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Samuel Davies and Patrick Henry: Introductory Remarks

1. Samuel Davies was the Martin Luther of Virginia, the organizer of its first Presbytery, a renowned homilist and writer who advanced Presbyterian ideas through published sermons, poems, and defenses of religious liberty in the *Virginia Gazette*.
2. Patrick Henry and his family on three sides, over a span of three generations, were central to the triumph of Presbyterianism in Hanover.
3. Samuel Davies' pulpit oratory shaped Patrick Henry's powerful political oratory, an influence he freely and enthusiastically acknowledged.
4. The arguments Samuel Davies and then Patrick Henry advanced in support of religious toleration and then religious freedom became part of the language defending political liberty and independence from the English crown.
5. The long history of Scots and Presbyterians in opposing repeated English attempts to control their political, educational, and religious life provided the Scots Presbyterians and English dissenters of Hanover County with a number of arguments and doctrines which they used in defending their religious and political rights. In addition, their religious practices encouraged careful reading and discussion of scripture and other texts, debates concerning scriptural and doctrinal interpretation, and the right and duty of self government, including congregational selection of clergy.
6. The "Great Awakening" brought Samuel Davies to Hanover as an innovative and gifted religious leader. His oratory converted Patrick Henry's mother and sisters to Presbyterianism. Although he remained an Anglican throughout his life, young Patrick attended Presbyterian services with his mother in his youth. According to family legend, while driving the carriage back home after services, he was asked to repeat back Davies' sermon, and began to give signs of a gift for oratory.
7. The pulpit oratory of Samuel Davies was the product of "New Light" or "New Side" Scottish Enlightenment teachings at the universities of Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh and brought to the colonies after the 1720s by Scots and Scots-Irish Presbyterians. Key features of these teachings were an emphasis upon the vernacular in classroom lectures and the pulpit, the doctrine that humans are created by God with an innate moral sense, that their love of God and willingness to obey his commandments is

evidence of this God-given endowment, and a shift away from the earlier Calvinist emphasis upon sin, fear, and punishment—"preaching the terrors" as it had come to be called. Instead the homiletics taught in the Scottish schools emphasized positive models of joy, grace, the promise of forgiveness, and the use of literary alongside scriptural readings to stimulate and guide the moral sense.

8. The homiletic practices of Samuel Davies should be studied by students of divinity because they bear with them a rich history of Presbyterian doctrines concerning the nature of the soul, the purposes of preaching, the role of the laity in religious communities and, most of all, beautiful examples of the eloquence that the eighteenth-century enlightenment brought to the pulpit. Davies often quotes from contemporary as well as classical poetry and literature. Alongside Biblical passages he places familiar and popular examples of faith, virtue, and religious joy. Unlike "Old Side" Calvinist preachers, Davies and other New Lights were unafraid of emotion and the religious passions that could and should be stirred by edifying and beautiful oratory. The moral sense; and the senses, "the heart" were regarded as God's gift.

9. The oratory of Patrick Henry should be revisited with an eye to Henry's life-long involvement in the struggle for religious freedom in Hanover. Many of the arguments he develops in his first court case, the Parson's Cause, and then in his first speech to the House of Burgesses, come straight out of Scottish political theories of self-government, the mutual duties of monarch and people, the right and duty of the people to resist and if necessary depose an unjust monarch, and the common sense of the common man when he sees or hears of an injustice. Moreover, the language of liberty, freedom, and rights had religious meanings for his Hanover constituents which have been lost to us. The same is true for the language of the Declaration of Independence.

Suggested Readings:

George Bost, "Samuel Davies, the South's Great Awakener." *Journal of Presbyterian History* 33 (1955) 135-156.

Charles Cohen, "The Liberty or Death Speech: A Note on Religion and Revolutionary Rhetoric." *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd. ser. 38 (1981) 702-17.

David McCants, *Patrick Henry, the Orator*. Greenwood P, 1990.

Rodger Payne, "New Light in Hanover County: Evangelical Dissent in Piedmont Virginia 1740-1755." *Journal of Southern History* 61: 4 (Nov. 1995) 665-694.

George William Pilcher, *Samuel Davies, Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia*. U of Tennessee P, 1971.

Stewart M. Robinson, "And... we mutually pledge..." *the Spirit of the Declaration of Independence and the Writings of the Colonial Clergy Which Are Reflected Therein*. The Long House P, 1964. Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The*

Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening, 1625-1760. Oxford UP 1980.