The language of Dissent: the defense of Eighteenth-Century English Dissent in the works and sermons of James Peirce.

Abstract
This biographical dissertation argues that the thought of James Peirce (1674-1726), the Presbyterian minister whose controversial theology was the catalyst for the division of Dissent in 1719, must be considered in relation to his hermeneutic of history. For Peirce, history was the telling of truth or events, but an inherently rhetorical recounting, fashioned by the historian to express the "sense" of the "original" in the language necessary to convince the audience. In this way, history proved to be malleable and increasingly corrupted the more it was distanced from the original. Peirce's understanding of the past was linked closely to his identification of the authority and proper explication of Scripture, the integral interpretive role of reason, and the definition of the Dissenting community. In his early career, Peirce applied his theory of history to the classics and the traditions of the Church—both being subject to the sullying emendations of human invention. Late in his life, however, Peirce was convinced that this same hermeneutic of history was applicable to Scripture, which he previously considered inviolate. Despite the assertions of friends and antagonists, Peirce did not 'convert', but rather he logically followed his earlier commitment to a traditional hermeneutic of history. This thesis asserts that although James Peirce was primarily a polemicist, he was also a Nonconformist historian who posited definitions of Christianity and Dissent which evolved with his changing ideas. In his late works, Peirce proposed a positive definition of Dissent, delineated by its primary emphasis on religious toleration. This study demonstrates that Peirce's The Western Inquisition (1720) should be considered the first major history of Nonconformity to define the movement according to religious toleration, thus supplanting Daniel Neal's The History of the Puritans (1732-1738) which commonly has been thought to be the first major history to promulgate such a position. Historically employed as either heretic or hero (or something in between), Peirce has defied careful classification. He was a man in transition: a man of his times, a man in philosophical, social, and economic change, and his changing perspectives on truth were integrally tied to his own historical formation.

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