

Irreverent Empire: Anglican Inattention in an Atlantic World¹

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ON a Sunday morning, early in the eighteenth century, Anglican minister James Blair accused male members of his Virginia congregation of attending church “on the purpose that they may feed their lustful Eyes.” Criticizing his hearers for unleashing their “Wanton Desires” through “Undecent, Lascivious Glances, and ogling Gestures,” Blair called on them to keep their “Hearts . . . eagerly intent upon Devotion” so as to “keep out the Wandring both of Eyes and Heart.” James Blair was not the only Virginia minister worried about the “irregular Wandring” of his parishioners’ eyes and minds during weekly services.²

Throughout the eighteenth century, Virginia’s Anglican clerics repeatedly used their sermons to chastise congregations for their “Unattentiveness,” their “Dulness and Absence of Mind,” and their “Car[e]less disrespect” during Sunday services.³ These previously unstudied sermonic reprimands indicate a pervasive inattentiveness in colonial Anglican churches. When coupled with lay descriptions of church inattention, ministerial chastisements reveal patterns of inattentive behavior that connected Virginia Anglicans with coreligionists throughout the British Atlantic. Examining both ministerial and lay accounts of inattentiveness in church, this essay maintains that inattention was integral to Anglican identity in colonial Virginia and to larger conceptions of popular religion that bridged geographic boundaries.

¹The author thanks Jessica Kross, Edward L. Bond, Robert W. Prichard, Valentine J. Belfiglio, Michael Chapman, Aaron Haberman, this journal’s anonymous reviewers, and Kathy Blosser. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the June 2007 conference “Legacies and Promise: 400 Years of Anglican and Episcopal History” and at the Biennial Boston College Conference on the History of Religion in March 2008.

²James Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon on the Mount, Contain’d in the Vth, VIth, and VIIth Chapters of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Explained: And the Practice of it Recommended in divers Sermons and Discourses*, 4 vols. (London: Printed for J. Brotherton and J. Oswald, 1740), II:243. Although almost all of Blair’s Virginia sermons were undated, they date from 1685 (when he began his ministry in the colony) to 1722 (when his sermons were first published in collected form).

³Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon*, IV:317, I:443; Charles Clay, Clay Family Papers (Mss1 C5795 a45), Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va.

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Simply stated, this essay argues that a common culture of inattentive church behavior united disparate peoples in Britain's vast, eighteenth-century Atlantic empire.

As it is used here, inattention refers to a variety of behavioral forms that competed with the prescriptive goals of Sunday services. These behaviors included sleeping, talking or whispering, failing to respond appropriately during readings, offering half-hearted prayers, ogling at neighbors, leaving the service, looking out church windows, or staring blankly into space. Inattention is best described as the inversion of clerical expectations for church behavior. As Richard Allestree explained in his enormously popular devotional text *The Whole Duty of Man*, the church was a "place set apart for [God's] publick worship."⁴ Readily available and widely read in Virginia, Allestree's text reminded readers, "when ever thou enterest the Church, remember that it is the house of God, a place where he is in an especial manner present, and therefore . . . behave thy self with that godly awe and reverence, which belongs to that great Majestie, thou art before."⁵ Allestree cautioned parishioners not to "sleep out the time" in church or to "dispatch business with our neighbours" but to listen attentively to sermons and to "shut out all thoughts of the world."⁶ In contrast, inattentiveness—in all its various forms—constituted a distraction from the didactic goals of Sunday services. Importantly, inattention, as it is described here, should not be conflated with impiety. This essay is solely concerned with *behavioral*

⁴[Richard Allestree], *The Practice of Christian Graces. Or The Whole Duty of Man Laid Down in a Plaine and Familiar Way for the Use of All, but Especially the Meanest Reader* (London: Printed by D. Maxwell for T. Garthwait, 1658), 43.

⁵[Allestree], *The Whole Duty of Man*, 44. First published in 1658, Allestree's *Whole Duty of Man* was continually in print throughout the eighteenth century. Its popularity was so great that it was advertised in the *Virginia Gazette*, achieved a rare Williamsburg imprint in 1746, and was regularly sold in the colony. Richard Beale Davis has argued that, in Virginia households, *The Whole Duty of Man* was second in popularity only to the Bible. Writing a generation before Davis, George K. Smart argued that Allestree's work was "amazingly popular." See Richard Beale Davis, *A Colonial Southern Bookshelf: Reading in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 68; M. Whiting, "Religious Literature in Virginia, 1685–1786: A Preface to a Study in the History of Ideas" (M.A. thesis, Emory University, 1975), 137–139; George K. Smart, "Private Libraries in Colonial Virginia," *American Literature* 10:1 (March 1938): 44–45. See also Kenneth A. Lockridge, *The Diary and Life of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674–1744* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 20–21; Louis B. Wright, "Pious Reading in Colonial Virginia," *The Journal of Southern History* 6:3 (August 1940): 384; Louis B. Wright, "The Purposeful Reading of Our Colonial Ancestors," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 4:2 (June 1937): 101–102; Isabel Rivers, "Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity," in *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Isabel Rivers (New York: Leicester University Press and St. Martin's, 1982), 168, n. 128; Carl E. Garrigus, Jr., "The Reading Habits of Maryland's Planter Gentry, 1718–1747," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 92:1 (Spring 1997): 41.

⁶[Allestree], *The Whole Duty of Man*, 52, 44.

patterns in church, manifested on a transatlantic scale, and does not speculate on the *spiritual* implications of inattention.

Colonial Virginians did not uniformly follow Richard Allestree's prescriptive advice on appropriate church behavior. Throughout the eighteenth century, ministers chastised and cajoled their congregations against the perils of inattention. Occasionally, ministers preached entire sermons encouraging better behavior at church. More often, they included comments on inattentive church behavior in the course of regular Sunday sermons. Importantly, Virginia ministers were in a unique position to observe parochial behavior. From the elevated vantage point of colonial pulpits, they could easily survey their congregations and make inclusive observations on inattention.⁷ Yet, because Virginia sermons have received very little scholarly attention, their vivid descriptions of parochial inattentiveness have remained unstudied.⁸ It should be noted that the surviving corpus of Virginia sermons is relatively limited; only a handful of sizeable collections and a limited number of individual sermons survive.⁹ This essay examines the theme of lay inattention in the largest surviving Anglican sermon collections. These collections include one hundred and seventeen sermons delivered by James Blair to congregations in Henrico and James City counties in the years between 1685 and 1722, forty sermons and partial sermons given by William Douglass to parishioners in Goochland County between 1750 and 1777, and forty-eight sermons and partial sermons given by Charles Clay to his parishes in Albemarle and Chesterfield counties between 1769 and 1786.¹⁰ Together, these collections represent a comfortable majority of the

⁷On colonial pulpits, see Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 133–138.

⁸The only scholarly examination of Virginia's Anglican sermons is Edward L. Bond, ed., *Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia: Sermons and Devotional Writings* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2004). Bond's purpose in this edited collection is to articulate the penitent piety he equates with Virginia Anglicanism. Because his focus is on belief systems and not behavioral patterns, he does not examine inattention as a form of religious response.

⁹For a partial discussion of the sermonic corpus, see Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1583–1763*, 3 vols. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), II:727–743.

¹⁰James Blair was born and educated in Scotland; he immigrated to Virginia in 1685 and became the colony's commissary, or representative of the bishop of London, in 1689. Throughout a colonial career that spanned nearly six decades, Blair was a parish priest, church administrator, founder and first president of the College of William and Mary, member of Virginia's royal council, and acting governor of the colony. Blair's extant sermons were the only Virginia sermons to be published in London (two editions, 1722 and 1740). William Douglass was an Anglican priest in Goochland County, Virginia, from 1750 until 1777. He retired during the American Revolution rather than forswear his ordination vow of allegiance to the monarchy. His extant manuscript sermon collection suggests that he continued to deliver sermons, especially funeral sermons, in several Virginia counties through 1787. Charles Clay was parish priest in St. Anne's Church in Albemarle County from 1769 until 1785 and in Manchester Parish in Chesterfield County from 1785 to 1786. On Blair, see Bond, *Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia*, 171–175; Thad

surviving corpus; they also demonstrate a diversity of theological opinion and geographic location.¹¹ Importantly, the frequency with which these different ministers addressed lay inattention, over a period stretching from 1685 through 1786, suggests that it remained a major theme in Anglican religious culture throughout the eighteenth century.¹²

The study of the established church in Virginia has long been hampered by an extreme paucity of evidence. Aside from sermons, which previous scholars have neglected and not mined for their descriptions of lay behavior, only a handful of elite-written manuscripts describing religious practice are extant.¹³ Consequently, the use of a previously under-utilized evidentiary base—sermons—to illuminate behavioral patterns in colonial Anglican churches is historiographically important. It should be noted, however, that the neglect of sermons and the relative lack of other sources has not hindered previous scholars from crafting narratives descriptive of the church and its role in colonial society. The oldest and most strongly entrenched of these narratives

W. Tate, "James Blair," in *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, ed. John T. Kneebone, J. Jefferson Looney, Brent Tarter, and Sandra Gioia Treadway (Richmond: The Library of Virginia, 1998), 1:539–543; Parke Rouse, Jr., *James Blair of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); Edward L. Bond, "Prologue to a Biography of James Blair," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76:1 (March 2007): 12–28; Edward L. Bond and Joan R. Gunderson, "The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607–2007," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 115:2 (2007): 183–184. On Douglass, see Joan R. Gunderson, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia: A Study in Social Class* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 153, 169, 250. On Clay, see Bond, *Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia*, 559 n. 219; Gunderson, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, 245–246.

¹¹Theologically, the sermons represent a continuum of views from mild latitudinarianism to evangelicalism. Geographically, they were preached in both the Tidewater (Blair) and Piedmont (Douglass and Clay) regions.

¹²It should be noted that Virginia sermons were frequently reused by ministers. Indeed, Charles Clay and William Douglass's surviving manuscript collections frequently note the dates on which they preached and re-preached their sermons. Because both Douglass and Clay were preaching to numerous churches and chapels within their parishes, they regularly repeated sermons. Not all of Douglass's and Clay's manuscript sermons show dates or frequency of delivery. None of Blair's published sermons show frequency of delivery, and only one is dated.

¹³As late as 1978, Richard Beale Davis lamented the general historiographic neglect of southern homiletics. Speaking of sermons, Davis wrote, "Few general, intellectual or religious historians seem aware that such works exist": Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*, II:704. More than twenty years later, Edward Bond became the first scholar to actively utilize Anglican sermons. Importantly, Bond has used sermons to elucidate the personal religious piety of Virginians—something he equates with repentance—and not to describe church behavioral patterns. It should be noted that not all scholars are in agreement about the use of sermons. As recently as 2001, John K. Nelson noted, "Sermons, to be sure, are essential sources for ascertaining the distinctive intellectual and spiritual climate of the eighteenth century, but to rely on them solely, or largely, for characterizing the operative religious faith and practice would, when all is said and done, be profoundly misleading": John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 210.

argues that eighteenth-century Virginia Anglicans were secular worldlings little interested in the things of religion. First articulated by nineteenth-century evangelicals, this declensional model of Virginia Anglicanism portrayed the established church and its ministers as corrupt and ineffective.¹⁴ A recent example of this historiographic school is Rhys Isaac's Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *The Transformation of Virginia*, which conflated the message of the church with gentrified social control. Isaac argued that elite vestrymen used processions, church seating plans, and even violence against dissenters to cement their social hegemony.¹⁵ Importantly, more recent work has questioned this declensional model of Virginia Anglicanism by contending that ministers were dedicated and well trained, that prayer books were plentiful, that churches were regularly built and adequately maintained, and that Anglican spirituality transcended social control.¹⁶ Indeed,

¹⁴The declensional model of Anglican historiography is best expressed in William K. Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857); Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740–1790* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1930); Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1952); Richard Hofstadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York: Knopf, 1971); Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton 1975); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1999); Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*.

¹⁵Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 58–65.

¹⁶The revisionist historiography of the colonial Anglican Church generally breaks into two categories. The first is based on rehabilitating the declensional view of the church's institutional structure, including its negative perception of the colonial clergy; important works include George McLaren Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church and the Political Conditions under Which It Grew* (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1947); Robert Detweiler, "Robert Rose, 1704–1751—Effective and Popular Minister of Colonial Virginia," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 41:2 (June 1972): 153–162; Joan Rezner Gundersen, "The Myth of the Independent Virginia Vestry," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 44 (June 1975): 133–142; Joan R. Gundersen, "The Search for Good Men: Recruiting Ministers In Colonial Virginia," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 48 (December 1979): 453–464; Joan R. Gundersen, "The Non-Institutional Church: The Religious Role of Women in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51:4 (December 1982): 347–358; Dan M. Hockman, "William Dawson: Master and Second President of the College of William and Mary," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 52:3 (September 1983): 199–214; Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*; Otto Lohrenz, "An Analysis of the Life and Career of the Reverend David Currie, Lancaster County, Virginia, 1743–1791," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 61:2 (June 1992): 142–166; Nelson, *A Blessed Company*. The second historiographic category is more concerned with rehabilitating Anglican ideology; while treated by Nelson and Gundersen in their institutional studies, it has received larger treatment in Edward L. Bond, "Anglican Theology and Devotion in James Blair's Virginia 1685–1743: Private Piety in the Public Church," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 104 (Summer 1996): 313–340; Edward L. Bond, "England's Soteriology of Empire and the Roots of Colonial Identity in Early Virginia," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 66:4 (December 1997): 471–499; Edward L. Bond, "Source of Knowledge, Source of Power: The Supernatural World of English Virginia, 1607–1624," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108:2 (March 2000): 105–137; Edward L. Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Colonial Virginia* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer

Edward L. Bond has argued that Virginians wholeheartedly embraced the *Book of Common Prayer*'s prescriptive teachings on repentance and were, therefore, genuinely religious.¹⁷ Whereas Isaac described them as hegemonic, Bond argues that Anglicans were sincerely devout. Consequently, in the eyes of recent scholars, Anglicans were either gentrified secularists who used the church to assert their social hegemony, or they were pious Prayer Book-reading Christians dedicated to the church's teachings of repentance. This essay suggests that an examination of previously underutilized sources, Virginia sermons, reveals a third way to describe colonial Anglicans: as inattentive, disinterested, and bored parishioners. Importantly, the use of sermons unleashes an evidentiary base larger than any previously employed to describe Anglican behavior. When correlated with themes in extant diaries and popular prescriptive manuals, sermons can provide a view of parochial Anglicanism that, given the relative paucity of sources, is thorough and convincing.

I. CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND SERMON CULTURE IN COLONIAL VIRGINIA

Sermons, and the chastisements against lay inattention they contain, need to be judged within the context of eighteenth-century churchgoing practices. In a colony in which church attendance was enforced by legal statute, Anglican churches were frequently crowded places.¹⁸ Describing church attendance patterns in his late 1740s diary, perambulating minister Robert Rose repeatedly noted that he preached "to a great Number of people," "to a numerous congregation," and "to a great many people."¹⁹ Similarly, parishioner William Byrd II noted "a very great congregation" on February 20, 1709, "the biggest congregation I ever saw in the country" on November 13, 1709, and "an abundance of people" on January 11, 1710.²⁰ Even more suggestive of

University Press, 2000); Anne Sorrel Dent, "God and Gentry: Public and Private Religion in Tidewater Virginia, 1607–1800" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 2001); Bond, ed., *Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia*; Brent Tarter, "Reflections on the Church of England in Colonial Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 112:4 (September 2004): 338–371; Bond and Gundersen, "The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607–2007."

¹⁷Bond, *Damned Souls*, 245–285.

¹⁸John Nelson has recently demonstrated that church attendance laws were regularly enforced; studying an 85-year period, he counted 3,685 instances of enforcement. He notes that enforcement rates were higher in the Tidewater than in the Piedmont or mountain regions. See Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 244–249.

¹⁹Robert Rose, *The Diary of Robert Rose: A View of Virginia by a Scottish Colonial Parson*, edited and annotated by Ralph Emmett Fall (Verona, Va.: McClure, 1977), 76, 94, 12, 57, 54. See also 75, 80, 82, 48, 106.

²⁰William Byrd II, *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1709–1712*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (Richmond, Va.: Dietz, 1941), 6, 106, 128.

widespread attendance are eleven Virginia respondents to the bishop of London's 1724 questionnaire on the size and vitality of American congregations. They collectively reported an average Sunday attendance of 420 parishioners. One of the bishop's respondents from Lancaster County noted, "The Church is thronged and almost all white persons in the parish . . . attend." Likewise, in Stafford County there was "generally as full a congregation as" the church "can contain." In Isle of Wight County, 500 "constantly attend[ed]" services, and in Hanover County attendance was "no less than 200 or 300 people." So great were the crowds in some Virginia parishes that some ministers noted they had "more present than they had pews for."²¹ The rector of Washington Parish in Westmoreland County complained that there was "not convenient room for them all" and, by mid-century, "benches . . . [were] placed at the doors" of St. Marks Parish Church in Culpepper County to accommodate parishioners.²²

The service these parishioners came to hear was, as historian Dell Upton has argued, predictable.²³ Each week Anglican parishioners reaffirmed their shared cultural and religious bonds by joining in common prayer. The liturgical rubrics crafted by Thomas Cranmer during the reign of Edward VI and slightly modified after the Restoration united coreligionists throughout Greater Britain in the cadenced repetition of familiar words and ideas. Even variations in congregational Psalm singing seem to have been relatively circumscribed by the colonial popularity of the Tate and Brady metrical Psalter and by Bishop Gibson's calendrical assignment of Psalm texts.²⁴ The

²¹Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, "Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39:2 (April 1982): 257–258, 259, 281, 282, 280. Bonomi and Eisenstadt studied eleven Virginia parishes in which ministers recorded both attendance numbers and the approximate number of people living in their parish. Their ultimate findings were that 56 percent of Virginians actively attended the established church.

²²Bonomi and Eisenstadt, "Church Adherence," 283; Meade, *Old Ministers*, II:78. Bonomi and Eisenstadt noted that given the extremely limited colonial authority of the bishop of London, Virginia ministers had few reasons to exaggerate their attendance figures. Additionally, the numbers' congruency with first-hand reports discussed earlier further contributes to their validity. For an excellent picture of a colonial bench perhaps reminiscent of those carried to the doors at St. Mark's Church, see Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 176.

²³Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 9–10.

²⁴Marion J. Hatchett, "A Sunday Service in 1778 or Thereabouts," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 45 (December 1976): 373. See also Nancy Saultz Radloff, "Congregational Song in the Protestant Episcopal Church in Early America: Hopkinson, Eckhard, and Loud," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 77:1 (March 2008): 22–28. On colonial Anglican services, see Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 187–199; Bond, "Anglican Theology and Devotion," 330; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 63–64; Bond and Gunderson, "The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607–2007," 188. An earlier, more idealized portrait of Anglican worship can be found in Arthur Pierce Middleton, "Anglican Virginia: The Established Church in the Old Dominion, 1607–1787" (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Research Report, 1954), 98–110. A highly entertaining and fictionally speculative account of a service can be found in Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 3–4.

one prominent variation in weekly services was the sermon. Indeed, because it was the single unpredictable aspect of Sunday services, Dell Upton has convincingly argued that the sermon was likely “the most attractive part of Divine Worship.”²⁵

While sermons were an unpredictable aspect of liturgical worship, they also possessed certain shared commonalities. For example, stylistic templates conveyed by widely circulated preaching manuals and popular sermon collections ensured that Virginia sermons mirrored fashionable metropolitan homiletic trends.²⁶ Consequently, although the subject matter of sermons varied from week to week, a highly structured sermon style—emphasizing the clear explication and application of biblical texts—remained in use throughout the period.²⁷ In addition to style, ministers shared a common understanding of the purpose of sermonizing that was regularly conveyed through a series of popular preaching manuals. In his highly influential work, *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*, Gilbert Burnet noted that the goals of preaching were “to make some Portions of Scripture to be rightly understood; to make those Truths contain’d in them, to be more fully apprehended; and then to lay the Matter home to the Consciences of the Hearers, so directing all to some good and practical end.”²⁸ A good preacher, John Wilkins argued in his manual, *Ecclesiastes or a Discourse*

²⁵Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 10. On the centrality of sermons to Anglican worship, see Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 201; Bond and Gundersen, “The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607–2007,” 188–189.

²⁶The most famous sermons to serve as templates for Virginia ministers were those written by Archbishop John Tillotson. This popular preacher’s collected sermons were “standard fare in clergy libraries.” Tillotson’s sermons have been described as “a favorite model for southern colonial preachers and favorite reading matter in their parishioners’ homes”: see Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, 163; Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*, II:715.

²⁷For more on the Restoration evolution of Anglican homiletics, see Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England From Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1603–1690* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); C. H. Sisson, *The English Sermon Volume II: 1650–1750; An Anthology* (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1976); Norman Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker: Aspects of English Church History, 1660–1768* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); W. M. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993); John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason: A Study of Changes in Religious Thought Within the Church of England, 1660 to 1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); G. R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648–1789* (New York: Atheneum, 1961); G. R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); L. P. Curtis, *Anglican Moods of the Eighteenth Century* (Hamden: Archon, 1966); H. R. McAadoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1965).

²⁸Gilbert Burnet, *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care* (London: Printed by R. R. for Ric. Chiswell, 1692), 217.

Concerning the Gift of Preaching, combined “a right understanding of sound doctrine” with “an ability to propound, confirm, and apply it unto the edification of others.”²⁹ Similarly, Joseph Glanvill commented in his ministerial manual, *An Essay Concerning Preaching*, that “The End of preaching must be acknowledg’d to be the *Instruction* of the hearers in *Faith* and *Good Life*, in order to the Glory of God, and their present, and future happiness.”³⁰ Likewise, the anonymous author of *Two Letters to a Friend Containing Certain Considerations Relating to the Pulpit* noted that “it is a Preacher’s part . . . by solid Arguments and Motives, to enforce the just practice of Christian Duties.”³¹ Or, as Robert Dodsley wrote in his versified *The Art of Preaching*,

‘Tis yours in useful Sermons, to explain,
Both what we owe to God; and what to Man.³²

That Virginia ministers followed the advice of popular preaching manuals is evidenced by the moral tone of their sermons. Indeed, James Blair, William Douglass, and Charles Clay devoted their preaching careers to the inculcation of what one recent historian has termed “practical godliness.” The message of Anglican ministers, John K. Nelson has argued, was that “lives were to be lived in conformity to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.”³³ This emphasis on pious virtue was, Edward Bond has written, “a practical theology [which] stress[ed] duty.”³⁴ Because the purpose of the sermon was to promote moral piety and virtue, it is not surprising that ministers responded brusquely to inattentive behaviors impeding these goals.

Despite their common style and shared goals, sermons remained the most unpredictable part of Sunday services and, consequently, received a great deal of attention in contemporary diaries. A parishioner could, after all,

²⁹John Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes: Or A Discourse concerning the Gift of Preaching As it falls under the Rules of Art* (London: Printed by T. R. and E. M. for Samuel Gellibrand, 1653), 2. Wilkins’s work was first published in 1646 and retained its popularity among ministers for more than a century. For a publishing history of this influential preaching manual, see Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, I:38–39.

³⁰[Joseph Glanvill], *A Seasonable Defence of Preaching: And the Plain Way of It* (London: Printed for M. Clark and H. Brome, 1678), 10.

³¹*Two Letters to a Friend: Containing Certain Considerations Relating to the Pulpit* (London: Printed for Tho. Bassett, 1692), 4.

³²[Robert Dodsley], *The Art of Preaching In Imitation of Horace’s Art of Poetry* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1739), 15. Attributed to Robert Dodsley, this often satirical pamphlet praised the great preachers of the church. It was printed in London in 1735, 1738, 1746, and 1762; Benjamin Franklin reprinted it in Philadelphia in 1739 and 1741; it achieved a Boston imprint in 1747. My thanks to Michael Warner for alerting me to the American imprints.

³³Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 205.

³⁴Bond, *Damned Souls*, 247.

never be completely certain what his minister would say on Sunday mornings. Consequently, when parishioners described church services, they often limited their comments to sermons. For example, planter-diarists William Byrd II and Landon Carter frequently passed judgment on their preachers' abilities. Byrd appreciated good rhetoric and resented panegyric; Carter wished that his preacher spoke more clearly.³⁵ Presbyterian tutor Philip Vickers Fithian marveled at the brevity of Anglican sermons and pined for the warmth of evangelical enthusiasm.³⁶ Fithian's contemporary, diarist John Harrower, limited his descriptions of church services to the name of the minister and his scripture text.³⁷ For all of these commentators, the sermon—whether “sorely delivered,” “good,” “poor,” “long,” “warm,” “useful,” or “one nobody understood”—stood at the center of the churchgoing experience.³⁸ The cultural preeminence accorded to sermons was further articulated in church architecture. Dominating the viewscape from the aisles and pews, elevated pulpits proclaimed the centrality of homiletics to the Anglican experience of worship. Pulpits were often the first objects visible from the nave, and the elaborate sounding boards constructed above them and the windows often located behind them were eminently practical devices designed to optimize sound and light so that a minister's words might be communicated more effectively.³⁹

Colonial Virginia was a churchgoing culture in which crowded pews and Sunday sermons were a part of everyday life. Yet, if Virginians took church attendance for granted, they also accepted a degree of inattentiveness and misbehavior in Sunday services. Indeed, crowded churches did not necessitate universally attentive and reverent behaviors. Consequently, it was the sermon's unpredictability—its unique caché of listenability in an

³⁵For examples of sermon commentary, see Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 29, 94, 106, 128, 149, 165, 260, 315, 428; William Byrd II, *The London Diary (1717–1721) and Other Writings*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinning (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 61, 64, 74, 80, 90, 96, 119, 122, 129, 132, 135, 141, 150, 153, 156, 165, 168, 173, 176, 183, 186, 188, 193, 204, 206, 218, 228, 234, 240, 255, 261, 284, 300, 303, 306, 308, 311, 314, 324, 332, 335, 346, 349, 378, 383, 393, 401, 404, 409, 424, 429, 434, 439, 449, 457, 465, 474, 479, 485, 487, 493, 508, 510, 521; William Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739–1744*, ed. Maude H. Woodfin (Richmond: Dietz, 1942), 6, 12, 22, 40, 47, 59, 63–64, 65, 69, 77, 91, 102, 142, 155, 175; Landon Carter, *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752–1778*, 2 vols., ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1965), II:752.

³⁶Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773–1774*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville, Va.: Dominion, 1968), 22, 23, 28, 29, 41, 88, 89, 137, 172.

³⁷John Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower: An Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia, 1773–1776*, ed. Edward Miles Riley (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1963), 89, 51, 59, 71, 82, 96, 99, 103, 132, 134, 140, 144.

³⁸Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 428, 29; Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 40, 47; Fithian, *Journal*, 28, 172, 88.

³⁹David L. Holmes, *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993), 97; Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 133–137.

otherwise predictably liturgical setting—that made it an ideal place for ministers to rail against the inattentive behaviors they witnessed from their elevated pulpits. Hoping that their sermonic chastisements would not fall on deaf ears, ministers concentrated on three forms of deviant, although popular, behavior: inattentive listening, indifferent hearing, and disrespectful action.

II. INATTENTIVE LISTENING

While their churches were frequently filled, Virginia ministers often worried that no one listened to them. In a sermon encouraging deeper piety, James Blair asked his congregation, “Of those who afford their bodily Presence at ... [Church], how few are there who Afford Attention or Presence of Mind?”⁴⁰ On another occasion, he spoke of the church’s “Edifying Sermons” and castigated his parishioners for “hear[ing] them so carelessly, that ye never think more of them to put them in Practice.”⁴¹ Similarly, in a sermon on prayer, he noted, “bare bodily Attendance signifies nothing, if we are absent in Mind; if we carry our Shops, and Stores, and Farms; our Accounts, Bargains, worldly Cares and Projects, along with us.”⁴² From Blair’s perspective, parishioners were too preoccupied with earthly concerns to listen to the spiritual fare he offered them.

James Blair’s sermons routinely commented on those parishioners who were “absent in Mind.” In 1717, he preached an entire sermon describing “the Duty of Hearers.”⁴³ Here, he confessed that the “Unattentiveness” of many parishioners gave him “too great [a] Reason to suspect that their Hearts and Minds are absent.” Too many, he complained, brought “their Cares and Lusts, their Shop and Farms, and worldly Projects and Contrivances along with them, which ... divert their Attention.” Instead of focusing their attention on “the divine Truths proposed to us in the Gospel,” his hearers were drawn to “Thoughts of an inferior and more hurtful Nature.” For Blair, these wanderings of the mind were comparable to “Weeds in neglected Gardens” that “kill and choak all the good Flowers and Plants.” What was needed in his congregation, he maintained, was “Attention ... and due Consideration.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon*, I:443.

⁴¹Ibid., II:438.

⁴²Ibid., III:66.

⁴³Ibid., IV:314. Blair’s published sermons are typically undated. However, the text of this sermon notes that “this is the two hundredth Year since *Luther* first began the Reformation.” Martin Luther issued his Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517. See Blair, IV:316.

⁴⁴Ibid., IV:317.

William Douglass encountered similar inattention in his Goochland County congregation. Like Blair, he worried that his parishioners were too easily distracted by “all our earthly cares buzzing about our Souls.” “The highest & best ends of preaching & hearing, praying & praising,” Douglass argued, could not be achieved “if we come into the sanctuary with our heads & hearts full of the affairs of this life.”⁴⁵ Young people, especially, were prone to inattention. In a sermon delivered for their benefit, Douglass complained that youth “were idle in ye duties of Religion, & waste yt [that] time that they pretend to employ wt [with] God.”⁴⁶ In a particularly dramatic use of language, he conjectured the deathbed contrition of a young person guilty of inattention in church. Devoting his last words to remorse over inattentive church behavior, the youth remembered, “how I have trifled when I heard Sermons! how I have mocked God by my Sleepy prayers.”⁴⁷

Charles Clay found his Albemarle County parishioners equally inattentive. In a sermon on Christian sincerity, preached sixteen times between 1770 and 1779, Clay questioned the piety of inattentive parishioners. “Can you be his [Christ’s] Disciples,” Clay asked, “when many of you, (might one Judge of your Devotion from the inattention Visible on your Countenances in time of Divine Service,) w[oul]d give more heed to a tale of Tom Thumb, Tom Hickerthreft, or Jack the Giant-killer, than to any prayer, or the best Sermon it was in the Power of Man to Preach.”⁴⁸ Clay expanded on the theme of lay inattention in a sermon delivered seven times during the same period. Preaching from the scriptural text “Take heed of how ye hear,” Clay admitted that while physical attendance at church can be noted, “whether our minds be absent Cant be so easily observed.” Moreover, Clay believed that serious attentiveness was beyond the capability of most of his parishioners. “Too many,” he preached, “have indulged an indolent thotlessness, till applying their minds in earnest to any thing is become extreamly difficult & painful to them.” The preacher remarked that “not a few” people were “engaged so deeply in Observation of w[ha]t they See at Church that they have no Room left of taking notice of w[ha]t they hear.” Others unleashed their imaginations during services. Echoing Blair, Clay noted that drifting thoughts were a particular hazard “in the midst of Our Religious Exercises.” Describing daydreaming in church, he wrote, “Once our minds are got loose; an Effect wh[ich] the least accident will produce; then On they Run from one thing to another, hanging together by Some kind of whimsical

⁴⁵William Douglass, Mss. Sermon Book, Virginia Theological Seminary Archives, Bishop Payne Library, Alexandria, Va., 79.

⁴⁶Ibid., 131.

⁴⁷Ibid., 132.

⁴⁸Clay, Clay Family Papers (Mss1 C5795 a57). On popular ballads in eighteenth-century culture, see Albert Friedman, *The Ballad Revival* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

Connection, till we are Carried we know not whither.” Believing that many in his congregation were absent-minded daydreamers, Clay was convinced that most parishioners “take no Notice of w[ha]t is said” and leave church “without So much as a Simple thot of ever Changing their Conduct.”⁴⁹

III. INDIFFERENT HEARING

For James Blair, William Douglass, and Charles Clay, inattentive listening was often manifested by a genuine lack of concern for the words spoken in Sunday services. James Blair likened this form of parochial response to hearing “the Word of Christ as we hear News of some remote Country, which we are indifferent and unconcerned whether it be true or false.”⁵⁰ In another sermon, Blair complained that his parishioners had a “universal Coldness and Indifference in all Things relating to Religion.”⁵¹ More than condemning daydreaming and other forms of inattentive listening, Blair, Douglass, and Clay sought to correct the half-hearted, indifferent attitudes of many of their parishioners. To properly participate in worship, they argued, churchgoers needed to both forgo daydreaming *and* compose their hearts and minds in an appropriately spiritual manner. In other words, from the vantage point of the pulpit, parishioners needed to look interested and engaged.

James Blair’s sermonic comments on parochial indifference questioned his congregants’ sincerity. In a series of sermons on avoiding hypocrisy in the practice of prayer, he complained that “there is all the Probability in the World . . . that our public Devotions are more for Fashion’s sake, and to be seen of Men, than from a true fear of God.” Blair cited his parishioners’ disinterested participation in public prayers as a sign of their indifference. “I wish,” he wrote, “that when we draw near to God with our Lips, our Hearts went duly along with them.”⁵² He was further convinced that “though we pronounce the Prayers with our Mouths, we do not trouble our selves to make good the Meaning of them.”⁵³ Blair especially noted his congregation’s indifference during the weekly recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. “We often say that excellent Prayer *Our Father which art in Heaven*,” he reminded his hearers, “but how few are there among us, that love, fear, honour, trust, and obey God, as if we believed in good earnest that he is our heavenly Father?”⁵⁴ Mumbled, half-hearted prayers were hardly indicative of the piety Blair expected from his parishioners.

⁴⁹Clay, Clay Family Papers (Mss1 C5795 a18).

⁵⁰Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon*, IV:317.

⁵¹Ibid., I:442.

⁵²Ibid., III:56.

⁵³Ibid., III:56–57.

⁵⁴Ibid., III:57.

James Blair further commented on the “lifeless” and indifferent faith of his congregation in a sermon comparing the “good Effects” of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount on its hearers with religious practice in Virginia. Whereas Christ’s hearers had been inspired to put their lessons into practice, Blair’s congregation thought “all is over as soon as we get out of Church.”⁵⁵ “Alas, how few have we in our Days,” the preacher lamented, “who are struck and pricked at the Heart with any Sermons they hear, or have any lasting Impressions made upon their Spirits from the best Doctrine that can be preached to them?”⁵⁶ Describing the indifference of his parishioners, Blair wrote that even when the minister was congratulated for “a very good Sermon . . . we take no Time to apply it to our own Use.”⁵⁷ James Blair complained that even if sermons were listened to, they were soon forgotten. For Blair, this indifferent parochial forgetfulness was simply a “Treachery of Memory.”⁵⁸

William Douglass similarly worried about his parishioners’ indifferent attitudes at church. He was convinced that some congregants were “only watching” the service or, more menacing for the pastor, “Passing Judgment on ye ability perhaps no more than ye style & outward manner of ye Speaker.”⁵⁹ Other signs of their indifference included uninspired participation in public prayers. Echoing Blair, Douglass noted “the generality [of people] content themselves wt [with] ye prayer of ye voice, without ye affections.”⁶⁰ Sermons were received with similar indifference. “How much less good will a sermon do us,” Douglass asked his congregation, “if as soon as the hour of worship is ended, we run immediately from God, & plunge our selves into worldly affairs, without giving our thoughts and leasure & leave to reflect on what we have heard?”⁶¹ To remedy parochial forgetfulness, Douglass encouraged his listeners to discuss the sermon around the Sunday lunch table. But he was quick to note that such a discussion should concern the discourse’s “application to our Selves & not to others.”⁶²

Charles Clay also remarked on the indifference of his congregation. In a sermon delivered in 1775 and again in 1780, Clay complained that his hearers were “cold & indifferent, lifeless & inactive.”⁶³ Likewise, in a sermon delivered twelve times between 1772 and 1786, Clay commented

⁵⁵Ibid., IV:369.

⁵⁶Ibid., IV:370.

⁵⁷Ibid., IV:370.

⁵⁸Ibid., I:442.

⁵⁹Douglass, Mss. Sermon Book, 30.

⁶⁰Ibid., 175.

⁶¹Ibid., 79.

⁶²Ibid., 70.

⁶³Clay, Clay Family Papers (Mss1 C5795 a23).

that many in his congregation heard his words with the “Coldest disregard.”⁶⁴ Echoing these sentiments in an undated sermon, he referred to his hearers’ hearts as “indifferent Cold & lifeless” and suggested that they might “Reap as much advantage in a Turkish Mosque or a Jews Synagogue.”⁶⁵ Like Blair and Douglass, Clay especially noted his congregation’s indifference during public prayers. In a sermon on the Lord’s Prayer given three times in 1774 and 1775, Clay asked his hearers: what is “the State of your minds w[he]n you Repeat the Lords P[rayer]?” Reminding parishioners that “there is great difference” between praying and saying the weekly prayer, Clay noted that although “It is an easy manner to Repeat the Lords P[rayer] with Our lips . . . God Requireth the heart.” Using strong language, Clay blasted his hearers for their indifferent approach to public prayer. “How can you,” he charged, “disregard that divine form of words, w[he]n they were Composed by God himself? W[ha]t signifies your Saying a parcel of words without paying the least attention to w[ha]t you are ab[ou]t?”⁶⁶ Similarly, Clay informed his congregation on another occasion, “if y[ou]r Devotion hath not been the effect of Faith . . . y[ou]r Devotions have been unmeaning Ceremony; y[ou]r Book not y[ou]r Heart hath Spoken.”⁶⁷

Like James Blair, Charles Clay associated indifference with a lack of religious sincerity. Describing a response he feared was “very Common” in his congregation, Clay noted that many people heard sermons “only with Curiosity.” The preacher worried that too many listeners heard his words only for their rhetorical value as “a pleasing exercise of our understanding at the time, & a help to Conversation afterw[ar]d.”⁶⁸ On another occasion, he asked his hearers if they were listening to him merely out of “Curiosity.” Did they pay attention to his words, he wondered, simply “to amuse a Critical Head,” or was it “to Settle you in Just Notions & Orthodox Opinions?”⁶⁹ Similarly, before a sermon on the last judgment, Clay informed his hearers that his words were “not designed merely as an amusing Speculation to gratify Our Curiosity, but Ought to have proper influence upon our temper & Conduct.”⁷⁰ Church attendance, he argued at another time, was not a “matter of Costom or entertainmt” but an opportunity to “Join fervently” in public worship.⁷¹ Yet few in Clay’s congregation demonstrated the fervent religiosity he expected in Sunday services. Like Blair and Douglass, Charles

⁶⁴Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a32).

⁶⁵Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a48).

⁶⁶Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a56).

⁶⁷Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a53).

⁶⁸Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a18).

⁶⁹Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a33).

⁷⁰Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a47).

⁷¹Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a12).

Clay despaired of his parishioners' poor memories, half-hearted prayers, and spiritual indifference.

IV. DISRESPECTFUL ACTION

In addition to observing sleepy prayers and blank facial expressions, Virginia ministers gauged parochial attentiveness in terms of more overtly distracting and disrespectful behaviors. William Douglass, for example, railed against those who “laugh and sport” at “the very time of divine worship.” Such rabble-rousers were “destitute even of the least Spark of [page torn] decency & good manners.” For Douglass, this “vain giddy tem[per]” in church was “ridiculous.”⁷² Similarly, as we have seen, James Blair chastised those who exchanged “lustful Look[s]” in his services.⁷³

The most comprehensive examples of disrespectful behavior in church are found in Charles Clay's sermons. In one of his most detailed chastisements against lay behavior, preached at least thirty-one times in two different sermons between 1769 and 1785, Clay spoke of those who

deem it ye most painful time of their whole Life that is Spent in Gods Service; & when at Church, instead of kneeling & making the proper Responces, in time of prayer when those Solemn addresses are made to Almighty God; are hanging first on one hipp then on the other; leaning with their Elbows on the pews or on the windows, looking Carelessly about them as unconcerned Spectators of what passes; or are Running in & out to the great anoiance & disturbance of those whose minds are piously inclined. And give not ye least Ear while the Lessons are Read, And while the Psalms for ye Day are Reading, instead of having a book & answering in turn; are playing with their Snuff box; dancing their foot with one leg across the other for amusement; or twirling their Hat about; making their observations on ye Congregation, whispering to the person that Sits next to them; or Smiling & grinning at others yt [that] sits at a distance from them; & are ashamed to be thot to have a wish for Salvation, or a Dread of Damnation; & So Careful are they to keep up this opinion of themselves amongst their acquaintances; yt [that] they wont be heard to uter a prayer even in Church; or be Caught with a prayer Book in their Hands there upon any Consideration what ever.⁷⁴

In this vivid description, inattention and indifference manifest themselves in distracting and disrespectful behaviors. Clay's parishioner was not only bored and indifferent, but he or she also refused to kneel, chatted with

⁷²Douglass, Mss. Sermon Book, 225.

⁷³Blair, *Our Saviour's Divine Sermon*, II:243.

⁷⁴Clay, Clay Family Papers (Mss1 C5795 a35). See also *ibid.* (Mss1 C5795 a57).

neighbors during the service, and—perhaps most distracting—ran in and out of the church. Preached a remarkable number of times to his congregation, Clay’s description of disrespectful church behavior was perhaps the preacher’s most oft-repeated and well-known sermon example.

Charles Clay’s remarks on disrespectful church behavior were not limited to one frequently repeated example. In another sermon, he described parishioners who “have So much to say one to another yt [that] they loose much of w[ha]t the Preacher hath to say to them.” The news they shared in the pews, Clay noted sarcastically, was “of such importance & necessity to be Communicated immediately yt [that] even the Duties of hearkening to Gods word in the lessons & Singing his Praises in the Psalms must give way to them.”⁷⁵ Similarly, on another occasion, Clay derided those who only came to church to share “Some matter of tittle tattle.”⁷⁶

More than chastising disrespectful chit-chatting, Clay used his sermons to combat the parochial practice of “Running in and out” of church. Mentioning the practice repeatedly in his sermons, he noted that some parishioners “when they Repair to the temple of God, are so Remiss, So unconcerned while there; Sauntering out & in, as if et[ernal] Sal[vation] was a Matter of indifference.”⁷⁷ Clay gave an extended example of one form of “sauntering” to which he objected in an undated sermon on baptism. Focusing on the behavior of women during the baptismal service, he railed against their “Common” practice of “talking & laughing & pacing up & down.” Emphasizing the movement implicit in such “pacing” or sauntering, Clay argued that it was better suited to the “race field” than the church. He described their movements as analogous to dancing but argued that a “Carriage wh[ich] appears so light & wanton in So Sacred a place, & at so holy a Solemnity” would “be deemed indecent even in a ball Room.”⁷⁸ For Clay, pacing, chatting, whispering, and refusing to kneel were all characteristic of “ye irreverent Behaviour yt [that] Careless disrespect, which is too Scandalously Visible in ye worship of these Days, (in Our Churches) out of which Negligence & Prophaness have almost banished Seriousness & Devotion.”⁷⁹

At the same time Charles Clay was chastising his parishioners for their inattentive behavior in church, he was also providing them with an ideal description of the form of parochial reception he wanted them to emulate. Yet, even in describing the ideal parishioner, Clay’s biting sarcasm provides a portrait of the inattention rampant in his congregation. In a note appended

⁷⁵Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a18).

⁷⁶Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a57).

⁷⁷Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a23).

⁷⁸Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a20).

⁷⁹Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a45).

before two sermons encouraging resolution and fortitude in spiritual matters, delivered thirteen times between 1770 and 1779, Clay noted that Christ “hath Said whomsoever Shall be ashamed of me befor Men of him will I be ashamed before my father wh[ich] is in heaven.” Building on the theme of shame, Clay told his hearers,

this I take to be a most evident proof yt [that] you are not ashamed to be thot Rel[igious], your paying Such Reg[ar]d to the Service of God yt [that] while you are engaged in it with all due Reverence, you think it not too Condescending Sometimes Reverently to kneel w[he]n you address y[ou]r Self to almighty God when you ask pardon for past offences, or give him thanks for fav[ors] recied [sic] & this you do not with a muttering hum or with Straind Voice on purpose to be heard of men, but audibly & distinctly to show y[ou]r dependce on God, & to Join with his Ser[van]ts publicly; & to even dare Run ye Risk of being Jeered & [illegible] at by appearing with a prayer book.⁸⁰

Clearly, there were some in Clay’s congregation who felt it was “too condescending” to kneel; there were others who muttered their prayers; and others who jeered the presence of a prayer book.

James Blair, William Douglass, and Charles Clay looked down from their colonial pulpits and saw widespread inattention. Parishioners, they claimed, were bored, disinterested, sleepy, insincere, rude, distracted, and talkative. Subsumed under the category of lay inattention, these behavioral patterns were certainly not the only possible responses to parochial Anglicanism—there were undoubtedly some pious Anglicans—yet, given the ubiquity of ministerial evidence, inattentiveness was clearly widespread in eighteenth-century Virginia.

V. HOMILETIC REALITIES

It is important to question, however, whether ministerial descriptions of lay inattention can be trusted to accurately portray the environment inside colonial Anglican churches. Is it possible that sermonic chastisements were merely rhetorical jeremiads—more reflective of ministerial biases than of actual conditions? Indeed, because two of the most outspoken clerical critics of lay inattention—Charles Clay and William Douglass—were Anglican evangelicals, it could be argued that ministerial chastisements were indicative of an evangelical ethos at odds with worldly-wise behaviors. Yet because James Blair—who was certainly not an evangelical—articulated almost identical ideas, the congruency between attacks on inattention and

⁸⁰Ibid. (Mss1 C5795 a51).

evangelicalism is imperfect. Indeed, the non-evangelical Blair complained just as loudly about church inattention as his more evangelical counterparts.

If evangelical biases do not fully explain the ministerial preoccupations with inattention, perhaps clerical chastisements reflected a bias against poorer, culturally unsophisticated parishioners. Anglican churches were, after all, meeting places for people of all socioeconomic levels. Noting the variety of peoples at church, Philip Vickers Fithian commented that at Easter “all the Parish seem’d to meet together High, Low, black, White all come out.”⁸¹ James Blair similarly recognized the diversity in his congregation, noting that his sermons had been written for “a plain Country Auditory” or, as he also noted, “the meanest Hearers.”⁸² Given the obvious social distinctions between parish priest and rural farmer, could clerical injunctions against inattention have represented a form of manners moralism in which clerics attempted to inculcate class-defined conceptions of propriety? It should be noted, however, that widely circulated preaching manuals actively discouraged ministers from conflating class biases with religious didacticism. While clerics were expected to improve parochial piety, they were also encouraged to understand the unique nature of their congregations. Educated priests, for example, were warned not to display their superior knowledge ostentatiously before their congregations. Gilbert Burnet’s preaching manual reminded ministers that a preacher should “fancy himself, as in the room of the most unlearned Man in his whole Parish; and therefore he must put such parts of his Discourse as he would have all understand, in so plain a form of Words, that it may not be beyond the meanest of them.”⁸³ Joseph Glanvill similarly noted that “the hearers of Sermons are mixt people, among whom usually there are very few of so much sagacity and attention, as to be able to comprehend, and to go along with a judicious, exactly penn’d Discourse: Whoever would edify them, must dilate, and represent the same things in different lights and colours.” Addressing ministerial ostentation in language, Glanvill maintained that it was “reprehensible in a Preacher . . . to affect outlandish words that have not yet receiv’d the publick stamp, and especially to do it when the ordinary *English* will represent the thing as well.” Glanvill especially cautioned against the use of “scraps of Greek and Latin” which, given their unintelligibility to common parishioners, clearly represented class ostentation.⁸⁴ The goal of ministers, Gilbert Burnet noted, was “to edify” their parishioners “rather than to make them admire [their minister] as a learned and high-spoken Man.”⁸⁵ Indeed, John Wilkins pressed humility

⁸¹Fithian, *Journal*, 89.

⁸²Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon*, I:xxxii, xx.

⁸³Burnet, *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*, 223.

⁸⁴Glanvill, *An Essay Concerning Preaching*, 63–64, 15, 18.

⁸⁵Burnet, *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*, 223.

on his ministerial readers by reminding them of the example of a Roman pagan noted for his “notional humane learning” who was, nevertheless, converted to Christianity by a plain-talking “Country-man.” According to Wilkins, “The greatest learning is to be seen in the greatest plainnesse.”⁸⁶

If preaching manuals warned ministers against bringing class biases into the pulpit, widely circulated devotional texts clearly demonstrated that religiously didactic admonitions against inattention functioned as something more than elite recommendations of bourgeois behavior. Indeed, reverent church behavior assumed an almost doctrinal significance in the Restoration Church of England. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, the edition used throughout eighteenth-century Virginia, argued that the purpose of liturgical (that is, Anglican) worship was “the procuring of Reverence, and exciting of Piety, and Devotion in the Publick Worship of God.”⁸⁷ That the “procuring” of reverent behavior superseded personal piety in the Prayer Book’s enumerated goals for Anglican worship attests to the religious importance of polite church behavior. Moreover, as we have seen, Anglo-America’s most famous devotional writer, Richard Allestree, repeatedly recommended reverence in his widely circulated self-help manual, *The Whole Duty of Man*. Allestree went on to include detailed admonitions against lay inattentiveness in another highly popular devotional work, *The Ladies Calling*. Here, Allestree vividly critiqued the church behavior of London women, noting that they “sit down to talk and laugh with their Pew-fellows, and rise up to gape and look about them.”⁸⁸ Instead of worshiping reverently, these women exchanged gossip and discussed the latest plays. In addition to chit-chatters, Allestree complained of those who arrived in the midst of the service. Echoing Clay’s “saunterers,” Allestree’s latecomers kept “the Congregation in a continual motion and agitation.” “Often,” Allestree wrote, “during the whole time of Praier, the clapping [of] Pew-doors does outnoise the Reader.”⁸⁹ Consequently, clerical chastisements against lay inattention were representative of a religious definition of appropriate church behavior, conveyed by devotional literatures and the *Book of Common Prayer*. In advocating reverence, clerics may have been extolling the virtues of their class, but they were also articulating the accepted mores of their church.

Neither purely the product of evangelical nor elite biases, ministerial chastisements against lay inattention accurately describe the environment inside colonial Virginia churches. That sermonic descriptions of lay behavior

⁸⁶Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes*, 130, 128.

⁸⁷*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Church of England* (London: Printed by His Majesty’s Printers, 1662), preface.

⁸⁸[Richard Allestree], *The Ladies Calling* (Oxford: Printed at the Theater, 1673), 118.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 120.

can be trusted is attested by their surprising resonance with the extant descriptions of Virginia church behavior. Given the paucity of contemporary accounts, the thematic congruity present between sermonic chastisements and surviving diaries suggests the viability of church inattention as a way of understanding Anglican religious practice in colonial Virginia. As in sermons, lay accounts stressed the variety of forms inattention could take. According to Philip Vickers Fithian, a Presbyterian tutor living in the family of Robert Carter, few Virginia parishioners joined in weekly psalm-singing. Remarking on the novelty of an organized choir singing from the church balcony, Fithian described it as “entirely contrary to what I have seen before in the Colony, for it is seldom in the fullest Congregation’s [*sic*], that more sing than the Clerk, & about two others!”⁹⁰ On another occasion, Fithian echoed Charles Clay by describing a form of “sauntering.” “It is not the Custom,” Fithian wrote, “for Gentlemen to go into Church till Service is beginning, when they enter in a Body, in the same manner as they come out; I have known the Clerk to come out and call them in to prayers.”⁹¹ For Fithian, Virginia Anglicans were quiet when they should have been singing and were talkative in the churchyard even as services were beginning. How ministers in the parish churches Philip Vickers Fithian attended felt about this behavior is unknown. However, Fithian did note that he heard rector Isaac Giberne “preach on Felixes trembling at Paul’s Sermon.”⁹² Although Fithian provided no description of the sermon, the choice of scripture text—one in which St. Paul’s sermon fully captivates the attention of a Roman governor—may be revealingly representative of Giberne’s own hopes for his congregation.

Even if one questions the objectivity of a Presbyterian observer, other evidence suggests the viability of inattention as a widespread parochial response within Virginia Anglicanism. For example, even pious William Byrd II—who bracketed most of his days in devotional reading and prayer—was apt to fall asleep in church on occasion. Hearing James Blair preach in Jamestown in 1709, Byrd noted, “Nothing could hinder me from sleeping at church, though I took a great deal of pains against it.”⁹³ Similarly, when living in London in 1718, he remarked, “I slept away a pretty good sermon.”⁹⁴ Following Byrd’s return to Virginia, he continued to sleep in church. After dining with Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood on

⁹⁰Fithian, *Journal*, 195.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 29.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 20. The scripture reference is Acts 24:24–27.

⁹³Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 25.

⁹⁴Byrd, *London Diary*, 150. On other occasions, Byrd noted sleeping “a little” or, more commonly, “went to church where I slept”: see Byrd, *London Diary*, 116, 138, 273, 276, 279, 292, 341, 444.

venison pasty in November 1720, Byrd went to church and “slept in sermon time.” A week later, he again ate venison with Spotswood and “slept a little” during the afternoon service. The following week, he ate gible pie and stayed awake.⁹⁵ Even when Byrd did not sleep, he occasionally described sermons as “dull,” and “sleepy.”⁹⁶ Inattention, it seems, was a dilemma even for the most pious of Virginians.

Like William Byrd II, Virginia planter Landon Carter similarly struggled with inattention. Confronted with the presence of a detested son-in-law at church in 1774, Carter “took up my hat, bid everybody goodby and walkt away home ordering my boy to fetch my great Coat and book out and follow me with my horses.” Explaining his action as a preservative against inattention, he noted, “there can be no true religion where such objects are Perpetually bringing to remembrance, the grossest of all injuries in the world.”⁹⁷ Later that week, after his minister had rebuked him for “turning [his] back on the church,” Carter informed his parson that leaving the church was a “sensible” act of “true Christian humanity.” “For there could be only a mockery in prayer,” Carter reasoned, “with the object of my injury received always in view Vibrating on every Nerve in my Machine.”⁹⁸ Rather than face distraction in his devotions, Carter left the church. Yet, Landon Carter did not always follow this logic. A year later, he attended church on a fast day even though he lamented the distraction that a neglected breakfast had caused him. It was hard to be piously “composed,” Carter argued, when he “was pained in the body that incloses the soul.”⁹⁹ A growling stomach or a despised enemy was enough to draw Landon Carter’s attention away from religious piety.

Of course, the testimony of extant diaries is undeniably limited to the experiences of social elites. The fact that planters, like William Byrd II and Landon Carter, were inattentive in church does not necessarily mean that others behaved in this manner. And yet, it should be stressed that while diaries describe elite inattention, sermon chastisements are far less exclusive in scope. When ministers cajoled their inattentive congregations, they spoke of the behavior of all the parishioners they could see from the vantage point of an elevated pulpit. Consequently, the fact that elites, who possessed the time and ability to write, corroborated ministerial descriptions of inattention is not an indication that inattentive behavior was solely the prerogative of the wealthy.

⁹⁵Ibid., 474, 477, 479.

⁹⁶Ibid., 119, 404.

⁹⁷Carter, *Diary*, II:807.

⁹⁸Ibid., II:809.

⁹⁹Ibid., II:924.

VI. TRANSATLANTIC CONTINUITIES

Inattention, as described by both ministers and parishioners, not only describes the experiences of some Virginia Anglicans, it also connects them with co-religionists throughout the British Atlantic. Indeed, if James Blair, William Douglass, and Charles Clay had been successful in stamping out the inattentive responses of their parishioners, their congregations would have been truly unique in an Atlantic context. Parochial inattentiveness was as much a factor in English churches as it was in Virginia. As we have seen, inattention featured prominently in Richard Allestree's transatlantic devotional works. Yet, descriptions of inattention in English churches were not limited to devotional texts; they were also featured in the pages of the popular London periodicals the *Spectator* and *Guardian*. Undeniably the most popular British magazines in the colonial Atlantic World, these journals were regularly available to colonial Virginians. Indeed, one author has argued that, on eighteenth-century southern bookshelves, "the *Spectator* is almost as likely to be present as the Bible."¹⁰⁰ In their witty and urbane articles, these popular magazines described lay inattentiveness to a transatlantic audience. For example, a 1711 correspondent to the *Spectator* described "a Set of Gigglers" who sat in church and because of the minister's unusual accent "made it an Occasion of Mirth during the whole Time of the Sermon."¹⁰¹ Likewise, a 1712 letter described a woman who "pull[ed] out her [snuff] Box (which is indeed full of good *Brazile*) in the middle of the Sermon; and to shew she has the Audacity of a well-bred Woman, she offer[ed] it the Men as well as the Women who sit near her."¹⁰² Another *Spectator* essay, published later in the year, described a man who "seldom comes in till the Prayers are about half over," and "who takes a Pinch of Snuff, (if it be Evening-Service, perhaps a Nap) and spends the remaining Time in surveying the Congregation."¹⁰³ The *Guardian* similarly described some "pretty young Ladies, in Mobbs, [who] popped in here and there about the Church, clattering the Pew Door after them, and squatting into a Whisper behind their Fans."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰Davis, *Colonial Southern Bookshelf*, 114. In Virginia, Williamsburg printers William Hunter and Joseph Royle sold twenty-six copies of the *Spectator* and *Guardian* during the four years for which their sales records are extant. The books were also advertised in the *Virginia Gazette* a total of thirty-four times between 1751 and 1778. See Gregory A. Stiverson and Cynthia Z. Stiverson, *Books Both Useful and Entertaining: A Study of Book Purchases and Reading Habits of Virginians in the Mid-Eighteenth Century* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1977), 146; John E. Molnar, "Publication and Retail Book Advertisements in the Virginia Gazette, 1736–1780" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978), 547, 767, 783–784.

¹⁰¹Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, et al., *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), II:120.

¹⁰²Addison and Steele, *Spectator*, III:279.

¹⁰³Ibid., III:427.

¹⁰⁴*The Guardian* 26 May 1713 (London: Printed for J. Tonson).

Not only did widely popular English magazines refer to the “sauntering,” “giggling,” and “chit-chatting” so popular in Virginia churches, but they also placed James Blair’s “ogling gestures” in a transatlantic context. Describing a London service, the *Guardian* blatantly noted that “I have seen the young People who have been interchanging Glances of Passion to each others Person.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, the *Spectator* published a 1711 letter from correspondent Jenny Simper in which she admitted, “I come constantly to Church to hear divine Service and make Conquests.”¹⁰⁶ Earlier in the year, the magazine published a letter from S. C. in which she complained against a male “starer” who had recently begun attending services with a largely female congregation in North London. The gentleman, although a “Head taller than anyone in the Church,” stood on a stool and stared at his female parishioners. Calling the man a “monstrous starer,” who had little “regard to Time, Place, or Modesty,” S. C. noted that, “what with Blushing, Confusion, and Vexation, we can neither mind the Prayers nor the Sermon.”¹⁰⁷ Two months later, a “reformed starer” wrote in to complain against the behavior of women he referred to as “Peepers.” “If they do every thing that is possible to attract our Eyes,” he asked, “are we more culpable than they for looking at them?” Describing a recent service in which he was “shut into a Pew, which was full of young Ladies in the Bloom of Youth and Beauty,” the man noted that his attempts to keep his “Eyes from wandring” were foiled by a Peeper who “so placed her self as to be kneeling just before me.” “She display’d the most beautiful Bosom imaginable,” he wrote, “which heav’d and fell with some fervour, while a delicate well-shaped Arm held a Fan over her Face . . . I frequently offer’d to turn my Sight another way, but was still detained by the Fascination of the Peeper’s Eyes, who had long practised a skill in them, to recal the parting Glances of her Beholders.”¹⁰⁸

References to church inattention contained in urbane metropolitan magazines were designed to foster both devout piety and polite gentility. As important cultural vehicles in the inculcation of bourgeois manners, the *Spectator* and *Guardian* were far more prone to class bias than religiously didactic sermons. Yet it should be noted that these magazines were not the only media in which church inattention was discussed. Far less sophisticated than the *Spectator* essays, and catering to a less well-heeled audience, street pamphlets also articulated themes of inattentiveness. Like the *Spectator* and *Guardian*, popular pamphlets demonstrate that sexualized interpretations

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Addison and Steele, *Spectator*, II:600.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., I:86.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., I:227.

of church services were a widespread phenomenon. Indeed, a nearly contemporaneous English example of Blair's "ogling Gestures" can be found in the following description of an English dandy in church, originally published in a London pamphlet:

I'd pierce the Ladies with an amorous Eye, But all their Pious Looks and Cheats defie. Take Notice who was *Fairest*, or most *Fine*, Who had the *Blackest Hair*, or *Whitest Skin*; What Charming *Phubsy* had the *Loveli'st Breast*, Who was the most *Devout*, and pray'd the *Best*, Who had the briskest *Eye*, and fullest *Brow*, Denoting a good *Furbulo* below, Who had an *Awful Look*, and *Modest Grace*, And who a *Lustful Air*, and *Tempting Face*: Thus as an *Observer* would I sit; Inspect the *Galleries* first, and then the *Pit*: And from the diff'rent Saints in sundry *Pews*; At once Learn how to *Judge*, and how to *Chuse*.¹⁰⁹

Whether published in urbane magazines or in the pornographic penny press, whether describing libertines or chit-chatters, English descriptions of church behavior suggest that when Virginia Anglicans ignored their ministers, talked in church, and flirted with their neighbors—when their thoughts wandered to secular or sexual matters—they were engaged in behavioral patterns that bridged the Atlantic. In addition to being united by the stately cadences of common prayers, Anglo-American Anglicans also shared a common proclivity for inattentive church behavior.

The transatlantic nature of this common religious culture of inattention is best gauged by the behavior of Virginians in English churches. For example, William Byrd II, who fell asleep with equal ease in Williamsburg or Westminster, also recorded ogling a woman in a London church. Living in London and attempting to woo a wealthy wife, William Byrd found himself smitten and scorned by Mary Smith. When Smith refused to see or speak to him, Byrd followed her to church where he "put her in all the confusion in the world, her face glowing and her eyes looking conscious both of love and shame." Refusing to recognize Byrd, Smith instead "hid herself behind those that sat with her in the pew."¹¹⁰ Byrd's actions at church, repeated on three successive Sundays with similar embarrassment for Mary Smith, were comparable to his behavior at the opera, where he confided to his diary, "I had the pleasure to ogle my dear Miss Smith."¹¹¹ In his attempts to win his "Dearest . . . divinest Mrs. Smith," William Byrd the Virginian connected

¹⁰⁹[Edward Ward], *The Libertine's Choice: Or, The Mistaken Happiness of the Fool in Fashion* (London: 1704), 24. This 27-page pamphlet was reissued in a 1709 London edition printed by H. Hills.

¹¹⁰Byrd, *London Diary*, 106. See also 109, 112.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 96.

James Blair's Virginia "oglers" with the English "starers" and "peepers" of the *Spectator*.¹¹²

In addition to being a Virginia ogler in London, William Byrd II was also a Virginia author whose pen captured the imperial dimensions of religious inattention. Heavily influenced by the wit and style of the *Spectator* and *Guardian*, Byrd's private manuscripts repeatedly addressed church behaviors that were common on both sides of the Atlantic. In the *Female Creed*, Byrd's earthy, misogynistic diatribe on women, he referred to a minister named Mr. Cant who preached his "Congregation into a Lethargy."¹¹³ Although fictional, Cant's boring style mimics Byrd's own lethargic experiences in church and the "sleepy" and "dull" sermons he heard. Even closer to Byrd's own experience was his confession in an undated letter to "Bellamira" that "My Eys have stray'd towards you at church." Bellamira's identity is unknown, and Byrd's love letter to her may simply have been a literary diversion, yet the letter's admission that Byrd's ogling was done "in prejudice of my Devotion" provides a masculine commentary on the behavior that is absent from his account of staring at Mary Smith.¹¹⁴ Conversely, in another letter, to the unidentified "Vaporina," Byrd describes a woman's reaction to being stared at in church. Describing a woman whose rarified beauty made her uncomfortable, Byrd imagines her asking, "How many young fellows have neglected their Devotion at church to ogle me?"¹¹⁵ Perhaps reflecting his own embittered rejection at the hands of a beautiful woman, Byrd prescribed self-mutilation as a "remedy" that would "put an effectual stop to all the mischiefs occasion'd by her charms."¹¹⁶ Byrd's literary descriptions of church behavior were not always as violently misogynistic. In a letter to "My Lady C," he lampooned the behavior of an unnamed woman whose "Devotion at Church is very singular, for she ogles the young fellows dureing the service and casts up her Eys devoutly at publishing the Banes [*sic*] of Matrimony."¹¹⁷ Similarly, in the *Female Creed*, Byrd told a story of a woman whose attempts to conceal her pimples with patches resulted in "not one Fellow [looking] upon her dureing the whole

¹¹²Ibid., 345. On Byrd, see Lockridge, *The Diary and Life of William Byrd II*; Pierre Marambaud, *William Byrd of Westover, 1674–1744* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970); Kevin Berland, Jan Kristen Gilliam, and Kenneth A. Lockridge, eds., *The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2001); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage: The Commonplace Books of William Byrd and Thomas Jefferson and the Gendering of Power in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

¹¹³Byrd, *London Diary*, 473.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 243.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 272.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 273.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 268.

Service.”¹¹⁸ Beautiful ladies that promoted distraction, ogling men burning with desire, and presumptuous women who came to church looking for husbands populated both William Byrd’s imagination and his real-life experience on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

VII. CAUSALITIES

In establishing lay inattention as a widespread, transatlantic form of religious response—as common in London as Williamsburg—little has been said about the motivating factors behind these behaviors. In other words, why were people inattentive? Or, what cultural meaning did inattention have in eighteenth-century Anglo-America? Perhaps one reason for inattention lies in the established nature of the Church of England. In Virginia, where church attendance was mandated by law, inattentiveness may have been an attractive option for evangelical dissenters dissatisfied with the ecclesiastical establishment. Yet, in Virginia, the widespread popularity of inattention seems incongruent with the colony’s relatively limited numbers of dissenters. To argue that inattention and dissent were synonymous would be to suggest that dissenters had overrun the colony as early as James Blair’s lifetime; a point, incidentally, that both recent scholarship and Blair’s own testimony strongly refute.¹¹⁹ Moreover, despite laws requiring bi-monthly, and later monthly, church attendance—laws that evangelicals strongly opposed—the evidence of crowded churches suggests that many people exceeded the requirement and came to church regularly and voluntarily.¹²⁰ Indeed, describing church attendance as “a matter of personal choice,” one recent scholar has argued that “a form of voluntarism was emerging within the structure of the institutional church.”¹²¹ It should also be noted that the extant evidence, ministerial and otherwise, does not support the association between evangelicalism and inattentiveness.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 467.

¹¹⁹Describing Virginia in the preface to his sermons, Blair wrote, “It is a particular Felicity of that Country, not to be infested with the Enemies of the Christian Faith; so that we have little or no Occasion in our Sermons to enter the Lists with *Atheists, Deists, Arians, or Socinians*; nor are we much troubled with either *Popish* or *Protestant Recusants*; or any of the unhappy Distinctions, by which the Church of *England* is most unfortunately subdivided in this our Mother Country”: Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon*, I:xx. Rhys Isaac notes, “The first signs of the coming disturbance [that is, revivalism] in traditionally Anglican parts of Virginia appeared in Hanover County in about 1743”: Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 148. James Blair died in 1743. See also Edward L. Bond, “Anglican Theology and Devotion,” 340; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 101.

¹²⁰On attendance laws, see Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 244–249; Bond, *Damned Souls*, 283.

¹²¹Bond, *Damned Souls*, 283.

It could also be argued that inattentive behaviors were the product of visual or hearing impairments. Disabled parishioners, legally required like other residents to attend church, might have manifested their sense of exclusion from the proceedings by being inattentive. Yet, notwithstanding Andrew Pettegree's fascinating discussion of the Early Modern ubiquity of "blunted sight," it seems unlikely that the numbers of persons with disabilities ever approximated the large numbers of inattentive parishioners.¹²² Moreover, neither sermon chastisements nor lay accounts make any connections between inattention and physical disability.

Perhaps inattentive behaviors were spawned by inebriation. Scholars have long commented on the popularity of alcohol in early America, and contemporary Virginians, including William Byrd II, regularly mentioned liquor's ubiquitous presence in public and private life.¹²³ Indeed, Byrd clearly recognized the signs of inebriation; he scolded slaves for drunkenness, identified horse races, court days, and militia musters as places where excessive drinking occurred, and noticed when dinner guests drank too much.¹²⁴ Interestingly, in March 1709, while visiting James Blair in Williamsburg, Byrd noted that he was "very much surprised to find Mrs. Blair drunk."¹²⁵ Similarly, Landon Carter described excessive drinking at barbecues, by slaves, and by plantation overseers.¹²⁶ Importantly, while they encountered drunkenness in many other places, neither man ever recorded witnessing inebriation in church. Moreover, ministers themselves did not describe inattentive behaviors in terms of drunkenness. In a society where signs of inebriation were readily recognizable, it is telling that no one connected inattentive church behaviors to excessive drinking. Indeed, on the rare occasions when ministers mentioned alcohol, they routinely referenced activity *outside* the church. For example, Charles Clay composed two

¹²²Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107–109. See also Patrick Trevor-Roper, *The World Through Blunted Sight: An Inquiry into the Influence of Defective Vision on Art and Character* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1970).

¹²³On drinking in early America, see W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford: University Press, 1979), 25–57; Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History* (New York: Free Press, 1982), 2–40; Eric Burns, *The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 7–45. Although beyond the scope of this essay, it should be noted that some ministers also drank to excess. As Joan Gundersen notes, in at least one case the vestry accused their minister of drinking "all the communion wine on the way to services." Gundersen is careful to show that ministerial drunkenness was certainly the exception rather than the rule in colonial Anglican churches. For more information on ministerial drinking habits, see Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, 71, 124, 128, 130–136, 140–141. See also Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 190.

¹²⁴Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 53, 56, 75, 218, 233.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 12.

¹²⁶Carter, *Diary*, II:722, I:559; I:363.

complementary sermons for Christmas Day that roundly criticized the conventional observance of the holiday. Too many people, Clay argued, spent Christmas Day in “drunkenness & debauchery, Reveling & Swearing fiddling & Dancing.” “Is the way to praise God,” Clay asked his congregation, “to Curse Swear & blasphem[e], to game to get Drunk, to Run into every excess of Riot Regardless of all law human and Di[vine] as many of you are known to do?”¹²⁷ By Clay’s own account, however, the drinking started after church. In a second sermon on Christmas, Clay identified “hunting, Sporting, Gaming, [and] Drinking” as forbidden holiday sins and noted that absent parishioners skipped church to begin these festivities early; the churchgoers, he complained, would wait until services had ended.¹²⁸ Yet, in both Christmas sermons there is some ambiguity as to when the drinking started. In a passage repeated almost verbatim in both sermons, Clay described Christmas as “a Day of immunity, one privileged for the Commission of all kind of Wickedness, Vice, & immorality, & accordingly you begin the soking feast in the morning, & are early inflamed with Strong Drink.”¹²⁹ It is likely that the persons “inflamed with Strong Drink” were also those who skipped Christmas services to begin the “soking feast” early. Even if these drinkers came to church, Clay gives no description of their behavior. Indeed, aside from the comment that Christmas tipplers began drinking early at a time, ostensibly, when services were held, neither Clay, Blair, nor Douglass gave any indication that alcohol played a role in inattentive behaviors at church. Consequently, while drinking was a regular feature of colonial society, ensuring that commentators would recognize the signs of drunkenness when they saw them, there is no evidence from ministerial or lay sources to suggest that inattentive church behaviors were caused by or attributed to inebriation.

In addition to evangelicalism, disability, or inebriation, it might be argued that inattention represents a surging secularism—a grassroots opposition to establishment metaphysics presaging the civic religion of Jefferson’s 1788 Statute for Religious Freedom.¹³⁰ Yet, it would be genuinely ironic if the church was secularized by inattentive behaviors while secular almanacs and newspapers simultaneously continued to express religious values. Indeed,

¹²⁷Clay, Clay Family Papers (Mss1 C5795 a46). This sermon, labeled “For Christmas Day,” was delivered every year, presumably at Christmas, from 1774 through 1778 and again in 1786.

¹²⁸Ibid., (Mss1 C5795 a47). Only partially present, this sermon is undated.

¹²⁹Ibid., (Mss1 C5795 a47). The passage is recorded in both Christmas sermons with minor variances. The version recorded in (Mss1 C5795 a46) reads: “do you not Rather look upon it as a Day privileged for the Commissioned of all kinds of wickedness; & accordingly you begin the soping feast in the morning, & are enflamed with Strong Drink.”

¹³⁰Rhys Isaac refers to Jefferson’s bill as “a statute—utterly without precedent in the Atlantic World—declaring the unqualified separation of church from state”: Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 284.

religion was so deeply entrenched in Virginia, as evidenced by government-sponsored fast days, the widespread popularity of devotional works, and what one historian has called “the most thoroughgoing religious establishment in colonial British North America,” that widespread secularism seems an unlikely reason for inattention.¹³¹ Of course, the concept of secularism could imply something more nuanced than a generalized opposition to religious faith that was, admittedly, rare in colonial Virginia. In this sense, perhaps secularism can explain religious apathy, which, far more than religious antipathy, was a defining characteristic of parochial life. Indeed, because inattentive behaviors brought the secular world into the spiritual realm, behavioral patterns that valued “worldly Cares and Projects” over religious prescription were an undeniable form of secularized expression.¹³² Consequently, an appreciation for the secular world certainly contributed to church inattention, although this secularism fell well short of religious antipathy.

Inattention to the things of God and attentiveness to secular concerns—whether “Shops, and Stores, and Farms” or members of the opposite sex—is best explained by parochial boredom.¹³³ Indeed, wistfully looking out of windows, chit-chatting, and sauntering are indications of an unwillingness to preserve rapt attention throughout rather lengthy services. Boredom was certainly a fear expressed throughout preaching manuals. Gilbert Burnet reminded ministers that “the shorter Sermons are, they are generally both better heard, and better remembered.” Noting that hour-long sermons might “tempt [hearers] to sleep,” Burnet suggested that in a thirty-minute sermon a minister might “hope to keep up the Attention of his People.”¹³⁴ Likewise, Robert Dodsley noted, “If Pastors more than thrice five Minutes preach, Their sleepy Flocks begin to yawn, and stretch.”¹³⁵ And, for obvious reasons, Joseph Glanvill advised ministers to “avoid a droning dullness of speech.”¹³⁶ While it is difficult to assign a spoken duration to a written manuscript, it is clear from their length that Virginia sermons were not easily deliverable in thirty, or even forty-five, minutes.¹³⁷ Consequently, with the

¹³¹Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 4. For the popularity of devotional works see: Bond, *Damned Souls*, 273–275.

¹³²Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon*, III:66.

¹³³*Ibid.*, III:66.

¹³⁴Burnet, *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*, 222.

¹³⁵Dodsley, *The Art of Preaching*, 13.

¹³⁶Glanvill, *An Essay Concerning Preaching*, 79.

¹³⁷It should be noted that some, but certainly not all, manuscript sermons provide authorial clues that they may have been delivered in stages over the course of two or more Sundays. Moreover, Philip Vickers Fithian claimed that sermons in his parish were “seldom under & never over twenty minutes.” Still, the length of surviving sermons (in the case of Charles Clay running to thirty or more manuscript pages; in the case of Blair running fifteen or more printed pages) suggests that sermons were much longer than twenty minutes. Fithian did comment on one

accompanying liturgy, Sunday services could easily last several hours. The length of the service undoubtedly exacerbated the discomfort of an alternatively unheated or sweltering church and an uncomfortable wooden pew.¹³⁸ Indeed, given the length of the service, it is perhaps not surprising that, on those Sundays when Holy Communion was observed, the vast majority of colonial Virginians chose to leave church at the earliest permissible opportunity rather than stay for the sacrament.¹³⁹

Yet, if parishioners were inattentively bored, why did they attend church above and beyond the legal requirements? How were crowded churches and the culture of establishment “voluntarism” compatible with inattentiveness? The answer lies in seeing the church not merely as a place for religious instruction but also as a site for sociability. Given the scattered nature of Chesapeake settlement, weekly church gatherings were important exercises in communal interaction. They were opportunities for parishioners to advertise their produce, discuss current events, and reaffirm social bonds. As Philip Vickers Fithian noted, it was a “general custom” in Virginia for gentlemen to “consult about, determine their common business, either before or after service.” Following the service, parishioners might spend “three quarters of an hour . . . strolling round the Church among the Crowd.” Church services gave individuals an opportunity for “giving & receiving letters of business, reading Advertisements, consulting about the price of Tobacco, Grain &c. & settling either the lineage, Age, or qualities of favourite Horses.” Indeed, when Fithian arrived at church on Sunday, December 12, 1773, he found an advertisement for pork “to be sold tomorrow at 20/. Per Hundred” posted on the church door.¹⁴⁰ Philip Vickers

occasion that “Parson Smith gave the usual Prayers for the Day and a long Sermon very suitable & well chosen”: see Fithian, *Journal*, 167, 88, 41, 29.

¹³⁸There is evidence that some parishioners stayed away from church during warm or cold weather. On Sundays, such as January 30, 1774, when “the trees hang Bending with Ice, & all the ways are all glassy & slippery,” or February 13, 1774, when it was “very blustry with wind & Snow,” Philip Vickers Fithian wrote that “None think of going to Church.” When Fithian did go to church on a winter Sunday, his parson determined that “it was too Cold a Day to give us a Sermon.” In a similar instance on a December Sunday in 1747, faced with “Extreme Cold” and “knowing few people [would] report to church,” Rev. Robert Rose “stayed home all day.” A week later, he set out for church but while en route he received news that “nobody was there.” At a service two weeks later, again in the midst of winter, “there were a few Men but not one Woman.” Although Landon Carter was known to attend church in chilly weather, in March 1777 he noted, “I am afraid it will be too cold for me to go to Church.” Alternatively, in July 1709, William Byrd wrote, “It was so very hot that I omitted going to church”: see Fithian, *Journal* 61, 65, 67; Rose, *Diary*, 23; Carter, *Diary*, II:1087; see also II:400, II:616; Byrd, *Secret Diary*, 63.

¹³⁹Virginians’ reluctance to participate in Holy Communion is well documented. See Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 196–199. Joan Gundersen provides another view of communicant participation in *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia*, 185.

¹⁴⁰Fithian, *Journal*, 29, 167, 29.

Fithian was not alone in describing a church culture of sociability; extant diaries brim with accounts of people encountered and news acquired at church. For example, Landon Carter noted in 1777 that “a report” of a revolutionary victory “Prevailed at Church.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, Carter, Fithian, William Byrd II, and the less affluent John Harrower were constantly meeting people at church with whom they later dined. Consequently, it is plausible to suggest that some people came to church both because the law required it and because they desired the sociability to be found there. In this light, lengthy services must have been a somewhat unwelcome interruption of the chit-chatting, gossiping, and wheeling and dealing that occurred before and after the service. Inattentive parishioners who demonstrated boredom with services through chatting, ogling, or sauntering were merely continuing the patterns of sociability that drew them to church.

VIII. CONCLUSION: ‘HORSE-SHED’ ANGLICANS IN AN ATLANTIC WORLD

Describing the majority of Anglo-American Anglicans as bored and, therefore, inattentive requires some modification of the existing historiography of the Anglican Church in Virginia. As we have seen, historians have described the colony’s parishioners in mutually self-exclusive terms. Anglicans were alternatively hegemonic elites who used the church to cement their social position or pious Prayer Book–reading Christians dedicated to their church’s prescriptive teachings on repentance. Based on the evidence for inattention presented here, a third historiographic option—describing some, but certainly not all, Anglicans as inattentively bored—seems necessary. A model for such a historiographic category exists outside of Anglican studies in the field of New English popular religion. There, David D. Hall has definitively argued that a sizeable number of New England Puritans were “horse-shed Christians.” These were less-than-zealous pew-fillers who “limit[ed] their commitment to the church.” Hall describes this group of New Englanders by noting their “indifference” to the prescription of the church. Some engaged in “mischief” during services while others gathered at the horse shed to discuss grain and horse prices.¹⁴² Hall’s point is that lay inattentiveness

¹⁴¹Landon Carter, *Diary*, II:1074.

¹⁴²David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 15, 16. “Theirs was thus a faith that settled at a lower pitch, the pitch of “horse-shed” Christians . . . Content to read about the martyrs without being such themselves, such ordinary Christians went to Church and between services talked animatedly of ‘their Farms, their Crops of Corn, their Horses, their Cows: or what’s the Price of this or that Commodity’”: Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 138.

constituted a viable parochial response among Puritans. Importantly, “horse-shed” Christianity need not imply radical secularism or revolutionary evangelicalism. Horse-shed Christians, whether in Massachusetts or Virginia, were no more violently opposed to established religion than they were religiously zealous. They were simply bored, apathetic, and indifferent.

Clearly Hall’s concept of the “horse-shed Christian” is applicable beyond the boundaries of New England. As we have seen, Virginia Anglicans demonstrated similar forms of religious inattention. Indeed, describing some Virginia Anglicans as “horse-shed Christians” seems as plausible as describing others as hegemonically elite or penitently pious. Moreover, given the transatlantic ubiquity of lay inattention, horse-shed Christianity seems to accurately describe the religious sensibilities of a large number of parishioners—both metropolitan and colonial—in the British Atlantic. Consequently, in the sense that Anglo-Americans regardless of geographic location engaged in inattentive behaviors, they participated in a common “horse-shed” religious culture. Indeed, the large numbers of chit-chatters and saunterers would have found cultural commonalities in both English cathedrals, Virginia churches, and Massachusetts meetinghouses.

The congruity between Anglican sermon chastisements, lay descriptions of church behavior, transatlantically popular devotional works, and widely circulated magazines suggests that inattentive church behaviors were common in the British Atlantic. Indeed, the evidence presented here suggests that church inattentiveness—or “horse-shed” Christianity—was an imperial phenomenon that transcended geographic and denominational boundaries. Given its nearly ubiquitous presence in sermons, diaries, and devotional and secular texts, lay inattentiveness clearly constituted a common parochial response—a shared religious culture—in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. While many Anglicans undoubtedly came to church to worship and pray, many others came to chat, ogle, and sleep. Consequently, when Virginians flirted with their neighbors, ignored their ministers, and sauntered about the church, they were engaged in activities that bridged the empire. Indeed, when bored parishioners stared blankly out of Virginia church windows, an empire of similarly uninterested churchgoers stared back.