Structure & Delivery of a Puritan Sermon

Compiled by Chris Torino, information from www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/sermstru.htm

"The Puritan sermon quotes the text and "opens" it as briefly as possible, expounding circumstances and context... setting forth its logical implications; the sermon then proclaims in a flat, indicative sentence the "doctrine" contained in the text or logically deduced from it, and proceeds to the first reason or proof. Reason follows reason, with no other transition than a period and a number; after the last proof is stated there follow the uses or applications, also in numbered sequence, and the sermon ends when there is nothing more to be said."

– Perry Miller, "The New England Mind"

Delivery of a Puritan Sermon:

The Puritans believed that the real power of a sermon was to be found in its words, rather than its delivery. Since the words were thought to be divinely inspired, it was believed that the words alone carried enough power to affect the congregation. As the preacher was simply a flawed agent of God's work, his presentation of the sermon was expected to be as unadorned as possible, so that the delivery of the sermon would not distract listeners from the words. Preachers usually spoke their sermons in a deliberate monotone. Consider this effect as you read "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Traditional Structure of a Puritan Sermon:

Most Puritan sermons were modeled after this structure. Examine "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" for the five main sections of the sermon — epigraph, doctrine, reasons, application, and epilogue.

I. Epigraph[1]
  a. Grammatical Reading
     – Restatement of the epigraph in easily accessible terms
  b. Logical Meaning
     – Explanation of the epigraph's Biblical context and its meaning within that context
  c. Figurative Meaning
     – Précis of the epigraph's theological and real-world implications

II. Doctrine
  a. Breaking Down the Topic
     – Division of the sermon's message into clear subsets
  b. Demonstration of Scriptural Evidence
     – Reference of relevant scriptural passages that support the meaning that the preacher has drawn from the epigraph

III. Reasons
  a. Establishing the Validity of the Doctrine

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[1] The epigraph was always a Biblical quotation, no more than a few verses in length. This passage was selected by the preacher and was intended to address a specific problem or concern in the community.

      – Coherent explanation of why the doctrine is rational and true
  b. Why Listeners Should Be Convinced
      – An extension of the above. Involves an explanation of why the listeners, specifically, should believe in the truth of the doctrine.

IV. Application
  a. Personal Life
      – Statement of how the doctrine applies to one's own personal, spiritual, and family lives
  b. Community and World
      – Statement of how the doctrine applies to the immediate community, as well as the greater world

V. Epilogue
  a. Emphasis of Arguments
      – Persuasive and bolder restatement of the main points of the argument
  b. Call to Action
      – Stimulation of the congregation to meaningful action and continued awareness of this issue
  c. Emotional Appeal
      – Final attempt to convince congregation of the unassailable truth of the message/doctrine