

Church History (34): An Overview of Puritan Belief and Practice

Both this morning and next week, I intend to survey various beliefs and practices that characterized the Puritans as a whole. We shall consider their views on Scripture, public worship, walking with God, conversion, prayer and meditation, assurance, and spiritual warfare.

I. An Overview of Puritan Belief and Practice

1. *Scripture*. "The Puritans were people of a Book. What did the Bible mean to the Puritans? The preface to the Geneva Bible is an apt summary: The Bible is 'the light to our paths, the key of the kingdom of heaven, our comfort in affliction, our shield and sword against Satan, the school of all wisdom, the glass wherein we behold God's face, the testimony of His favor, and the only food and nourishment of our souls' (Ryken).¹ "Reading the Puritans, it is hard not to be struck by their knowledge and use of Scripture. Their sermons and writings are studded with biblical allusions, phrases, illustrations, and proof texts. The Bible was their supreme authority, and was always referenced as the yardstick against which their teaching could be tested" (Beeke).² "Puritans were united in their dependence upon the Bible as their supreme source of spiritual nourishment and guide for the reformation of life. They based this commitment on their belief that the Bible was the inspired Word of God. 'Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you,' said Thomas Watson. For John Owen, 'The whole authority of the Scriptures depends solely on its divine origin. The Scripture hath all its authority from its Author'" (Kapic).³

Here I want to consider how the Puritans interpreted Scripture. We will limit our consideration to two early treatises on the interpretation of Scripture from the Puritan era, and one later: William Whitaker (1548-1595), *Disputations on the Holy Scripture*; William Perkins (1558-1602), *The Art of Prophesying*; and John Owen (1616-1683), *Means to be Used for the Right Understanding of the Mind of God in the Scripture*. Whitaker's *Disputations* served as a textbook on post-Reformation era hermeneutics, Perkins taught the first few generations of Puritan ministers at Cambridge, and John Owen is considered the 'Prince of the Puritans.' "It is written, John v. 39, 'Search the scriptures.' Christ our Savior said this to excite the Jews, and all of us also, to investigate the true sense of scripture. For the scripture consists not in the bare words, but in the sense, interpretation, and meaning of the words" (Whitaker).⁴ In other words, for Whitaker, it wasn't enough to merely quote the words of Scripture, without a right and proper understanding of their meaning. Whitaker provided eight means to properly understand Scripture, Perkins provided five basic principles, and Owen gave two broad and basic rules (I have condensed these into seven).

(1) Prayer. "Before we do anything else, God must earnestly be sued unto by prayer, that He would bless these means, and that He would open the meaning of the Scripture to us who are blind" (Perkins).⁵ "In the first place, prayer is necessary for reading the scriptures so as to understand them; and on that account David so often begs of God to illuminate his mind and to open his eyes; and, Matthew 7 says, 'Ask, and it shall be given you: seek, and ye shall find: knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' And James, says: 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.' Whence a certain father said, that he profited more in the knowledge of scripture by prayer, than by reading and study. And Origen, in his 12th Homily on Exodus, says that we must not only apply study in order to learn the sacred word, but also supplicate God

¹ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, 154

² Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 43

³ Kelly Kapic and Randal Gleason, *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, 26

⁴ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:1

⁵ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:302

and entreat him night and day, that the Lamb of the tribe of Judah may come, and, taking himself the sealed book, vouchsafe to open it. Augustine too, says, 'Reading inquires, meditation finds, prayer asks, contemplation tastes. And Jerome says, 'Let reading follow prayer, and prayer reading.' This should be always the first means, and the foundation of the rest" (Whitaker).⁶ "The first thing required as a spiritual means is prayer. I intend fervent and earnest prayer for the assistance of the Spirit of God revealing the mind of God, as in the whole Scripture, so in particular books and passages of it" (Owen).⁷

Whoever, in the diligent and immediate study of the Scripture to know the mind of God therein so as to do it, does abide in fervent supplications, in and by Jesus Christ, for supplies of the Spirit of grace, to lead him into all truth, to reveal and make known unto him the truth as it is in Jesus, to give him an understanding of the Scriptures and the will of God therein, he shall be preserved from pernicious errors, and attain that degree in knowledge as shall be sufficient unto the guidance and preservation of the life of God in the whole of his faith and obedience.⁸

(2) The diligent reading of Scripture. "Scripture must be read diligently, with a sedate, rational consideration of what we read. That is, with a due consideration of the things read, inquiry into them, meditation on them, with a regard unto the design and scope of the place, with all other advantages for the due investigation of the truth" (Owen).⁹ "Read first the epistle of Paul to the Romans and, after that, the Gospel of John (as being indeed the keys to the NT). And then the other books of the NT will be easier when they are read. When all this is done, learn first the dogmatical books of the OT, especially the Psalms; then the prophetic, especially Isaiah; lastly the historical, but chiefly Genesis" (Perkins).¹⁰ Perkins also suggested, "those things, which in studying you meet with, that are necessary and worthy to be observed, you must put in your tables or common-place books, that you may always have in a readiness both old and new material."¹¹

(3) The consideration of context. "To rightly interpret Scripture, we must consider the circumstances of the place propounded: Who? To whom? Upon what occasion? At what time? In what place? For what end? What goes before? What follows? (Perkins).¹² "We ought to consider the scope, end, matter, circumstances (that is, as Augustine says, the persons, place and time), the antecedents and consequents of each passage; and by this means it will be no hard matter both to refute many errors, and to arrive at a clear understanding of those things which seemed at first obscure" (Whitaker).¹³ (4) The analogy of faith. "What the Puritans meant by the analogy of faith was the Scripture makes up a coherent system of doctrine and that any specific passage, including an obscure one, must be interpreted in harmony with what we know about Christian doctrine generally" (Ryken).¹⁴ "Now the analogy of faith is nothing else but the constant sense of the general tenor of scripture in those clear passages of scripture, where the meaning labors under no obscurity; such as the articles of faith is the Creed, and the contents of the Lord's Prayer, the Decalogue, and the whole Catechism: for every part of the Catechism may be confirmed by plain passages of scripture. Whatever exposition is repugnant to this analogy must be false" (Whitaker).¹⁵ "The analogy of faith is a certain abridgment (or sum of the Scriptures) collected out of

⁶ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:9

⁷ John Owen, *Works*, 4:201

⁸ John Owen, *Works*, 4:204

⁹ John Owen, *Works*, 4:200

¹⁰ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:301

¹¹ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:302

¹² William Perkins, *Works*, 10:303

¹³ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:9

¹⁴ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, 154

¹⁵ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:9

the most manifest and familiar places. The parts thereof are two. The first concerns faith, which is handled in the Apostles' Creed. The second concerns charity or love, which is explicated in the Ten Commandments" (Perkins).¹⁶ "There is a harmony, an answerableness, and a proportion, in the whole system of faith, or things to be believed. Particular places are so to be interpreted as that they do not break or disturb this order, or fall in upon their due relation to one another. This 'proportion of faith,' this 'form of sound words,' is continually to be remembered in our inquiry after the mind of God in any particular place of Scripture; for all the Scripture is from the same spring of divine inspiration, and is in all things perfectly consistent with itself. And the things that are of greatest importance are delivered in it plainly, clearly, and frequently. Unto these the sense of every particular place is to be reduced" (Owen).¹⁷

(5) The use of other interpreters. "We must get aid out of orthodox writings, not only from the latter but also from the more ancient church, because Satan has raised up from the dead the old heretics that he might hinder the restoration of the church, which is begun to be made in our time" (Perkins).¹⁸ "There are means and helps for the interpretation of the Scripture which I call *ecclesiastical*. Those I intend which we are supplied withal by the *ministry of the church* in all ages. And they may be referred unto three heads, under which their usefulness to this purpose is pleaded: as – 1. *Catholic or universal tradition*; 2. *Consent of the fathers*; 3. *The endeavors of any persons holy and learned* who have gone before us in the investigation of the truth, and expressed their minds in writing, for the edification of others, whether of *old* or of *late*" (Owen).¹⁹ "Since the unlearned know not how to make a right use of these means, they ought to have recourse to other persons better skilled than themselves, to read the books of others, to consult the commentaries and expositions of learned interpreters, and to confer with others. Such was the practice of Jerome, of Augustine, and of other fathers. But, in the meanwhile care must be taken that we do not ascribe too much to them, or suppose that their interpretations are to be received because they are theirs, but because they are supported by the authority of scripture or by reason, so as to allow them no weight in opposition to the scripture" (Whitaker).²⁰

(6) Comparing Scripture with Scripture. "One place must be compared and collated with another; obscurer places with the plainer or less obscure. For though in one place the words may be obscure, they will be plainer in another" (Whitaker).²¹ "The principal interpreter of the Scripture is the Holy Spirit. He who makes the law is the best and the highest interpreter of the law. The supreme and absolute means of interpretation is the Scripture itself" (Perkins).²² "The collation (or comparing of places together) is that whereby places are set like parallels one beside another, that the meaning of them may more evidently appear" (Perkins).²³ These comparisons, according to Perkins, may include passages that are identical, similar, or opposite.²⁴ (7) Distinguishing between proper and improper predication. "In dealing with the words, we should consider which are proper, and which figurative and modified. For, when words are taken figuratively, they should not be expounded strictly, says Augustine, in his books of *Christian Doctrine*, 'a wretched bondage of the soul, when signs are taken for things;' that is, when what is spoken figuratively is expounded as if spoken strictly. Hence hath arisen that difficult

¹⁶ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:303

¹⁷ John Owen, *Hebrews*, 4:315

¹⁸ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:301-302

¹⁹ John Owen, *Works*, 4:226

²⁰ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:9

²¹ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:9

²² William Perkins, *Works*, 10:303

²³ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:303-304

²⁴ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:304-309

and long-continued dispute between us and the papists about the words of consecration, which we would have understood figuratively, and they strictly" (Whitaker).²⁵

2. *Public worship*. (1) Its beauty. For the Puritans, the beauty of NC worship existed in its simple and spiritual nature. In his sermon *The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship*, Owen described the beauty of OC worship, with its external pomp and glory, only to contrast it with the superior and spiritual beauty of NC worship. "That worship may be well suspected not to be according to the mind of God, which comes short in these properties of order and beauty, comeliness and glory. I shall add unto this only this reasonable assertion, which no man can well deny—that what is so in His worship and service, God Himself is the most proper judge. If, then, we prove not that spiritual gospel worship, in its own naked simplicity, without any other external helper or countenance, is most orderly, comely, beautiful, and glorious (the Holy Ghosts in the Scripture being judge), we shall be content to seek for these things where else, as it is pretended, they may be found."²⁶ Owen underscored a similar truth in his catechism entitled, *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God*: "This is the glory of gospel worship and the beauty of it; whose considerations whilst the minds of men are diverted from, to look for beauty in the outward preparation of ceremonies, they lose the privilege purchased for believers by the blood of Christ. Instead, then, of furthering the beauty and comeliness of gospel worship, they are apt to lead men into a dangerous error and mistake—namely, that the beauty and excellency of it consists in such things as, upon a due consideration, will appear to be mean and carnal, and far beneath those ceremonies and ordinances of the OT, which yet, in comparison of the worship of the gospel, are called 'worldly, carnal, beggarly,' and are said to have 'no glory.'"²⁷

(2) Its primacy. David Clarkson (1622-1686) wrote a treatise entitled, *Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private*. His text was Psalm 87:2, "The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob." His main doctrine was: "Public worship is to be preferred before private. So it is by the Lord, so it should be by His people. So it was under the law, so it must be under the gospel."²⁸ He then provided 12 arguments in favor of his doctrine: "1. The Lord is more glorified by public worship than private. 2. There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private. 3. Here are the clearest manifestations of God. 4. There is more spiritual advantage to be got in the use of public ordinances than in private. 5. Public worship is more edifying than private. 6. Public ordinances are a better security against apostasy than private. 7. Here the Lord works His greatest works; greater works than ordinarily He works by private means. 8. Public worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven, therefore to be preferred. 9. The examples of the most renowned servants of God, who have preferred public worship before private, is a sufficient argument. 10. Public worship is the most available for the procuring of the greatest mercies, and preventing and removing the greatest judgments. 11. The precious blood of Christ is most interested in public worship, and that must needs be most valuable, which has most interest in that which is of infinite value. 12. The promises of God are more to public worship than to private."²⁹

(3) Its elements. "Nothing may go under the name of the worship of God, which He has not ordained in His own Word and commanded to us as His own worship. For we are forbidden under pain of the curse of God, either to add or to take away anything from the precepts of God in which He prescribes His own worship" (Perkins).³⁰ "All things in God's worship must have a warrant out of God's Word. It

²⁵ William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 5:9

²⁶ John Owen, *Works*, 9:56

²⁷ John Owen, *Works*, 15L469

²⁸ David Clarkson, *Works*, 3:187

²⁹ David Clarkson, *Works*, 3:189-197

³⁰ William Perkins, *Works*, 7:477

must be commanded, it's not enough that it is not forbidden" (Burroughs).³¹ Thus, for the Puritans, as for Calvin and the other Reformers, public worship must be regulated by Scripture. "The focus of Puritan worship was not objects and ritual but the glory of God in Christ, hearing God's Word, praising God's name, praying for God's grace, and receiving God's blessing. Puritan pastors led their churches in substantial, heartfelt prayers for the needs of their members, the nation, and the advance of the gospel around the world. The Puritans loved to sing and found in the book of Psalms a divinely inspired hymnbook for the church of all times" (Beeke).³² "This divine worship God is very jealous of; it is the apple of His eye, the pearl of His crown; which He guards, as He did the tree of life, with cherubim and a flaming sword, that no man may come near it to violate it. Divine worship must be such as God Himself has appointed, else it is offering strange fire. The Lord would have Moses make the tabernacle, 'according to the pattern in the mount.' He must not leave out anything in the pattern, nor add to it. If God was so exact and curious about the place of worship, how exact will be about the matter of His worship! Surely here everything must be according to the pattern prescribed in His word" (Watson).³³

"Whereas the worship of the medieval church centered on visible images and ceremonial actions, the Puritans focused worship on the reading and the preaching of God's Word. Substantial portions of Scripture were read aloud to the congregation. The sermon was the highlight of the Puritan worship service. The sermon usually lasted about an hour and had several points of doctrine or teaching to believe and many 'uses' or applications to put into practice" (Beeke).³⁴ "The first part of a Puritan sermon was exegetical and expositional; the second, doctrinal and didactic, and the third, applicatory" (Beeke).³⁵ "It was the genius of the Puritan preaching that in style it was plain without being dull; in emphasis, an admirable balance of doctrine and practice; in character, faithfully devoted to the exposition of the Word of Scripture, both letter and spirit, which they loved" (Lewis).³⁶ Jeremiah Burroughs, in his treatise *Gospel Worship*, provided ten ways the name of God is sanctified in the hearing of His word: "1. There must be a preparation of the soul so that when you come to hear you may receive the Word with all readiness. 2. The fallow ground of the heart must be plowed up so as to receive the word with meekness and humility. 3. There must be a careful applying of the heart to the Word and an applying of the Word unto the heart. 4. We must mix faith with the Word or else it will do us but little good. 5. We must hear the Word with a trembling heart. 6. We must receive the Word in humble subjection to it. Our hearts must bow to it, must lie under the Word that we hear. 7. The Word must be received with love and joy. 8. We must receive the Word with honest or sincere hearts. 9. If we will sanctify God's name in the Word, we must hide the Word in our hearts. We must not only hear the Word, but keep and preserve it. 10. If you would sanctify the name of God in hearing His Word, turn it into practice or otherwise the name of God is blasphemed, or at least is taken in vain by you if you do not turn what you hear into practice."³⁷

3. *Walking with God*. This is where the Puritans excelled. They wrote full treatises on how to walk with God in every area of life. For example, Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory: or, A Sum of Practical Theology*, is 950 pages of double-column small type, wherein every area of life is considered. It's divided into four main sections: ethics (private duties), economics (domestic duties), Ecclesiastics (church duties), and politics (social duties). Masters, servants, pastors, churchmen, husbands, fathers, mothers, wives, and children are all shown their duty from Scripture. The same is true of George

³¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, 13

³² Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 92

³³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 8

³⁴ Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 92

³⁵ Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 690

³⁶ Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, 47

³⁷ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, 198-247

Swinnock's *The Christian Man's Calling*, which contains 1,250 pages on 1 Timothy 4:7, "exercise thyself unto godliness." His intent is to show, "what it is for a man to make religion his business or to exercise himself unto godliness: (1) in religious actions, or the worship of God in general, (2) in his natural actions of eating, drinking, sleeping, and clothing, (3) in his recreations, (4) in his particular vocation or calling, (5) in reference to his relations and family, (6) in his dealings with all men, (7) in all conditions, whether of prosperity or adversity, (8) in all companies, whether good or evil, (9) in solitariness, or when he is alone, (10) on a week-day, from morning to night, (11) in his visiting the sick, and (12) upon a dying bed."³⁸ In 1626, Robert Bolton (1572-1631) wrote his popular treatise, *General Directions for A Comfortable Walking with God*. His main doctrine was, *Walking with God is the crown of the Christian's character*. He then said, "By walking with God, I mean, a sincere endeavor, punctually and precisely, to manage, conduct, and dispose all our affairs, thoughts, words, and deeds, all our behavior and conversation, in reverence and fear, with humility and singleness of heart, as in the sight of an invisible God, under the perpetual presence of His all-seeing, glorious, pure eye; and, by a comfortable consequence, to enjoy, by the assistance and exercise of faith, an unutterable sweet communion and humble familiarity with His holy Majesty: in a word, to live in heaven upon earth."³⁹ He first provided ten General Preparatives which are foundational to walking with God (abandon thy beloved sin; hate hypocrisy; build thy resolutions on self-denial; live the life of faith; settle in thy heart a right conception of the substance and power, nature and materials of Christianity; guard against worldliness; let thy heart be thoroughly warmed with the love of God; prize the fruition of God's reconciled face; watch over thy heart, and keep it in a spiritual temper; meditate on thy future bliss). He then gave Particular Directions, wherein the General Preparatives are applied to every circumstance of life (family duties, idleness, meditation, keeping company, government of the heart, repressing raging passions, government of the tongue, managing carefully every action of our lives - recreations, visits to unsanctified great men, natural actions, civil affairs, works of mercy, and self-examination).

X. Let thy soul full often soar aloft, upon the wings of faith, unto the glory of the sublime heaven, where God dwells, and bathe itself beforehand with many a sweet meditation in that everlasting bliss above. Oh, think with thyself, though it far pass the reach of any mortal thought), what an infinite, inexplicable sweetness it will be to look for ever upon the glorious body of Jesus Christ, shining with incomprehensible beauty; and to consider that even every vein of that blessed body bled to bring thee to heaven; and that it, being with such excess of glory hypostatically united into the second Person in the Trinity, has honored and advanced thy nature in that respect far above the brightest cherub. To say nothing of the beauty and brightness of that ever-blessed place, that unapproachable light which besets God's dreadful throne, the walking in closest fellowship with the angels of God, that everlasting joyful communion and conversing with the dearest Christian friends and all the crowned saints...Methinks, if a man do but once a day seriously and solemnly thus cast up the eye of his faith upon that never-fading crown of life, which, after an inch of time, shall eternally rest upon his head, the goodly splendor therefore, and beams of that incomparable joy, should be able to dispel those mists of fading vanities and hurtful fumes of honors, riches, and earthly pleasures, which this great dunghill of the world, heated by the fire of inordinate lust, does evaporate and interpose between the sight of the soul and celestial bliss; so that he might, with more affectionate freedom and contempt of earth, have his conversation above, and turn the current of all his delights, love, and longings, with more resolution and constancy, towards his heavenly home (Bolton, 71-72).

³⁸ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:86

³⁹ Robert Bolton, *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God*, 30