

THE PURITANS: WHAT THEY HAVE THAT THE MODERNS HAVE NOT

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Whoever dares embark on a subject of this nature in a paper this brief faces three insuperable difficulties. The first concerns definition: how large a group of people, over how broad a time-span, can be included in the term "Puritan"? Even if that problem is solved, it leads directly to the next: in a brief article, the detailed documentation needed to be convincing cannot possibly be included. And that lack produces the third difficulty: as the documentation decreases, the dangers inherent in subjectivity increase in proportion. It is all too easy to discover in Puritan writings precisely what the critic would like to discover. Having admitted the difficulties, we nevertheless plunge into the subject since the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ continues to exhibit a sad ignorance concerning that incomparably Godly and influential minority group of believers called Puritans. Though the term be filled with opprobrium and mockery by the ignorant, let those who love the Lord Jesus remember with respect that genuine purity is never to be despised; and the Puritans, in church life as in individual deportment, in private prayers as in scholarly achievement, stand amongst the grandest exemplars of Biblical purity.

The Puritan age proper spans a mere hundred years. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the crying need in both England and Scotland centred on the appalling ignorance of the masses at the parish level. Nominally, the people had become Protestants by royal decree. Following the years of turmoil under Henry VIII, the boy King Edward VI (1547-1553), and Mary Tudor (1553-1558, of "Bloody Mary" fame), the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558 coupled with the formal abolition of Catholicism by the Scottish Parliament in 1560 brought back scores of British exiles from their havens of refuge on the Continent. No haven was as influential as Geneva, where Calvin and his colleagues had taught some two hundred British exiles. They returned to their homeland bringing with them the so-called *Geneva Bible*, which went through 140 editions during the subsequent eighty years, read by Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans alike. The Westminster Assembly, which effectively brought together

divines from both groups, met in 1643; and out of this convention there emerged a matchless expression of Biblical truth in systematic and catechetical form: the *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*.

The men in the south were called "Puritans" because it was their avowed goal to purify the national Church. The name was first applied during the decade following 1560. One hundred years later, Charles II came to the throne. In 1662, the infamous Act of Uniformity was passed, ejecting two thousand Puritan preachers from their pulpits. It was followed by even more savage acts in subsequent years. New Testament Christianity in the English speaking world went into an eclipse that lasted, with minor exceptions in Ireland and in America, until the rise of George Whitefield, Howell Harris, and the Wesley brothers some eighty years later.

The one hundred years between 1560 and 1660 burn brightly with names like John Knox and Christopher Goodman in Scotland, Thomas Cartwright at Cambridge, and William Perkins who influenced Thomas Goodwin, who in turn is considered by some to be the intellectual peer of John Owen. Who has read Puritan history and not been thrilled with the accounts and/or writings of Lawrence Chaderton, John Preston, Richard Sibbes, William and Thomas Gouge, Samuel Fairclough, John Rogers, John Howe, Richard Baxter, Philip Henry (father of Matthew Henry), Joseph Alleine, Stephen Charnock, Robert Pollock, John Welch, Robert Boyd, John Davidson, Robert Blair, George Hutcheson, John Brown, and many more?

For the purposes of this paper, however, I will include among the Puritans those of subsequent generations who follow the mainstream of Puritan thought. In general, the further removed from the original Puritans, the greater was the likelihood of significant departure from Puritan belief. There are notable exceptions; but these serve only to prove the rule. Even C. H. Spurgeon, who is often dubbed "the last of the Puritans", disagrees with mainstream Puritan thought in the realm of eschatology.

The Nature of Truth

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, few attacks on Biblical Christianity have been as vicious as those in the area of epistemology. Liberal optimism, with its myopic view of man's alleged goodness, gave way to neo-orthodoxy following two world wars. At the same time, the rise of existentialism gave impetus to emphases on an "encounter" with God and with truth. Higher criticism destroyed much of the confidence in revealed and propositional truth, leaving little but Bultmannian "hope".

But new light is dawning. C. Van Til, H. Dooyeweerd, and on a more popular level, Clark Pinnock and Francis Schaeffer, have sought to lay epistemological foundations justifying the propagation of Biblical truth. Not surprisingly, most of the men involved in this area of thought are of Reformed persuasion.

Nevertheless, I suggest that the Puritans have something to teach us in this matter. In their day, they admittedly did not have to confront a plethora of diverse epistemologies; but they did face the opponent of traditionalism encrusted within church authority, by which all questions were decided. In meeting the enemy, the Puritans operated at two levels: in the first place, they produced scholarly refutations of anti-Biblical positions, along with comprehensive statements of Biblical truth; and in the second place, they laid enormous emphasis on teaching systematized truth to the laity. The sermons of the Puritans were filled with content, rich in doctrine, endlessly expository — and no less fervent for these graces. In addition, Puritan preachers *catechized* the families committed to their charge. "We must to-day humble ourselves before the Lord for our former negligence, especially in not catechizing and personally instructing those committed to our charge," wrote Richard Baxter.¹ Baxter's sixth chapter is filled with reasons to justify this work. Concerning the homes of non-Christians, he writes: "The work of conversion consists of two parts, (1) The clear and full informing of the judgment in necessary points; (2) The change of the will by the efficacy of truth, as applied by the Holy Spirit."² He therefore demonstrates that what non-Christians first need is the "informing of their understandings." What better way than by a careful presentation of truth in the homes of the unconverted? He gives a further nineteen reasons why the private instruction of believers is urgent, and exhorts his fellow-pastors:

Set yourself to do this work closely and diligently . . . You will live to see that day when the neglect of private, personal oversight for each member of the flock will be counted a scandalous and odious omission. It will become as disgraceful for those who are guilty of such neglect as preaching only once a day was in other days. If physicians were only engaged in giving public lectures on health, or on diseases, then their patients would not be much the better for them . . . A pastor's work requires personal dealings in order to be effective . . . Let us show the world that we care, by our practice, for most men have grown weary and heedless to mere words . . . My brothers, if you will but faithfully perform what you have agreed upon, both in the business of catechizing and personal instruction, and in the matter of discipline, then *you will do more for the true reformation than all the changes of forms and orders so eagerly contended for by others.*³

¹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, N.F.C.E. reprint, p. 35.

² *op. cit.*, p. 67.

³ *op. cit.*, pp. 70, 75; italics mine.

Yet, Baxter is not advocating mere activism. His section titled: "Most Ministers Are Negligent of their Studies" would make most modern evangelical preachers hang their heads in shame. The point to be noted is this: both in the pulpit and in the homes, in sermons and in private instruction, the Puritans taught the lay people the things of God. They realized full well that erudite responses to learned opponents might have some fruit in a *future* generation of people who adopted the thinking of the winners; but that what was needed to win a decisive victory, speedily, was to *teach* and *teach* and *teach*. . . .

I am persuaded that, difficulties notwithstanding, if a contemporary preacher adopts such a course — realizing at the same time the need for tact and graciousness in making marked transitions — then the church of which he is the pastor will become so used to sound and systematic teaching that it will refuse anything less. The majority of the members will gradually lose their taste for endless pageantry, spectacular titles, pompous mouthings, and emotion without content. If ten thousand pastors in North America adopted the goals and methods of the Puritans in this respect, a new age of piety would be ushered in.

In short, the Puritans were absolutely convinced that they possessed the truth, that the truth alone makes men free, that the One who is the Truth would call out His people by their instrumentality if they were but faithful in proclaiming the doctrines of Holy Writ. Unlike Evangelicals caught up in certain modern trends, however, they did not restrict themselves to erudite replies to those who attacked their belief in revealed propositional truth. (Indeed, their writings seem to indicate a naivete about the evaluation of historical evidence which forms a necessary part of a sound epistemological basis. No doubt this is due to the pre-scientific era in which they lived.) Instead, they set out to win and teach the masses. Truth was not to be simply defended before the experts; it was to be disseminated among the people.

The Sovereignty of God

A second feature, utterly inescapable to anyone who drinks in the richness of the writings of the Puritans, is the constant underlying acknowledgement of the absolute and utter sovereignty of God. This fact of Puritan thought is inextricably interwoven with other aspects: Puritan eschatology, Puritan views of the wholeness of life, and Calvinism.

Of course, all that was said in the paragraph above may be summed up in fewer words: the Puritans were intensely true to the Scriptures. In a later section I wish to show that the Puritans were

not unbalanced pessimists, or supra-Calvinistic fatalists; nor as a body were they guilty of hobby-horsing. They were men who paid more than lip service to the sovereignty of God. Many modern expressions would sound pagan to their ears. It is impossible to picture John Owen saying, "God will do such-and-such if only you'll let Him." For that matter, such nonsense cannot be envisaged as coming from the pen of Paul. But to these points I shall return.

Perhaps the most fruitful result of the Puritans' grasp of the sovereignty of God was their implicit understanding of the wholeness of life and thought. By contrast, we moderns live in an era in which compartmentalized living is accepted as the norm. One bit of each life is reserved for work; another section is taken up by eating; a third by sleeping, a fourth compartment embraces leisure time; a fifth is reserved for family responsibilities. Somewhere near the top of the heap, a compartment is reserved for Christianity.

Of course, no one is quite so gross as to reason it out this way; but the last paragraph pretty well describes the results nevertheless. A little reflection discloses that the failure stems from an inadequate appreciation of the sovereignty of God. The Eternal Almighty God must be honored as Lord and Ruler over *every* aspect of life. He is no less the Sovereign of the intellect than Captain of the soul. Not only our conduct, but equally our thinking, must be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Our use of time, our leisure, our relationships in the family, our view of work, of marriage, of the Church — all must bend to the pattern of Holy Writ. And in this discipline the Puritans were mature masters.

There are countless examples of this thesis. Perhaps the most outstanding is *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, by Jonathan Edwards.⁴ Nothing escapes the searching truths that Edwards expounds. When we are in his company, we understand the veracity of the thought, "The righteous scarcely are saved." Alerted to hypocrisy and heart-deceit, awakened to the wrestlings that belong to the believer, we are also aroused to new heights of sublime joy as we grasp afresh the inwardness and spirituality of true religion, glimpse with new insight the matchless grace of God, and rise on wings of faith to soaring pinnacles of assurance.

In emasculating the sovereignty of God, the post-Puritans have left their successors with a caricature of salvation, a disjointed cosmology, a disunified body of knowledge, and a quivering faith. Read the Puritans, and you will discover that Romans 8:28 is true in practice. Ponder Robert Haldane on Romans, and little is left of egotism, while praise is born anew in the soul.

⁴ Sovereign Grace Reprint, 1971.

Scholarship And Devotion

Much of Church history testifies to the ease with which imbalance between the twin aspects of this section can destroy the genuine vitality of the Church. Seventeenth century Particular Baptists were theologically tight and sound; they were also as cold as corpses. In the succeeding century, the French Prophets and the Moravians both had much to commend them; but having embarked on a pietistic and experiential course, many years did not have to elapse before there were gross instances of heterodoxy found among them. Scholarship was sacrificed on the altar of piety; and the result was no less repulsive than when the victim and the altar exchanged places.

The twentieth century harbours a strange paradox in this regard. Following the battles with so-called liberal Protestantism (*i.e.* heterodoxy) in Europe in the nineteenth century and in North America in the twentieth century, Evangelicals viewed as disturbingly suspect anything that smacked of erudition. The result was predictable: a massive defection by the Evangelicals from the front ranks of scholarship. Of course, a further result was then inevitable; the proud disdain of the intellectual giants for those they regarded as poor ignorant Fundamentalists whose minds were so made up, it was thought, that they refused to be confused by twentieth century facts. Meanwhile, the despised Fundamentalists, often with equal pride, reminded all who would listen that God hadn't called the wise of the world anyway, but had chosen the foolish to confound them that are wise. Perhaps the skeptic could be pardoned if he thought he detected a certain pride of ignorance at times.

That is the one side of the paradox. The other is both encouraging and dangerous. Its history is essentially bound up in the amazing rise of the Tyndale Fellowship. Under the good and powerful influence of men like F. F. Bruce and W. J. Martin, the rise of this Fellowship in the fifties and sixties has left in its train a bright and promising school of scholars of the very first rank. Convinced Evangelicals for the most part, they are producing some of the best commentaries, critiques, historical assessments, and works in apologetics and Old Testament, that are available on the market to-day. The number one commentary of 1971 is without a doubt the massive work on John written by Leon Morris, certainly an example of one who has been influenced by the Tyndale Fellowship.

Yet there are dangers in this whole movement. It is not so much that some of the men do not wear learning lightly: there are no offences so blatant, to my knowledge. It is rather that there seems to be no glow, no fervour, little spontaneous adoration, no exclaiming awe before the splendour of grace, little by way of importunate

pleadings within the writings of these scholars. Erudition abounds; conservative and Biblical exegesis is plowing new furrows; but I fear that, apart from the intervention of the grace of God, the *next* generation of "Evangelical scholars" will be more scholarly than Evangelical.

Again do the Puritans have much to teach us. There is among them a marvelous marriage of scholarship and devotion, an incomparable union of intellectual stature and humble piety, found in no other body for such a prolonged period of Church history. The brilliance of Jonathan Edwards is well known. John Owen and Thomas Goodwin were in the vanguard of scholarship in their day. Indeed, a comparison of Goodwin's *Magnum opus, An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness Before God, in Respect of Sin and Punishment*⁵ and G. C. Berkouwer's latest tome, *Sin*⁶ is revealing. Quite apart from the stylistic differences that a chronological separation of three centuries is bound to produce, it is the former which emerges as the more fervent and passionate of the two: and this despite the fact that Goodwin strikes one as the least warm of the luminaries of his day. Where is the contemporary popular volume that can stand beside Joseph Alleine's *An Alarm to the Unconverted?* Indeed, it must be admitted that Alleine would almost embarrass us, were it not for his transparent sincerity. Yet those who are familiar with Spurgeon's autobiography will remember that, as a boy, he heard a little of Alleine's *Alarm* and a little of Baxter's *Reformed Pastor* read by his parents almost every day, along with the reading of the Word of truth.

Now it is quite clear that the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and other learned volumes are not likely to print materials brimming with Evangelical fervour. Yet surely something of the balance of the Puritans needs to be recaptured. If it is true that God sets no premium on erudition, it is also true that He sets no premium on ignorance. Paul writes, "not *many* wise men after the flesh;" rather than, "not *any* wise men after the flesh." The latter would have excluded the apostle himself. The Puritans viewed all things as being under the Lordship of Christ. So convinced were they of the bondage of the will, that intellectual pride did not have much of a chance. All that was left was a desire to mould society for Christ, to serve as very salty salt, to be light to the world; and so they tried to get the best possible training, and coupled their exalted learning with a Spirit-given devotion that matches the expressions of the greatest mystics. Hence, it was Bishop Hall, who, commenting on Mt. 8:34-9:1, broke into the prayer, 'O Saviour, thou hast just cause to be weary of us, even while we sue to hold thee; but when once our wretched unthank-

⁵ Sovereign Grace Reprint, 1970.

⁶ Eerdmans, 1971.

fulness grows weary of thee, who can pity us to be punished with thy departure?" The present writer would like to see such fervour exploding in the books of modern conservative scholars.

Every year, a major American Evangelical periodical publishes a series of articles reviewing the significant writings of the past year. The reviewers generally note what is Evangelical and what is not. Praise goes to all works of scholarship, whether or not they contain one particle of truth or one iota of respect for the sacred things of God. Invective is reserved for works lacking in erudition. Now I would not want to propose that ignorance be praised; but I sense that the criteria by which a work is judged are moulded by the norms of scholarship rather than by the exigencies of revealed truth. I could accept such criteria from an unbeliever; I could even tolerate them from a believer who is writing for a thoroughly secular journal. In a magazine or journal which purports to be Evangelical, however, I fear that we Evangelicals are establishing a new idol; with one accord we are falling before the shrine of erudition. There is a desperate need for learned outrage at the unbelief, vagaries, and vanities foisted on a confused and lost public in the name of "Biblical scholarship". When the false teachings of scholars still dupe millions of gullible souls, surely there needs to be some denunciation of those who say, in effect, "Thus saith the LORD"—when the LORD has not spoken; who put no difference between the clean and the unclean, between the holy and the profane. Let the thoughtful reader meditate long on Ezekiel 13:6; 22:23-31. The "conspiracy" of which the prophet speaks is developing into a conspiracy of silence in order to keep our academic reputations intact and unblemished. Who but Evangelical scholars of the first rank can reply with gracious but fervent authority to the brilliant minds actively engaged by the enemy of our souls? Fervour can never replace a profound knowledge of the truth; but the converse is equally true. What the Church of Christ urgently needs is balance.

It is a question of attitude towards learning, which determines whether it is an idol or a beneficial tool. Therefore C. H. Spurgeon can say in one place, "Oh! Spirit of God, bring back thy Church to a belief in the gospel! Bring back her ministers to preach it once again with the Holy Ghost, and not striving after wit and learning" — and in another place, "The day is not far distant when the old, old gospel shall again command the scholarship of the age, and shall direct the thoughts of men. The fight is not over yet; the brunt of the battle is yet to come."⁷ Spurgeon is not here contradicting himself. As an heir of the Puritans, who were heirs of the greatest Reformers, who in

⁷ *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1970 IX, p. 198 and XXXII, p. 430.

turn were heirs of the first apostolic communities, he is summing up the balance between an objective and scholarly pursuit of the truth and a heart filled with devout humility, both of which are forcefully required in the pages of the Word. To succumb to expository and exegetical preaching devoid of compassion and fervour is to give an Evangelical twist to one of the most naive notions of the nineteenth century — the erroneous theory that education and right information suffice to change a man.

Theological Balance

The Puritans have been constantly brought before us as a sombre people who dwelt almost exclusively on the wrath of God, the torments of the damned, and the viciousness of sin. Their Calvinism, it is popularly believed, bordered on fatalism, if it did not actually cross into that pagan territory. The Puritans are further maligned for establishing what we call "the Protestant work ethic", with the resulting abuses of capitalism. Coupled with their alleged legalism, they emerge as a very nasty, hypocritical and self-righteous group of frauds.

There is no doubt that some of the later so-called Puritans tumbled into one or more of these traps. Some late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century American Christians of the Puritan tradition are especially notable in this respect. In England, Oliver Cromwell is frequently cited as an example of the worst of Puritanism, though his remarkable accomplishments, and the rebukes administered to him by Richard Baxter and other leading Puritans, are more quickly forgotten.

Taken as a whole, however, the Puritans emerge before the admiring eyes of this writer as the most theologically balanced and spiritually perceptive people since the days of the Apostles. This is especially true of the giants of the 1560-1660 era, though it applies with equal cogency to those who followed directly in their train.

We have noted that the Puritans upheld mightily the sovereignty of God. They read Romans 8 and 9 and believed — and taught — absolute predestination. The tendency in Canadian Baptist circles is either: (1) to hobby-horse the doctrine to death, or until the pastor is forced to resign; or (2) to believe it but not teach it because it is obviously much too difficult; or (3) to attempt to explain it away and thus to deny its veracity by a variety of expedients. The Puritans were saved from imbalance in this area because they believed — and taught — the doctrine of depravity, the doctrine of human moral responsibility, as vigorously as they upheld the doctrine of election. To them, the antinomy was not between election and free will (which is not an antinomy at all, but a flat contradiction), but between election and

moral responsibility.⁸ The Puritans could thus produce a Christopher Ness with his *Antidote to Arminianism*, and a Joseph Alleine with his burning *Alarm to the Unconverted*; and the two men were in sharp theological agreement. There could be a Jonathan Edwards with his *Religious Affections*, probing with the Sword of the Lord to bring the spurious "conversions" to light, and a Thomas Brooks to write the delightful but equally searching volume, *Heaven on Earth*, a treatise on Christian assurance. (The latter volume I recently gave to a youth who had completed but the first year of university. He read it through with profound delight.) They maintained the same balance between the sovereignty of God and human moral responsibility, as between the humanity and the Deity of Christ.

The same admirable balance is evident even within the works of one individual Puritan. Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" is still considered to be more infamous than famous by reputable Evangelicals. Edwards, however, believed that John 3:36 and Romans 1:18 are as much a part of the Word as John 3:16. Indeed, he contended that the love of God becomes meaningless and insipid unless seen against the backdrop of justifiable and righteous wrath. But before Edwards is written off as hopelessly morbid, let us not forget that from his pen came the superb volume, *Charity and Its Fruits*, an exposition of I Cor. 13.⁹

Some affirm that the Calvinism of the Puritans precluded any effective missionary thrust until the rise of the Arminian branch of the Methodists a century later. This again contradicts the evidence. It can be shown that all of the early missionary societies that sprang up in the seventy-five years following the beginning of the Great Awakening, were Calvinistic in theology and heavily reliant on the writings of the Puritans. Of this period of expansion, the famous historian Kenneth Scott Latourette writes:

This Protestantism was characterized by an abounding vitality and a daring unequalled in Christian history. Through it, for the first time, plans were seriously elaborated for bringing the Christian message to all men and to make the life of all mankind conform to Christian ideals. In the first century some Christians had believed it to be their obligation to "preach the gospel to every creature" . . . Never before, however, had the followers of any faith formulated comprehensive plans covering the entire surface of the earth to make these purposes effective.¹⁰

If any more proof is needed, let it be noted that as late as 1786, Wesley's Methodist Conference had to acknowledge ruefully "the

⁸ The best recent work on this aspect of theological balance is J. I. Packer's *Sovereignty of God*, IVP, 1961.

⁹ cf. George Whitefield's assessment of Edwards in A. Dallimore's recent volume *George Whitefield*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1970, pp. 537f.

¹⁰ *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1945, IV, p. 44.

fact that nearly all the converted clergymen in the kingdom (are) Calvinists."¹¹

The point to be made here is that the Puritans embraced an almost incredibly well-balanced system of doctrine. Their view of the sovereignty of God demanded not only that the distant "savages" be brought to a knowledge of the truth, but that those under the Lordship of Christ obey His commands and go as witnesses and missionaries. Conversely their view of the responsibility of each man encouraged the most passionate pleas for the finest missionary recruits. Even though the Lord sovereignly elects and effectively calls His people, Paul's question still had to be faced: "How shall they believe in Him of Whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" Even the famous alleged rebuke of John Ryland, Sr., to William Carey probably never occurred!¹²

This profound theological balance enables us to understand why the Puritans would never have stooped to statements such as, "God could do such-and-such if only we'd let Him." They were too full of the mentality of Mordecai: "For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise . . . from another place: but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:10).

Part of the beauty of the Biblical balance which the Puritans maintained was in their *use* of the doctrines they upheld. Almost any doctrine can be perverted by applying it the wrong way. For example: Our Lord affirms that lust is the moral equivalent of the actual act of adultery (Mt. 5:27f.). This is so because the former is the base from which the latter springs. It does not follow that, since I have lusted, I may just as well follow through with the act, since I am already guilty. That is an inappropriate application. The proper application encourages me to repent of my wicked thoughts before they are transformed into actions.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God can be misapplied in an analogous fashion. The following are *improper* applications and/or conclusions: (1) I am a robot. (2) Since God is sovereign, and I still sin, God is the author of sin; or (3) I need not bother trying to fight with sin. (4) If God wants pygmy natives saved in the jungles of

¹¹ Dr. Coke is quoted by Teerman in his *Light of Wesley*, III, p. 478 to the effect that Charles Wesley got up "with a very loud voice and in great anger" to deny the statement; but according to Pawson, "Mr. Mather got up and confirmed what Dr. Coke said, which we all know to be a truth." Essential reading in this area is Iain Murray's recent well-researched and well-documented volume, *The Puritan Hope*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.

¹² The popular story is repudiated by Ryland's son, John Ryland, Junior, who was Carey's close friend and a fellow member of the Northampton Association, being assistant minister at his father's church at the time when the incident was supposed to have happened. "I never heard of it till I saw it in print and cannot give credit to it at all." I. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 280, n. 14.

Ecuador, He can do it without your help or mine. (5) There is no point to witnessing, since the elect will infallibly be saved.

The above list is a partial one, obviously very incomplete; but many who oppose election think this is what those who uphold the Biblical doctrine of predestination are trying to say. The *proper* applications and/or conclusions to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God would include the following: (1) We are saved by pure grace. As Paul affirms, all boasting is excluded. No one will be able to get to heaven and say, "I'm here because I made the right choice. The poor wretches in hell made a wrong choice." (2) Unbounding confidence and joyful practical faith in Romans 8:28; and a subsequent diminution of murmurings and complaints. (3) Increasing faith in God in day-to-day living, and decreasing strife with the Almighty. (4) An adoring presentation of all my life to the One who is Eternal and Sovereign, and a subsequent comprehension of the wholeness of life. (5) A decreasing fear before the perils provided by this old world, since not a bird drops from the heavens without the acquiescence of the Almighty.

The Biblical teaching on the responsibility of man can be misapplied also. It is not correct to deduce from man's responsibility before God that he has a free will. Nor does the denial of free will imply that man is a will-less robot; rather, the denial of free will implies only that man's will is bound. A fish may swim where it pleases, but it cannot get out of the aquarium and walk around the room. It doesn't *want* to, because by its nature it is a fish. The question of whether or not it *could* even if it *would* never arises, because its fish-nature never wants to travel through any other medium than water. So it is with man and his sin-nature. We are not bound because God has decreed that we must be. We are bound because our sin-nature never wants anything other than degrees of sin. Anything outside our aquarium strikes us as foolishness (I Cor. 2:14). We *cannot* walk in the atmosphere of holiness and acceptance with God, because our wills are bound, and we *will not* so walk. The tragedy of the human dilemma is that we must get out of our aquarium of sin or be damned; and we don't even want to leave. Yet, for all that, we are *responsible* for leaving. Therefore, Christians may press on unregenerate man his responsibility, his *need* to repent and believe the gospel. But let them be assured that if a soul is awakened and becomes genuinely ready to forsake sin and trust the Saviour, it is because the LORD'S people become willing in the day of His power (Psa. 110:3).

The point to be made is that the Puritans followed the balance of Scripture, not only in the *content* of truth and doctrine, but also in the *application* of truth and doctrine. The same mature balance

is demonstrable in virtually every other Biblical teaching carefully espoused by the Puritans. Would to God a great host would rise and follow their example.

Other charges against the Puritans can be answered with similar ease. The Puritans were not generally legalistic: but they were thoroughly submissive to the Lordship of Christ. Let Samuel Bolton's *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* find a lodging-place in the lives of men, and both legalism and careless indifference will be quelled. The Puritan successors, of course, were not always as mature as their forefathers; and true it is that Puritan entanglement in politics set them up for charges of legalism. In all fairness, however, it should be remembered that democracy was not even a thorough-going ideal in the sixteenth century. Since "righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people," since the Lord God is sovereign over the State as well as over the Church, the political actions of the Puritans are understandable at the very least.

It is easy to comprehend how the Puritans and their spiritual mentor, John Calvin, got blamed for the present so-called "Protestant Work Ethic," too. It is true that the Puritans demanded hard work. They eschewed laziness as a vice which needed to be forsaken as an abomination in the sight of God. That is simply Biblical truth, but as Carl F. H. Henry has pointed out:

Not a few elements now often associated with a Calvinistic work ethic really have their roots elsewhere. That time is money, that money-making is life's ultimate purpose, that one does his duty and glorifies God by the increase of wealth — these ideas find support in the outlook of deists like Benjamin Franklin rather than that of Reformers and the Puritans.¹³

Again, of course, the simplicity of the Puritans became distorted after several generations; but the balance of life and doctrine, of Biblical and theological antinomies, in no way qualifies the Puritans for critical adjectives like "sombre", "dour", and "self-righteous". By contrast, they were actually sober, full of the joy of the Lord, and constantly in awe of the righteousness of God.

Puritan Eschatology

The present writer is well aware that there are broad differences of opinion in the realm of eschatology. The following observations and remarks are intended without rancour; and I for one would be disturbed if only bickering is produced by what is said here. On the other hand, I shall be gratified if men of all eschatological stripes are encouraged to re-examine the studies and thinking of the Puritans on this important question. The book I would most recommend is one

¹³ "The Christian Work Ethic", *Christianity Today*, XVI, 7, p. 22. Henry's entire article should be read.

previously mentioned: Iain Murray's *The Puritan Hope*.¹⁴ It is a well-documented volume showing the relationship of Puritan eschatology to Puritan faith, hope, and piety.

When I first began a serious study of eschatology, I was gathering material for a M.Div. thesis on the relationship between the Kingdom and the Church. Exegesis of such passages as Romans 9-11 and Galatians 4 led me to form certain conclusions; but I stated some of them very tenuously because the majority of contemporary Evangelical churches would flatly deny them. Therefore, it has been of considerable delight to me subsequently to discover that some of the things held so timidly by me were at one time cardinal doctrines among the most outstanding Evangelicals in the world: the Puritans.

Because of limitations of space, I shall not attempt detailed documentation. Interested readers may refer to *The Puritan Hope*, to which I acknowledge grateful indebtedness. Let it also be said that the following outline of Puritan eschatological beliefs follows mainstream Puritan thought; but there were one or two notable exceptions even between 1560 and 1660. Exceptions increased in the nineteenth century as the rigour of Puritan distinctives diminished and the teaching of Edward Irving and J. N. Darby were in the ascendancy.

In the first place, the Puritans believed that at some future time, before the Lord's return, the majority of the Jews then living would be converted to Christ, and that this happy event would be followed by a further advance of the gospel among Gentiles. This period was usually called *the latter-day glory*. Concerning what happened next, there was a division of opinion; but in general it was believed that Christ would return following a brief but vicious outbreak of evil and trial, and eternity would be ushered in. These points were based notably on four features: (1) certain promises in the Old Testament which speak of great blessing to both Jews and Gentiles, and which have not yet been fulfilled; (2) the manner in which the New Testament quotes Old Testament promises, and the consequent conviction that the Church is the legitimate successor of national Israel, and especially of the Remnant; (3) the absence of any promises of a return to Palestine for the Jews in the New Testament (Old Testament promises were usually related to the return following the exile); (4) most important, a detailed exposition of Romans 9-11, especially Romans 11:12, 15, 25f.¹⁵

Main-stream Puritan thought flatly denied any form of Chiliasm. Most of the writers dismiss the notion as a weird and unorthodox

vagary. Furthermore, the few who held to some form of Chiliasm did not embrace the many flourishes of contemporary popular belief. For example, the notion of a "rapture" of the Church before the Second Advent — which from our vantage point implies two more comings for Christ — cannot be found in any Chiliast in the early Church, nor in the writings of any Reformer or leading Puritan. Support for the belief has been claimed in Victorinus of the fourth century, and in Joseph Mede of the seventeenth. Whether this is so or not, certain it is that no body of Christians accepted the teaching before the nineteenth century.

It is transparently obvious, however, that the aspect of Puritan thought to which most contemporary Evangelicals will object is the implicit denial of "the imminent return". The following points need to be noted. (1) The "imminent return" is in any case a misnomer. The doctrine affirms that Christ *could* come at *any* time. The word "imminent" suggests His coming is impending. The misnomer lent support to early Brethren expectations — which have not been fulfilled, obviously. (2) He who believes in an imminent return cannot also believe in "signs of the times" — not, that is to say, if he is to remain consistent. If Christ can come at any time, there are no signs left to be fulfilled. For a sign to be meaningful, it must be precisely fulfilled *before* the event to which it points can occur. Until all "signs" are fulfilled, Christ's advent cannot possibly be theologically "imminent". It therefore follows that it is proper to believe in *either* an "imminent" return of Christ, *or* that there are signs of the times. If the latter, then Christ's return becomes "imminent" only after all the signs have been fulfilled. (3) To require people to believe that Christ's advent is impending is to require every generation of Christians except the last one to believe a delusion. It is obvious that "I am coming soon" is a promise from Christ's exalted perspective of the onward rush of events in His universe. (4) Puritans in this area once again achieved matchless theological balance. They taught that it was the duty of each believer to look forward to Christ's coming, to prepare for it, to live in the light of its perspective, to yearn for it — even while they encouraged people to pray for the conversion of the Jews, and the "latter-day glory". They in no way depreciated the marvelous truth that Christ's advent is the Church's best and ultimate hope; but they learned to live with the balance reflected in the New Testament. Peter, for example, had been told that he would die a martyr's death, yet his consciousness of that fact did not prevent him from "looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God" (II Peter 3:12). Paul also knew that he would die (II Tim. 4:6), but that knowledge did not quench his ardent desire to see the Lord's return. In other

¹⁴ Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.

¹⁵ (For the ablest contemporary exposition of these difficult chapters, in the Puritan tradition, see John Murray's commentary on *Romans*.)

words, the antinomy of the Scripture exists between looking with yearning for Christ's Advent, and some specific things that must occur *before* He comes. Did not Christ say that the gospel would first have to be preached to every nation, before the end would come? George Whitefield could therefore preach, "We do not live up to our dignity till every day we are waiting for the coming of our Lord from heaven,"¹⁶ yet he believed a great host of Jews would yet be converted, and would touch off an explosion of gospel blessing among the Gentiles.

The practical use to which the Puritans put their eschatology centered on hope, faith, and piety. They were boundless optimists, not because they had any confidence in the flesh, but because they were thoroughly convinced that the Lord had great numbers to be converted before His return. Whitefield predicted that there would be far greater revivals than anything he ever saw. Coupled with the Puritans' view of the sovereignty of God, this eschatology of hope drove a little band of committed men to wield a wildly disproportionate influence on their times and on subsequent generations. It is the base from which modern world missions have sprung.

Perhaps the easiest way to illumine the practical results of Puritan eschatology is to contrast in outline form the immediate results of the Darby movement in the last century. They include the following: (1) A radical change in missionary strategy occurred. A. A. Hodge of Princeton, who had himself served as a missionary in India, chronicled the change:

Millenarian missionaries have a style of their own. Their theory affects their work in the way of making them seek exclusively, or chiefly, the conversion of individual souls. The true and efficient missionary method is, to aim directly, indeed, at soul-winning, but at the same time to plant Christian institutions in heathen lands, which will, in time, develop according to the genius of the nationalities. English missionaries can never hope to convert the world directly by units.¹⁷

Certainly Carey, Duff, Morrison, Moffatt, Livingstone, and other great missionary leaders in the Puritan tradition espoused the philosophy of church-planting.¹⁸ (2) A withdrawal from the exercise of Christian influence in secular fields followed the Darby movement. The Puritan strategy, by contrast, regarded everything as under God's authority; and therefore they set themselves to capture what they could. The change in the nineteenth century had catastrophic results. Just when heterodox Protestantism was beginning to make serious inroads into the historic faith, the Church, influenced by the teachings that Christ's return was imminent, that the world situation

was hopeless, that the moral and ecclesiastical situation was bound to worsen anyway, and that there would be and could be no more great revivals, opted out of the fight, asking in gloom, "what else can you expect?" The Puritan eschatology of hope would have demanded a much more vigorous fight. (3) The attitude of implicit despair and pessimism that has settled on the Church in the western world, and which saps her strength and vigour, is also in marked contrast to the Puritans' hope. That hope, and the theological balance to which it was integrally related, demanded self-control, joyful exuberance, patient endurance when things were discouraging, and a believing expectation of blessings from the hands of a sovereign and gracious God. Their dogmatism was therefore linked to a contagious optimism.

Whatever the reader may think of Puritan eschatology, in all fairness let him not link Puritan hope to the modernistic hope and optimism of the pre-1914 years. The two, of course, are not at all identical as a few moments' reflection will reveal. The one was based on the revealed Word of truth, and on a brimming faith in God's sovereign intervention for the accomplishment of His own purposes; the other was based on a false notion of human goodness founded on humanistic and naturalistic assumptions.

Exposition and Systematic Theology

We live in an age of specialization. The learned exegete is a little inclined to give no place to systematic theology; the theologian frequently has a penchant for generalities that do not stand up to exegesis; and both disciplines are considered narrow by the historian. Such assertions are too harsh, and are certainly oversimplifications; but there is enough truth in them for us to derive some lessons from the Puritans by way of comparison.

Once again these illustrious men of God exhibit a matchless balance. Although their sermons are too textually-oriented (as opposed to paragraph-oriented) for our present day, nevertheless, considering the limited tools available at the time, the Puritans emerge as fine exegetes and expositors. Goodwin's treatment of Romans 5:12 is exhaustive; Goodwin and Bayne on Ephesians run to 1500 pages (although the style is sermonic). Balanced against the centrality of exposition, however, is the ability of the Puritans as theologians. Their system of theology was Biblically based; but they were not ashamed to have a system. Even for mnemonic reasons, it is axiomatic that a harmony of exposition and theology is highly desirable. A *Body of Divinity* by Thomas Watson, is incomparable in this respect. Spurgeon wrote:

[It] is one of the most precious of the peerless works of the Puritans;

¹⁶ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, p. 608.

¹⁷ *Princetoniana*, Charles and A. A. Hodge, (eds.) 1888, pp. 238ff.

¹⁸ For detailed documentation see I. Murray, *op. cit.*

and those best acquainted with it prize it most. Watson was one of the most concise, racy, illustrative, and suggestive of those eminent divines who made the Puritan Age the Augustan period of evangelical literature. There is a happy union of sound doctrine, heart-searching experience and practical wisdom throughout all his works, and his *Body of Divinity*, is, beyond all the rest, useful to the student and the minister.

Some of the Puritans bent a quill to writing histories, as well, although their output in this area is not as significant. Edwards wrote his influential *Narrative of Surprising Conversions* about 1736, and his even more influential *Life and Diary of Rev. David Brainerd* in 1749; but inevitably, he writes not only as an historian, but as an expositor and theologian.

To sum up: the Church to-day cries not only for specialists, but for men who can grasp the best of several disciplines and weave a coherent whole.

Conclusion

There have always been individual believers of grand spiritual stature; but in the opinion of the present writer, there has not been an entire group of believers that can begin to compare with the Puritans in the excellent things of truth and of God, since the days of the early Church. It is a source of unbounded pleasure to note how many of the writings of these men of God are being reprinted. Their works are not infallible, and in terms of scholarly criticism and modern exegetical tools, their tomes are strangely dated. Nevertheless, it is impossible to read them without feeling the fire burn within, without being humbled by their almost fantastic grasp of Scripture and of theology. Indeed, it is a little disturbing to testify how difficult it is to find areas in which the Puritans may be faulted. Such an apparent scarcity of defects is likely to reduce the credibility of any historical account. If God by matchless grace has worked to produce such abundant fruit of superior quality in centuries past, let us lay hold on Him with the importunate cries of faith to perform in men once again the good work done in those whom history dubs, "the Puritans".