THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE PURITANS

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What is a Baptist? The answer to that question will depend both on the type of Baptist one may be considering and also upon the place in time where one finds the Baptists. Seventh Day Baptists emphasize the seventh day as the time of worship. Particular Baptists in England were strongly Calvinistic in their doctrinal statements. Southern Baptists in America have emphasized financial cooperation as a means of fulfilling the great commission.

British Baptists have normally looked with favor upon participation in the ecumenical movement with other Christian groups. Southern Baptists have been critical and skeptical of ecumenical involvement.

Baptists in the American south have often dominated the culture of their communities. Baptists in Asia constitute a tiny minority. Baptists in America and in western Europe have normally faced little persecution. The vigorous spiritual life of Romanian Baptists has been molded by their poverty and persecution.

Walter Rauschenbusch, theologian of the social gospel, belonged to an American Baptist church. Nobel Prize winner Martin Luther King came from a Black Baptist background. Evangelist Billy Graham lives in North Carolina but belongs to the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas.

What is a Baptist? It all depends on the time in which you live and the group with which you worship.

I. WHAT IS A PURITAN?

What is a Puritan? Scholars struggle to define this virile religious movement. The term possesses an elastic meaning that has even been used to refer to some religious leaders of the twentieth century. Some would use the term Puritan to refer to John Wesley and the Methodists. Many would regard the nineteenth-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon as a Puritan. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, late pastor of London's Westminster Chapel, was styled by many as a twentieth-century Puritan.

Puritanism began as part of the Protestant Reformation in England. We cannot easily link its inception with a specific event or date. It appeared as an organized movement during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the 1560s. Its roots extended back into the early part of the 1500s and included figures such as the Bible translator William Tyndale and later the Protestant

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exiles who came to Europe under the persecution of Catholic Queen Mary (1553–58).

Puritanism began as a movement related to the Church. In 1559 Queen Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity authorized the Anglican *Prayer Book* for public worship and prescribed penalties for those who refused to use it. Many Puritans viewed Elizabeth's establishment as Catholic in worship form. The church government established under Elizabeth was episcopal.

Puritans struggled to rid the Church of the remaining remnants of Catholic ceremony and practice. They also favored a Presbyterian form of government. This early disagreement with Elizabeth's state Church broadened to include other personal and religious issues. As the movement developed, many Puritans were unwilling to conform to the state Church. Some were ejected from pulpits in which they long had preached.

Historians frequently divide the history of Puritanism into three periods: (1) from the accession of Elizabeth in 1559 to the crushing of the Puritan movement in the Conventicle Act of 1593, (2) from 1593 to the calling of the Long Parliament in 1640, and (3) from 1640 to the restoration of Charles II in 1660.[1] The Conventicle Act crushed Puritanism by decreeing that those who refused to conform were to be banished and martyred if they returned. L. Ryken has said, "Just as Puritanism had no specific birth date, it had no precise termination."[2] Despite Ryken's suggestion we will find it best to focus on those Puritans from the time of Elizabeth II until the end of the seventeenth century. During this period of nearly 150 years the Puritans lost most of their public battles, "but the moral and spiritual victories that the Puritans won by keeping sweet, peaceful, patient, obedient, and hopeful under sustained . . . pressures and frustrations give them a place of high honor in the believers' hall of fame."[3]

It would be possible to add to the study of Puritanism in England a study of those Puritans who migrated to America and began to build a kingdom and nation for God there. This paper, however, will limit its investigation of hermeneutics to the study of how the English Puritans interpreted the Bible.

II. THE GENERAL APPROACH OF THE PURITANS TO SCRIPTURE

Puritanism was a spiritual movement that impacted Christian life, the declaration of the gospel, and ministry in local churches. Puritans applied their religious views at work, in the home, in carrying out social action and in education. They attempted to regulate their church worship by their understanding of God's directives for local congregations. All of their beliefs and practices came from the contents of Scripture. "Puritanism was, above all else, a Bible movement."[4] The most characteristic feature of Puritanism

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[1] "Puritans; Puritanism," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1974).

[2] L. Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 8.

[3] Ibid. xi.

[4] J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991) 129.

was its respect for Scripture and its desire to know and carry out all its prescriptions.

J. I. Packer has suggested several principles that characterized the general manner in which the Puritans approached Scripture.[5] (1) They were premodern in that they did not come to the Bible with a sense of the difference between the culture of their day and that of Biblical times. This is both an asset and a liability. It is a liability in that Puritans may have tended to ignore the impact of culture in making interpretations of specific passages and may have produced applications that were less viable because of that feature. It is an asset in that they felt a close kinship with the Biblical characters and sought to follow their spiritual practices without a critical mentality that vitiated Biblical application.

(2) Most Puritans were amazingly competent in their exegesis of Scripture. The biting sarcasm of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, both martyred under Queen Elizabeth, hindered their exegetical effectiveness and reflected a desire to duplicate each perceived Biblical feature of church order in their contemporary worship. But most Puritan expositors were competent in their knowledge of the Biblical languages and incisive in their logical deductions.

(3) The Puritans excelled in the area of application. They sought to make the Bible practical for themselves and their people. The Puritan theologian William Perkins preached at English fairs in an effort to reach buyers and sellers from throughout England, and Thomas Brooks devoted an entire book to the subject of Satanic temptation.

III. THE PURITAN USE OF THE BIBLE

The Puritans viewed the Scriptures as authoritative for all issues of faith and morals. They saw it as authoritative in the determination of church order and organization. This high view led them to feel strongly the importance of preaching and declaring the entirety of Scripture to their people. It also led them to proclaim the sufficiency of Scripture. They felt they needed nothing other than the written Word to serve as a source of guidance for their spiritual life.

The writings of Richard Baxter demonstrate the determining voice of Scripture for faith and morals. A prolific writer, Baxter was ejected from his pulpit in Kidderminster when he refused to subscribe to the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Although excluded from his church, he continued to preach and was imprisoned in 1685 and 1686. Baxter said about the Bible:

> The reading of the word of God, and the explication and application of it in good books, is a means to possess the mind with sound, orderly, and working apprehensions of God, and of his holy truths: so that in such reading our understandings are oft illuminated with a heavenly light, and our hearts are touched with a special delightful relish of that truth; and they are secretly attracted and

[5] Ibid. 129–130.

engaged unto God and all the powers of our souls are excited and animated to a holy obedient life.[6]

Baxter's answers to doctrinal questions came from his examination of Scripture. In preparing a reader to trust Christ he asked, "Do you question whether there be so severe a judgment, a heaven, and a hell, as ministers tell you? Search the scripture in Mat. xxv. and 2 Thess. i. 8, 9, 10; John v. 29; Mat. xiii."[7]

What was true for Baxter was true for any other Puritan whom we can find discussing the question of Scriptural authority. William Bradshaw (1571–1618) was educated at Emmanuel College of Cambridge and became a Puritan controversialist in many areas. He said, "The word of God contained in the writings of the Prophets and Apostles, is of absolute perfection, given by Christ the head of the Churche to bee unto the same, the sole Canon and rule of all matters of Religion."[8]

Puritans also contended for the authority of Scripture in determining church order and practice. Here some of them became quite contentious in their demands and claims. As previously mentioned, two of the most polemical of the Puritans in contending for Scriptural authority in church order were Barrow and Greenwood. Both men were hanged in 1593 for writing and publishing seditious books. They collaborated in some writings in their common opposition to Anglicanism.

Barrow in particular threw caution to the winds, defied those who interrogated him, and never learned that a soft answer would turn away wrath. He accused Archbishop of Canterbury John Whitgift of being devoid of all true learning and godliness. To an interrogator, Lord Burghley, he described the archbishop as "a monster, a miserable compound neither ecclesiastical nor civil, that second beast, that man of sin, that son of perdition." Lord Burghley slyly requested proofs of these labels.[9]

Barrow said of the authority of the Bible for church order, "We seeke and fully purpose to worship God aright, as he hath commaunded in his holy worde."[10] His intemperate language toward an opponent named George Giffard (Gifford) appears in his biting accusation: "We can saye then that those Scriptures which you thus prophane and abuse to your idolatries . . . are in their due place and true use, holie, reverend, gratious; but when they are abused, perverted, and joyned to patch up this idolatrie, they make the whole the more execrable."[11]

Greenwood's tongue was not as vicious as that of Barrow, but he was an equally doughty defender of using Scripture as an authority for determin-

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[6] R. Baxter, *Select Treatises from the Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London: Blackie and Son, 1863) 195.

[7] Ibid. 541.

[8] W. Bradshaw, *English Puritanisme and Other Works* (Westmead: Gregg, 1972) 1.

[9] *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1587–90* (ed. L. H. Carlson; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962) 16.

[10] Ibid. 84.

[11] *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1590–1591* (ed. L. H. Carlson; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966) 98.

ing church order. In writing against the use of a read or prescribed prayer, Greenwood said, "To do any thing in the worship of God without the testimonie of his word, is sinne; but there is no ground in the Scripture for such manner of praying, as having no witnesse of the word, whether God be pleased with them, or no."[12]

The result of holding to this high view of Scripture was that the Puritans felt constrained to preach and declare God's word to their people. Thomas Cartwright (1535–1603) was educated at Cambridge and briefly served as Lady Margaret professor of divinity in 1569. Driven from his professorship in 1570, he later suffered imprisonment but escaped a death sentence. Cartwright urged the importance of preaching and teaching the people from Scripture by saying:

> Let him that shall Preach choose some part of the Canonicall Scripture to expound, and not of the Apocrypha. Further in his ordinary Ministery, let him not take Postills (as they are called) but some whole booke of the holy Scriptures, especially of the new Testament, to expound in order. In choise whereof regard is to be had both of the Ministers ability, and of the edification of the Church.[13]

Cartwright gave more specific instructions concerning the number and length of sermons. He said, "Let there be, if it may be, every Sabbath day two Sermons, and let them that preach always endeavour to keepe themselves within one hour, especially on the weekdayes."[14]

Puritans felt that they would find in Scripture all they needed for salvation and the living of the Christian life. William Perkins (1558–1602) received his education at Cambridge and lectured in a Cambridge church until his early death. He was primarily concerned about pastoral renewal and practical religion, and he never publicly contended for a presbyterian church polity. He had a marked skill for popularizing difficult material and was one of the most widely known theologians of the Elizabethan Church. He felt that the form of church government would not be a factor in bringing renewal to the English Church, and therefore he avoided entering into argument about these issues. He expressed his love for and reliance on Scripture when he said:

> We hold that the scriptures are most perfect, containing in them all doctrines needful to salvation, whether they concern faith and manners and therefore we acknowledge no such traditions beside the written word which shall be necessary to salvation, so as he which believeth them not cannot be saved.[15]

Puritans felt that God had not given to the Church any gift more precious than Scripture. To neglect it would be a great insult to God, and to revere it was a sign of obedience to God. "Intense veneration for Scripture,

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[12] *The Writings of John Greenwood, 1587–1590* (ed. L. H. Carlson; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962) 14.

[13] T. Cartwright, *A Directory of Church Government* (London, 1644) 9.

[14] Ibid. 10.

[15] *The Work of William Perkins* (ed. I. Breward; Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1970) 549–550.

as the living word of the living God, and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism's hallmark."[16]

IV. PURITAN INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Laurence Chaderton served for many years as headmaster of Emmanuel College, the most Puritan of all of the colleges of Cambridge University. He was a native of Lancashire in northern England, an area that was strongly Catholic. One day Chaderton was preaching in this territory and had spoken for two hours. He neared his point of conclusion with a comment suggesting "that he would no longer trespass upon their patience." The audience refused to allow him to stop. "For God's sake, sir, go on, go on," they implored. Chaderton, surprised by their insistence, continued his message for an even longer time.[17]

The enemies of the Puritans were most fearful of their preaching. The Puritans made their mark on seventeenth-century England through their effective use of the pulpit. Puritan sermons were chiefly expositions of Scripture that aimed at both the hearts and the minds of the audience. Their plain style of preaching developed from a hermeneutical method that aimed at practicality and intended to be clearly understood. What did the Puritan preacher do in his study to prepare him to deliver a message from God?

First, he emphasized the importance of words in the text of Scripture. Often his knowledge of the text was based on an understanding of the original Greek or Hebrew and came after the preacher had compared the use of the word with other Biblical passages.

John Flavel, who died in 1691, lived in Devon in southwestern England. Remembered chiefly for his practical writings, he had a peaceful, healing spirit that produced unity among his hearers rather than division.

In commenting on the phrase "curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth" (Ps 139:15), Flavel identified the Hebrew verb for "curiously wrought" as "*ruchampti*" and noted that "the vulgate renders it, 'painted as with a needle,' i.e., richly embroidered with nerves and veins." He added, "O, the skilful workmanship that is in that one part, the eye! How has it forced some to acknowledge a God upon the examination of it!"[18]

Flavel's vivid word pictures produced memorable and life-changing sermons. Quite moving is the story of L. Short, a New England farmer, who heard Flavel preach when he was a fifteen-year-old boy in Dartmouth, England. Still unconverted when he reached the age of 100 in America, he sat one day in the fields musing on his long life and remembered the sermon he had heard eighty-five years earlier from Flavel. His memory of the message impressed the horror of dying under God's curse on him, and he was converted.[19]

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[16] Packer, *God's Giants* 129.

[17] Quoted in Ryken, *Worldly Saints* 91.

[18] J. Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (London: Banner of Truth, 1963) 44.

[19] Ibid. 11.

Brooks attended Emmanuel College at Cambridge and served as a chaplain in the English Civil War. Ejected from his church in 1660, he remained in London preaching and writing. He authored the very practical *Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices* and filled it with sound advice, memorable pictures and wise instructions. Using his knowledge of Greek he referred to 2 Tim 2:26, which speaks of those who "may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will." Brooks stated that the Greek term for "taken captive" is "a warlike word, and signifies to be taken alive, as soldiers are taken alive in the wars, or as birds are taken alive and ensnared in the fowler's net. Satan hath snares for the wise and snares for the simple. . . . Happy are those souls that are not taken and held in the snares that he hath laid."[20]

Another Puritan who excelled in his use of words and in his understanding of their importance was John Owen (1616–1683), perhaps the most eminent theologian of Puritanism. Owen was at home in either Hebrew or Greek, and he used his knowledge of word meanings to arrive at his exegetical conclusions. He used his knowledge of word meanings to prove that the death of Christ made satisfaction for our sins. Referring to 1 Pet 2:24, which speaks of Christ "who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree," Owen said that the verb for "bare" suggests that Christ bore our iniquity or underwent the punishment due our iniquity. In doing this he made satisfaction for our sins: "For to make satisfaction to God for our sins, it is required only that he undergo the punishment due to them; for that is the satisfaction required where sin is the debt."[21]

Owen also reflected on the significance of such terms as "all," "every," and "the world" in such a way as to suggest that the terms meant that Christ did not die for "a collective universality, but . . . (for) men of all sorts."[22] In this way he understood the reference of 1 John 2:2 to Jesus' death as a propitiation "for the sins of the whole world."

He observed that an attribute could sometimes be attached to an object more from a sense of appearance than from an expression of reality. He suggested that Jerusalem was called the "holy city" (Matt 27:53) "because it was so in esteem and appearance, when indeed it was a very 'den of thieves.'"[23]

He also recognized that sometimes an attribute was attached to an object or to a person more from a "judgment of charity" than from an actual description. When Paul indicated that he knew that the Thessalonians were God's elect (1 Thess 1:4), Owen viewed the statement as more a loving comment than an actual reality.[24]

This wise and insightful use of words gave Puritan preaching an exactness and attractiveness that many other English pulpiteers lacked. It is not

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[20] *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks* (ed. A. B. Grosart; Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866) 1.12.

[21] J. Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh; Banner of Truth, 1959) 154.

[22] Ibid. 190.

[23] Ibid. 198.

[24] Ibid. 198–199.

difficult to recognize that their understanding of and facility with the use of words was a great source of strength in their Biblical interpretation.

A second practice that added exactness and correctness to the Puritan use of Scripture was their recognition of the importance of the context of a statement in making an interpretation. This is not to suggest that all Puritans always took proper recognition of the context, for some erred seriously at this point. But most Puritans realized that a statement's context must be fully considered before the statement can be applied and understood.

Baxter demonstrated a mastery of this important principle in many of his practical writings. In a discussion of the application of Eccl 9:10, in which the writer urged his readers to do whatever their hands found to do with all their might, Baxter discussed the context of the statement at length before making an appeal for its application. He noted that the "brevity of life" was the principal subject of the chapter and that the writer inferred "from the brevity of man's life, the necessity of speed and diligence in his duty."[25]

Flavel turned in a mixed performance in his correct use of a knowledge of the context. In a reference to Jer 32:40 he understood that the "everlasting covenant" God promised was available for NT believers as a means of giving them "great security . . . against new breaches between God and them."[26] Since 32:41 makes reference to planting "them in this land," it seems better to view the promise as a special promise of divine love to the nation of Israel. But he correctly inferred from "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4) that the fact of the suffering of Christ in the suffering of his people implies a mystical union between them.[27]

John Hooper (1495–1555) was a former Cistercian monk converted in the final ten years of the reign of Henry VIII. A powerful preacher, he became influential during the reign of Edward VI. Hooper is in many ways a pre-Puritan, but he spoke out against the religious policy of Thomas Cranmer who in Hooper's opinion had mixed divine truth with "superstitious" human inventions. Hooper failed to consider the principle of context in his interpretation of Gal 2:18: "If I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor." Believing that Paul had written Hebrews, Hooper asserted that in that writing Paul had abolished all the rites, vestments and rituals the Anglicans used. From Gal 2:18 he inferred that "whatever re-establishes things that have been annulled in Christ, transgresses the will of God."[28]

Owen realized that context would be a chief determining factor of the meaning of a word. He observed that Jesus' comment in Matt 8:22 to "let the dead bury their dead" included two different meanings of the same Greek word. He noted that the first reference to "dead" described those who were dead spiritually in sin and that the next referred to those who were physically dead.[29]

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[25] Baxter, *Select Treatises* 486–487.
[26] J. Flavel, *The Method of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 60.
[27] Ibid. 37.
[28] *The Reformation of the Church* (ed. I. H. Murray; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965) 58.
[29] Owen, *Death* 193.

The ability to recognize the importance of context in determining the meaning of a statement added strength and relevance to the writings of those Puritans who followed this principle. The failure adequately to recognize this principle by some Puritan writers weakened their arguments. Their failure reminds us of the ease with which we too can ignore this important feature.

A third feature that Puritan exegesis demonstrated was an awareness of the necessity for critical thinking in understanding and applying Scripture. I do not use the term "critical thinking" in its more modern sense of skepticism but in reference to the need for rational justification of a meaning and application before adopting it. Most Puritans recognized the need for practicing this principle, but we can find occasional lapses by some commentators.

Perkins, whose writings are models of hermeneutical propriety, demonstrated an awareness of the need for practicing this principle: "The circumstances of the place propounded are these: who? to whom? upon what occasions? at what time? in what place? for what end? what goeth before? what followeth?"[30] To Perkins a proper understanding and application of a passage involved rational thinking about the passage.

Bradshaw also insisted on the necessity of a thinking approach to Scripture. He said:

> They [the Puritans] hould that in interpreting the Scriptures: and openyng the sence of them, he ought to follow those rules onely that are followed in finding out the meaning of other writings, to wit, by waying the proprietie of the tongue wherein they are written, by waying the Circumstaunce of the place, by comparinge one place with another, and by consideringe what is properly spoken, and what tropically or figuratively.[31]

Flavel based an interpretation upon an improper exegesis of the words of Agrippa in Acts 26:28. Assuming that Agrippa meant "within a very little thou persuadest me to be a Christian," Flavel assumed that he was "almost" persuaded to respond to Christ and to turn from his sin.[32] Most contemporary interpreters would understand Agrippa to be saying, "You are presenting very scanty material in your effort to try to convince me to become a Christian." Flavel's interpretation would find its contemporary supporters, but his grasp of the meaning of the underlying Greek text seems inadequate at this point.[33] His observations about the meaning of the statement are not sufficiently reflective to avoid a misunderstanding about its meaning.

A fourth principle of interpretation practiced by Puritans involved the use of Scripture to interpret Scripture. Perkins defined this principle precisely in the following statement:

> The supreme and absolute mean of interpretation is the scripture itself. . . .
> The means subordinated to the scripture are three: the analogy of faith, the

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[30] *Perkins* (ed. Breward) 338.
[31] Bradshaw, *Puritanisme* 18.
[32] Flavel, *Method* 84.
[33] The NIV translators view Agrippa's statement as ironic: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Alternatively, C. Keener opts to take Agrippa seriously and suggests the translation: "You are so convincing that you may soon convert me!" (*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993] 400).

circumstances of the place propounded and the comparing of places alto-gether. . . . The analogy of faith is a certain abridgment . . . or sum of the scrip-tures, collected out of most manifest and familiar places. The parts thereof are two. The first concerneth faith, which is handled in the Apostles' Creed. The sec-ond concerneth charity or love, which is explicated in the Ten Commandments.[34]

The more theoretical description of this principle given by Perkins is prac-tically illustrated in Flavel, who used the principle in equating the mean-ings of "coming to Christ" and "believing on Christ." Using Jesus' statements in John 6:35 Flavel said:

Coming to Christ is believing in Christ; and believing in Christ is coming to Christ. The expressions are synonymous, importing the self-same thing, only that in *coming* to Christ there are many rich and excellent things hinted to us which no other word can so aptly convey to our minds.[35]

Flavel also used the principle to give a proper interpretation to Jer 31:34: "And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying Know the Lord: for they shall all know me." Noting that some used the verse to deny the necessity of a teaching ministry in a church he said:

But if these words should be understood absolutely, they would not only over-throw God's own institution, 1 Cor. 12:28, and deprive us of a principal fruit of Christ's ascension, Eph. 4:11, 12, but would destroy all private instructions and admonitions. . . . The sense therefore cannot be negative, but comparative; it shows the excellency of divine, but does not destroy the usefulness of human teaching.[36]

A fifth principle of interpretation that Puritans practiced involved their quest for the literal meaning of the text. They rejected an allegorical empha-sis but, as we shall see, they did note the presence of typology and figures of speech in Scripture. Again it is Perkins who speaks forthrightly about the necessity of using the literal sense:

The Church of Rome maketh four senses of the scriptures, the literal, allegori-cal, tropological and anagogical, . . . but this her device of the fourfold mean-ing of the scripture must be exploded and rejected. There is only one sense and the same is the literal.[37]

Puritan exegesis provides frequent examples of the usage of the literal sense of the text. Owen, in discussing the death of Christ, argued that the Jewish plotting against Christ "did nothing but what the 'hand and counsel of God had before determined should be done,' Acts iv.28; and in respect of Christ they were no way able to accomplish what they aimed at, for he him-self laid down his life, and none was able to take it from him, John x.17, 18."[38] Using the same intent of extracting the literal sense of the text, Owen turned to Gal 3:13 to suggest that

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[34] *Perkins* (ed. Breward) 338.
[35] Flavel, *Method* 199.
[36] Ibid. 367.
[37] *Perkins* 338.
[38] Owen, *Death* 51.

it was no more nor less than the curse of the law of God which he [Christ] underwent for us: for he freed us from the curse "by being made a curse," Gal iii. 13; which contained all the punishment that was due to sin, either in the severity of God's justice, or according to the exigence of that law which required obedience.[39]

A sixth principle of Puritan usage of Scripture was that they recognized the appearance of figures of speech in Scripture. This recognition moderated their emphasis on literalism so that they did not practice a wooden literalism that could lead to serious errors in interpretation. Perkins distinguished between a literal and figurative interpretation of Scripture:

> If the natural signification of the words of the place propounded do agree with the circumstances of the same place, it is the proper meaning of the place. . . . Cryptic or hidden places are those which are difficult and dark. For the expounding of them let this be thy rule and leader. If the native (or natural) signification of the words do manifestly disagree with either the analogy of faith, or very perspicuous places of the scripture, then the other meaning which is given of the place propounded is natural and proper.[40]

Owen frequently called attention to passages he regarded as containing figures of speech. In referring to the term "redemption of the transgressions" in Heb 9:15 he said that some viewed the reference as "a metonymy, transgressions being put for transgressors."[41] He used the term synecdoche to refer to the "world" in Rev 12:9. Here he understood "the whole world," which was deceived by Satan, to refer to "the worser part of the world." He saw the same figure of speech in 1 John 5:19. He took the phrase "the world" in Col 1:6 as a reference to the better part of the world.[42]

Puritan interpreters were not only proficient in detecting figures of speech but also alert to the presence of typological features in Scripture. Owen designated "Adam" in Rom 5:14 as a type, with the explanation that he was not "an *instituted type*, ordained for that only end and purpose, but only that in what he was, and what he did, with what followed thereupon, there was a *resemblance* between him and Jesus Christ."[43]

By the use of these six principles the Puritans attempted to set out clearly the teaching of the Bible for the daily needs of their people. Puritans used the principles to make the Bible clear for all, and they did not attempt to limit Bible interpretation to a few well-trained pastors. They believed that God had instituted a special group of leaders to serve as teachers, but they also contended for two principles about the understanding of Scripture that put the act of interpretation clearly into the hands of the individual Christian.

First, they insisted that Scripture was clear on all matters essential to salvation and Biblical morality. They felt they were rescuing the Bible from the obscurity with which the Catholic clergy had surrounded it due to

[39] Ibid. 61.
[40] *Perkins* 339.
[41] Owen, *Death* 148.
[42] Ibid. 224–225.
[43] Ibid. 241.

confusing allegorical interpretations. It was part of the Puritan heritage that they insisted that the truths necessary for salvation were clearly shown in Scripture.[44]

Second, they emphasized the illumination of the Holy Spirit in making Scripture clear. This insistence put the meaning of Scripture within reach of the average Christian. It minimized spiritual dependence on a professional clergy.[45]

V. PURITAN APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE

Puritans excelled in their aim of making the meaning of Scripture clear to the average reader. Some of the leading Puritan thinkers provided very practical instructions on the necessity and means of applying Scripture. Many Puritan pastors may not have read these treatises, but they came into their ministry armed with the passion to be understood by the average person. As we see their writings and the effects they produced, we can recognize that they succeeded in their aim. Puritan preacher Henry Smith said, "To preach simply is not to preach rudely, nor unlearnedly, nor confusedly, but to preach plainly and perspicuously that the simplest man may understand what is taught, as if he did hear his name."[46]

Perkins defined application as "that whereby the doctrine rightly collected is diversely fitted according as place, time and person do require."[47] He explained the dual aims of application:

> Application is either mental or practical. Mental is that which respecteth the mind and it is either doctrine or redargution. . . . Doctrine is that whereby doctrine or teaching is used for the information of the mind to a right judgment concerning things to be believed. Redargution is that whereby teaching is used for the reformation of the mind from error. . . . Practical application is that which respecteth the life and behaviour: and it is instruction and correction. Instruction is that whereby doctrine is applied to frame a man to live well in the family, commonwealth and church. . . . Correction is that whereby the doctrine is applied to reform the life from ungodliness.[48]

The practical nature of Puritan preaching is apparent from a reading of the table of contents of a collection of Baxter's writings.[49] Within a single volume was included *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, a writing on the blessedness of believers in heaven; *The Divine Life*, a study of the spiritual life of the believer; *A Treatise of Conversion* and *A Call to the Unconverted*, writings aiming to win the lost to Christ; *Directions for Weak, Distempered Christians*, a profound analysis of obstacles in the Christian life; and *Dying Thoughts*, a somber reflection on preparing for eternity.

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[44] Ryken, *Worldly Saints* 145–146.
[45] Ibid. 146.
[46] Ibid. 105.
[47] *Perkins* 341.
[48] Ibid. 342–343.
[49] Baxter, *Select Treatises* v–xx.

Typical of the Puritan focus on practical application are the emphases of two lesser-known Puritan writers. Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) was a Scottish pastor and theologian who wrote largely on matters of church polity. His opponents tried to silence him by imprisonment, but instead they provided him an opportunity to author a famous collection of letters written from jail. The letters were written to those both high and low in society and covered such topics as perseverance in Christian living, the use of trials, suffering for Christ, the love of Christ, hope, prayer, and false spiritual security. Successive generations of Christian leaders have derived much hope and encouragement from Rutherford's letters. Charles Spurgeon said that they were "the nearest thing to inspiration which can be found in all the writings of mere men."[50]

Jeremy Burroughs was a renowned preacher who was deeply affected by the divisions of the time. He served as a member of the Westminster Assembly in 1646 and ultimately held lectureships at leading congregations in London. Concerning Burroughs, Baxter said that "if all the Episcopalians had been like Archbishop Ussher, all the Presbyterians like Stephen Marshall, and all the Independents like Jeremiah Burroughs, the breaches of the Church would soon have been healed."[51] Burroughs showed his genuinely irenic spirit when he warned that

> if men take this power upon them, to compel men to do whatsoever they conceive good, and to deny or forbear whatsoever they conceive evil, they take more power upon them than ever the Apostles took. The government of the saints under the Apostles, was a great deal more mild, sweet, gentle than this. The rule the Apostles went by was, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you."[52]

Often Puritan writers dealt with passages containing prophetic views of Christ. They showed their practical bent by normally refusing to become involved in presenting speculations about the time of fulfillment but instead interpreted the prophetic passages in a very practical manner. Esteemed preacher Richard Sibbes, who died in 1635, presented a message entitled "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax," based on Matt 12:20 in which Matthew was quoting Isa 42:3. His sermon emphasized that the people with whom Christ deals are all bruised and in need of mercy. Sibbes emphasized that Christ showed mercy to all bruised sinners whom he met.[53]

Sometimes Puritan writers sought to convince the readers of their viewpoint by appealing to common sense and the judgment of reason. This frequent appeal shows that the Puritans relentlessly used logic in arriving both at their interpretation and their application.[54]

[50] S. Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973).

[51] *Reformation* (ed. Murray) 325.

[52] Ibid. 330.

[53] *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes, D.D.* (ed. A. B. Grosart; Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862) 1.44–46.

[54] Note Owen's appeal to common sense in his efforts to prove his point: "For that which some say, namely, that the death of Christ doth procure that which is never granted, we shall see afterward whether it do not contradict Scripture, yea, and common sense" (*Death* 73).

In their lifetime the issues the Puritans championed caught the conscience of England. Although they never remained in political power, their spiritual power showed itself by the impact that their preaching and writing had in molding the conscience of the English people. Two emphases the Puritans followed explain at least a part of their effectiveness in impacting the English people.

First, they educated the mind.[55] As a group Puritan pastors had an educational method that was well planned. They aimed at instructing the mind so that faith and obedience could become possible. They recognized that heat in the pulpit without light from Scripture would not change people. They rejected an appeal for religious feeling without knowledge or instruction, and in this emphasis we can well learn from them.

Second, they aimed at the conscience.[56] They appealed to an individual's relationship to God at each present moment. As they explained Scripture they expected the Holy Spirit to honor their work by leading the hearers to judge themselves and by producing responses to the preaching that had been given.

Sibbes proved effective in combining these twin appeals to both the mind and the conscience. In a sermon entitled "A Description of Christ" he presented over twenty-five pages of doctrinal instruction that targeted chiefly the mind. In a closing section aimed specifically at application he asked, "What should we learn hence?"[57] He responded with a moving appeal to the conscience of his readers, saying, "Let us commit the fame and credit of what we are or do to God. He will take care of that. Let us take care to be and to do as we should, and then for noise and report, let it be good or ill as God will send it."[58]

Puritans like Sibbes expected that their preaching would produce faith, hope, love, repentance, humility, self-denial, praise, thanksgiving and joy. These aims and expectations helped to guarantee their effectiveness in molding a national conscience.

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[55] Packer, *God's Giants* 90–92.

[56] Ibid. 86.

[57] *Sibbes* (ed. Grosart) 1.30.

[58] Ibid.