Re-creating Zeal in
Donne’s “The First Sermon after Our Dispersion, by the Sickness”

Catherine I. Cox

... the plague to a righteous man is as El[i]jahs charriot which lifted him to heauen.¹

The time is January 15, 1625² and the place the Church of St. Dunstan-in-the-West, London. One of the city’s most devastating outbreaks of bubonic plague since the disease’s first entry into the British Isles in 1348 has recently subsided,³ and the congregation has gathered --after months of separation, fear, and uncertainty--to hear the words of their parish minister, Dr. John Donne, the distinguished Dean of St. Paul’s. The moment must have been exceedingly sad and anxious, for many worshippers had endured the deaths of family, friends, and servants. Thirty-six thousand Londoners, roughly one fifth of the population, had died of disease that year. Many worshippers would also have suffered deep financial losses due to the closing of London shops, markets, and courts, and the public’s fear of crowds. Intensifying this sense of loss, the kingdom had faced the death of James I, their monarch of twenty-two years, the preceding spring. Political and religious tensions were running high, for the accession of Charles I and his young Catholic bride, the French princess Henrietta Maria--along with the Privy Council’s suspension of recusancy laws, which was part of the marriage settlement--had stimulated fears of a Catholic resurgence in the country. The plague that followed hard upon Charles’s accession heightened these concerns, for as Derek Hirst explains, “the standard protestant response to plague was to regard it as divine judgment for backsliding. The council’s cessation of the prosecution of Catholics seemed to threaten the lives of all” (139).⁴ Responding to this climate of loss and anxiety, Donne stands in the pulpit of St. Dunstan’s prepared to deliver a sermon that will transform sickness into healing, the heat of tribulation into a powerful and loving zeal.

Like his Protestant contemporaries, Donne believed that God had sent the plague to warn his people against sinning and to renew their zeal.

EIRC 35.2 (Winter 2009): 150-171
for his Word. But whereas most English ministers and religious writers emphasized the fear of God’s destructive power, Donne appealed to his parishioners to trust in God’s promise of enduring love. By emphasizing love over wrath in his conception of God’s scourge and of Christian zeal, Donne expressed his yearning for unity, a habit of mind that John Carey argues developed from Donne’s numerous experiences of isolation. Now, following his seclusion in Chelsea during the London pestilence, a separation that would have intensified his desire for community, Donne forges a more compassionate and empowering concept of zeal than he has formerly articulated, one that strengthens the Church of England’s message of via media by expressing zeal’s essence as deep and fervent love. For Donne, the plague has become a crucible of love, for it strips away all human comforts and satisfactions, testing to the very core every Christian’s faith. Though dampened by disease, melancholy and fear, Christian zeal must at length rise like the phoenix from its ashes to protect God’s Church. Donne’s rhetorical aim is to journey spiritually to retrieve the soul’s original relationship with God, reviving, even in the shadow of death, a burning love for true worship. Thus, fired by the crises of plague and political strife, Donne distinguishes his conception of zeal as an impassioned, creative love and seeks, by re-igniting zeal in his own and his parishioners’ hearts to fortify the Church against all divisive and insidious threats.

That Donne would select zeal as the subject of this sermon is not surprising since plague and zeal were often linked in the early modern imagination. Agreeing that plague signified God’s zealous response to a nation’s lukewarm faith, most preachers imitated in their style the heat of plague and the fiery rhetoric of God’s prophets. M. Thomas Hester explains that outbreaks of plague contributed to the apocalyptic fervor of many sermons at the close of the sixteenth century, such as John King’s Lectures Upon Jonah (1597) and Thomas Beard’s Theatre of Gods Judgments (1597), since pestilence alerted the godly that the end of the world was near (“Zeal’ as Satire” 176-77). Thomas Nashe’s Christ’s Tears Over Jerusalem (1593) exemplifies this vehement, prophetic style: “the Sunne... shall enrobe himself in scarlette, and the mayden-Moone... shall haue her crimson cheekes (as they wold burst) round balled out with bloode.” Exhalations from “the clowde-climing slaughter-stack of thy dead carkases” shall “not onlie be culpable of gorging the Earth, but of goring the Heauens with blood” (II: 49). Through corrosive and graphic rhetoric of this kind, Nashe and others attempt to soften “stoney” hearts and thus move their fellow Londoners to weep for their sins. We find in Donne’s January sermon for St. Dunstan’s, however, a