
Convincing Methods Of The Sermon Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God

'Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering'(Edwards,2). It is this kind of language that Jonathan Edwards used to persuade many early American settlers. This line comes from the famous sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God', which was delivered July 8,1741 in the state of Connecticut. Many people believe that Edwards was able to allure his listeners into believing his preaching and was even able to influence the listener's very way of life because of how convincing he was. Yet there are also those who believe that the provocative techniques Edwards used within his sermons were too overbearing and actually didn't convince or move the audience at all. After examining both of these positions on the matter, it is clear that Jonathan Edwards was indeed able to persuade his listeners dramatically by using both scare tactics and persuasive techniques within his sermon.

The first reason that Edwards was able to convince his beholders so much was due to his use of scare tactics. Throughout the entire sermon you can see that the use of scare tactics are the most commonly used compared to the other means of persuasion that have been demonstrated in it. One example of these scare tactics can be seen on page six of the sermon, when Edwards wrote, 'The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood'(Edwards, 6). In this instance of the use of scare tactics, Edwards aimed to inform the listeners that God is not a merciful or pitiful being, but an all-powerful force that has the ability and the right to strike you down at any moment but doesn't due to his decision to spare the powerless person. When the listener hears this, especially including the somewhat naive audience of the 1700's, they gain a sense of unease at the fact that they are seemingly powerless against the force of God and they reach Edwards intended effect of persuasion through fear. Another instance of Edwards's use of scare tactics is how he describes the punishments of the certain unfortunate individuals who were not spared of God's horrible wrath. Edwards stated on page nine that, 'It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long for ever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all.' (Edwards, 9). By explaining this idea of a never ending torment to the audience, he achieves the feeling of fear he wishes to instill within the listener as he did before but this time slightly reassured the listener by nodding to the fact that if they stay devoted to God that this will not happen to them. Edwards was very clever in doing this as it directly makes the listeners devote themselves more and more to the church and puritan life without the sermon actually stating to do so in it. A third example of how Edwards preaching used fear tactics to convince his congregation can be seen with his use of imagery. The use of imagery has actually been used to great extent in most of the preacher's descriptions of God's wrath and eternal punishment throughout the sermon, but the previous examples of fear used in the sermon are fantastic examples of how he used it. To be exact, in the previous quote when describing punishment by stating, 'you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery...a long for ever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your

thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having...any rest at all' (Edwards, 9). The imagery here is used in a very effective manner since it describes these things in a very frightening, graphic tone and managed to give the reader some reliability to the suffering when Edwards says that the mere thought of rest you had access to so easily in regular life would become an unimaginably swell pleasure if you were to endure eternal punishment. The use of this imagery, along with the other methods of scare tactics, included strong language which of course frightened the reader on a physiological level but Edwards also used a more literary approach to allure his listeners.

Another reason Edwards was able to strongly convince his readers was because of the persuasive writing techniques he used in the sermon's text. A prime example of one of the many writing techniques used in the sermon is repetition, which can be used to stir emotions and emphasize ideas. A sample of this repetition can be seen on page five of the sermon when it reads, 'This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. -- That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up'(Edwards, 5). Here you can see how both the previously mentioned fear tactics and Edwards use of repetition are being used since the restating of the word 'you' induces fear in listeners by emphasizing the fact that the punishments mentioned in the sermon are directed towards them and the repeating of the word also emphasizes to the listeners that it is them that has to take action and embrace Edwards message. A second example of Edwards's literary methods of persuasion is the metaphors scattered through the sermon. On page five of the sermons text it reads, 'If God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea...it would be nothing to withstand or endure it'(Edwards, 5). This statement from Edwards is filled with different metaphors representing the overall idea of God's mercy on all humans sinful ways and what would happen if he didn't show such mercy. The individual metaphors in this excerpt are the floodgate which refers to God's mercy on humans and the water inside of the gate which represents the horrible wrath and punishment that hell is, the excerpt also mentions that the punishment is so horrible that even a man with ten thousand times his current strength wouldn't even have the power to resist it. These metaphors work to influence the reader since it helps them grasp the importance and consequence of what is being said as it becomes easier to imagine what a seemingly inconceivable punishment is like. People of course don't know how eternal punishment feels, so instead it is represented as conceivable incident, such as the incident of a person being violently submerged in water, to represent the message more accurately. A third example of Edwards's persuasive writing techniques is his use of similes in the sermon. Much like the metaphors used in the text, the similes are used to help visualize certain ideas, except unlike the metaphors, Edwards primarily uses the similes in the preaching for the purpose of representing some of the sermons provided situations from God's point of view. You can see this when Edwards stated in his sermon, ' The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked'(Edwards,6). In this specific scenario, Edwards compares humans to repulsive insects being dangled over some kind of flame, or at least that's how he manages to make it seem like God sees humans. Edwards addition of how God is 'provoked' to throw the insect into the fire adds to the perspective of God's toleration towards humans and how he has such great power that damning a person is tempting yet takes very

little effort. As evidently shown, these persuasive writing techniques used by Edwards excelled in using perspective and emphasizing of certain propositions to help the listeners grasp ideas and help achieve Edwards's overall goal of persuading people to heed his sermon's message.

While there has been plenty of supporting evidence as to why Jonathan Edwards was successful at creating a convincing, persuasive sermon, there are those who oppose this statement and claim that the sermon did not persuade its listeners. The reason for this is because, although the graphic detail used in the text has been shown to be convincing, people believe that the straightforward and harsh detail of the sermon was enough to actually frighten people to the point of rebuke towards the sermon. This is an understandable statement as Edwards did indeed use details that were extremely violent for the time in order to help people embrace the Great Awakening. What really drives this argument is that the language can be considered even more vile when taking into consideration that this is affiliated with the innocence of a church and its puritan occupants. However, what these people may not have taken into consideration is that Puritan beliefs at the time acknowledged the fact that their God wasn't a merciful guardian with infinite powers used to defend humans. The Puritans actually knew that their God was more of a powerful being who watches over humans, but shows more mercy than he is showing embrace towards them, as they are all sinners in his eyes and nobody is perfect. So, the statements used in Edwards sermon may have been graphic and may have been explicit, but they did have an effect on listeners to help reach the overall goal of embracing God and actually helping the people live a more peaceful, Puritan life by doing so.

Thus, it is clear that by cleverly using multiple scare tactics and persuasive techniques, that Jonathan Edwards was able to create a sermon that effectively convinced and influenced the lives of countless people who witnessed the spoken or written words inside it. Yes, Edwards spread his message in a revolutionary way that many saw as bold and vivid, but by doing what he did in a way that only Edwards could, he managed to change the thoughts and even the lives of the people living in America in 1741.