

# **"Sermon Preached at Cambridge" (1770) by Samuel Cooke: A Canonical Book:**

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**



*Joseph D. Backus*

*B B 5*

S E R M O N

PREACHED AT CAMBRIDGE,

IN THE

AUDIENCE OF HIS HONOR

THOMAS HUTCHINSON, Esq;

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR AND COMMANDER IN CHIEF;

THE HONORABLE

HIS MAJESTY'S COUNCIL,

AND THE HONORABLE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

OF THE PROVINCE OF THE

*Massachusetts-Bay in New-England,*

MAY 30th, 1770.

BEING THE ANNIVERSARY FOR THE ELECTION OF HIS  
MAJESTY'S COUNCIL FOR THE SAID PROVINCE.

BY SAMUEL COOKE, A.M.

Pastor of the Second Church in CAMBRIDGE.

B O S T O N :

PRINTED BY EDES AND GILL, PRINTERS TO THE  
HONORABLE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

MDCCLXX.

**"ON THAT NIGHT THE FOUNDATION OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE WAS LAID" (JOHN ADAMS): RARE FIRST EDITION OF SAMUEL COOKE'S BOLD MAY 30, 1770, *SERMON*, DELIVERED WITHIN THREE MONTHS OF THE BOSTON MASSACRE—"MANY OF THE PRINCIPLES ON WHICH THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE RESTS ARE ALREADY HERE"**

*First edition of Reverend Samuel Cooke's May 30, 1770 Sermon—"blending the ideas of Locke with the idiom and structure of Biblical verse"—a profoundly influential call for constitutional authority over rulers, the rights of "Men, who are... by nature equal," the need for checks and balances between "branches of power," and highly notable in early defense of "the cause of our African slaves."*

After British soldiers opened fire in the Boston Massacre, John Adams noted: "On that night, the foundation of American Independence was laid. Not the Battle of Lexington or Bunker Hill, not the surrender of Burgoyne or Cornwallis, were more important events in American history than the battle of King Street on the 5th of March, 1770" (National Constitution Center). On May 30, 1770, less than three months after the Boston Massacre, Reverend Samuel Cooke, a graduate of Harvard College, stood in Cambridge's Second Church to deliver this bold Election Day *Sermon* to an audience that included Britain's embattled colonial governor Thomas Hutchinson and America's fiery Samuel Adams. Revolutionary-era Election Day sermons were "delivered on the only official holiday in new England... the premiere public forum for clergymen to voice their views about colonial politics" (Silva, *Increase Mather's 1693 Election Sermon*, 48-51).

Cooke's *Sermon*, "one of the finest reviews of enlightened political theory in the history of Massachusetts election sermons," is especially forceful "in its comprehensiveness; *it says it all for 1770... many of the principles on which the Declaration of Independence rests are already here*: civil government is an ordinance of God; only the people have the right to choose who will rule, them; the government must contain a balance of power with built-in checks" (Plumstead, *Wall & Garden*, 324-25; emphasis added). A ruler, he declares, must "not forget that he ruleth over *Men—Men, who are... by nature equal*" (emphasis in original). "Blending the ideas of Locke with the idiom and structure of Biblical verse" (Plumstead, 325), he pointedly argues the authority of constitutions, stating: "rulers are appointed guardians of the constitution... and must confine themselves within the limits by which their authority is circumscribed." He is also distinctive in using this *Sermon* to speak out on "the cause of our African slaves": calling for "effectual measures, at least, to prevent the future importation of them." Although Cooke urges reconciliation of the differences with Britain, this *Sermon* "is clear in intent; America has a right to enjoy and direct her own domain—a right sanctioned not only by God... but now by almost 150 years of history" (Plumstead, 324-25). First edition, first printing: without half title. Resolution signed in print by "Samuel Adams, Clerk." Woodcut-engraved initial, head- and tailpiece. Evans 11613. Sabin 16348. ESTC W29234. Early owner signature above title page. Occasional marginalia mainly to rear blank.

COOKE, Samuel, A.M. A Sermon Preached at Cambridge, In the Audience of his Honor Thomas Hutchinson, Esq; Lieutenant-Governor and Commander in Chief: The Honorable His Majesty's

Council, And the Honorable House of Representatives, Of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New England, May 30th, 1770. Being the Anniversary for the Election of His Majesty's Council for the Said Province. Boston: Printed by Edes and Gill, 1770. Octavo, period-style marbled wraps; pp. (3-5), 6-49 (1).

Text generally fresh with light scattered foxing, tiny corner loss to title page not affecting text, expert paper repair to rear leaf.

## Introduction

Samuel Cooke's "Sermon Preached at Cambridge" stands as a pivotal document in pre-Revolutionary America, delivered at a critical juncture in the colonies' relationship with Great Britain. Preached on May 30, 1770, this election sermon was delivered in the audience of Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives of Massachusetts Bay. The timing was particularly significant, coming just three months after the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, when British soldiers killed five civilians, inflaming anti-British sentiment throughout the colonies. Cooke delivered this sermon on Election Day, an annual civic occasion when a new Council was elected to serve as advisors to the colonial governor[1]. Among those in attendance were prominent revolutionary figures including Samuel Adams (who served as clerk) and John Hancock[8].

The cultural and political climate surrounding this sermon was one of increasing tension between the American colonies and Great Britain. The Stamp Act of 1765, though repealed, had ignited colonial resistance to taxation without representation. By 1770, the Townshend Acts had further strained relations, leading to boycotts and protests throughout the colonies. The Boston Massacre had transformed theoretical political disagreements into bloody reality, making Cooke's sermon all the more poignant as he addressed the very authorities responsible for maintaining British rule in Massachusetts[7].

Economically, the colonies were chafing under British mercantile policies that restricted their trade and manufacturing. This sermon was delivered in a context where colonists increasingly questioned not just specific policies but the fundamental nature of legitimate governance. Cooke's motivation appears to have been to articulate a theological foundation for just governance that would resonate with both the colonial leadership and the broader population, using biblical principles to subtly challenge British authority while maintaining the appearance of loyalty to the Crown[2].

## The Author

Samuel Cooke (1709-1783) was a Harvard-educated Congregational minister who served as pastor of the Second Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts for over four decades. Born in Hadley, Massachusetts, Cooke came from a family with deep New England roots and a tradition of military service. His great-grandfather and grandfather had been militia captains in frontier

Massachusetts, where such service involved actual combat rather than mere ceremonial duties. His great-grandfather gained fame as a "killer of wolves" and helped found three towns, while his grandfather represented Hampshire County in the General Court in Boston[7].

Cooke graduated from Harvard College in 1735, during the administration of Massachusetts and New Hampshire Governor Jonathan Belcher. After completing his education, he was installed as minister of the Menotomy Church (Second Church of Cambridge) in 1740, where he would remain until his death. He purchased land from parishioner Jason Russell to build his home on Pleasant Street, where he lived with his three successive wives throughout his ministry[7].

As a minister, Cooke was known for his "good sense and prudence" and was described as "a man of science, of a social disposition" who served as "a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus"[4]. His reputation and theological acumen led to his selection for several prestigious preaching opportunities beyond his regular pastoral duties. Before his famous 1770 election sermon, Cooke had delivered the Artillery Election sermon in 1753 and the Dudleian Lecture at Harvard in 1767[7].

Cooke's theological position placed him within the Reformed tradition, though he was not as evangelical as some of his contemporaries. He was part of a generation of ministers who helped shape colonial political thought through their pulpits, interpreting current events through a theological lens that emphasized both divine providence and natural rights. He died on June 4, 1783, at the age of 74, having lived to see the American Revolution come to fruition and the establishment of the independent nation whose philosophical foundations he had helped to articulate[4].

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

Samuel Cooke's "Sermon Preached at Cambridge" deserves canonical status because it represents a crucial link between Puritan political theology and Revolutionary political philosophy. This sermon articulates many of the foundational principles that would later appear in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, demonstrating how religious thought informed and shaped American political identity in the Revolutionary era[6].

First, Cooke's sermon establishes the theological basis for legitimate civil government while simultaneously setting limits on governmental authority. He argues that while government is divinely ordained, the specific form of government is "left to the choice and determination of mankind"[3]. This distinction provided theological justification for the colonists to question and ultimately reject British rule without rejecting the concept of government itself. By framing government as an institution that derives its legitimacy from both divine ordination and popular consent, Cooke helped bridge religious authority and democratic principles.

Second, the sermon articulates a theory of natural equality that would become central to American political thought. Cooke reminds rulers that they govern over "men who are of the



same species with himself, and by nature equal,—men who are the offspring of God, and alike formed after his glorious image"[6]. This concept of natural equality, derived from theological premises, would later be secularized in Jefferson's famous declaration that "all men are created equal."

Third, Cooke's sermon develops a sophisticated understanding of checks and balances in government. He argues that "in the present imperfect state, the whole power cannot with safety be entrusted with a single person; nor with many, acting jointly in the same public capacity. Various branches of power, concentrating in the community from which they originally derive their authority, are a mutual check to each other in their several departments, and jointly secure the common interest"[6]. This anticipates the system of separated powers that would become a hallmark of American constitutionalism.

Fourth, the sermon articulates a theory of government accountability to the people. Cooke declares that rulers "in the whole of their public conduct, are accountable to the society which gave them their political existence"[6]. This principle of governmental accountability to the governed would become a cornerstone of American republican thought.

Finally, Cooke's sermon exemplifies how the election sermon tradition served as a crucial vehicle for political discourse in colonial America. These sermons provided a platform for ministers to address political issues through a theological lens, helping to shape public opinion and political thought. The election sermon tradition, of which Cooke's is a prime example, represents an important aspect of early American political culture that combined religious and political discourse[12].

As one historian has noted, "Many of the principles on which the Declaration of Independence rests are already here" in Cooke's sermon[6]. By articulating these principles in 1770, six years before the Declaration, Cooke's sermon helps us understand the intellectual foundations of American independence and constitutionalism, making it an essential text in the American political canon.

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God." (2 Samuel 23:3)[3]

This biblical quotation, which serves as the foundational text for Cooke's sermon, encapsulates the essential qualities required of those in positions of authority. Its relevance to our current times cannot be overstated. In an era of increasing political polarization and questions about the character of our leaders, this quote reminds us that justice and moral accountability are timeless requirements for legitimate governance. The phrase "ruling in the fear of God" speaks to the need for leaders to recognize a higher moral authority beyond themselves, whether understood in explicitly religious terms or as a commitment to universal ethical principles. This quote

challenges contemporary leaders to consider whether their governance is truly just and whether they recognize limits to their own authority.

2. "The people, the collective body only, have a right under God, to determine who shall exercise this trust for the common interest, and to fix the bounds of their authority." [6]

This quote articulates a fundamental principle of democratic governance: that political authority ultimately derives from the consent of the governed. In our current political climate, where debates about voting rights, electoral systems, and the nature of representation are prominent, this quote reminds us that the legitimacy of government rests on its accountability to the people. It challenges us to examine whether our political institutions truly reflect the will of "the collective body" and whether we have adequately "fixed the bounds" of governmental authority. This principle remains essential to evaluating the health of our democracy and the legitimacy of our political institutions.

3. "Rulers are appointed for this very end—to be ministers of God for good. The people have a right to expect this from them, and to require it, not as an act of grace, but as their unquestionable due." [6]

This quote powerfully articulates the purpose of government—to serve the common good—and frames good governance not as a privilege bestowed by benevolent rulers but as the rightful expectation of citizens. In contemporary politics, where public service is sometimes treated as a path to personal power or enrichment, this quote reminds us that the fundamental purpose of government is to serve the welfare of the people. It challenges both citizens and leaders to evaluate governance based on whether it effectively promotes the common good, and it empowers citizens to demand good governance as their "unquestionable due" rather than as a favor granted by those in power.

4. "Various branches of power, concentrating in the community from which they originally derive their authority, are a mutual check to each other in their several departments, and jointly secure the common interest." [6]

This quote articulates the principle of separated powers and checks and balances that would become central to American constitutionalism. Its relevance to current debates about executive power, judicial independence, and legislative authority is clear. As we witness tensions between branches of government and debates about the proper limits of each branch's authority, this quote reminds us that the separation of powers is not merely a procedural arrangement but a substantive safeguard for liberty and the common good. It challenges us to maintain the delicate balance between governmental branches and to resist attempts by any branch to accumulate unchecked power.

5. "The first attention of the faithful ruler will be to the subjects of government in their specific nature. He will not forget that he ruleth over men,—men who are of the same species with himself, and by nature equal." [6]

This quote articulates a profound commitment to human equality that transcends its historical context. In our current era, marked by ongoing struggles for racial justice, gender equality, and recognition of human dignity across differences, this quote reminds us that equality is not merely a political slogan but a fundamental truth about human nature. It challenges leaders to recognize the equal worth and dignity of all those they govern, regardless of differences in wealth, status, race, gender, or other characteristics. This principle remains essential for evaluating whether our political institutions truly serve all citizens equally and respect the inherent dignity of each person.

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. Divine Origin and Popular Foundation of Government**

Cooke articulates a sophisticated theory of government that balances divine ordination with popular consent. He argues that while government itself is "an ordinance of God," the "particular form is left to the choice and determination of mankind"[3]. This dual foundation allows Cooke to maintain the sacred character of government while also insisting on its accountability to the people. He writes that rulers "in the whole of their public conduct, are accountable to the society which gave them their political existence"[6]. This balance between divine and popular authority provided a theological justification for resistance to tyranny without descending into anarchy. By framing government as both divinely ordained and popularly established, Cooke helped colonists navigate the moral complexities of challenging established authority while maintaining social order.

### **2. Natural Equality as the Basis for Just Governance**

Throughout the sermon, Cooke emphasizes the natural equality of all humans as a fundamental principle that should guide governance. He reminds rulers that they govern over "men who are of the same species with himself, and by nature equal,—men who are the offspring of God, and alike formed after his glorious image"[6]. This theological understanding of equality provided a powerful foundation for political equality. By grounding human equality in divine creation, Cooke establishes it as an immutable truth rather than a mere social convention. This principle challenges rulers to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of those they govern, regardless of social status or other distinctions. This theological articulation of natural equality would later be secularized in the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "all men are created equal."

### **3. The Necessity of Checks and Balances**

Cooke argues that due to human fallibility, power must be distributed among different branches of government to prevent tyranny. He writes that "in the present imperfect state, the whole power cannot with safety be entrusted with a single person; nor with many, acting jointly in the same public capacity. Various branches of power, concentrating in the community from which they originally derive their authority, are a mutual check to each other in their several departments,



and jointly secure the common interest"[6]. This sophisticated understanding of separated powers anticipates the system of checks and balances that would become central to American constitutionalism. Cooke's recognition of human fallibility—that even well-intentioned rulers are subject to corruption and error—provides a theological justification for institutional constraints on power rather than merely relying on the virtue of leaders.

#### **4. The Fear of God as a Restraint on Power**

Cooke emphasizes that rulers must govern "in the fear of God," recognizing a higher authority to which they are accountable. He argues that "the true fear of God only is sufficient to control the lusts of men, and especially the lust of dominion, to suppress pride, the bane of every desirable quality in the human soul, the never failing source of wanton and capricious power"[6]. This theological principle serves a practical political purpose by establishing a moral constraint on rulers that transcends human institutions. By insisting that rulers are accountable to God, Cooke provides a basis for evaluating and potentially resisting unjust governance. This principle challenges the absolutist claims of monarchs and establishes moral limits on political authority that cannot be overridden by appeals to tradition, law, or expediency.

#### **5. The Purpose of Government as Promoting the Common Good**

Throughout the sermon, Cooke emphasizes that the fundamental purpose of government is to promote the welfare of the people. He writes that "rulers are appointed for this very end—to be ministers of God for good. The people have a right to expect this from them, and to require it, not as an act of grace, but as their unquestionable due"[6]. This teleological understanding of government provides a standard by which to evaluate the legitimacy of political authority. If government fails to promote the common good, it fails in its essential purpose and loses its claim to obedience. This principle establishes the promotion of public welfare, rather than the maintenance of order or tradition, as the primary criterion for legitimate governance. By framing good governance as the "unquestionable due" of the people rather than a gift from benevolent rulers, Cooke empowers citizens to demand that government fulfill its proper function.

### **Three Major Controversies**

#### **1. The Tension Between Loyalty and Resistance**

One of the most significant controversies surrounding Cooke's sermon was its navigation of the delicate balance between professing loyalty to the British Crown while articulating principles that could justify resistance. Cooke explicitly states that the colonists "glory in the British constitution, and are abhorrent, to a man, of the most distant thought of withdrawing their allegiance from their gracious Sovereign, and becoming an independent state"[2]. Yet the principles he articulates—popular sovereignty, governmental accountability, natural equality—provide a theoretical foundation for precisely such independence.

This tension reflects the broader political dilemma facing colonists in 1770. Many still hoped for reconciliation with Britain and reform within the imperial system rather than outright independence. Critics of sermons like Cooke's might have seen them as disingenuous—professing loyalty while undermining the foundations of that loyalty. Defenders would argue that Cooke was sincerely attempting to articulate principles that could reform rather than destroy the imperial relationship. This controversy highlights the evolutionary rather than revolutionary nature of American independence, as colonists gradually developed a political theology that would ultimately justify separation from Britain.

## **2. The Role of Religion in Political Discourse**

Cooke's sermon exemplifies how religious discourse shaped political thought in colonial America, but this integration of religion and politics was not without controversy. By using biblical texts and theological concepts to address political questions, ministers like Cooke claimed a role in political discourse that some might have seen as overstepping clerical boundaries. The election sermon tradition itself represented an institutional fusion of religious and political authority that would become increasingly controversial as America moved toward greater separation of church and state.

This controversy continues to resonate in debates about the proper role of religious discourse in American public life. Some view America's founding principles as fundamentally religious in origin and argue for a continued prominent role for religious values in political discourse. Others emphasize the Enlightenment influences on American political thought and advocate for a more secular public square. Cooke's sermon, with its blend of theological principles and practical political recommendations, stands at the intersection of these competing visions of American political culture.

## **3. The Limits of Equality**

While Cooke articulates a powerful vision of natural human equality, the application of this principle was limited in practice. When Cooke speaks of men being "by nature equal," he does not explicitly extend this equality to women, enslaved people, or Native Americans. In fact, the sermon was delivered in a context where slavery was still legal in Massachusetts and women were excluded from political participation. This tension between theoretical equality and practical inequality represents a significant controversy in American political thought.

Interestingly, according to one source, Cooke did use the occasion of this sermon to "plead the cause of our African slaves" and express a wish for the abolition of the slave trade[2]. This suggests that Cooke may have recognized some of the implications of his egalitarian principles beyond their immediate political context. Nevertheless, the gap between the universal language of equality and its limited application in practice represents a fundamental tension in American political thought that continues to this day. This controversy challenges us to consider whether America's founding principles contained the seeds of a more inclusive equality that would

gradually be realized through ongoing struggles for justice, or whether these principles were fundamentally limited by the prejudices of their time.

## In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read Samuel Cooke's "Sermon Preached at Cambridge" because it provides crucial insight into the religious and philosophical foundations of American political thought. This sermon demonstrates how theological concepts were translated into political principles that would shape the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. By understanding these intellectual origins, citizens can better appreciate the moral and philosophical depth of American political institutions.

The sermon also illuminates the complex relationship between religion and politics in American history. Rather than supporting either a purely religious or purely secular understanding of America's founding, Cooke's sermon reveals how religious and Enlightenment ideas interacted to produce a distinctive American political philosophy. This historical perspective can help citizens navigate contemporary debates about the role of religion in public life with greater nuance and historical awareness.

Furthermore, Cooke's sermon addresses perennial questions about the nature and limits of political authority that remain relevant today. His emphasis on the accountability of rulers to the people, the necessity of checks and balances, and the purpose of government as promoting the common good provides a framework for evaluating contemporary political institutions and leaders. At a time when many Americans are concerned about the health of our democracy, Cooke's articulation of the principles of just governance offers valuable guidance.

The sermon also demonstrates the importance of moral constraints on political power. Cooke's insistence that rulers must govern "in the fear of God" reminds us that political authority is not absolute but is bound by moral principles that transcend human institutions. This perspective challenges citizens to hold leaders accountable to ethical standards and to resist the temptation to evaluate politics solely in terms of partisan advantage or material interest.

Finally, reading Cooke's sermon helps citizens understand the evolutionary nature of American independence. Rather than emerging fully formed as a revolutionary ideology, the principles that would justify American independence developed gradually through sermons, pamphlets, and other forms of public discourse. By witnessing this development in process, citizens can better appreciate the intellectual labor that went into articulating America's founding principles and the ongoing work required to realize those principles more fully in each generation.

In an era of political polarization and historical amnesia, returning to foundational texts like Cooke's sermon can help Americans reconnect with the deeper principles that unite us as a political community while also acknowledging the tensions and contradictions that have been

present from the beginning. This historical perspective is essential for thoughtful citizenship and for the continued vitality of American democracy.

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