METHODISM entered the White House for the fifth time in 1897, but William McKinley was determined that his faith would not keep him from being a national leader in an age of emerging religious pluralism. He wanted to be well-liked by all men. Yet he was not ashamed of the Gospel or his church. He was equally determined that his office should not interfere with his faith, his worship, or his relationship with his pastor. But McKinley stood on the edge of the modern Presidency in which privacy would be at a minimum. Before he left Canton, Ohio, for the inauguration, McKinley asked that no special attention be given to his plan to attend the Metropolitan Methodist Church in Washington.

Hugh Johnston, the pastor of Metropolitan, shared the illusions of the President-elect. He was prepared to welcome the President as another parishioner, but he had no intention of becoming a power in the administration or having his church regarded as an extension of the Executive Mansion. He wanted to be the President’s pastor. He had little interest in politics or power. William McKinley would be just another worshipper. Like McKinley, Johnston failed to understand that this is impossible in a modern democracy. Like every man close to the President, he and his words would be carefully studied.

In 1897 the Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church seemed admirably located part-way between the Capitol and the Executive Mansion. Cars now fill a parking lot on the site where the towering Gothic building had been erected in 1869. Surrounded by residential buildings the 2,500-seat edifice was a prominent landmark. One of the charter members had been Ulysses S. Grant, who regularly worshiped from a fourth row pew which had been set aside for the President. Since 1877, the pew had been vacant. Directly in front of this pew stood a pulpit made of Palestinian olivewood. In March of 1893 a fifty-three-year-old preacher from Canada entered this pulpit to begin his first American pastorate. On his sturdy five-foot, ten-inch frame he carried no more weight than was fashionable for the times.

Although an American by virtue of his American parentage, he had lived and worked only in Canada. His father had migrated from New Jersey to homestead in Ontario Province. Here Hugh was born in 1840. In true pioneer fashion he received his early education by the light of the fireplace after the evening chores were completed.
In 1865 he was graduated valedictorian from Victoria College in Toronto and ordained a minister in the Canadian Methodist Church. The lack of financial resources and the acquisition of a family forced him to spread his seminary education over nine years while serving a number of churches. In 1874 with seminary behind him he devoted his energies to a succession of distinguished pastorates. By 1893 his reputation was such that Bishop Hurst and the pastoral relations committee of Metropolitan had no hesitancy about inviting him to accept the pastorate of the national Methodist church. Hugh Johnston had no hesitancy about accepting. He had always thought of himself as an American. His great-grandfather had marched in the ranks of the Continental Army. When he arrived in Washington, he secured from the Secretary of State a certificate stating that he had always been a citizen of the United States. This meant that his seven sons were also citizens, and he was eager to see them have the advantages of education and work in the land of opportunity.

Diligently he set about his pastoral duties. By 6:30 each morning he would be in his study reading or working on his sermon, but he never found it difficult to tear himself from his desk. He was always eager to be out in the homes and the hospital rooms of his flock. He had the rare faculty of being able to interject humor into tense situations without being unsympathetic. While this humor rarely found its way into his sermons, his articles and books abound with it.

In commenting on the image of Americans held by Europeans he wrote, “The old saying, that none but lords and fools ride first class, has been modified to none but lords and Americans.”

Each Sunday he delivered two polished discourses. He always wrote a complete manuscript but rarely used notes. Saturday morning he would take a long walk away from the city going over his sermons as he went. At the beginning of his ministry he had saved his sermons with the intention of using them in his next parish. When he went to Europe one summer, he left them with a friend. Upon his return they could not be located. He decided then that he would write a new sermon every week. Ironically, the box of sermons was found and sent to him shortly before he died. His sermons reflected his broad reading and scholarship, but he once stated his aim as “simplicity and directness rather than originality or scholarship.” If his erudition sometimes got in the way of his message, it was not by design.

Theologically conservative, in his book, Beyond Death, he took to task liberals like William Newton Clarke of Colgate and George Stevens of Yale. Affirming his belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture, Original Sin, Salvation through Grace, the Last Judgment, and Heaven and Hell, he concludes, “A religion that can ignore or play with such essential doctrines may borrow from the gospel, as it
borrows from philosophy, but it can scarcely be called Christianity.”

Johnston did not shrink from the idea of the wrath of God either. He wrote, “The punishment of sin must fill the divine heart with deepest grief, but sin remains sin and God himself cannot save those who will not be saved.” Sin consisted of violating the Ten Commandments. To the Ten he added four more: Thou shalt not drink. Thou shalt not play cards. Thou shalt not dance. Thou shalt not attend the theatre. He was not caught up in the enthusiasm for the Social Gospel. He told a group of graduating seniors, “What is needed is not so much to improve our institutions as to improve men. Make men better, and you ameliorate every condition of society.” Few in his congregation would disagree with these views. To sermons in this framework William McKinley would listen in his first year as President.

Religion and the church had always played an important part in the life of William McKinley. As an earnest lad of ten he had gone forward to kneel before the altar-rail in his home church and confessed, “I have not done my duty; I have sinned; I want to be a Christian.” Even the reality to which he was exposed as a soldier in the Civil War could not shake this faith. Following the War he was active in The Methodist Church in Canton and for a time acted as Sunday school superintendent.

During his Presidency and since many critics have been ready to agree with The Nation which in 1899 commented, “His so-called faith is the faith of a man who shrewdly orders his conduct with an eye single to his own immediate success.” As in the case of most persistent criticism, there was some truth to this statement. In 1892 he told a group of Y.M.C.A. leaders,

No man gets on so well in this world as he whose daily walk and conversation are clean and consistent, whose heart is pure and whose life is honorable. A religious spirit helps every man.

There is little doubt that McKinley cultivated his religiosity.

The seeds of this faith were planted long before he began to cultivate. He once told a group of churchmen, “I mean to live and die, please God, in the faith of my mother.” From his earliest years Nancy McKinley had guided William’s religious development. Known as the “peacemaker” in the town of McKinley’s boyhood, she participated in many church and charitable activities. In her youngest son she saw the makings of a preacher. That he turned to law and then politics was one of her greatest disappointments. There is a ring of truth to the story that after McKinley had taken the oath of office his brother, Abner, turned to their eighty-four-year-old mother and said, “Mother, this is better than a bishopric.” There is no indication that she was convinced. With her son in the
White House she became a national symbol of domestic virtue affectionately called "Mother McKinley" by all.

As a congressman McKinley had attended Foundry Methodist Church where his longtime friend, Rutherford Hayes, worshipped. Many people expected him to go there as President, but another old friend, District of Columbia Judge Thomas Anderson, convinced him that it would be more appropriate for the President to attend the national Methodist Church, Metropolitan. It is hard to believe that McKinley expected to attend church without exciting public interest, yet on the first Sunday after the inauguration he left for church with his mother on his arm just as though it was another winter Sunday in Canton. The church was surrounded by more than five thousand persons seeking a glimpse of the President. Police had to form a corridor for McKinley and his mother. Before many months had passed, he would comment in frustration,

I would rather attend some tiny mission, down among the wharves, and be allowed to worship as I wish, than come to this large church and be continually conscious of my position. I want to lay aside my position on Sundays, anyway.

Yet the habits of a lifetime were too strong. Each Sunday found him taking his place in the Presidential pew. Often as he rode the elevator to the domestic quarters of the White House after church, he would still be humming the concluding hymn.

Possibly this satisfaction was due to the warm relationship he quickly established with his new pastor. In the closing years of the 19th Century there was still enough informality in the Presidency that a pastor could feel free to "drop in" at the White House. So much of Hugh Johnston's ministry centered around calling that he did just that. McKinley often would engage Johnston in a discussion of some point in his sermon of the previous week. He once told a friend, "I like to hear the minister preach the plain, simple gospel—Christ and Him crucified." Sometimes Johnston stayed for dinner in the McKinleys' private quarters. On one occasion the President offered his pastor a cigar after dinner. When Johnston declined, McKinley commented that he was glad his pastor did not smoke. Mrs. McKinley chimed in, "William, that is not very consistent for you to be smoking yourself and telling Dr. Johnston you are glad he does not smoke." Yielding to her logic, McKinley laughed, "Well, Dr. Johnston, I did one good thing, I made a good Methodist out of a Presbyterian girl." Illness kept Mrs. McKinley confined to their quarters much of the time. The McKinleys had lost their only two children in infancy. Because Johnston knew how much Ida McKinley enjoyed children, he took his young son, Charles, with him on
one visit. His visits to the White House were not for the purpose of giving advise, nor was his company sought for that purpose.

Johnston went to see the President after he returned from the funeral of his mother. With tears in his eyes, he told his pastor of those last moments with her before she died. On another occasion when the jingoists were accusing McKinley of cowardice for refusing to declare war on Spain over the sinking of the Maine, Johnston paced up and down the corridors of the White House with the President as he poured out his resentment at the injustice being done to him. In moments like these the President needed a good listener. In Hugh Johnston he had one. But the pleasant relationship they enjoyed failed to prepare them for the storm; that would be created by Johnston’s Thanksgiving Day sermon.

Although a few newspaper reporters were present that morning, Hugh Johnston did not expect any special attention to be given to his sermon. Before announcing his text, he read the President’s Thanksgiving Proclamation. He had invited the President to read it, but the President had declined. This completed, he announced his text, “He has not so dealt with any other nation.” In developing the theme, our national heritage, he enumerated the blessings enjoyed by Americans: happy homes, growing churches, national prosperity, and freedom. In discussing this last point he contrasted the progress of America with that of the Latin countries. He commented on the poverty and illiteracy of Latin American and southern European countries of which Spain was to be regarded as “the most deplorable.” In conclusion he warned against four evils which threatened the American way of life: irreligion in the cities, anarchism, the liquor power, and the type of religio-political power associated with Ultramontanism or Jesuitism. In speaking of this last threat he said,

We believe that our Roman Catholic citizens are entitled to their fair share of public offices and public honors. I have no sympathy with that secret organization which would deprive a man of his civil rights because of his religion. . . . But we want no alien government and no political power like Jesuitism to disturb our liberties and to destroy our government. The mission of America is found in the legend inscribed on the Liberty Bell, “Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof.”

Johnston had said much the same thing on other occasions and saw nothing startling about it, but the reporter of the Hearst Press thought otherwise.

Friday morning on the upper left-hand corner of page four in the New York Journal there appeared a two column article headlined:
The moderate tone of Johnston’s discourse was altered to make him appear a fiery nativist. By combining the first two sentences quoted above by the negative conjunction “but,” they made it appear that the secret organization he opposed was the Jesuit Order, when in fact he had meant this statement as a rebuke to the reactionary American Protective Association. To the word “Jesuitism” in the next sentence was appended, “the most infernal system that ever cursed the earth.” And the last sentence was rewritten to read,

It is time for the long-suffering American people to say to the whole intriguing band: “You, Jesuit Fathers, you are entitled to all the rights and liberties of thought, speech, press, and worship, but in the name of American liberty and fair play, we lift up our hands and swear to Almighty God you shall not do in this country as you have done in Spain, in Mexico, in Italy; you shall not rule us.”

The religious press was quick to enter the controversy. On December 5, The Catholic News attacked Johnston and concluded, “We are glad to note . . . that the President intends to show his displeasure at his pastor’s exhibition of bigotry by attending services more often elsewhere than at this new Burchard’s church.” The Presbyterian Journal came to his defense declaring, “To let the people know of the exils [sic!] that exist in their midst, prey upon and work harm to them, is the duty of every minister and every intelligent Christian.” The Catholic News replied, “Apparently they do not see why any one should protest against a parson making an unjust attack upon the Catholic Church. ‘Rome,’ of course, is fair game for all the howling pulpiteers.”

Two Methodist journals, The New York Christian Advocate and Zion’s Herald, tried to protect Johnston by pointing out that the reports of the sermon had been in error. The Zion’s Herald further
pleaded for publication of the sermon as the best way to refute the charges. The Churchman, an Episcopalian periodical, turned its guns on the secular press suggesting, "In these days of multiplied newspaper enterprise, it is high time that something should be arrived at that would represent what we may call the ethics of journalism."

There is no record of McKinley's reaction to the sermon other than in the newspaper accounts. Johnston and the President continued the open relationship that has already been discussed. Furthermore, from the time he returned from his mother's funeral until the Cuban crisis in March, the President attended Metropolitan every Sunday. Probably the most accurate statement of the President's feelings was carried in The Washington Post.

The statement that President McKinley will withdraw from the Metropolitan Church on account of the sermon preached on Thanksgiving by its pastor, Hugh M. Johnston, is denied authoritatively at the White House. . . . The President is very much annoyed at the frequent allusions to the sermon, and has stated that he thought Dr. Johnston's sermon ill-timed. He will continue, however, to attend services there whenever he desires.

As on other occasions McKinley chose silence as the best method for riding out the storm.

Johnston was shocked by the reaction to his sermon. On the Tuesday following the sermon he granted an interview to a local reporter.

There was nothing against the Catholic Church. In fact, I expressed the admiration and respect that I feel for that organization, as a compact, strong church, doing its good, spiritual work, and making social and moral reforms. . . . I said that I had no sympathy with the secret organizations which work against the church. In speaking of the great evils which threaten the United States, I mentioned the liquor traffic, the social disturbances, Tammany and such political organizations of misrule, and finally that jesuitical faction in the United States which interferes with our policies and institutions. This influence is as abhorrent to the best Catholic churchmen as it is to the best Americans in any church.

His protests were in vain. Ironically, the tolerant pastor, who counted among his friends many eminent Catholics, including Cardinal Gibbons, had become a symbol of "imported bigotry" for many people who shared his views and a new champion for those whose views he strongly opposed. It is not surprising that he too chose silence as the best way to extricate himself from this irony.

While he and the President remained silent, many good citizens did not. Letters came to Johnston from all over the country. A Philadelphian informed him,
When Abraham Lincoln, the patriot and the martyr [sic!] President, in making his call upon the manhood of the North to come forth and crush the rebel spirit of the South, did not specify that “no Catholics need apply.” . . . I think you owe it to this non-sectarian government to apologize to the President and the Country for your disgusting display of yesterday.

A group probably still smarting from the sting of the Burchard alliteration, the Catholic Total Abstinence Union, sent a formal protest. A New Jersey resident, who signed his letter “a Working Man,” wrote:

Mr. Johnston let me say to you in all kindness most Americans are laughed at in Europe by educated people, but it’s not necessary for Americans to go to the old world to make asses of themselves. They can do it in Washington, D. C.

But the letters that hurt most were those that praised the sermon as it had been reported. They gave indication that Johnston had indirectly aided the cause he had sought to oppose. Five regional councils of the American Protective Association sent him citations commending him for his fearless preaching. The True American League of Kansas City, Missouri, wrote to express their gratitude. A letter from Boston informed him that he had received a rising vote of thanks from three thousand persons attending a “patriotic meeting.” The editor of the Independent Loyal American wrote:

I, as a publisher of a strictly anti-Roman newspaper, have heard many compliments placed on your patriotic attitude. Go on my brother, make the walls of Zion echo with the warnings of alarm, made necessary by the encroachments of America’s subtle and crafty foe.

In the weeks that followed his sermons were scrutinized by the press, but he failed to provide them with more stories. After his Christmas sermon one reporter followed him to his study, baiting him, and trying to get him to say something else about Spain or the Catholic Church. In exasperation Johnston finally suggested that the reporter make up something the way the rest had done. On the last Sunday in December Bishop Cranston of Chicago was a guest preacher at Metropolitan. With McKinley in attendance, he preached on the freedom of the pulpit. As he concluded his remarks he turned to Johnston and said,

Go ahead, brother, and continue to preach the Gospel in the way in which you think you can best serve God, and he will say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

This he intended to do, but the problem was that he had not been
attacked for something he had intended to say. Finally, he asked a prominent Chicago journalist why he had been so maligned. The journalist answered, “It was brutal, I admit, but it had to be done. It was a political necessity.”

Having served his full five-year term at Metropolitan, on March 28, 1898, Hugh Johnston turned over his pastoral responsibilities to Frank Bristol, who moved from the First Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois. Along with the other responsibilities, he transferred the task of ministering to the man who must now conduct a war he had sought to avoid. Johnston soon became engrossed in his duties as pastor of the First Methodist Church of Baltimore. Much to his relief, the Thanksgiving Sermon was eventually forgotten. Indeed, he was too busy to talk or even think very much about his year as the President’s pastor. The White House was far from his thoughts on that warm day in September, 1901. He was so busy with the activities of the camp meeting he and several of his sons were attending in the hills of Pennsylvania that he had not even looked at a newspaper. His nineteen-year-old son, Edward, ran all the way from town to bring him the news. Hugh Johnston went to his cabin and wept. His friend, the President, had been shot.