

## ADDING TO THE CHURCH

### THE PURITAN APPROACH TO PERSUADING SOULS

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'WHY **will ye die?** why will ye perish? why will you not have compassion on your own souls? Can your hearts endure, or can your hands be strong, in the day of wrath that is approaching? It is but a little while before all your hopes, your reliefs, and presumptions will forsake you, and leave you eternally miserable. Look unto me, and be saved;—come unto me, and I will ease you of all sins, sorrows, fears, burdens, and give rest unto your souls. Come, I entreat you;—lay aside all procrastinations, all delays;—put me off no more;—eternity lies at the door'.<sup>1</sup>

In this way John Owen entreated unbelievers. Was this exceptional? Ours is a time of great emphasis on evangelism when world congresses are convened to talk about evangelization. And so we ask whether or not the Puritans were evangelistic in their preaching? If they were, how did they go about the work of persuading souls to believe in Jesus Christ? Did they have conversions? Did they address unbelievers in a personal face to face way? What did they say? Since the Puritans believed in the spiritual inability of unbelievers to repent, did they not find themselves restricted? Did their belief in election, predestination and particular redemption, that is that Christ died to save His people only, shackle or confine them in their efforts to persuade the lost to be saved?

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<sup>1</sup> *Works*. Vol. 1, p. 422.

A short answer to these questions is that the Puritans followed the apostles. They were evangelistic in outlook and in their preaching. They were blessed with conversions. Of William Gouge, minister at Blackfriars in London, it was said that God made him 'an aged father in Christ... for thousands have been converted and built up by his ministry'.<sup>2</sup> Alexander Groshart says of Thomas Brooks that 'he was the instrument in the hand of God for the conversion of many souls', and the same can be said for many others. Belief in the spiritual impotence of sinners to turn to God by their own strength, and the sovereignty of God in election, did not inhibit the way in which they addressed unbelievers in their preaching. Like the apostles they saw preaching as God's way of adding to the church. For them all, preaching was to a greater or lesser degree evangelistic in character. Yet at the same time preaching for them involved the declaration of all God's Word, not some parts only.

The preaching of the Puritans was both doctrinal and evangelistic. Preaching the Word meant preaching the whole of revealed truth as a unity. We do not find the Gospel oversimplified, reduced to a minimum, or turned into a simple formula. For the Puritans the Gospel could never be divorced from the revelation of God as a whole, and this whole which we call 'the Word' is evangelistic either explicitly or implicitly. By evangelistic we mean that it conveys the fact that all men everywhere should turn to God in repentance and faith. Let me cite an example. Thomas Brooks' treatise *The Necessity, Excellency, Rarity and Beauty of Holiness* of some 410 pages' length in the 19th century reprint is evangelistic throughout in the implicit sense. Robert Bolton put it this way, 'The Lord Jesus Christ is offered most freely, and without exception of any person, every Sabbath, every sermon, either in plaine and direct terms, or impliedly at the least'.<sup>3</sup> Some explanation of the words 'impliedly' or 'implicitly' is received from the *Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God*, when it asserts that preaching ought to be performed in such a manner that, 'auditors may feel the Word of God to be quick and powerful and that if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest, and give glory to God'.

The preacher at the beginning or at suitable points during the preaching or, as is most commonly the case, at the end, may make direct and personal application of the truth to unbelievers, but even if he makes no such application this does not mean that his preaching is not evangelistic. 'To preach,' declared Sibbes, 'is to open the mystery of Christ: to break open the box that the savour may be perceived of all.'<sup>4</sup>

To prove and illustrate that the Puritans were evangelistic in their outlook is possible by making a study of their lives. A volume edited by John Rogers with

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<sup>2</sup> *The Rise of Puritanism*, William Haller, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Instructions for a Right Comforting of Afflicted Consciences, 1640, p. 185.

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, Vol. 5, p. 505.

the title, *The Beloved, or The Bridegroom Going Forth for his Bride*, published in 1653 contains not only the experience of the author himself with regard to his conversion, but sixty pages are devoted to the testimonies of those converted under his ministry. Vol. 1 of the recently published set of Flavel's works describes something of his success as a soulwinner. Such study is very rewarding but my concern will now be to concentrate upon a particular aspect of the Puritan approach to persuading souls. This aspect is the actual manner in which they addressed the Gospel to unbelievers in their preaching. How did they offer the Gospel to the unconverted? I avoid the word 'present' the Gospel. They did not merely 'present' the Gospel, they entreated, they besought, they reasoned, they urged and they offered the Gospel. Some are disposed to contend that the word 'offer' is unsuitable as it implies creature ability or gives the impression that God is less than omnipotent to change hearts. Others say the word does not mean now what it meant in Puritan days. But Richard Sibbes uses a word indicating a condescension stooping lower than any such meaning implied by the word 'offer' which word I would contend has not changed. On II Cor. 5:20 Sibbes declares, 'This is the manner of the dispensation in the gospel, even to *beg* of people that they would be good to their souls. Christ, as it were, became a beggar himself, and the great God of heaven and earth *begs* our love, that we would so care for our souls that we would be reconciled unto him' (*italics mine*).<sup>5</sup>

The Puritans addressed men in the wholeness of their being—mind, heart, conscience, memory and will. If such preaching did not succeed to persuade then they had nothing else to resort to and nothing to add by way of devices to induce a decision; no raising of hands, coming to the front, or signing cards. Preaching was for them supreme for they viewed it as the means by which God regenerates souls. The comprehensive character of this supreme work was ably summed up by Thomas Brooks when he said, 'Ministers are to preach Christ to the people 1. *Plainly*. 2. *Faithfully*. 3. *Humbly*. 4. *Wisely* (there is wisdom required to suit things to the capacity and conditions of poor souls). 5. *Zealously, boldly*. 6. *Laboriously* (A minister must be like the bee, that is still a-flying from one flower to another to suck out the honey for the good of others—Oh the dreadful woes that are pronounced in Scripture against idle shepherds! Ezek. 13:3, 34:2, Zech. 11:17, etc.). 7. *Exemplarily* (Be thou an example to the flock; I. Pet. 5:3). 8. *Feelingly, experimentally*. 9. *Rightly* (rightly dividing the word of truth, 2 Tim 2:15). 10. *Acceptably* (Eccl. 12:10. 'The preacher sought to find out acceptable words'.) 11. *Constantly* (continually given 'to prayer, and to the ministry of the word'. Acts 6:4)'.<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of preaching of this kind the Puritan approach to persuading souls can be summed up and comprehended under four headings.

(i) They were biblically consistent

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 506.

<sup>6</sup> *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 210 ff.

- (ii) They were free and unfettered
- (iii) They were flexible
- (iv) They were fervent

Now I am aware of the fact that since Puritan literature is so vast in extent one can prove almost anything by the art of selective quotations but my contention is that these features characterised Puritan preaching as a whole. In their persuasive approaches they were Biblically consistent, free, flexible and fervent. Most Puritan literature consists of sermon material which was later prepared for press. Naturally some sermons, or series of sermons, are more evangelistically orientated than others. The best known are Joseph Alleine's *Alarm to the Unconverted* and Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*. But there are lesser known works which reveal a different approach and which, while not having such a popular appeal, are works of great quality showing a wonderful grasp of truth. I refer to such works as Nathaniel Ball's sermons on John 8: 36, *If the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed*, and two books by another Nathaniel, namely, Nathaniel Vincent: *The Conversion of the Sinner* (1669) and *The Conversion of the Soul*. Vincent who gathered a large congregation at Southwark did most of this writing in prison. It was said of him 'his pen was going when his tongue could not!' In the preface of the *Conversion of the Sinner* he leaves readers in no doubt concerning his purpose: 'Reader art thou unconverted? Dost thy stupidity under the guilt of sin and thy contentedness to be its slave prove thee to be so? I pray thee, have not less faith than the very devils, for they believe and tremble'. The better known Puritans offer a plenitude of examples which, in extenso, are within our reach. We only need to think of John Owen's *An exhortation to such as are strangers to Christ* or Thomas Goodwin's *Of Christ the Mediator*. Then there are a host of powerful sermons such as Bunyan's *Come and Welcome* and *The Jerusalem sinner saved* or Thomas Doolittle's *Eyeing Eternity* described by one enthusiast as, 'the most solemn and awful sermon in the English or any other language'. There are miscellaneous sermons of instruction concerning what may be done to attempt the persuasion of others—a sermon by David Burgess, concerning young people and one by Samuel Lee on means to be used with regard to unconverted relatives. In addition to the explicit and direct approach there are expositions on hypocrisy in which professors of the Faith are searched and tried as to whether or not they are truly converted. Examples are Matthew Meade's *The Almost Christian*, Shepard's *Parable of the Ten Virgins*, and John Preston's sermons on Judas Iscariot. Says Preston, 'Judas's repentance was out of self-love—men ought to be urged to examine themselves especially since they are so unwilling,—because they have been long sure, and others so judge them, and therefore now they are loath to call into question their estate'.

## **1. The Puritans were Biblically Consistent**

The charge can be substantiated that most evangelicals today do not follow the apostles and Puritans in their approach to persuading souls. The commencement of this Conference twenty-two years ago marks the time when interest was beginning to rekindle in the Puritan approach. This interest has increased considerably yet the reason why most evangelicals do not follow the way of the Puritans is because they still fail to comprehend two fundamental points of truth

The first is man's total depravity which means that man is at enmity to God in all his faculties and hence is unable of himself to repent and believe. Total depravity does not mean that a man is as wicked as he possibly can be, but rather that he is destitute of spiritual life and dead in trespasses and sins.

Most Christians hold that man has freewill to come to God and can believe and repent of himself. When the sinner responds, then God regenerates. Hence the tremendous emphasis in evangelistic services on the visible response and efforts to induce that response. The objection is made that it is ludicrous for God to command men and women to repent and believe if they are unable to do so. Of course they are able, it is claimed, and we should exhort them as though they are able. The first then, concerns man's depravity and his inability.

The second concerns God's sovereignty. Since man has so fallen that he will never of himself come to God, it is needful, if there is to be salvation at all, for God to take the initiative. This He has done by electing souls to be saved, giving up Christ to die for them in particular and sending the Holy Spirit to regenerate and sanctify them. In contrast to this many hold that Christ died for all equally and that all should be told that Christ died for them. 'How can Christ,' they say, 'be sincerely offered to souls if He did not die for them?'

Let us deal firstly with the question of depravity and inability. While sinners are dead in trespasses and sins and wholly destitute of the ability to repent and believe, they are thereby no less responsible to do so, as MacLeod states it: 'When God calls upon man to repent He but asks what He is entitled to. When He bids the sinner who needs the Saviour receive Him as His own, God is altogether within His rights in doing so. There is a glorious superiority to man's reasonings shown by God who bids the deaf hear and the blind look that they may see. They cannot do what He bids them do. Yet He claims what is His own inasmuch as their disability, which is common to the fallen race, is one that is self-induced. Man, by his sin by which he fell away from God, has wrecked the spiritual integrity of his first creation. The mystery—and mystery it is—of race unity in the first sin accounts for the present state of obligation that binds us to all that God would have us to be, and to do all that He would have us to do. Such is our sin and not only our misery that we cannot yield the return of homage that our Maker and King calls for at our hand.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Scottish Theology, p. 141.

David Clarkson probes the root of the matter when he says, 'Nothing can draw men to repentance but the regal power of Christ, that power which He exercises at God's right hand. For the acts of repentance are hatred of sin, sorrow for it, resolution to forsake it, and endeavour its ruin. Now sin is so transcendently dear, lovely, and delightful to a man out of Christ, as nothing but an infinite power can draw him to these spiritual acts.'<sup>8</sup>

Sinners, then, according to the Puritan approach, are to be urged to repent. They must repent or be lost for ever. Yet they cannot repent. Should they be told that they cannot repent? Certainly! Their complete lostness should be exposed. Of what use is that? By discovering his inability the sinner is shut up to God since there is no other source of help, least of all in himself. But realising his responsibility and the awful nature of judgment and eternal punishment, the sinner is impressed with the urgency of his case. It cannot be postponed. Is there anything that the unregenerate man can do? The answer is in the affirmative. William Greenhill in a sermon on Ezekiel 18:32, 'Wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye', with the title, *What must and can persons do toward their own conversion*, after analysing and defining the extent and nature of a natural man's ability, urges what they ought to do. 1. Strive to enter in at the straight gate. 2. See how corrupt and impotent our nature is. 3. Look for help from whence the command cometh.<sup>9</sup>

The Puritans held consistently to total inability and total responsibility, which beliefs are declared in what is regarded as the greatest confession of faith to emerge from the Puritan era, namely, *The Westminster Confession*. Distinguishing between free agency and free will the Confession declares that man, by his fall, 'hath lost all ability of will to any spiritual good', and, 'it is every man's duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins particularly'.<sup>10</sup>

We spoke secondly of God's sovereignty. If God has sovereignly elected to save some and pass by others, how can the Gospel be offered to all men? Surely that implies insincerity, which, if we are to avoid, we should confine and restrict the offers of mercy to the elect, who are to be discerned by the inward drawing to which they alone are subject. John Owen answers such objections with a cogency peculiarly his own:

'Their objection, then, is vain, who affirm that God has given Christ for all to whom he offers Christ in the preaching of the gospel; for his offer in the preaching of the gospel is not declarative to any in particular, neither of what God has done nor of what he will do in reference to him, but of what he ought to do, if he would be approved of God and obtain the good things promised. Whence it

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<sup>8</sup> *Works*. Vol. 2, p. 219.

<sup>9</sup> *Morning Exercises*, Vol. 1, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from chapters 9 and 15.

will follow— First, that God always intends to save some among them to whom he sends the gospel in its power. And the ministers of it being, firstly unacquainted with his particular purpose; secondly, bound to seek the good of all and every one, as much as in them lies; thirdly, to hope and judge well of all, even as it is meet for them,—they may make a proffer of Jesus Christ, with life and salvation in him, notwithstanding that the Lord has given his Son only to his elect.

Second, that this offer is neither vain nor fruitless, being declarative of their duty, and of what is acceptable to God if it be performed as it ought to be, even as it is required. And if any ask, What it is of the mind and will of God that is declared and made known when men are commanded to believe for whom Christ did not die? I answer, firstly, What they ought to do, if they will do that which is acceptable to God; secondly, The sufficiency of salvation that is in Jesus Christ to all that believe on him; thirdly, The certain, infallible, inviolable connection that is between faith and salvation, so that whosoever performs the one shall surely enjoy the other, for whoever comes to Christ he will in no wise cast out'.<sup>11</sup>

Even in Puritan times there were some who sought erroneously to impose rationalistic thinking into what essentially is a supernaturalistic framework by arguing that the Gospel was to be offered to the elect only.

This is illustrated by the appearance of an excellent evangelistic book by Ezekiel Culverwell in about 1644 with the title, *A Treatise of Faith*. The book provoked a charge of inconsistency. In reply he acknowledged that the central issue, 'indeed the onely point in question is, whether salvation in Christ, bee in the Gospel proclaimed and offered in general to all that heare it, or only to the Elect?' To which he gave reply, 'The former I hold and prove by most evident Scriptures, that is that Christ bee in the Gospel offered in general to all who heare it'.<sup>12</sup> Culverwell then quoted the Synod of Dort as upholding his position: 'It is the promise of the Gospel, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified, should not perish, but have life everlasting: which promise together with the injunction of repentance and faith, ought promiscuously and without distinction to be declared and published to all men and to all people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the Gospel', and, 'But as much as many being called by the Gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in their infidelity, this comes not to pass for want of, or by any insufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ offered upon the Cross, but by their own default'.

Continuing in his defence Culverwell declares, '*The general offer* doth not make all partakers of Christ: nor does the *special partaking of Christ*, hinder the general

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<sup>11</sup> *Works*, Vol. 10, p. 300.

<sup>12</sup> A brief answer to certain objections against *The Treatise of Faith* clearing Ezekiel Culverwell from the error of Arminius unjustly layd to his charge. 1646.

offer. By *Offer* I meane only the *outward calling by the Gospel* which none can deny to belong *to many that are not chosen*'.

In facing the challenge to produce any one Scripture to prove the general offer, Culverwell selects two examples, John 3:16 and Mark 16:15. Since, he points out, John 3:16 speaks both of believers who are saved and unbelievers who perish, the text cannot be confined to the elect only. Also when we are commanded to preach the Gospel to every creature it is unreasonable to confine that to every elect creature.

While believing that, 'no man can believe except it be given him', Culverwell at the same time insisted on the necessity of the Gospel being preached to every creature, stating his case as follows:

'either there must bee some speciall marke of difference whereby it may bee knowne, to whom the pardon is proclaimed, and to whom not, or else it must be general to all. But there is no such special certaine difference betweene sinners before faith, whereby one may know the pardon is granted to him.—The onely way whereby any may know himself to bee contained under the pardon, is this, that he heares that God in his Gospel doth proclaime forgivenessse of sinne in Christ, without exception, to all sinners: that whosoever heareth and beleeveth shall be saved'.<sup>13</sup>

This statement suggests that the Puritans did not find themselves restricted or fettered in any way because of their belief in human inability or because of God's sovereignty in election, which brings us to the second point.

## **2. The Puritans were Free and Unfettered**

Now it is true that the doctrines of grace misconstrued can lead to what we call hyper-Calvinism—that is the denial of the free offers of the Gospel. Departing from the position held by John Calvin, the hyper-Calvinist thinks it inconsistent, indeed dishonouring to God, to offer the Gospel to all men. The main misunderstanding has centred around the issue of man's ability. Free offers seem in the eyes of the hyper-Calvinists to imply free will and this to them contradicts the sovereignty of God in His irresistible grace to call whom He wills to Himself. Not unrelated to the subject is the question of supralapsarianism which has to do with the logical priority of the decrees firstly of election, secondly the fall. The 'supras' place election first, the 'infras' the fall first. (Incidentally, anyone wishing to study this matter is advised to avoid Berkhof who shows a lack of clarity on the subject. Rather, I suggest the reading of Warfield or Shedd.) Two famous Puritans, William Perkins and William Twisse, adopted

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<sup>13</sup> A Treatise of Faith, p. 151.

supralapsarianism which is sometimes called high Calvinism. Most of the Puritans were infralapsarians as was Calvin. Almost all of them rejected Arminianism. Richard Baxter was exceptional in being Amyraldian—that is he rejected the doctrine of limited atonement.

To outline the history of hyper-Calvinism in all its branches, and in particular its fettering and shackling influence in the realm of persuading souls would take a College term to accomplish. A brief outline, however, is necessary.

The Puritan era ended in 1662 when the majority of able, orthodox, Calvinist ministers were rejected from the Church of England to become the Nonconformists. The restrictions placed upon them curtailed much of their influence until 1688. During this time moderate Calvinism became popular. From about 1689 to 1765 the role of reason was much emphasised in religion. Calvinists during this time were prone to imbibe principles of logic or rationalism. Baptists and Independents, often hindered by poor education, felt themselves to be the heirs and defenders of Calvinism. Joseph Hussey (1660-1694) was one of the architects of hyper-Calvinism who applied strict logic to Christian doctrine and wrote a book the title of which testifies truly to its contents, *God's Operations of Grace but no Offers of His Grace*. Others associated with this position were Skepp, Wayman, Brine and the famous John Gill. Hyper-Calvinism was dominant among the Baptists until Andrew Fuller published his book in 1785 with the title, *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*. Fuller's book was very effective and accomplished an enormous amount of good in liberating the churches from hyper-Calvinism as well as in sounding the trumpet to call for the evangelization of the world. Most of the Particular Baptist churches embraced the free offer position from that point onwards but during the last century one section of the Baptist denomination actually formulated articles denying that it was the duty of men to repent and believe for salvation. One of the articles established in 1848 reads: 'We reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in, or turn to God'. The controversy is very much alive today.

In Scotland the 'free offer' controversy has focussed more on the question of the extent of the atonement than on the question of the ability of the sinner. A Puritan book written in 1645 by one who signed himself E.F. and which received the approbation of several famous Puritans including Jeremiah Burroughs and Joseph Caryl was destined to play a major role in the history of the Scottish controversy. E.F. (Encyclopaedias attribute the book to Edward Fisher but there is serious doubt about whether he was the author) entitled his book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. At a time when theology was running in the direction of hyper-Calvinism and introspection, Thomas Boston found *The Marrow* to be just that to his soul. The book was republished and thereupon followed one of the most important controversies in the history of the Scottish churches known as the Marrow Controversy.

In the Dutch speaking world the question of the free offer has been debated down the years and there has been an overflow of the controversy into the American Dutch churches which in turn has affected the English world. The Dutch have given much more attention to the subject of common grace. Common grace is implicit in Puritan theology. John Owen gives it some of its best statements.<sup>14</sup> The question is of crucial importance because common grace teaches that, although man has fallen, God always addresses him as man, that is, according to His revealed will that He, God, desires the salvation of all men, and never addresses them in terms of His secret will. 'The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever.' Hence the Puritans used such texts as 2 Peter 3:9 and 2 Tim. 2:4, 'who will have all men to be saved', at their face value and without any equivocation; that is that God declares His will for the salvation of all sinners to whom the Gospel is addressed upon the terms proposed, namely, the obedience of faith.

A denial of common grace, which is the position of Herman Hoeksema of our century, turns the Gospel into a principle of divine power and causation. As James Daane, a contemporary American theologian points out, 'Such a Gospel can be announced—coolly, objectively, without pathos or human concern or tears—but it cannot be preached with persuasion'.<sup>15</sup>

The freedom from all fetters arising from a misunderstanding of the doctrines of grace among the Puritans is seen in their use and application of the Scriptures. Take Rev. 3:20 as an example. This text has been terribly abused by Arminians. Using Holman Hunt's painting of Christ outside a door with no handle on the outside, they portray helpless deity. Reaction is understandable, but we ought not to allow the abuse of a text to lead us to unwarranted conclusions about the meaning God intends by it. The Puritans used Rev. 3:20 in application to the unconverted and freely offered the Gospel using this text as a basis. Flavel preached on each phrase of Rev. 3:20 in great detail. David Clarkson did likewise. Obadiah Sedgwick, of whom it was written that in hot weather he used to unbutton his doublet in the pulpit that his breath might be the longer, also preached on Rev. 3:20. It was breath well spent for he was exceedingly followed as a preacher at Covent Garden, being instrumental in the conversion of many souls. Stephen Charnock held the opening of the door to be conversion.<sup>16</sup> The enablement to open the door they took to be effectual calling as Clarkson puts it, 'Christ empowers his word to affect that which he calls for'. Thomas Brooks sees the Laodiceans as the worst of sinners, 'Now, pray tell me, what preparations or qualifications have these Laodiceans to entertain Christ? Surely none; for they

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<sup>14</sup> See Owen's commentary on Hebrews 6:4-6. Also *Works* Vol. 3, p. 236, and Vol. 11, p. 640ff.

<sup>15</sup> *The Freedom of God. A study of election and the pulpit.* James Daane, Eerdman, 1973.

<sup>16</sup> *Works*, Vol. 7, p. 91.

were lukewarm, they were "neither hot nor cold", they were "wretched and miserable and poor, and blind, and naked", and yet Christ, to shew his free grace and his condescending love, invites the very worst of sinners to open to him, though they were no ways so and so prepared or qualified to entertain him'.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The Puritans were Flexible

Of paramount importance in the Puritan approach was the use and application of the moral law or ten commandments. Since the Gospel is good news for sinners only, it is vital that the hearers of the truth see themselves as transgressors, and hence as guilty and condemned before God. Application of God's law to the heart and conscience they deemed imperative. Because of this stress on the law, without which there cannot be a Gospel, some have misunderstood the Puritans. Early in his ministry Spurgeon criticised Alleine and Baxter, Shepard and Thomas Hooker as well as Rogers of Dedham, for being better preachers of the law than of the Gospel. Said Spurgeon, 'they preached repentance and hatred of sin as the warrant of a sinner's trusting in Christ'.<sup>18</sup> Now this allegation simply cannot be substantiated. Thomas Brooks spoke for all his fellows when he declared, 'The Lord does not in all the Scriptures require such and such preparations and qualifications before men come to Christ, before they believe in Christ, or entertain, or embrace the Lord Jesus'.<sup>19</sup> Brooks repudiated the notion that the invitations or offers of mercy extend only to those who labour or who are heavy laden. (Matt. 11:28.) 'God has nowhere in the Scripture required any worthiness in the creature before believing in Christ'.<sup>20</sup> Giles Firmin represents the whole Puritan era when he asserts, 'it is the duty of all the sons and daughters of Adam, who hear the Gospel preached, and Christ offered to them, to believe in, or receive Christ, whether they be prepared or not prepared'.<sup>21</sup> He then uses 1 John 3:23 and John 6:29 in support of this. Some Puritans may be criticised as overstressing the need for conviction of sin before conversion and in sometimes giving the impression that all conversions follow the same pattern. Also some of them may well have erred by concentrating too much on a prevenient or preliminary work of grace. We can understand Spurgeon's impatience with Thomas Hooker's *Qualifications for Coming to Christ*, but surely Hooker's *Poor Doubting Sinners drawn to Christ* redresses the balance. After all they did believe as William Greenham put it, 'never any of God's children were comforted thoroughly, but they were first humbled for their sins'. The preacher must have the liberty of the Spirit to preach the law and judge for himself at what time and way he will preach the good news. He must have room to be flexible. Whether or not these men were too long-winded, too severe, too slow in moving from the law to the Gospel, or inadequate in declaring the warrant of faith, is not

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<sup>17</sup> *Works*, Vol. 2, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Sermon* 531, with the title, 'The Warrant of Faith'.

<sup>19</sup> *Works*, Vol. 1, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

<sup>21</sup> *The Real Christian*, 1670, p. 2.

easy for us to judge at this distance as we would need to know the state of their hearers. Whatever shortcomings they may have had, they were flexible, showing great variety in their material and in their presentation. Norman Pettit in his book, *The Heart Prepared* discusses in detail the differences which pertained among the Puritans with regard to the work of the Spirit in sinners before regeneration, and the extent to which the unconverted can be exhorted to prepare their hearts unto the Lord. At last year's conference we saw that Richard Rogers differed from Greenham with regard to preparationism. Giles Firmin opposed Thomas Hooker's views. According to Pettit, Perkins and Sibbes held the view that what others regarded as merely preparatory was in fact true grace resulting from regeneration, while in contrast to that, Preston held that faith is effectual only when, 'the humiliation is sound and good', when, 'the preparation is perfect'.

In a recent series of articles and letters in *The Presbyterian Guardian* Joseph Alleine was attacked and defended. One of the main criticisms was that he dwelt too long upon sin and the law and not enough upon the atonement and the Gospel. Generally speaking today there is not enough stress on the law. Whatever our views on this matter we should grant to preachers the right of flexibility.

#### **4. The Puritans were Fervent**

We have seen that the preaching of these men was consistent in regard to Biblical truth. They were free, unfettered and flexible. They were also fervent, indeed passionate, in their preaching to the unconverted. Note the fervency of Joseph Alleine as well as the skilful way in which he handles the question of the sinner's inability:

"Turn you at my reproof; behold I will pour out my Spirit unto you" (Prov. 1:23). Though of yourselves you can do nothing, yet you may do all through His Spirit enabling you, and He offers assistance to you. God bids you "wash and make you clean". You say you are unable, as much as the leopard to wash out his spots. Yes, but the Lord offers to cleanse you; so that if you are filthy still, it is through your own wilfulness—God invites you to be made clean, and entreats you to yield to Him. O accept His offers, and let Him do for you, and in you, what you cannot do for yourselves'<sup>22</sup>

For the Puritans the power to persuade lay in the truth and in the Spirit's power to apply it. Hear George Swinnock as he preaches persuasively on the solemn subject of the sentence of eternal perdition being passed upon Christ rejecters and observe the responsibility that is heaped on those who hear the Gospel:

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<sup>22</sup> *An Alarm to the Unconverted*. Banner of Truth reprint, p. 140.

'It will greatly add to their torment and anguish to consider that they were sometime near the enjoyment of this blissful presence of Christ. Pardon, and peace, and love, and life, and the endless fruition of the blessed Jesus were tendered to them, were nigh them, were at the very door of their hearts. They were solemnly commanded, lovingly invited, severely threatened, sweetly allured, and pathetically persuaded to accept of Christ and grace; yea, and heaven, and happiness, and eternal life; yea, and their hearts began to relent, and to close with the entreaties of the gospel. They were almost persuaded to be Christians indeed; there was but a little, a very little, between them and Christ.

'It will much augment their anguish and misery to consider who it is that passes so severe a doom upon them. This dreadful sentence is pronounced by love, and grace, and goodness itself. He that sometimes called them to him so sweetly, so affectionately, now casts them from him so sharply, so furiously; he who sometimes cried to them, "Come to me all ye that labour and are heavy laden", and wept over them, "Oh that thou hadst known, even thou in this thy day, the things of thy peace"; he that formerly invited, entreated, besought them to be reconciled (2 Cor. 5:20) and shewed them his heart-blood, the price of their pardon and life, and stretched out his arms to embrace their returning souls, will now in wrath, and rage, and flames, and fury, bid them begone from him, and his curse go along with them.'<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the last and final sentence of Christ on Judgment Day listen to Nathanael Ball, this quotation being an example of the use of every conceivable argument to persuade sinners:

'Tho' thou art a great sinner, yet thou art not a sinner in hell; thou art a sinner upon earth still. And there is this difference betwixt sinners upon earth, and sinners in hell; that the first are yet under hope, while the others are past it. It is thy great misery, that thou art yet among the unconverted; but 'tis great mercy, that thou art not among the damned. The place in which thou yet art, is the place of repentance, and not of punishment. We must look upon no sinners as past hope, that are not past this life:

Why, thou livest yet; Christ bath not denounced the final sentence against thee; thou hast not yet stood before his Judgment-seat, and heard him say to thee, Depart thou cursed into everlasting fire. What is the patience and long suffering of God toward thee for, but

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<sup>23</sup> *Works*, Vol. 5, p. 288.

to shew thee that thy condition is yet recoverable' (2 Peter 3 :9).<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusions

1. In persuading souls we ought to be Biblically consistent. The doctrines of grace are logical inasmuch as they are argued carefully from the Scriptures as a whole. There are, however, points that are not easily harmonised and must be left to lie side by side. We must not be supralogical and impose human rationalism where the Scriptures give no warrant for this. Arminianism and hyper-Calvinism can be charged as guilty of imposing rationalism. Both reason that ability limits obligation. 'Man,' says the hyper, 'is unable to believe and therefore cannot be required to do so.' 'Man is commanded to believe,' says the Arminian, 'and therefore he must be able to do so.' The Puritans were consistent Calvinists stressing Responsibility and Divine Sovereignty without attempting to rationalise at every point. Biblical consistency includes a clear grasp of the fact that regeneration precedes faith. We can well understand why these men knew nothing of appeals for sinners to make a recorded decision. The whole of their preaching was one protracted and powerful appeal to the whole man, that the sinner being born again might be persuaded once and for all to turn and close with Christ. If that failed other expedients could only achieve, as they so often do today, a temporary willingness to be a disciple, at the same time running the fearful risk that the person in question thinks himself saved when his heart is still in the mire. In a paper at this conference entitled Arminianisms, the assertion was made that the Bible forbids us to go one step along the road of Arminianism. That is right. It is also true that the Bible forbids us to go one step along the road of 'restrictionism'! Ought we not to exercise great caution not to proceed one inch along the road of hyper-Calvinism? This will mean that we will be on guard when we read polemical works against Arminianism. Is there not, even with John Owen's valuable polemic on Particular redemption, a tendency to neglect the urgency of the Gospel?<sup>25</sup> It is essential that we contend for truth but in defending one aspect it is possible to neglect another of equal importance. The quotation with which we began is in no way inconsistent with the careful exegesis of Owen's above mentioned treatise.

2. We ought not to be embarrassed by any texts or passages of Scripture. All Scripture is capable of application to unbelievers, Isaiah 55 as much as Romans 9. It is a bad sign when preachers avoid, indeed never preach on texts which plainly declare God's sovereignty in salvation and equally bad when some never preach on texts such as Rev. 22:17 which we associate with the free offers of the Gospel. The Puritans gloried in all Scripture and were free and powerful in the application of truth both with regards to men's inability and responsibility. Are we like them in this respect?

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<sup>24</sup> *Sermons on John 8:36.*

<sup>25</sup> *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ. Works, Vol. 10.*

3. The warrant of faith should be crystal clear in our preaching. The door of salvation should be opened early and the law applied that sinners be pressed through the door. We ought to be flexible in our presentation of the moral law, the extent to which it is preached and applied, as well as with regard to its relationship to the Gospel. For instance the commands to repent and believe need not necessarily always occur at the end of a sermon.

4. Finally we must not miss the lesson that the Puritans showed great confidence in preaching. Why is it that we lack this confidence? Where is the fervour and passion to persuade souls today? The greatest need in the world today is not for more oil, or more coal, or more food. The greatest need of all is for a return of powerful preaching, preaching which is not only proficient in presenting truth as truth, but preaching which is vigorous, bold and full of Holy Ghost unction. Such preaching must address the unbelieving world. As the Scripture contains a wide variety of address: command, reason, invitation and entreaty, so ought our preaching to contain these aspects if souls are to be persuaded for these are the means which God has ordained and which He uses to His glory.

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