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Cornerstones, Cannons, and Covenants:

the Puritan Clergy as Cultural Guardians



by Helen Petter Westra

The Puritan Calvinists who settled the New World, and especially their leaders, have often been portrayed as dour, sullen, and fanatical souls who excelled primarily in generating gloom and guilt. Oversimplified portraits such as these, however, prevent us from grasping some of the many serviceable insights the Puritan colonists still offer us today. Foolishly joining the questionable sport of Puritan bashing keeps us from appreciating what Leland Ryken's recent study on Puritans (*Worldly*

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Saints) clearly documents as their extraordinarily "zestful approach to life," a vitality fed by the spiritual wellsprings of "prayer, Christian fellowship, meditation, preaching, . . . the Bible, . . . and a theology of personal salvation . . . wedded to an active life . . . of engagement in the world" (221).

As this sturdy, energetic, and almost universally literate group of New England colonists established communities in a strange new world, they were undergirded by a coherent moral vision, a profound concern for the quality of life for future generations, and a deep respect for the home and family within the community. Under strong, educated leadership, they worked to build on a covenantal and cooperative, rather than an individualistic framework; and it is to their credit that they labored tirelessly to prevent their faith from being pressed into the kinds of narrow channels which our virulently secular society reserves for religion today.

Within their growing communities, the Puritan clergy stood as spiritual and cultural guardians, educators in the school of life. The ministers, with their firm theological base and deep piety, were particularly designated to nurture a morally and socially responsible laity. Fundamental to the ministers' work was belief in the sovereignty of God, the divinity of Christ, the Holy Spirit's power to convert and sanctify lives, the infallibility of the Bible, and the dark reality of sin within every heart and life. It was especially the work of the pastors in their daily "care for souls" to set and polish the essential cornerstones upon which successive generations could build and maintain God-glorifying communities.

Today, centuries removed from these early New Englanders, Christians struggle to challenge secular, materialistic, and atheistic assumptions that have eroded moral and ethical values in our nation and have thrust our country (and particularly our youth) into a wrenching crisis of authority. The evidence is everywhere—AIDS, drugs, crack cocaine babies, child and spouse abuse, pornography, failed marriages, huge numbers of out-of-wedlock births, rootlessness, abortion, homelessness, and single-parent families (1 out of every 4) in epidemic proportions. In these unsettling times, we do well to re-examine the cornerstones the Puritan clergy set as elementary to Christian faith and practice; to recall the pointed warnings they issued as keepers of heaven's cannons; and to review the social and familial patterns they urged their communities to uphold.

The Puritans understood that right living requires faith *and* action, word *and* deed, or as Jonathan Edwards described it, seeing life through "the eyes of the souls." Accepting the sinfulness of human nature as an indisputable fact, they recognized "the need for the watchful eye of skillful guides" (Edwards, "Unpublished Letter," 108), a learned and pious leadership to oversee and teach them. These guides and educators, in large part the ministers of the gospel, poured their energies into the opportunities they viewed as a God-given "errand into the world,"—the mandate to be an example, "a city set on a hill," as they structured a society upon biblical values and a covenanting community in which the members individually and collectively were committed to God and to each other's welfare.

Puritan Emphasis On Education

From the beginning, the Puritans saw the need to establish schools and colleges as part of the community's structure and mandate. Stemming from the Puritans' great respect for literacy and learning, the American educational enterprise at its inception was unabashedly Christian. All of the first colleges in America were founded by churches and headed by members of the clergy, and these institutions' primary purpose was to encourage and perpetuate Christian virtues and wisdom, and to equip minds and hearts with the "gifts and graces" needed to withstand and counter evil—from within and from without.

The colonists, with strong encouragement and support from the clergy, likewise instituted a system of elementary schools which were overtly Christian. The General Court of Massachusetts, for example, in defining the purpose of education, did not mince words: education and especially teaching children to read will serve to fight the old deluder Satan whose "chief project" is to keep people from the knowledge of God and his word (Morgan 88). The New England clergy indeed vigorously promoted educational institutions, but what was equally important was the central role New England parish ministers themselves played both formally and informally as leading educators in their communities.

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Pastor as Teacher

The pastor's educational influence in the social history of early America was enormous. In New England, the congregational minister, chosen by a people to "care for its souls," was usually by virtue of study and training, the most learned person in a town. No other individual had as regular, lengthy, or widespread access to the public ear—through Sunday sermons; sermons for fast days, funerals, and other special events, as well as regular weekday lectures and teachings; and through catechism classes. The minister thus had a weighty educational and social as well as religious task; few others had an office of such scope or an influence so comprehensive.

The minister as teacher was keeper and purveyor of the community's highest values. His messages served to enforce shared community standards of order, decency, civility, and morality as well as the standards of doctrinal orthodoxy. In *The Search for Christian America* George Marsden suggests, "God's law was the schoolmaster for New England, and New England to a large extent was the schoolmaster for America" (40). I would add that the New England congregational pastor was to a large extent the schoolmaster for the home and the family.

Particularly significant in illuminating the New England colonial pastor's role as cultural guardian and teacher are a group of Jonathan Edwards' unpublished sermons, messages he delivered especially to young people and their parents during the time of the Great Awakening (the 1730s and 1740s). These manuscript lectures and sermons; untranscribed and relatively unknown, offer an intriguing complement and contrast to his rousing hell-fire-and-brimstone sermons such as the regularly-anthologized "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards, of course, as America's most impressive eighteenth-century evangelical preacher and one of the last great Puritan theologians, serves well as a window into Puritan views on the minister as educator. Indeed, beyond his considerable importance in American literature and history, Edwards' works continue to be studied in departments of theology and philosophy as the product of one of America's most extraordinarily powerful minds, the man who almost single-handedly, says Bruce Kuklick, "gave rise to the most sustained, systematic, and creative intellectual tradition produced in this country" (*Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, 257). It is Edwards' manuscript sermons, claims Nathan Hatch, which are of all his many works "the most revealing of his innermost thought" (9). Accordingly, the messages Edwards presented expressly to parents and children during the 1730s and 1740s can be appreciated not only for their emphasis on biblical doctrines or revival but for their vigorous presentations of his deeply-held principles bolstering proper respect and authority in the family; civility, decorum, and social harmony in the community; and of course, generational continuity and fidelity in the church and the service of Christ.

Some brief background will be helpful on these manuscripts to which I give the label of "domestic" or "familial" messages. Housed at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, they are among Edwards' approximately 1200 collected manuscript sermons presently being transcribed and prepared for publication as part of the Yale project on Edwards' *Works*. Each sermon is identified and filed according to the text upon which it is based. As these sermons appear in future volumes, they will no doubt greatly enlarge our view of Edwards and offer valuable supplements to the relatively few of Edwards' sermons (approximately 118 or about 10

percent of his total sermon corpus) published during the last 250 years.

The lectures and messages to children and to parents (these include at least 30 sermons I've identified as such) are pointed examples of Edwards' concern for the well-being of the family as "a type and cornerstone of the communion of the saints" and the fundamental social "commonwealth" in the development of strong churches and communities. As these messages stress the responsibility that members of family and community have for each other, they underscore essential principles of authority and respect; they urge familial and communal solidarity, devotion, and love for one another; and they warn against disorderly or subversive behavior. In light of our contemporary climate for childrearing, it is interesting to note the behaviors he identifies as subversive.

Cornerstones

In the Community

Edwards' children's messages—variously inscribed "To the children at a private meeting," "Lecture to young people," or "To the children" etc. are calculated to undergird and deepen the lessons in piety and morality which he insists should be taught by responsible parents in the home. The minister here clearly exercises his official role as educator seeking to perpetuate behavior, attitudes, and norms he believes fundamental to family welfare and community stability. In these children's sermons, more than any others, we see Edwards appealing with great care and urgency to the youngest, most impressionable "souls in his care." If Christ's gracious work in the souls of children is their only hope for eternal life, then pastors must emulate the writer of Galatians 4:18 who said, "My little children, . . . I travail in birth . . . until Christ be formed in you." For these tender souls to grow and flourish in God's grace, they must come to God and belong to God. These members of Christ's—and the pastor's—flock whose lives are most tender, most malleable, are seen in terms of a divine economy: "The earlier persons begin [in their love to God], the more of their lives are given to God" [sermon on Psalm 71:5], the more of their lives will be productive and God-glorifying, and the more they will have "opportunity to be eminent in holiness." In his interleaved Bible, Edwards notes that children, "if they are virtuous and wise, may

be such great blessing & of so great importance in the family that they may be as cornerstones in the house" [note on Psalm 144:12]. On the contrary, the longer children remain detached from God, the more they and the community will have to regret.

In a 1741 message delivered to Northampton children following the unexpected death of Billy Sheldon, an exemplary Christian boy in the community, Jonathan Edwards elaborates on images of youth. Youth is a flower which is "the most beautiful pleasant and fragrant part of the plant—that is most commonly put forth in the spring of the year, the pleasantest part of the year . . . and it is also the most promising part of the plant—promising fruit This is a spiritual emblem of a young person in the bloom of life with . . . promising qualifications . . . and agreeableness to those that are round about and giving hope of much fruit hereafter to be brought forth of much Serviceableness in the world" [sermon on Job 14:2]. Edwards presents the life of young Billy as one which had already borne fruit; and so we see that perhaps not the least of that fruit is the example he becomes in Edwards' message. Indeed, seven years later (in February 1748), Edwards uses this sermon again, with some additions and revisions, as the funeral sermon for his own teenage daughter Jerusha.

These sermons, with their clear references to the deaths of Christian youth in the bloom of their lives, are poignant reminders of the reasons why colonial pastors felt so compelled to urge young people to turn to God and to live productive, serviceable, lovely, and pleasant lives in the sight of God. Children represented sources of great joy and hope for the community. But their lives were often severely threatened. In colonial times, children especially were menaced by illnesses or epidemics—smallpox, croup, influenza, dysentery—that might sweep across a region. When major outbreaks of diphtheria and scarlet fever moved through New England in 1735, a broadside poster proclaiming a public fast day in Massachusetts Bay colony described the "malignant and mortal distemper, by which great numbers, especially of the younger people, have been removed by death" (John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America*, 116). Such words only hint at the *overwhelming* losses some towns experienced—such as the parish of Hampton Falls, in which "twenty families buried all their children"

during the 1735 diphtheria epidemic or the town of Haverhill which in a period of two months in 1736 lost "more than one half of the children under 15 years of age" (118).

For the New England congregational pastor such untimely deaths raised the spectre of children, whose souls were under his care, dying in an unconverted state. Youth was a time of great vulnerability—threatened not only by epidemic outbreaks, but also by household accidents, childhood illnesses, or by evil companions and temptations. Therefore, religious and familial education which aimed to awaken and protect the child's soul was of greatest importance.

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Pastor as Heaven's Cannon

Within the Puritan social, ecclesiastical, and educational framework, however, the pastor in his capacity as teacher did more than shape and polish cornerstones for the family and Christ's kingdom. Equally important was his role as a cannon—a thundering "voice of God" [sermon on Micah 6:9] which warns as well as protects. Edwards' references to the "thundering of heaven's cannon" are of course a military metaphor, for those who speak unflinchingly in God's name can be viewed as doing battle against the powers of evil. As a cannon, the minister's messages served to alert the people of God, to send out alarms when the community and its individual members seemed threatened by external circumstances or by apathy and hardness of heart. Although God alone converts souls through his saving grace, says Edwards, he "sends forth his ministers to call [to children] & to teach 'em." The cannon's voice thus helps to assure that the standards of the Christian life and faith and community are held high.

In the December 1742 message on Micah 6:9 to community children following the night of a tragic fire which destroyed John Lyman's Northampton house and children in it, Edwards enlarges on "the voice of the Lord [that] cried to this town last night." Edwards uses the conflagration and the ser-

mon as "a great loud voice" to awaken people to the unexpected dangers surrounding them. Although the pastor offers genuine comfort to the grieving parents—"I believe your children are gone to eternal life"—he also warns the survivors and especially children to think of the "need to be prepared" for death and to consider "the day of judgement and the manner in which some will be found unprepared."

Although Edwards speaks with great compassion, on the one hand, to families deeply grieving the loss of a child, he does not hesitate, on the other hand, to use a cannon's thunder to "endeavor to frighten persons away from hell [if] they stand upon its brink." Elsewhere, in a rhetorical question, he offers a rationale for such warnings as he asks: "Is it not a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire?" ("Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," *Works*, Hickman edition, II, 226). However, in the sermon on Micah 6:9, he also claims that if children persistently, willfully ignore the cannon's warnings and walk deliberately into enemy territory or into the fire, they (no less than adults) will suffer the consequences. In another sermon to young people, Edwards comments thus: "If . . . death comes upon you and finds you unprepared through your neglect . . . , it will be your own fault. It will be your own foolish[ness]" because "God has not been [lacking] in giving you warnings" [sermon on Job 14:2]. Clearly, the minister's messages are part of those warnings.

Sometimes Edwards presents the warnings as a series of questions to echo in the ears of his young audience: "Is there not a . . . number of [you] young men and young women that now sit in this house that have no reason to think that you are prepared? [If you become sick suddenly,] where will you go when your exhausted body grows cold and death takes hold? What will you do with death? Where will you look for comfort? What will you do for your poor soul [leaving the body]? How will you go into the Eternal world? How will you appear before God? And why will you delay [now]?" [sermon on Job 14:2]. At other times, as in a May 1739 sermon on Proverbs 24:13-14, Edwards urges his young listeners to consider the pleasantness and loveliness of true beauty. Genuine beauty is like a "constant shining sun" for it is the grace of God's spirit and "the lovely image of God," not mere physical beauty or outer adornment which will pass quickly like "a blaze of crackling thorns."

Because life in the colonies (much as life today) was precarious, the minister's task of developing cornerstones for Christ's kingdom here and in eternity is an urgent one. Edwards speaks vigorously against attitudes and actions which will endanger a young person's movement toward gracious Christian living. He sounds alarms against disobeying one's parents, neglecting family devotions and prayers, against "gross and lascivious acts," "habits of vanity," "tavern haunting," cruel gossip, "lewd jesting and filthy songs," disrespecting authority—all activities which, he assures his young listeners, will offer "no comfort on a death bed."

With remarkable candor, he even uses one of his sermons [Job 14:2] to address the temptation of "bundling," a way of courting under the bed quilts which was allowed in some New England homes to provide privacy and warmth to a young couple otherwise limited to a crowded kitchen or a cold parlor. Jonathan Edwards lectures against "bundling," this trend which he defines as "the different sexes lying on beds together." Such courting activities, says Edwards, will lead to "taking such liberties as naturally tend to stir up lusts" and to the "shameful custom of fondling woman's breasts" and to exciting "lustful desires," "unclean imaginations," not to mention possible consequences some months later.

Such ministerial rumbling of "heaven's cannons" is necessary, Edwards believes, because God holds children and youth accountable for their behavior and for deliberate violations of his moral laws. Because sin is as smoke in God's nostrils, "God hates sin . . . it is loathsome to him and . . . their being children don't excuse them" [sermon on II Kings 2:23]. In this lecture labeled "To the children at a private meeting Feb 1741" (the same month that Billy Sheldon died), Edwards warns that in an unredeemed state, children who defy God's commandments are no less culpable than unregenerate adults. Children, he reminds the youngsters, "are guilty of a great deal of sin." Their "hearts are naturally full of sin," full of selfishness and quarrelsomeness, and their mouths are prone to filthy talk—a habit which in another sermon [on Ephesians 4:29] he graphically compares to taking "dead rotten carcasses full of crawling worms into their mouths." But as in his other messages to children, Edwards here also expresses his great hope that

children will give the first part of their lives to God, for "all of you have precious souls." Because each person has a "never-dying soul," he says, all behavior has not only temporal but eternal consequences. In the divine scheme, children who give over their lives to God bring great joy to their own lives, to their parents, the church, the community, and above all and forever to God.

Messages to Parents

Edwards not only spoke candidly to *children*. Among his manuscript messages and lectures are those that address *parents* on their familial responsibilities. A 1744-45 lecture develops the following doctrine: "The religious education of children is one of the principal means of grace that God has appointed . . ." [lecture on Psalm 78:5-7]. In dwelling on the spiritual welfare of children, Edwards gives parents numerous reminders that death is an inevitable part of the human condition, and for this reason, full attention to the "good of the souls of your children" is one of the most important tasks that any parent, pastor, or community can take up. Then with the eye of an experienced observer, he pictures how fragile life can be.

Death can take a child in a hundred ways that parents, no matter how solicitous, can not prevent. He details some of the ways—"a small sore or tiny [cut] on a finger," a "very little thing [which] after[ward] proves an occasion of what we call accidental death"—"a little break in the skin . . . or sometimes only the bite of a small insect no bigger than a louse or flea . . . or sometimes a pin [prick] . . . [Any of these things] shall be sufficient to throw all the [body] into terrible agonies and struggles and [then] to take away life notwithstanding the utmost [parents, physicians, friends] themselves can do." Three years later Edwards, as a grieving father himself, would describe the death of Jerusha, his "own dear child" who expired "in the very flower of youth," who "was the sabbath before last here at meeting without any sensible signs of approaching death—suddenly cut down Her place in the-house of God you now see empty. This is a remarkable instance of human frailty and the great uncertainty of life . . ." [February 21, 1748, sermon on Job 14:2]. In this sermon, we see Edwards forcefully arguing the importance of the spiritual nurture, time, and care which parents should "take to lay up for [children] that they may

be provided for [now and] hereafter."

Covenant Promises

Certainly, then, for the Puritan pastor and community, "the religious education" of children becomes a means to prevent untimely death from having the *final* or *spiritual* victory over their offspring. But "religious education" is also a most important means of holding to covenantal promises, of assuring the spiritual health of the Christian family and the prosperity of God's people from generation to generation.

In a sermon on Joshua 24:15 and a number of others like it directed to parents, Edwards presents

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the duties of convenanting parents as three-fold: to teach by patient and thorough *instruction*, by godly and consistent *example*, and by just and firm *government*. Besides teaching their children to pray, read the Bible, sing praises to God, and to love and fear their Creator, mothers and fathers must instruct their children in "proper values" and "moral interpretation" [sermon on Psalm 78:5-7] and "good manners which indeed is one branch of religion presented in the holy script" [the Joshua 24:15 sermon cites many texts to support this]. Further, as a basic social and ecclesiastical unit, parents must govern their families justly and uprightly and teach respect for authority, not only for the good of the child and the family but also for the good of the church and the community of which they are part.

In discussing "family education," Edwards indicates that parents in the family, like ministers in the church, "are to rule for God," for families are "the first kind of societies that God instituted for the benefit of mankind." He further says that because "a family society is the foundation to all human society, so . . . in families . . . a foundation [must be] laid for future benefits and common use." Because "a Christian family is as it were a little church and commonwealth," says Edwards to parents, "God's eyes are on you" in the vital role of preparing young lives for the movement of God's word and the Holy Spirit upon their souls. Parental responsibility is enormously consequential, for "the ruin of all things in human society generally begins

in the neglect of that resolution in . . . families” [lecture on Joshua 24:15 (1)].

As Edwards asserts in the above quarterly lecture to parents, there is “more within [parental] reach and under [parental] power than any other society . . . under the power of its ruler.” Such power, lovingly and conscientiously exercised, has widespread effects as to the present well-being of the family and God’s blessing on future generations. For this reason, parents faithful in their familial and covenantal promises will travail over the souls of their children, never forgetting that the earlier a child comes to know and belong to God, the more that child can give to God and the community.

From the pen of one of Edwards’ grandsons, we catch an intimate glimpse of parental rule in Jonathan Edwards’ own household, particularly as it was administered by the hand of his wife Sarah:

She had an excellent way of governing her children: she knew how to make them regard and obey her cheerfully, without loud angry words, much less heavy blows. She seldom punished them, and in speaking to them, used gentle and pleasant words. If any correction was necessary, she did not administer it in a passion; and when she had occasion to reprove and rebuke, she would do it with few words, without warmth [anger] or noise; and with all calmness and gentleness of mind. In her directions and reproof in matters of importance, she would address herself to the reason of her children, that they might not only know her inclination and will, but at the same time be convinced of the reasonableness of it. She had need to speak but once; she was cheerfully obeyed . . . Her system of discipline was begun at a very early age . . . to resist the first, as well as every subsequent exhibition of temper or disobedience in the child, . . . wisely reflecting that until a child will obey his parents, he can never be brought to obey God. (Greven 32-33)

In a “familial” sermon on Ps. 71:15, Jonathan Edwards expands richly on the preciousness of the soul which must be brought to know and obey God, a soul “precious because tis a soul capable of exceeding happiness and inexplicable misery and because it is an . . . immortal soul . . . It is a never-dying soul . . . It will remain forever and ever . . . Your soul is precious because tis accountable to God.” It is precious “because of the unspeakable happiness it will enjoy if it is converted.

But it is in great and unspeakable danger if it goes to the grave in an unconverted state.”

Pastor as Covenanting Parent And Friend

The pleasantness and sweetness of God’s grace in the lives of young people is the primary theme of a Proverbs 24:13-14 sermon which Edwards first delivered in Northampton March 1734 and preached many times and places thereafter (across the top of the sermon are listed the towns of Scantick, Canaan, Hadley, Stockbridge, York, Westfield, East Hadley). The sermon’s doctrine reads: “The directest way that young people can take to spend their youth pleasantly is to walk in the ways of piety and virtue.”

This is also the theme of a 1744 quarterly lecture on Psalm 144:2 in which Edwards stresses that the “spiritual prosperity of a people as appearing very much in the piety of their youth” and also that “the flourishing of religion among a people usually begins with the young people” for “youth is the flower of life and in many accounts the best part of it and [therefore] should be [given] to God.” This sermon rounds off with a strong appeal to his young audience to join the church as part of a faithful and covenanting people. He says simply and pastorally, “Let me beseech you for the sake of the interest and honor of religion, for the sake of the town and prosperity of the town, for the sake of the comfort of your parents and friends, and for God’s sake and [for] Christ’s sake, and for your own sake, to come to a full determination to depart from all the ways of youthful vanity, all . . . sinful indulgences of carnal appetites, all worldly and [tempting] company, all lewd ways of using your tongue, all indulgence of a vain [sort] . . . Walk with God and a heart devoted to God and a life given to Christ . . .” And finally, in a voice which has much more of the sound of a loving teacher, friend, and spiritual parent than of a cannon rumbling, Edwards says, “And as I desire your good, your happiness in this and in that which is to come and as God has committed the care of your souls to me, I beseech you to hearken to me.”

It is to Edwards’ credit that during these years of the Great Awakening, there were, as one of his biographers notes, appreciable changes in the community: “more decency in demeanor and teachableness of spirit . . . among the youth, and parents

showed . . . more care for the moral and spiritual good of their children" (Joseph Tracy 8).

But we must also add that in the years following the Great Awakening as the Northampton parish was influenced increasingly by the spirits of the age—by virulent seeds of individualism, secularism, capitalism, and resistance to strong spiritual direction—parish members found Edwards' teaching and preaching less and less to their satisfaction.

Painfully aware of these tensions and deeply concerned, Edwards redoubled his efforts to touch the hearts of parents and children, not only for their own sakes but for the sake of the church and the community. The breaking of commitments and covenants among Northampton church members, who were more interested in their own material status and prosperity than in the spiritual welfare of the community and who were drawn by the appeal of enlightenment ideas and a gospel of self-achievement and self-saving, eventually forced Edwards to leave Northampton and take a small mission station in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Here he taught young Indian children, preached to a fledging church, and wrote some of his greatest theological and philosophical works before going to Princeton College in 1758 as its president for the last months of his life.

In exploring these "familial" manuscripts of one of America's great evangelical preachers, we find these particular words, after centuries of silence, again instructing us in the importance of the commitment of God's people to each other and their responsibility to be beacon lights and cornerstones in the world. Edwards' messages remind us that life is fundamentally religious and the way we live in the present has profound consequence for eternity.

Edwards never hesitated to declare that divine and supernatural wisdom is the only true and dependable light by which to examine human and temporal wisdom. Seeing with the eyes of his soul, he beheld and asserted truths about family, community, and society that no strong institution or nation can ignore without demoralizing effects. Today's climate of religious apathy and moral turpitude is often a chilly one for souls. For true warmth, for heat as well as light, we need parents and families, teachers and leaders with spiritual and moral courage, who understand that communities as well as individuals have souls and are inextricably bound together.

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