

Samuel DANFORTH (1626-1674)

From "A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness" (1670)

in A. Delbanco, ed. *Writing New England* (Harvard UP, 2001)

④ Doctrine. Such as have sometime left their pleasant cities and habitations to enjoy the pure worship of God in a wilderness are apt in time to abate and cool in their affection therunto: but then the Lord calls upon them seriously and thoroughly to examine themselves, what it was that drew them into the wilderness, and to consider that it was not the expectation of ludicrous levity nor of courtly pomp and delicacy, but of the free and clear dispensation of the Gospel and kingdom of God . . .

2 To what purpose did the children of Israel leave their cities and houses in Egypt and go forth into the wilderness? . . . Was it not to see that burning and shining light which God had raised up? To hear his heavenly doctrine and partake of that new sacrament which he administered? O how they were affected with his rare and excellent gifts! with his clear, lively, and powerful ministry! The kingdom of heaven pressed in upon them with a holy violence and the violent, the zealous, and affectionate hearers of the Gospel took it by force (Matt. 11:12; Luke 16:16). They leapt over all discouragements and impediments, whether outward, as legal rites and ceremonies, or inward, the sense of their own sin and unworthiness, and pressed into the kingdom of God as men rush into a theater to see a pleasant sight or as soldiers run into a besieged city to take the spoil thereof; but their hot fit is soon over, their affection lasted but for an hour, i.e., a short season (John 5:35) . . .

3 Use I. Of solemn and serious enquiry to us all in this general assembly is whether we have not in a great measure forgotten our errand into the wilderness. You have solemnly professed before God, angels, and men that the cause of your leaving your country, kindred, and fathers' houses and transporting yourselves with your wives, little ones, and substance over the vast ocean into this waste and howling wilderness, was your liberty to walk in the faith of the Gospel with all good conscience according to the order of the Gospel, and your enjoyment of the pure worship of God according to his institution without human mixtures and impositions. Now let us sadly consider whether our ancient and primitive affections to the Lord Jesus, his glorious Gospel, his pure and spiritual worship, and the order of his house, remain, abide, and continue firm, constant, entire, and inviolate . . . let us call to remembrance the former days and consider whether "it was not then better with us than it is now" [Hos. 2:7].

4 In our first and best times the kingdom of heaven brake in upon us with a holy violence and every man pressed into it . . . How diligent and faithful in preparing your hearts for the reception of the Word, "laying apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness," that you might "receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save your souls" [Jas. 1:21], "and purging out all malice, guile, hypocisies, envies, and all evil speakings, and as newborn babes, desiring the sincere milk of the Word, that ye might grow thereby" [1 Pet. 2:1, 2]? . . . How painful were you in recollecting, repeating, and discarding of what you heard, whetting the Word of God upon the hearts of your

children, servants, and neighbors? How fervent in prayer to almighty God for his divine blessing upon the seed sown, that it might take root and fructify? O what a reverent esteem had you in those days of Christ's faithful ambassadors that declared unto you the word of reconciliation! "How beautiful" were "the feet of them that preached the Gospel of peace, and brought the glad tidings of salvation!" [Rom. 10:15] . . .

5 And then had the churches "rest" throughout the several colonies and were "edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" [Acts 9:31]. O how your faith grew exceedingly! . . . O how your love and charity towards each other abounded! O what comfort of love! What bowels and mercies! What affectionate care was there one of another! What a holy sympathy in crosses and comforts, weeping with those that wept and rejoicing with those that rejoiced!

6 But who is there left among you that saw these churches in their first glory and how do you see them now? Are they not in your eyes in comparison thereof as nothing? "How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed!" [Lam. 4:1]. Is not the temper, complexion, and countenance of the churches strangely altered? Doth not a careless, remiss, flat, dry, cold, dead frame of spirit grow in upon us secretly, strongly, prodigiously? . . . Pride, contention, worldliness, covetousness, luxury, drunkenness, and uncleanness break in like a flood upon us and good men grow cold in their love to God and to one another. If a man be cold in his bed let them lay on the more clothes that he may get heat; but we are like to David in his old age: "They covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat" (1 Kings 1:1) . . .

7 Now let me freely deliberate with you what may be the causes and grounds of such decays and languishings in our affections to, and estimations of, that which we came into the wilderness to enjoy . . . Surely it is not for want of fullness in the Spirit of God that he withhold comforts and blessings from any; neither doth he delight in threatenings and judgments, but his words both promise and perform that which is good and comfortable to them that walk uprightly . . . What then is the cause of our coolings, faintings, and languishings? The grand and principal cause is our unbelief. We believe not the grace and power of God in Christ. Where is that lively exercise of faith which ought to be in our attendance upon the Lord in his holy ordinances? Christ came to Nazareth with his heart full of love and compassion and his hands full of blessings to bestow upon his old acquaintance and neighbors among whom he had been brought up; but their unbelief restrained his tender mercies and bound his omnipotent hands, that he could not do any great or illustrious miracle amongst them . . .

8 But though unbelief be the principal yet it is not the sole cause of our decays and languishings; inordinate worldly cares, predominant lusts, and ma-

lignant passions and distempers stiffe and choke the Word and quench our affections to the kingdom of God (Luke 8:14) . . . Some splir upon the rock of affected ostentation of singular piety and holiness and others are drawn into the whirlpool and perish in the gulf of sensuality and luxury . . .

9 Use II. Of exhortation, to excite and stir us all up to attend and prosecute our errand into the wilderness. To what purpose came we into this place and what expectation drew us hither? Surely not the expectation of ludicrous levity. We came not hither to see "a reed shaken with the wind." Then let not us be reeds—light, empty, vain, hollow-heared professors, shaken with every wind of temptation—but solid, serious, and sober Christians, constant and steadfast in the profession and practice of the truth, "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified" [Isa. 61:3], holding fast the profession of our faith without wavering . . .

10 But to what purpose came we into the wilderness and what expectation drew us hither? Not the expectation of courtly pomp and delicacy. We came not hither to see men clothed like courtiers. The affectation of courtly pomp and gallantry is very unsuitable in a wilderness . . .

11 To what purpose then came we into the wilderness and what expectation drew us hither? Was it not the expectation of the pure and faithful dispensation of the Gospel and kingdom of God? The times were such that we could not enjoy it in our own land, and therefore having obtained liberty and a gracious patent from our Sovereign, we left our country, kindred, and fathers' houses, and came into these wild woods and deserts where the Lord hath planted us and made us "dwell in a place of our own, that we might move no more, and that the children of wickedness might not afflict us any more" (11 Sam. 7:10). What is it that distinguisheth New England from other colonies and plantations in America? Not our transportation over the Atlantic Ocean, but the ministry of God's faithful prophets and the fruition of his holy ordinances . . .

12 The hardships, difficulties, and sufferings which you have exposed yourselves unto that you might dwell in the house of the Lord and leave your little ones under the shadow of the wings of the God of Israel, have not been few nor small. And shall we now withdraw ourselves and our little ones from under those healing wings and lose that full reward which the Lord hath in his heart and hand to bestow upon us? . . . And do we now repent of our choice and prefer the honors, pleasures, and profits of the world before it? . . .

13 How sadly hath the Lord testified against us because of our loss of our first love and our remissness and negligence in his work! Why hath the Lord smitten us with blasting and mildew now seven years together, super-adding sometimes severe drought, sometimes great tempests, floods, and sweeping

rains that leave no food behind them? Is it not because the Lord's house lyeth waste, temple-work in our hearts, families, churches is shamefully neglected? What should I make mention of signs in the heavens and in the earth—blazing stars, earthquakes, dreadful thunders and lightning, fearful burnings? What meaneth the heat of his great anger in calling home so many of his ambassadors? In plucking such burning and shining lights out of the candlesticks; the principal stakes out of our hedges; the cornerstones out of our walls? . . . Is it not a sign that God is making a way for his wrath when he removes his chosen out of the gap? Doth he not threaten us with a famine of the Word, the scattering of the flock, the breaking of the candlesticks, and the turning of the songs of the temple into howlings?

14 It is high time for us to "remember whence we are fallen, and repent, and do our first works" [Rev. 2:5]. Wherefore let us "lift up the hands that hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees; And make straight paths for our feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed" (Heb. 12:12, 13) . . .

15 "Alas, we are feeble and impotent; our hands are withered and our strength dried up . . . alas, our bruise is incurable and our wound grievous; there is none to repair the breach, there is no healing medicine."

16 The Lord Jesus, the great Physician of Israel, hath undertaken the cure. "I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the Lord" (Jer. 30:17). No case is to be accounted desperate or incurable which Christ takes in hand . . . When Christ came to Lazarus his grave and bade them take away the stone, "Martha saith, Lord, by this time he sinketh: for he hath been dead four days." But Christ answereth, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God?" (John 11:39, 40). Let us give glory to God by believing his Word and we shall have real and experimental manifestations of his glory for our good and comfort.

17 "But alas, our hearts are sadly prejudiced against the means and instruments by which we might expect that Christ should cure and heal us." . . .

18 "But alas, the times are difficult and perilous; the wind is stormy and the sea tempestuous; the vessel heaves and sets and tumbles up and down in the rough and boisterous waters and is in danger to be swallowed up."

19 Well, remember that "the Lord sitteth upon the flood; yea, the Lord sitteth King forever" (Psal. 29:10) . . . "He stilleth the noise of the seas, the noise of their waves, and the tumult of the people" (Psal. 65:7) . . . Yea he can enable his people to tread and walk upon the waters. To sail and swim in the waters is an easy matter, but to walk upon the waters as upon a pavement is an act of wonder. Peter at Christ's call "came down out of the ship, and walked on the water, to go to Jesus" (Matt. 14:29), and as long as his faith held, it upheld him from sinking; when his faith failed his body sunk, but he "cried to the Lord, and he stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

[...]