Deputy Sheriffs* (Philadelphia, Penn.: T. Kirk, 1797), 2.

seemingly harsher treatment of the women in the sermons could indicate that the ministers wanted the women brought to their knees, begging for salvation. The ministers who preached to the men, however, sermonized in such a way as to build them up. Instead of condemning the men as fervently as the women, the writers encouraged the men to gain assurance in salvation. Women heard an opposing message. Why would this tactic even be necessary? Perhaps society saw women as more optimistic in general than men and needed coercion rather than “encouragement” for repentance. Their optimism would interfere with the realism of their situation. Only when women were discouraged could they find salvation. Society expected men to be more pessimistic and thus doubt more easily. This theory did not hold true for the male or female criminals. The women were no less doubting than the men, refuting the social idea that women were naturally more optimistic.¹⁶ When faced with execution, the criminals’ emotional tendencies were the same. Men and women both doubted their salvation regardless of what the ministers preached.

The criminals’ doubts seem both sad and deserved. These men and women committed terrible crimes that affected their communities and they deserved punishment. The doubts they felt about their own salvation created some sympathy and compassion for their souls. The best way to demonstrate this conflict is through a recorded

¹⁶ Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 15, notes that men and women shared an equal burden in their doubts: “Not only were all women and men equally burdened by that original sin which was the root cause of murder; all were guilty as well of committing those besetting sins which could lead ineluctably to that worst of crimes.” Her statement shows that though many expected men and women to react differently to capital punishment, the reaction was, in fact, the same. This reaction is so reaching that even those who were not guilty of any crime shared in the same burden as the criminals.

conversation between a criminal and a visitor that revealed questions and doubts about salvation. Joseph Quasson's and Rebekah Chamblit's attitudes seem very similar at times, but the way in which they were encouraged and discouraged were very different. Society misjudged the expected emotional state of both criminals. These dialogues show that Chamblit and Quasson both experienced the same feelings and their lives ended with the same result.

Chamblit greatly desired repentance, though the courts openly condemned her. The condemnation continued into the church. Her conversation with a visiting minister revealed a young woman who knew what she needed to do and was certain of how to ensure her soul a place in heaven. Even so, the conversation she had with a minister should have reinforced her spiritual instincts. Instead, their conversation resulted in the opposite outcome. Chamblit was discouraged by her salvation. The minister greeted her with, "Poor Prisoner, I am come to your desire to accompany you to your death."¹⁷ This was the last conversation recorded before her death. Her response to this greeting showed that she was happy to see the minister and possibly optimistic that she would get some kind of comfort before she faced death. The minister declared that he came to bring encouragement and she expressed her great desire to submit to the will of God. Instead of reinforcing her optimism, he chose to enforce the social expectations for women and discourage her. This was supposedly the only way for women to be aware of their sins and repent. She was, of course, aware of her transgressions and noted that her very condition was miserable: "I feel I am in a miserable condition: and I can do nothing,

¹⁷ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach'd on the Lord's-Day*, 62.

of my self, to please God.”¹⁸ Her existence bothered even her. In that moment, Chamblit needed to hear something to encourage her and lead her to believe that she might go to heaven. Instead the minister discouraged her by asking her if she knew that God could still refuse her entrance into heaven.¹⁹ The theological basis of this idea is debatable, but clearly Chamblit did not expect to hear such words as she was on the verge of repentance. It is almost as if the minister did not want her to repent and was trying to turn her away from salvation. She claimed that she knew God could refuse her once she died, which was probably why she wanted a minister to assure her that God would not refuse her. The minister’s words, “you have nothing in your self to recommend you to God,” declared there was no way that God would take her as she was. He followed by asking her if she understood grace. Once again, the minister was inconsistent in his message. The entire point of grace was the reception of something one did not deserve. There is no other option but for people to be accepted as they were, even women such as Chamblit. She expressed that she understood grace, but she was still afraid of death.²⁰ Fear does not usually accompany faith. The minister seemed to tell her that because she did not deserve salvation she should, therefore, not expect it. As one could imagine, this conversation did not end well as Chamblit fainted. The person recording the conversation noted, “Only short words of encouragement were now and then spoken to

¹⁸ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day*, 63.

¹⁹ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day*, 63.

²⁰ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day*, 64.

compose and animate her, till she arrived at the place of Execution.”²¹ It is no wonder that no words could comfort her, as the earlier conversation did not soothe her either. She left for the gallows fearful of her spiritual future, hoping that her previous prayers would be enough to save her. Society succeeded in bringing Chamblit deep into doubt.

By contrast, the conversation with convicted criminal Joseph Quasson was quite different. The social theory to encourage repentance in the pessimistic man had quite the opposite effect on this criminal. Quasson’s attitude was similar to Chamblit’s, and yet completely different in cause. While Chamblit was repentant even as she doubted, Quasson could not find any repentance in his heart. Ministers encouraged him to repent, but no words of love or wisdom helped him. Instead of actively seeking God’s grace, he felt that he deserved what was coming to him, claiming to be “willing to receive my desserts.”²² The greatest contrast between the dialogue of Chamblit and Quasson is that a female visited Quasson instead of a male minister. The more optimistic tone of the conversation may be attributed to the generally more loving and optimistic nature of the female, since society would expect her to be more encouraging than a man. She entered his cell and asked, “How is it with you now Joseph?” His response was that he was in a miserable condition.²³ He greatly feared going to hell, but he found comfort in knowing he would never sin again. The thought of sinning again was his greatest concern. Even though he felt he deserved this version of eternity, he continued to worry about his fate

²¹ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day*, 68.

²² Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 12.

²³ Moody, *Summary Account of the Life and Death of Joseph Quasson*, 11-14.

and the woman's efforts did not appease him. Quasson felt that the longer he was alive, the more his sin kept building up and he would never be able to receive salvation. The woman was persistent in her plea with Quasson, urging him to question if he really wanted to go to hell. She advised him to understand that God did not want him to remain in his miserable state. Salvation was readily available for Quasson no matter the circumstance. Even with these persistent urgings, Quasson declared that he could not repent. Her response to these desperate quotations was, "If you would only ask!" He admitted that he read several passages of scripture, but none seemed to help. Perhaps he read the wrong passages, but he never specified what he read so nothing can be determined about what he should or should not have read. In fact, instead of directing Quasson to a specific place in the Bible for comfort, she urged him to keep praying to save his soul. Quasson replied that he tried praying, but saw no result. He decided in his miserable state God's method of salvation would not save him, even though Quasson never offered an alternative route. No scripture or prayer helped him. Somehow, through this and probably many other urgent conversations with this man, he reached a point of repentance and died with his soul in peace as the writer recorded that by the time of his execution he was finally confident in his salvation.

A woman close to assurance in her salvation went to the gallows questioning her faith. A man who previously felt so unworthy of grace that he did not even desire it went to his death with confidence. Why did these differences exist between Chamblit and Quasson? Why should not both criminals walk to their deaths confident in salvation? The ministers who visited the criminals ought to have encouraged all criminals to repent

of their sins regardless of gender expectations. The ministers ought to be pointing the criminals towards a strong faith instead of questioning their eternal destiny. As stated before, women were usually known for a more encouraging disposition than men. This gender distinction could explain the difference in the outcomes of the two conversations. The woman's words to Quasson were far more encouraging to him than the minister's words to Chamblit. If women were more encouraging than men, then why did not more women minister to women in jail? If these criminals were so terrible and the people of the community really felt that they should truly pay for their crimes, why not send a male minister to bring discouraging words to an already discouraged male criminal? If different people were going to get different messages, why bother sending ministers? If society really wished the consequences of sin upon the criminals, they should have let them die without any direction to salvation. The criminals probably had no concept of these differences in presentation at the time. These questions may never receive definite answers. Even if the minister chose to ignore the criminals, the congregation required guidance. The ministers still had an obligation to the spiritual education of society.

CHAPTER 5: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR THE COMMUNITY

Ministers had more to look after in society than just condemning sinners.

Ministers also took these opportunities to provide advice and guidance to the people of the community. Often this was directed at the youth in attendance. Believing young people were prone to great mistakes if not properly directed, ministers hoped that with the proper warnings and guidance that they might be able to avoid a life of sin.

Execution sermons were a perfect time to exploit this notion.

Much of the advice specific to the youth in the congregation came from the women's execution sermons. The ministers targeted the youth present, since the young female criminals began their road to sin particularly early in life. Ministers emphasized to the young people that the sins of their youth would later bring them shame. Arthur Browne directed his entire sermon toward how children should behave, but clearly some of his comments specifically described Penelope Kenny. He depicted children as "supple and pliable in their first and early Years . . . but they grow fix'd and stiffen'd as they ripen into Age, then preserving the same Shape . . . which they had been first moulded."¹ Kenny was twenty-years-old when she became a convicted criminal, so her childhood education ended by the time she killed her child. Browne's description of Kenny was clearly a lesson for the congregation in child rearing. While this advice was good for parents raising children, the ministers did not direct anyone to salvation.

¹ Arthur Browne, *Religious Education of Children Recommended in a Sermon Preach'd in the Church of Portsmouth December 27th 1739. Being the Day appointed for the Execution of Penelope Kenny* (Boston, Mass.: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1739), 7.

The women also provided advice to the youth present based on their own experience. This kind of advice was generally more practical and relevant than the advice emphasized by the sermon writers. Garret gave a brief speech warning all “Little Children” to “Learn to Pray to God, sit still on the Lord’s Day, and Love your Books.”² She warned servants to obey their masters as it provided proper practice for obeying God as master. This advice was more specific than that offered in the sermons. Sarah Simpson also “advises young People to keep their Hearts and Eyes from wandering in the House of GOD.”³ These women conveyed that had they paid attention to previous sermons giving spiritual advice they could have avoided such trouble. Simpson advised that women marry a man who truly loved God, as this mistake helped propel her into a life of sin. Boston urged young people to avoid temptation.⁴

These types of warnings compelled people to repent by scaring them. None of the people in the congregation desired to spend eternity in hell for their wickedness. People needed to know what could happen to them if they did not repent of their sins before they died. The criminals themselves provided the sternest warnings. Some of the repentant women feared that God would harden their hearts and refuse them eternity. Boston was particularly frightened that “God had given me up. Romans 9:18 was a dreadful Word to

² Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 44.

³ William Shurtleff, *The Faith and Prayer of a Dying Malefactor. A Sermon preach’d December 27. 1739. On occasion of the execution of two criminals, namely Sarah Simpson and Penelope Kenny, and in the hearing of the former* (Boston, Mass.: J. Draper, 1740) 28.

⁴ Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 6, 21.

me.” Romans 9:18 states, “Therefore hath he [God] mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.” This was not the last time this verse haunted Boston. Later in her narrative she noted some comforting scriptures had come to her: “though in it’s Strength it lasted not long---It was some Time before that, I heard a sermon from Romans 9:18,” and her comfort was gone once again.⁵ The women provided a picture of the haunting consequences of sin through their narratives--the sermons did not reveal the women’s feelings, only the teachings of the minister.

Is it possible that the ministers were perpetuating the guilt the prisoners felt through the scripture references they used? Although Boston claimed to have read all of Romans chapter 9, she apparently missed the few verses preceding verse 18. The passage actually refers to Pharaoh, who repeatedly refused to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt. Pharaoh’s heart was hardened because he constantly defied God’s commands.⁶ Boston was no longer defiant, yet she feared there was still a chance that God would not receive her. These women feared death unnecessarily, and the ministers caused this concern by giving them incorrect information through scripture.

Not all of the scripture-based advice was meant to scare people. Ministers hoped to enable people to live more spiritually productive lives. As it was, the prisoners would not live long enough to practice any of this advice. Much of the minister’s advice, with the exception of the men’s sermons, was specific to raising children properly. This advice was useful and appropriate because many of the female criminals were young

⁵ Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 21, 24.

⁶ Exodus 7-11, KJV.

when they committed their crimes, especially Ocuish, who was only twelve-years-old. Ministers urged parents to bring up their children as Christians in hopes that they would have a prosperous and sin-free life. Before Kenny's death Browne urged parents to "teach them [children] their duty . . . what they are to believe . . . instruct them in the knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ . . . what they are advanced by Grace . . . that without Holiness there can be no Happiness." He persistently urged parents and "all those who have the Care of Children, to train them up in the Way they should go." Ministers knew the importance of making sure children received proper upbringing or they could turn out wickedly. It was important to keep children away from the devil "because the Seducer is always at Hand to lead them aside."⁷ Many of the women claimed that a "seducer" of some kind led them into their life of sin, which ultimately resulted in their demise. Ministers cautioned people not to be foolish in their actions, citing Ecclesiastes 7:17 that warned that fools would die before their time.⁸ The minister coupled this passage with the sight the congregation was about to witness, a foolish man or woman who was about to die before their time. Interestingly, this message was the only one that could truly change the way the people lived.

The ministers urged young people to avoid sin, but not the adults. Parents were to be the teachers, but the ministers never urged the parents and adults to avoid sin. Such was the advice the minister offered. Like the women, the men offered practical advice to

⁷ Browne, *Religious Education of Children*, 5, 8-9, 11.

⁸ Adams, *A Sermon Preached on the Occasion*, 26. Ecclesiastes 7:17, KJV: "Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before they time?"

the congregation. Some of the men made some last requests, something the women did not do. A few of the men directed their advice to young people in the congregation, usually urging them to avoid falling into bad company and sinful actions. Several of the men also urged the youth to obey their parents. This advice related to the beginning of their confessions, when the men claimed the one who raised them urged them to keep out of trouble. Providing an example of what could happen if one did not obey their parents or guardians was a hopeful deterrent to those listening to avoid a life of sin. What is unusual about the men's confessions is that none of their advice included scripture. Since it was more practical than spiritual nature, no scripture was necessary. For example, Levi Ames urged people to "keep your doors and windows shut on evenings, and secured well to prevent temptation. And by no means to use small locks on the outside, one of which I have twisted with ease when tempted to steal."⁹ Ames seemed to think that if the people in the congregation had only been more careful, he might not have answered the temptations to steal. The women did not offer this kind of advice to people. This could be a way to put the responsibility of his crimes on someone else, but that did not seem to be the case. His motive for this advice was more for people to prevent thieves from stealing so that they could avoid his fate. His motive was helpful instead of selfish. John Young murdered his creditor to whom he owed a great deal of money. He offered advice specifically to other creditors, urging them to be careful of whom they trusted and not mistreat debtors as he had. He instructed, "Creditors! . . . see there many unfortunate worthy citizens . . . unable to discharge in FULL their debts . . . 'tis a duty you owe your

⁹ Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted*, 35.

constituents, to frame just and equitable laws between debtor and creditor”¹⁰ It is unlikely that creditors and lawmakers followed the advice of a criminal. It was the hope of the ministers that others were inspired by the example of these men and women to avoid crime.

In addition to the advice, another difference between the confession statements was that the men offered a last request and the women did not. A few of the men asked that the community care for their families. Ames began his confession by stating that he was the first of his family to be disgraced. He hoped that his actions would not reflect upon the family he left behind.¹¹ He urged the congregation to care for his mother and brother, asking that his mistakes not reflect poorly upon them. Solomon Goodwin requested the congregation to make sure that his wife and children had good masters that would care for them. None of the women asked people to care for their families or friends in their confessions. Much of the advice lacked spiritual significance. Charles O’Donnel was the exception to this rule, quoting John 3:16 in his confession and explaining that “God would pardon the vilest of the vile”¹² The men called themselves wicked and some even declared that they were glad they were about to be punished. They knew they deserved death, but they did not condemn themselves to hell.

¹⁰ Flanagan, *Narrative of the Life, Last Dying Speech and Confession of John Young*, 7-8.

¹¹ Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted*, 35.

¹² O’Donnel, *The Life and Confession of Charles O’Donnel*, 14. John 3:16, KJV: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Since the men cited no scripture, they did not indicate any of the reasons that the sermons provided for why they should die. The men simply recognized that they were wrong and deserved their punishment. However, they did not declare that such punishment should be spending all of eternity in hell.

No matter who scripture or advice was directed to, everyone in attendance could gain something practical from the sermons. Youth could learn how to avoid sin and adults could learn how to raise their children. Adults also learned what some of the pitfalls to their society were and, hopefully, could work to fix them. People were continually aware of consequences, and ministers hoped that such a method would keep them from preaching more execution sermons. Only the criminal missed out on being able to use the advice given in the sermons. Regardless of their spiritual state, never would they be able to live in such a way as avoid the crimes they already committed and for which they were about to be punished.

CHAPTER 6: MISTAKES BY THE MINISTERS

The ministers took great pains to identify the spiritual instructions and advice necessary for the congregation, but many times they proved fallible in their presentation. Often they took scripture out of context. Due to the seemingly subjective nature of this topic, it is necessary to define what taking scripture out of context means. A verse taken out of context is quoted by itself instead of within the framework of the entire Biblical passage. The verse or passage is then used in the sermon, ignoring the original intention of the scripture. Theologians can always argue the true intentions of the scripture used, but such arguments would be incredibly complex and potentially unnecessary. Both the verse and the sermon had to work together in meaning and form so that the scripture presented the proper message without an accurate explanation. This is important because most in the congregation who were hearing the sermons would not be able to discern the verse's proper message. Many of the sermon writers improperly quoted the scripture, either by leaving words and phrases completely out or by quoting the wrong reference.

Any verse not referenced properly is not considered legitimately used, whether cited by the sermon writer or the criminal. It is unlikely that the congregation caught the mistake. Several of the sermons quoted the scripture and provided no references, thus making it impossible for anyone to discern where to find the verse or place it in the original context. With the help of a concordance and the verse, anyone today can find them all. For the people at the time, no such luxury existed. Some sermons footnoted the references. This practice was acceptable for the people who read the printed copies of the sermon, but not for the people who were listening to the sermon as it was presented. No

one could see the footnotes unless the minister gave the reference. These kinds of errors required the congregation to know the entire Bible by heart including the references. This was not an impractical expectation.

Some of the scripture that seemed incorrect at first proved contextually useful in the end. One example is the usage of Genesis 2:16-17: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”¹ These two verses deal with God’s command to Adam and Eve to not eat of the tree of knowledge. What could this passage have to do with a murderer? It is the promise of death that Occom emphasized to Moses Paul: “we are to consider man’s spiritual death And yet he [Adam] did eat of it, and so he and all his posterity, are but dead men.” Occom emphasized God’s promise that man would surely die if he were disobedient, a promise justified in Paul’s death. Likewise, Henry Channing referred to Micah 6:8: “He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”² This is not a verse one would expect to hear at an execution, but within the sermon the verse was used to urge parents to teach their children properly. Exodus 33:18 applied to the sermon for John Ormsby when Webb said that “tis certain the Mercy of God is elsewhere emphatically styled the Name of God; as tho the Almighty eminently gloried in this Perfection of his nature, and delighted chiefly in the display of it. This is evident from

¹ Occom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, 11.

² Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 15.

Paul's humble request to God, 'And he said, I beseech thee, show me thy glory.'"³ This verse by itself has nothing to do with a murderer, particularly when placed in its Biblical context. However, Ormsby emphasized the mercy and glory of God, showing that God was inherently good in spite of how he chose to punish the wicked. Perhaps this signified affirmation for the congregation that God was good as well as wrathful. One final example of the seemingly illegitimate quotations was the use of Psalms 139:3: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts."⁴ What good does it do a man for God to search and know him when he is about to die? However, Hilliard asked all those present to "make it your earnest prayer" because "if you are in reality what you profess to be, a true friend and disciple of the blessed Jesus, you will be as a brand plucked out of the burning, a single monument of divine grace and mercy." The sermon writer made the point that if the people loved God then they would act righteously because God knew everyone's hearts and intentions. For the sake of Alexander White and those he was executed with, God knew if they repented or not. This verse, though seemingly misplaced, was useful for giving advice to all present and may have provided some comfort. Each of these verses as well as several others contributed to how scripture was employed appropriately even though the initial examination of the verse seemed meaningless.

Not every scriptural passage was used appropriately. The sermons writers often twisted verses into meaning something that was never originally intended, forcing the

³ Ormsby, *The Last Speech and Dying Words of John Ormsby*, 11.

⁴ Hilliard, *Paradise Promised by a Dying Saviour*, 20.

congregation to trust blindly what they heard. Benjamin Coleman employed Genesis 39:9, as did some of the women's sermons. The entire verse reads as follows: "There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" This passage refers to Joseph's seduction by Potiphar's wife when Joseph declares as to why he would not consent to her advances.⁵ The verse expresses a desire to not sin against God, while the passage in the sermon referred to God withholding men from sin. Deciding not to commit a sin based on free will was not the same as God keeping a person from sinning, seemingly against their will. The sins in question here were also not the same. Joseph was tempted with sexual sins while Wallis was tempted to murder. The actions ought to match for the verses to be legitimately used. Bascom also noted "how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" from Genesis 39:9, but failed to include the entire verse.⁶ While just this portion of the verse sounds like advice one could remember to keep from sinning, the rest of the verse reveals a completely different purpose. This entire verse has nothing to do with Converse murdering her infant, but Bascom quoted only what he needed and forced the verse to take on a new and incorrect meaning.

Coleman used Job 33:15-18 for a purpose contrary to its original meaning. The passage refers to a dream Job described in which God was protecting him, knowing there

⁵ Genesis 39:7-18, KJV.

⁶ Bascom, *A Sermon, Preach'd at the Execution*, 6.

had to be some purpose for his current sufferings.⁷ The sermon writer, however, referenced the story of Abimelek alongside this verse. These two men had nothing in common, as Job was a righteous man who suffered seemingly needlessly and Abimelek was a great sinner. The actions of Abimelek may relate to Wallis since they both committed murder, but Job committed no sin to warrant his situation.⁸ This verse is quite inappropriate for Wallis' execution sermon. An extreme example is Channing citing James 5:12, but only quoting the first phrase "But above all things."⁹ He left out almost the entire verse, which had nothing to do with his point. This verse pertains to being persecuted for one's faith and making sure of one's beliefs. Channing lost the true meaning of the scripture by pulling out only what phrases he wanted read. Webb misused Jeremiah 2:31: "O generation, see ye the word of the LORD. Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? A land of darkness? Wherefore say my people, we are lords; we will come not more unto thee?"¹⁰ This verse seemed to have no connection to any of the categories in which it must fit. Webb followed this verse by stating, "And 'tis upon this account only, that sin contracts such guilt as to need a pardon," emphasizing the need to

⁷ Coleman, *The Hainous Nature of the Sin of Murder*, 4. This passage reads, "In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men in slumberings upon the bed; Then he openeth the ears of men and sealeth their instruction, That he may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man. He keepeth back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword."

⁹ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 15. The entire verse reads, "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation."

¹⁰ Ormsby, *The Last Speech and Dying Words of John Ormsby*, 6.

gain forgiveness from sin. Jeremiah 2:31 has nothing to do with forgiveness or salvation. A less extreme example is Browne using the phrase “walking through the Valley of the Shadow of Death” paraphrased from Psalm 23, excluding the rest of the verse.¹¹ Browne made no mention of comfort and fearing no evil. There was apparently no place for comfort in these sermons, so Browne just omitted it. Samuel Mather presented to Levi Ames a misuse of Mark 11:7, a description of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem before being arrested and crucified. The sermon used the verse, “And they brought the colt to Jesus, and cast their garments on him; and he sat upon them,” followed by the writer’s thought, “now it is our Savior God, who, by his divine influence and help, is the physician and beater of the children of men.”¹² The minister directed this verse to young people, inferred from his statement “the children of men.” His statement refers to Jesus as a healer, but the verse describes Jesus acquiring a donkey or colt by which he would travel into town the week before his crucifixion. These two topics have no connection at all, and yet the sermon writer used it to support his point anyway. One of the ministers referred to Micah 6:8: “He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”¹³ This is not a verse one would expect to hear at an execution, but the sermon

¹¹ Shurtleff, *The Faith and Prayer*, 10. The entire verse reads, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear not evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Browne ignores what serves as a comfort while in the valley, as well as the joy once a person leaves the valley.

¹² Mather, *Christ Sent to Heal the Broken Hearted*, 10.

¹³ Channing, *God Admonishing His People*, 15.

writer who quoted the verse urged parents to teach their children properly. Such usage makes sense, but this was not the case for all of the verses that seem out of context.

These misstated verses were probably not apparent to the people at the time. The criminals in particular would not have the opportunity to go back into the text of the sermon and figure out exactly what all of the scripture meant. These ministers fell short of the mark of preaching the Bible accurately. Aside from the criminals' example, the scripture was the most important tool used to convince people to repent. The Bible stood on its own in their eyes and needed no explanation.¹⁴ Almost all of the ministers examined through the sermons were guilty of taking many verses out of their Biblical context to convey what they wanted.

Taking scripture out of context was not the only way by which the ministers misused the Bible. Often, the minister did not reveal the citation for the scripture, but just recited it as if the scripture were his words instead of God's. The sermons' texts set the scriptures apart by printing them in italics, but those who heard the message did not have a sense of that distinction. Some of the texts provided footnotes, but the congregation would never read those during the sermon's presentation. The problem was that the minister did not reference from where he derived his sermon. People who did not know the Bible as well as the ministers could not detect such an inconsistency. Even

¹⁴ Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 12. People heard scripture regularly, but they may not have been able to recognize from where it came. Halttunen notes the importance in scripture for everyday life when she states, "The formal presentation of God's Word by the clergy was deemed crucial to every significant event in the life of New England communities, including election days, militia musters, fast days . . . as well as public executions . . . sermon was a powerful force in shaping that culture's values and sense of corporate purpose"

though the congregation would never know the difference, there was no excuse for the ministers to misquote the Bible. It is doubtful anyone took notes so that they could double check the minister's message after church.

The important question is whether or not the ministers did this on purpose, and if they did, why? Knowing that the ministers were guilty of mischaracterizing the Bible in execution sermons, did this practice continue in their weekly messages? The sermons provide no answer to these questions. The purpose behind altering the scripture must have been to provoke an emotional response from the prisoner or the congregation.

Generally, the criminals did not quote many verses in their dying speeches or narratives, but those who did usually got the context correct. Of those criminals who did not provide the proper context, the offense is understandable because they often had limited prior exposure to the Bible. Often any Biblical knowledge the criminals gained was during their stay in prison. The women were exposed to the Bible during their imprisonment perhaps only with the minister present. The verses that the women recalled could be the few that they knew or some the minister read to them. One cannot assume that the women had constant access to a Bible, or that the women read all of it. While one expects women ignorant of Biblical teaching to quote a passage incorrectly, the only verse with an improper context was one written on the title page of the printed narrative and not the actual text, so the woman never actually addressed the verse. The ministers probably placed verses on the front page prior to publication to draw the attention of the reader. In this case, the minister was at fault for taking the verses out of context – not the

women. The prisoners, who were not equipped for teaching, would not know the proper usage of the scripture. The ministers had no excuse for taking scripture out of context.

Why such mistakes were tolerated at the time is unclear. Perhaps no one really knew and did not think to question what ministers preached. The ministers' message could have better served the community had their references been correct and had they quoted the verses accurately. It is puzzling as to why this was not a problem. Such mistakes would receive much scrutiny in any other venue, theological or historical. These issues do not dismiss the sermons from study; however, one should be aware of their shortcomings.

CHAPTER 7: THE AVERAGE WEEKLY SERMON

One question that arises when examining these execution sermons is how they compare to sermons preached on a regular basis. Executions, after all, were not an every day occurrence. Did the typical sermon use scripture and, if so, what kind? Regular services presented sermons that were not specific to a particular criminal and their crime. Did the average everyday sermon use scripture in the same way? Did those sermons use the same amount and kind of references to women? Was the gospel presented to the congregations in such a way to convince people to repent? This particular question is troubling because many of the criminals expressed in their confessions that prison was the first place where they were exposed to the Bible. It seems as though ministers in the community did not preach the kind of message that would keep people from sinning and get them to repent. A careful look at nine different sermons that were not preached before an execution reveals some answers to these questions: These sermons also came from the Early American Imprints Series and were chosen based on their subject matter. None of them deal with murder or an execution, but rather with practical messages that one would expect to be delivered on a regular basis. These particular sermons also contained a large number of scripture references, making them ideal for comparison.

The first issue is what verses the execution and weekly sermons shared in common. The nine different sermons, all by different ministers, contain 585 scripture verses. The weekly sermons used by far more verses per sermon than did the

executions.¹ One would suppose that since ministers taught messages concerning sin during the week that many of the verses in the execution sermons would be common to what people heard during the week. However, this is not the case. Of the 535 verses in the everyday sermons, only 38 were in common with the execution sermons. Those common verses often carried a similar meaning and purpose. Discerning the truth of this statement does not require too much interpretation, leaving out most subjective opinion. One example is Psalms 101:5: “Whoso privily slandereth his neighbor, him will I cut off: him that hath a high look and a proud heart will not I suffer.”² John Danforth referenced this verse in his sermon concerning strife. Coleman’s sermon concerning David Wallis used the same verse. Both showed that God was willing to forgive all people for all of their sins, describing God as one who “is ready and easy to accept of just apologies . . . defers anger . . . and lets not the sun go down upon wrath.” If this were true, then Wallis could receive forgiveness as well. Samuel Phillips used Proverbs 4:15: “Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away.”³ Ocuish and Converse’s sermons both referenced

¹ The average number of verses per sermon was 73.1. This represents a significant difference in the average number of verses used in the men’s and women’s sermons. The women averaged 16 verses per sermon while the men only averaged 11 verses per sermon. According to the sermons, this shows that scripture was a greater part of the everyday sermon than the occasional execution sermon.

² Coleman, *The Hainous Nature of the Sin of Murder*, 28. John Danforth, *Holy Striving Against Strife; the Indispensable Duty of Godly Brethren, Evidenced by the Holy Scriptures. Also Love and Unity Encouraged, and Contention and Division Disswaded, in a Poem* (Boston, Mass.: Eleazer Phillips, 1712), 110.

³ Channing, *A Sermon, Preached at New-London*, 24, Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 23; and Samuel Phillips, *Advice to a Child or Young People, Solemnly Warn’d Both Against Enticing, and Consenting When Enticed to Sin. In a Plain Discourse from Prov. 1:10* (Boston, Mass.: J. Phillips, 1729), 78.

this verse, referring to the path of the wicked that people should avoid. Samuel Phillips' sermon emphasized keeping the youth of the community on a course away from sin and destruction. The titles of these two women's sermons emphasized that the youth needed special attention. Since Ocuish was only twelve-years-old and Converse was in her twenties, both of these women were very young and yet capable of committing terrible crimes. Both sermon writers, recognizing the need to reach the youth in these two communities, dealt specifically with how to communicate with young people. Naturally, this verse also urged the youth to avoid the sins of the criminals before them. Matthew 9:13 states, "But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."⁴ Corbin referenced this verse in his sermon, as did Foxcroft for Chamblit. This verse called to all people that they were all able to receive salvation. If none was righteous, and Christ only came to save the unrighteous, then everyone could receive grace and salvation. Corbin called all to "Rejoyce to hear that Jesus Christ is become an earnest Suitor for thy love" in referencing this verse. The main difference between the two references is that with respect to Chamblit, Foxcroft referenced this verse in a conversation with her instead of within the text of a sermon. He asked her "what should hinder that you should not hope for a pardon? I pray you hearken to me, as if you heard the great God himself speaking

⁴ Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach'd on the Lord's-Day*, 64; Samuel Corbin, *Advice to Sinners Under Convictions to Prevent Their Miscarrying in Conversion. To Which is Added, Some Scruples of the Tempted Resolved* (Boston, Mass.: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1741) 10; Peter Thatcher, *Christ's Forgiveness of True Christians, is a Preceptive Patern of Christian Fraternal Forgiveness. A Sermon on Colossians 3:13, Preached on a Solemn Occasion* (Boston, Mass.: E. Green, 1712), 32.

to you.”⁵ Even with this difference, the compelling effect of saving souls was still the same.

Lastly, the most commonly-shared verse was 1 Timothy 1:15: “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; to whom I am chief.”⁶ Writers Samuel Corbin and Peter Thatcher referenced this verse in multiple places, as well as Cleveland, who used it as a cover verse. The writers for criminals David Wallis, Charles O’Donnel, John Jacobs, Abiel Converse, Patience Boston, and Rebekah Chamblit all cited this verse to show God’s pardon for sinners which was the message everyone needed to hear regardless of whether they were criminals. What is important in these similarities is that the same verse was legitimately used for a different purpose. These verses also provided some consistency in the preaching. If the same verses were used in the same way, then the ultimate message was preached to everyone in the same manner.

There are several verses that apply to the above rule. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for the same verse used differently simply conveys the Bible’s versatility. One passage with differing usages is Genesis 49:6-7 whose two verses state: “O my soul, some not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they digged down a wall. Cursed be

⁵Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day*, 64.

⁶ Coleman, *The Hainous Nature of the Sin of Murder*, 20; O’Donnel, *The Life and Confession of Charles O’Donnel*, 1; Pitkin, *A Sermon Delivered at Litchfield*, 13; Bascom, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution*, 21; Boston, *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life*, 19; Foxcroft, *A Sermon Preach’d on the Lord’s-Day*, 3; Corbin, *Advice to Sinners Under Convictions*, 8, 15; Thatcher, *Christ’s Forgiveness of True Christians*, 23.

their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.”⁷ John Danforth used this verse to make a point about anger, calling it “contrary to the meekness and mercifulness commanded in the gospel; ‘tis irrational and brutish,” therefore a sin. Coleman explained how terrible murderers were in such a way as to point all fingers at Wallis for his crimes. Both sermons reasonably interpreted the same two verses in a way that best served their individual purposes and did not violate the context or integrity of the scripture. Joshua 24:15 states, “And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”⁸ The passage was about rejecting all other gods and forms of worship. Thatcher used the verse to express, “The heart is set upon getting Christ as the Principle thing. The Soul is willing to suffer the loss of all, to part with all for Christ.”⁹ Neither sermon writer used this verse correctly. In contrast, Browne’s sermon before Kenny used the verse to demonstrate “the general precepts of loving our neighbors as our Selves, and of doing to others as we would they should do unto us, makes it necessary for all those who have the Care of Children, to train them put in the Way they should go.” Danforth and Browne quoted Galatians 5:21: “Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and

⁷ Coleman, *The Hainous Nature of the Sin of Murder*, 11; Danforth, *Holy Striving Against Strife*, 79.

⁸ Browne, *Religious Education of Children*, 11, Thatcher, *Christ’s Forgiveness of True Christians*, 27.

⁹ Thatcher, *Christ’s Forgiveness of True Christians*, 28.

such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told [you] in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”¹⁰ Danforth focused particularly on envy and “how odious and contrary to God is this.”¹¹ Browne emphasized God’s punishment for those kinds of people, and that God’s punishment would be worse than the gallows for people who did not follow him and repent.¹² One minister focused on the sin and the other on the consequences. Lastly, Proverbs 4:7: “Wisdom [is] the principal thing; [therefore] get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding,” found in Thatcher and Channing’s sermons. Thatcher focused on Christ providing wisdom to all. Channing emphasized on educating children in the ways of wisdom to keep them far away from sin.¹³ This sermon was much more specific than general wisdom, for this kind of wisdom intended to teach a specific group of people for a particular purpose. Both topics represented a subtle variation of the other, but still maintained different usages of the same verse.

¹⁰ Browne, *Religious Education of Children*, 14; Danforth, *Holy Striving Against Strife*, 78.

¹¹ Danforth, *Holy Striving Against Strife*, 79.

¹² “What think you of malice, envy, slander, detraction, backbiting, lying? These, my brethren, are sins of the flesh, and tho’ nor punished with a gallows here, are reserved for God’s eternal judgment.”

¹³ Thatcher, *Christ’s Forgiveness of True Christians*, 28; Channing, *A Sermon Preached at New-London*, 20. Channing challenged his congregation by saying, “Do you love your children? O then, as you regard your own happiness and theirs, guard them as the apply of your eye. While their minds are tender and open to every impression, leave them no unguarded to receive their first impressions from a corrupt heart and a degenerate world.”

The weekly sermons did not refer to many women from the Bible, but by far used more Biblical women than the execution sermons. Fewer of the women mentioned in the weekly sermons were sinful. In contrast, someone wronged the Biblical women discussed in the weekly sermons. Women such as Tamar, Hannah, and Dinah all had terrible things happen to them or found themselves in difficult situations.¹⁴ These were all women not referred to in any of the execution sermons. These sermons actually mentioned several women in the New Testament that received healing from Jesus for various afflictions. Even with additional Biblical women, there were no references to Ester, Ruth, or Eve.¹⁵ No minister mentioned Mary, the mother of Jesus. Biblical women did not receive much time in sermons in general no matter their type. Since men dominated the ministry, male characters generally dominated the sermon topics.

Finally, the ultimate goal of all the weekly sermons was to convince people to repent of their sins. The weekly sermons were full of references to salvation and the gospel. This message was not one saved only for special occasions. Repetition in presentation was necessary for the ministers to reach as many people as possible. It would be unfortunate if the sermons only presented this message at the execution sermons. Not everyone would want to go to the executions and therefore would miss the sermon. These other sermons presented the salvation message in some way. The criminals had ample opportunity to hear about God, but still missed out. If the criminals

¹⁴ Tamar, 2 Samuel 13; Hannah, 1 Samuel 1-2; Dinah, Genesis 34.

¹⁵ Eve's tale is found in Genesis 2-3. Ester and Ruth each have an entire book in the Bible.

did not hear the gospel until just before their death, there had to be another reason for their lack of knowledge. The ministers must not have effectively convinced people with so many criminals claiming that the Bible was new to them. This problem probably has no direct solution, for the sermons did not reveal why the criminals never heard the gospel before their imprisonment. The criminals provided little information to answer this question as well.

CHAPTER 8: THOUGHTS FROM THE COMMUNITY

After examining the thoughts and opinions of the ministers and the criminals themselves, it would also be interesting to know the feelings of the congregation. Unfortunately, there is little information to provide a clear analysis of what the average person thought about the criminal. The sermons revealed what God and the Law commanded, and sometimes the opinion of the minister himself. The confession statements from the criminals showed how they felt about themselves. Some of the criminals even revealed how their families felt. Neither of these sources provides a clear picture of how the people in the congregation felt even though the executions and sermons were widely attended.¹ These people knew the victim of the crimes as well as the criminal. Although the clarity of these people's thoughts remains unclear, the newspapers reveal indications of what the congregation may have thought. These criminals did not get a lot of print, but what little they received reveals some of the congregation's feelings since people experienced the crimes in their own towns. The articles discussed in this part of the study came from the Early American Newspapers database provided by the American Antiquarian Society. These articles were chosen through a search for the specific criminals researched in this study, and twenty articles were found describing two of the female criminals and five of the males.

¹ Daniel Williams, *Pillars of Salt: And Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1993) 2. Williams notes that "not only the idle and the curious who gathered to witness a macabre and sensational spectacle; people from a variety of levels and areas assembled to experience a carefully stated public ritual . . ." Cohen also states that "early execution sermons were almost as well attended as the hangings themselves." 147.

Newspapers always reported with a certain amount of bias, try as they might to avoid it. But, this bias reveals the opinions of the people in the various communities. Only 33% of the men and 25% of the women received any mention in the newspapers. Most of the men received just a sentence or two about what happened to them, usually stating their crime and punishment and that the execution was performed successfully. Many of these little stories are sandwiched between a notice of something for sale or a child saved from drowning. This same pattern also held true for the women criminals. At face value, these short stories do not seem significant. One would have to read the paper in its entirety to find the stories about the criminals because they are hidden. However small, these stories provide some clues as to how the people of the congregation may have felt about the criminal and what was happening to them. The words the journalists used and the locations of the articles also provide the key to finding out what the people thought and felt. A few newspapers followed the entire story of the criminal revealing more details of the crime than the sermons or narratives. Finally, the specifics of the crime were disclosed.

The words of the newspaper stories offer an important way to determine how the congregation felt. Even when only a couple of sentences report the crime, a short phrase can speak volumes. A 1794 article in the *New Hampshire Gazette* about Edmund Fortis called his act a “horrid murder.”² It is indisputable that his crime was terrible, but use of

² “For the Gazette,” *The New Hampton Herald*. December 9, 1794, Vol. XXXVII, Issue 1985, *Early American Newspapers*, 1. Only a few of these articles have a headlining title, so often the city and the date of the article are cited in place of a headline. Some of the names of the newspapers are also unavailable. All of them came

the word “horrid” evokes more emotional opinions than simply stating that Fortis murdered a woman. If everyone who read the article already knew and understood that murder was wrong, then any added description should not be necessary. After all, the people had already heard the sermon about how God demanded that murder not be committed and Fortis’s own confession admitted that his crime was terrible and that he deserved his punishment.³ Use of the word “horrid” seems like overkill, but provides a strong sense of the public opinion about the crime.

The story for Alexander White, Richard Barrick, and John Sullivan in the *Massachusetts Spy* mentioned that these thieves were executed “without any expense to the community.”⁴ This begs the question whether the executions were at the expense of the community? What was the paper talking about? Or were the writers simply stating that no one would notice these men’s execution? If this were the case, it seems that the paper was commenting on how little the people cared about these men. Though their thieving was against the law, their crime had largely gone unnoticed. Rather than creating a public spectacle of the three men, the paper kept the issue quiet by only briefly mentioning the execution. This may have been the only information the people ever had about them. It was not until six days later that the same paper announced that the men committed highway robbery. Another Boston paper used the exact same story that the

from the Early American Newspapers Series compiled by the American Antiquarian Society.

³ Fortis, *The Last Words and Dying Speech of Edmund Fortis*, 12.

⁴ “Boston, November 22,” December 1, 1784, Issue 892, 3.

Massachusetts Spy first ran, merely mentioning the executions.⁵ The same story also noted that the men were executed “with the utmost decorum.” What the paper meant by this term is uncertain. Of course, this also could have been a sarcastic comment about the men if such decorum came at no cost to the community.

The female criminals were equally invisible according to the newspapers. A newspaper that reported the verdict of Ocuish’s trial claimed she received a “fair and impartial examination.”⁶ Perhaps this does not seem to be as severe a wording as some of the others, but this phrase raises some questions. Was the writer present at her trial? Did he poll the judge and jury? How did he know she received a fair trial? None of the other papers indicated the conditions of the trial. The newspaper went on to describe the jury itself as “an ample and candid discussion of facts by the council.”

The *New Hampshire Gazette* reported that John Jacobs was scheduled for execution for the murder of James Chockerer. The newspaper revealed that he was an Indian and that he received the death sentence.⁷ There was no other written description about his crime or how he acted during the trial. However, knowing that there was a trial shows that Jacobs first pled not guilty to the charges. Initially, he must have had no remorse for the murder or he would have pled guilty and no trial would have happened. The sermon reinforces Jacob’s attitude. Before his execution he still had no remorse for

⁵ “By the Boston Post, Portsmouth, November 18,” *Massachusetts Spy*; or *Worcester Gazette*, December 12, 1784, Volume XIV, Issue 711, 3.

⁶ “New London, October 6,” October 10, 1786, Issue 989, 3.

⁷ “Hartford August 22,” *The New-Hampshire Gazette, and Historical Chronicle*, September 2, 1768, Volume XII, Issue 621, 2.

his crime, so this assumption is plausible. This is obvious when Pitkin asked the audience to “pour out your hearts to God; and put up your united supplications for this man’s soul, that God would give him repentance.” *The New Hampshire Gazette* reported Levi Ames’ crime. This newspaper provided the most information of all the crimes and even revealed some humor in the theft. Ames confessed after his capture, but the authorities also found half of the stolen goods on him.⁸ What was humorous about his crime is that the authorities found the stolen goods in the crotch of his breeches.⁹ This newspaper must have had a sense of humor to report this kind of information. The wording of these small articles reveals small amounts of information about how the congregation may have felt about these criminals.

The article’s placement also reveals the public’s emotions. None of the stories made the front page news and none had individual story space. All of the criminals shared space with other, less relevant, stories. Jacobs’s story was sandwiched in between a story about a barn fire and the upcoming wheat harvest.¹⁰ The paragraph following the brief mention of Alexander White and his friends described how a storm at sea affected the crew.¹¹ The story that preceded six days earlier in the same paper started with a recap

⁸ “Boston, September 2,” *The New Hampshire Gazette, or Historical Chronicle*, September 10, 1773, Volume XVII, Issue 88, 3.

⁹ “Boston, September 2,” *The New Hampshire Gazette, or Historical Chronicle*, September 10, 1773, Volume XVII, Issue 88, 3.

¹⁰ “Hartford August 22,” *The New-Hampshire Gazette, and Historical Chronicle*, September 2, 1768, Volume XII, Issue 621, 2.

¹¹ “By the Boston Post, Portsmouth, November 18,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, December 2, 1784, Volume XVI, Issue 711, 3.

of a ship that came into a storm and sank. All of the people were “happily saved, but the ship and most of her cargo is lost.”¹² The next paragraph mentioned the three criminals. Likewise, Converse’s short print space came right before a story about a barge that burned to the ground and two oxen were killed inside. There were more details in a story with 51 words than Converse’s story that had 74 words.¹³ Ames’s story followed a short paragraph about the militia gathering earlier that week.¹⁴ The story of Hannah Ocuish had many unrelated stories surrounding it. Following her judgment announcement was a story about Captain Robert Colfax, who experienced a great gale and several of his crew were drowned.¹⁵ The story that followed Ocuish’s execution announcement was a short piece about Walter Tiffany, who spent time at the pillory for forging an order.¹⁶ The newspapers did not seem to care enough about these criminals to offer them much print space. Perhaps news was simply less sensational at the time. Since people did not care about it, the newspapers did not print it. This is quite the opposite of what happens today; the old adage “if it bleeds, it leads” must not have been as important at the time, thus explaining why these criminals received very little print space. However, it is

¹² “Worcester November 24,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, November 24, 1784, Volume XIV, Issue 710, 3.

¹³ “Northampton July 23,” *The Worcester Magazine*, July 31, 1788, Volume XVII, Issue 800, 3.

¹⁴ “Boston September 2,” *The New-Hampton Gazette and Historical Chronicle*, September 10, 1773, Volume XVII, Issue 882, 3.

¹⁵ “New-London, October 20,” October 15, 1786, Issue 991, 1.

¹⁶ “New-London, December 22,” December 27, 1786, Issue 1000, 3.

significant that these stories received print at all. The stories are small enough to overlook completely and still leave out so much detail that no one could be satisfied with the account. Even so, the newspapers still reported them. The point is that someone spent the time and money to print these stories, even lacking many details.

Though the criminals received little print space, occasionally the newspapers followed the entire story of one of the criminals. For example, the high profile case of Samuel Frost was covered in multiple newspapers over several months. His crime was more dramatic probably because he murdered a public figure. The July 18 edition of the *Massachusetts Spy* reported that Captain Elisha Allen of Princeton was “most inhumanly murdered by Samuel Frost.”¹⁷ This article also revealed that Frost was previously tried and acquitted for the murder of his own father. The murder account claimed that he beat Captain Allen with a hoe. He may have temporarily escaped because the article called for “every person will feel himself under obligations to use his utmost endeavors to bring him to justice.”¹⁸ What is humorous about this particular story is that when describing him to the readers, it was noted, “He will easily be known by his constantly shrugging up his shoulders, stretching out his arms, and shaking his head.”¹⁹ Perhaps he had a nervous twitch. The description proved effective because by July 25, Frost was in jail. The

¹⁷ “Murder! Worcester, July 18,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, July 18, 1793, Volume XXII, Issue 1059, 3.

¹⁸ “Murder! Worcester, July 18,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, July 18, 1793, Volume XXII, Issue 1059, 3.

¹⁹ “Murder! Worcester, July 18,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, July 18, 1793, Volume XXII, Issue 1059, 3.

newspaper reported that it would “continue to detail murders and depredations, committed by the Indians”²⁰ This story obviously revealed not only how the people felt about the murderer, but also about Indians in general. This statement seemed to suggest that Indians committed all murders. By September 26, Frost pled guilty to the charges. The humor continued in that the court refused his initial plea, believing that he was mentally incompetent and did not comprehend what he was saying. Frost refused to retract his plea and he continued to plead guilty during his next court visit. The newspaper also reported that he would “suffer an ignominious death.”²¹ The October 10 edition reported that his execution was set for October 31.²² The November 6 paper explained the connection between his previous trial and the trial for his father’s murder. The jury at that time found him insane and acquitted him. His previous court appearance was the reason why his first plea was not accepted, but the newspapers did not explain that fact. The court was careful to ensure that Frost was just as mentally unstable for this particular case based on his previous record. This same article described the execution itself. Frost must not have repented of his sin, because the newspaper reported, “He

²⁰ “Worcester, July 25,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, July 25, 1793, Volume XXII, Issue 1060, 3.

²¹ “Worcester, September 26,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, September 26, 1794, Volume XXII, Issue 1069, 3.

²² “Worcester, October 10,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, October 10, 1793, Volume XXII, Issue 1071, 3. What is ironic about the date of his death was that it fell on Halloween.

showed few or no signs of penitence.”²³ The newspaper was quite observant, yet assumed how Ames felt as well as the state of his soul. The newspaper also mentioned that Frost was asked repeatedly if he wanted his execution delayed. Every time he responded that he did not. His last words were that he did not want anyone following him, probably meaning that he wanted no one to fall into the same sin. Then, according to the newspaper, he was “launched into eternity.” These events had to have deeply affected the people in the area, because 2,000 of them came to his execution.

Though the newspaper cannot truly represent the opinions and feelings of every one who attended an execution, it did provide a different perspective than the sermons or confession statements. This perspective related directly to what the community felt instead of the preaching of a minister. The community can speak as to how they felt about the events of the time. Judging from the seeming lack in reporting, their feelings were few but powerful.

²³ “Worcester, November 6,” *Massachusetts Spy or Worcester Gazette*, November 6, 1793, Volume XXII, Issue 1095, 3.

CONCLUSION

Execution sermons and the confession statements that usually accompanied them are much richer in historical significance than previous historians have given them credit. The ultimate goal of the ministers preaching the sermons was to impact the community in a positive direction in the aftermath of some often horrid events. While no crime statistics can support exactly the kind of influence the ministers had in these situations, one could still argue that for the moment the ministers' points were clear.

Men and women were treated in this venue as they often were in all other aspects of society. Ministers brought different messages to the community depending on the criminal, often to the dismay of the criminal. In bringing this message, all ministers put great importance on quoting from the Bible, employing both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible was the singular foundation for their argument in upholding the law and condemning the criminal, as well as advising society. Even though the Bible was their greatest resource, many ministers quoted incorrect or incomplete passages in order to make their point more solid. It is this use of scripture that made this study so revealing, providing further insight into the teachings brought by the minister.

Probably the most revealing aspect to this study is the narratives and confessions from the criminals. Knowing what a minister will tell a crowd about a criminal is predictable, but the confession statements provide an outlet into the minds and hearts of the criminals themselves. It is here that we find the details of their crimes and how they felt in the days preceding their executions. Often their advice was more practical in

preventing more crime, and their pleadings to the youth to avoid their lifestyle seemed more urgent than even the ministers' teachings.

It is also important to see how the community reacted to such events, as evidenced in their local newspapers. Crimes such as the ones discussed here today would make front page news and be discussed at the top of every hour on every major news network. In this particular period, however, this news though shocking was not a headliner. People obviously attended these executions so they were not unimportant to the community, just not a necessary news item.

It is interesting to see how things have changed. Today, these stories would create public anger that would result in little sympathy for the criminal, particularly the crimes against children. Though the reaction might be similar, the continued reaction in the aftermath would differ. Trials involving the criminals would be labeled "trials of the century" and debates about the proper punishment would flood the airwaves.¹ Even the execution sermon would be considered something liable to protests. Though this particular thesis did not explore the decline in use of the execution sermon, such a topic would be noteworthy for further research.

¹ The recent OJ Simpson, Andrea Yates, and Mike Peterson trial come to mind.

CHART 1: CRIME SYNOPSIS

Criminal's Name	Date of Execution	Place	Crime
David Wallis	9/24/1713	Boston, Massachusetts	murdered Benjamin Stalwood after a quarrel by stabbing him to death
Joseph Quasson	6/29/1726	Boston, Massachusetts	an Indian who shot a fellow soldier named John Peter, also an Indian
Barnett Davenport	1729	Litchfield, Connecticut	tried to steal all he could from a family and murdered them after they caught him
Rebekah Chamblit	9/27/1733	Boston, Massachusetts	dumped her child in a vault shortly after giving birth thinking it was dead
John Ormsby	10/17/1734	Boston, Massachusetts	in a drunken state stabbed a man with a fork, and beat another man for offending him
Patience Boston	7/24/1735	Boston, Massachusetts	drowned her master's son, Benjamin Trot, in a well
Katherine Garret	5/3/1738	New London, Connecticut	an Indian servant who also violently killed her illegitimate child
Penelope Kenny	12/27/1739	Boston, Massachusetts	killed their illegitimate infants
Sarah Simpson	12/27/1739	Boston, Massachusetts	killed their illegitimate infants
William Wieer	11/19/1754	Boston, Massachusetts	boy of just thirteen who murdered a man named Darby O'Brian
John Jacobs	11/2/1768	Litchfield, Connecticut	murdered another Indian named James Chockerer
Solomon Goodwin	11/12/1772	Boston, Massachusetts	Goodman killed Wilson with the oar from the canoe when the amount was not in his favor
Moses Paul	9/2/1773	Salem, Massachusetts	another Indian, struck a man named Moses Cook enough to kill him
Alexander White	11/17/1784	Boston, Massachusetts	hanged for a robbery they committed in Boston
Richard Barrick	11/17/1784	Boston, Massachusetts	hanged for a robbery they committed in Boston
John Sullivan	11/17/1784	Boston, Massachusetts	hanged for a robbery they committed in Boston
Elizabeth Wilson	1/3/1786	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	murder of her twin infants
Hannah Ocuish	12/20/1786	New London, Connecticut	twelve-year-old mulatto slave who beat to death her master's six-year-old daughter
Abiel Converse	7/6/1788	North Hampton, Massachusetts	murdered her infant, illegitimate child
Samuel Frost	10/31/1793	Worcester, Massachusetts	beat Captain Elisha Allen to death
Edmund Fortis	9/5/1794	Exeter, New Hampshire	raped and killed a fourteen-year-old girl

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BIOGRAPHY

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