

"THY WORD'S A WONDROUS PLOUGH"

How to get from here (body experience) to there (soul experience)

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Yesterday being our church's first worship in its third century, we sang a hymn (gotten from the Congregational Historical Society) written in the century of our church's birth & by a shaper of our church tradition, **Cotton Mather**, on whom I'd provided some basic information for the church bulletin. Let's look at the hymn first; then I'll finish the page with some remarks on the hymnist.

My heart, how very **hard** it's grown, **thickened** and **stiffened clay** / Daily trod by the wicked one. / Of sin the **beaten way**. (2) An heart wherein **compacted weeds** / Of diverse lusts abound, / No entrance for the heavenly seeds / Falling on such a **ground**! (3) O my almighty Saviour, come! / Thy word's a wondrous **plow** [spelled "plough" in the hymn's title, "Singing at the Plough"]. / And let thy spirit drive it home; / This heart, oh break it so! (4) Lord, let my broken heart receive / Thy truth with faith and love: / May it a just reception give / To what falls from above. (5) Will my God **plough** upon a **rock**? / Change thou the **soil**, my Lord! / My heart, once by thy **ploughshare** broke, / Will entertain thy word.

This we sang to what Mather probably wrote it for: Cambridge CM, 1677. Try almost any other CM tune!

1 A single body-experience metaphor is sustained throughout with a simplicity none in the 1727 congregation for whom the hymn was written could miss: no New Englanders of that time were any distance from plows (as is true today: we are in the Blizzard of '96!). In the hymn, note that **boldface** (14x) indicates the body-experience, physical, earth words.

2 Studying those 14 earth-words, what picture do you get of plowing in New England in 1727? Not prime farmland! Clayey, cloying the plowshare if wet & hardpan if dry. Foot-hoof-wheel beaten to hardness. Weed-matted. Above all, rocky, denting if not breaking the plowshare, racking the rig, slowing the job for the removal of the larger rocks (often requiring getting oxen for rocks the horses--& earlier, before horses, cattle--couldn't budge).

3 So why all that sweat? To get into the ground what I've underlined in the hymn: "seeds," "what falls" from the sower's hand "above" (literally, then also figuratively: God is the sweating plowman-sower, by his spirit overcoming our resistance so he can plant in us the seed of his word).

4 In soul experience, it's the devil, "the wicked one," who beats our hearts to a hard surface in an effort to discourage Plowman God. For those old Puritans, demonic forces were as powerful & as personal as in the NT. Yet in New England there were almost no witch trials & no burnings, while at the same time in Europe "thousands [were] hanged or more often burned" (135, Edwin S. Gaustad's A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA, vol.1, Eerd./82). Cotton Mather (1663-1728) was asked at age 29 to write an account of a Salem witch trial, which he did with no relish, & soon persuaded the government to stop the persecution, using his weight as (138) "the colony's leading theologian." In a 31 May 1692 letter, he said that in failing to use rational analysis & reasonable suspicion, "a door may be thereby opened for the devils": the devils infesting the government, not the accused! He was not so irrational as to overbelieve or underbelieve in the demonic. A false accusation can kill as truly as a sword or a keg of gunpowder (but "who gives fire" to the gunpowder?). Furthermore, may not capital punishment be excessive? Perhaps some lesser sentence will do--"only scourged with lesser punishments, and also put upon some solemn, open, public, and explicit renunciation of the devil" (140; both documents, 135-140).

5 The "compacted weeds" are "lusts": those Puritans were lusty (life-loving) & anti-lusts (runaway passions). The protection against the latter was not negative (asceticism) but the implantation & cultivation of God's seed-word: they believed in education, centering in the Bible & motivating work, civic responsibility, & lawful government ("central elements of puritan preaching since the beginning" [Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, Yale/72/73, 164])...Stanza 4 of our hymn: truth, faith, love....Mather's MAGNALIA CHRISTI AMER-

ICANA (1702, just $\frac{1}{4}$ c. before our hymn) is, while in form a history of "Christ's Great Works in America," in force also religious guidance of the American people as to how to live in light of the new thing God is doing with them in America.

6 The hymn is deeply pietistic, devotional; but Mather's mind was not individualistic: individualism is a degenerate product of pietism. For Mather, God's word-plow was always for the person-in-community, neither end of this hyphenate overbalancing the other. Nor in him did faith subvert reason or reason, faith: he lost face with the superpious when he supported inoculations for smallpox, a disease the superpious saw as a not-to-be-interfered with expression of God's wrath (as some fundamentalists today view AIDS). But at the time of his death, both balances were being lost: "the national covenant, once a mainstay of Puritan thought, was yielding to moralistic individualism" (Ahlstrom.280). But only six years after his death, in 1734 the spiritual resurgence we call the Great Awakening began with Jonathan Edwards, whom many scholars consider the most creative theologian in American history. But it was no novelty: "Puritanism was itself, by expressed intention, a vast and extended revival movement" (Ahlstrom.281).

7 As for the metaphoring of body/soul experiences, Mather's hymn is in the style of his pastor-contemporary Edward Taylor (d. the year after Mather), a master of common-life metaphor (spider web, spinningwheel, et al). All in the mold of Jesus' "Consider the lilies...."

8 What I find most important in Mather is his attempt to **hold together** the warm, personal relationship with God (as in this hymn) with the cool, Enlightenment increasing stream of influence in America. The balance was lost to the latter in (eg) Jn. Adams, Benj. Franklin, Thos. Jefferson. Mather did not yield to the engulfing deism with its far off, virtually impersonal deity--the secularism of his day. He was forward-looking, liberal (eg, helping ordain a Baptist!), but always faithful to the Puritan evangelical tradition & witness. As his hymn ends, "My heart...will entertain thy word." A man after my own heart.

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