The Puritan view of theology

'Man's chief end (purpose) is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.' Thus begins the Shorter Catechism, which sums up the Puritan attitude towards life and theology. Theology is not an academic study of God, divorced from everyday life. Quite the contrary. The whole of our lives are to be spent in glorifying God. And this is no joyless task. The Christian should be the happiest person on earth. He may enjoy God now, and will enjoy God for eternity in heaven.

This intensely practical definition of theology as given by the divines of the Westminster Assembly (1643-1648) is echoed by other great Puritan theologians. For instance, William Perkins at the end of the sixteenth century wrote: 'Theology is the science of 'living blessedly for ever. Blessed life arises from the knowledge of God'. Similarly, Edward Leigh somewhat later wrote that 'divinity (theology) is such an art as teaches a man by knowledge of God's will and assistance of his power to live to his glory ... There is no true knowledge of Christ but that which is practical ... Christ is not propounded to us to be known theoretically but practically' (A System or Body of Divinity, 1644).

So the Puritan view of theology is God-centred but also intensely practical. This is very different from so much modern 'theology' which is centred on man, but at the same time has become the play-thing for a narrow circle of academic, professional theologians.

The source of all theology: the Holy Scriptures

The Puritans would have been horrified by the theological turmoil and vagueness of our own day. For them there could be only one authentic source for theology ('the science of God') — what God had revealed about himself in Scripture. Puritan theology is therefore thoroughly biblical. The Puritans followed in the footsteps of Luther and Calvin in giving the highest place in theological thinking to the Bible; the Bible for them had divine authority far above human reason, church tradition or mystical experience.

The Westminster Confession of Faith significantly placed 'Of the Holy Scripture' as the first of its 33 chapters. In this chapter, Scripture is exalted above the 'light of nature' and God's works of 'creation and providence' which are 'not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his will which is necessary unto salvation'. Furthermore, 'The authority of the Holy Scripture ... depends not upon the testimony of any man, or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God'.

A little later this important statement regarding theological investigation is made: 'the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself'. In this the Puritans followed the revolutionary teaching of Luther, which cut through the centuries of scholastic Roman Catholic theology to get back to the Bible, and indeed, to our Lord himself, who so often stated 'It is written' as the final authority.

As representative of Puritan views of the authority of Scripture we may glance at the work by William Bridge entitled Scripture Light the Most Sure Light (1656). In this excellent treatise Bridge examines in detail the place and authority of these eight other possibilities: Revelations and Visions; Dreams; Feelings; Light and Law within; Divine Providence; Christian Experience; Human Reason; and Astrology. He clearly shows the supreme authority of Scripture above all these other ways. He finishes his final sermon on the subject (for much, if not most, of Puritan theology was preached and published as sermons) with a rousing word of exhortation:
The martyrs in Queen Mary’s day prized the written word of God much. One man gave a cartload of hay for one page of the Bible in English. Another, shipwrecked at sea, and having all his belongings, which was five pounds in one hand, and the Bible in the other, was forced to part with one or the other. He chose to keep his Bible and throw away his money. So get your heart affected with love to every truth which you know. Let the Scriptures be your continual companion wherever you go. If you go into the fields, oh, let the word go with you; if you go to work, oh, let the Scripture and the written word of God be with you.

For the Puritans, Scripture was central. But it was no mere academic head-knowledge. Rather, they knew from their own experience that God, by the Holy Spirit, could take the Bible and make it come alive and change a man’s whole life. In the twentieth century we have seen come and go existentialist theology, neo-orthodox theology, black theology, feminist theology, liberation theology, even ‘Death of God theology’ and many others. With the Puritans, we should come back to Scripture itself, and to God’s theology.

**The Puritan view of God**

To understand God, the Puritans went to Scripture: both to Old and New Testaments. Their view of God was robustly trinitarian. They avoided the tendency of modern neo-orthodoxy and some sentimental evangelicalism so to focus on Christ that vital teaching on the majesty and holiness of God the Father is ignored. The Puritans stressed both the holiness and the amazing grace of God, and their entire theology of salvation may be said to be based on the harmonious reconciliation of these two attributes of God. How can a holy, loving God forgive sinners? Puritan views of the covenant of grace and of the atonement systematically set out the biblical teaching in a convincing way in answer to this vital question. God, the great and holy creator of the universe, had created man for his own glory. When man freely sinned and rebelled against God, God had every right to punish man in accordance with his holy laws. But out of his free grace and mercy he chose to save his elect through his Son, Jesus Christ, who took their punishment upon himself. The Puritans preached and wrote about God with a fervour that has seldom been equalled since. They loved to dwell on the divine attributes of God: his eternity, omnipotence, wisdom, holiness, goodness, patience, etc. Stephen Charnock’s massive work on *The Existence and Attributes of God* (1697) is representative. In the modern reprint edition this runs to over 800 pages! Yet there is not a word too many, and all is thoroughly biblical and practical.

John Owen, probably the greatest Puritan theologian (his works are reprinted by the Trust in 16 volumes) staunchly defended the doctrine of the Trinity against its opposers. By the mid-seventeenth century, heresies such as Socinianism and Unitarianism were denying the truth of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit. Owen examines all the relevant evidence in both Old and New Testaments and effectively demonstrates the truth of the Trinity. A cold tide of rationalism began to sweep into the church in the form of Deism which denied that God was personally interested in the world, or that men could know him personally. So Owen wrote another book, called *Communion with God* (1657), which shows that the heart of the Christian faith is having fellowship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Not only knowing about God, but actually knowing him is the Christian's privilege.

**The love of Christ: the centre of Puritan theology**

This century, many modern theologians have described the Puritans as obsessed with dry, academic theology and the intricacies of predestination — and even accused them of ignoring the Person of Christ. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The Puritans were taken up with Christ as he is described in Scripture. They saw Jesus Christ as the only way to know God and the only way of salvation, and they loved to preach his life-giving atonement for sin.

John Owen, in *The Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ* (1679), said of Christ: Unto them that believe he (Christ) is, he has always been, precious — the sun, the rock, the life, the bread of their souls — everything that is good, useful, desirable here or in eternity. In, from and by him, is all their spiritual and eternal life, light, power, growth, consolation and
joy here, with everlasting salvation hereafter. By him they are brought into the nearest friendship with God, the firmest union with him, and the most holy communion with him.

Owen, in another book, Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ (1684), says: Be not contented to have right notions of the love of Christ in your minds, unless you can attain a gracious taste of it in your hearts. We may taste that the Lord is gracious; but if we find not a relish (desire) of it in our hearts, we shall not long keep the notion of it in our minds. Christ is the meat, the bread, the food of our souls. Nothing is in him of a higher spiritual nourishment than his love, which we should always desire.

For John Owen, as for all the Puritans, the Christian should aim to know Jesus Christ personally and enjoy close fellowship with him.

This concern of the Puritan preachers that their hearers should experience the love of Christ is also shown in the many commentaries they wrote on the Song of Solomon. The Puritans followed the ancient Christian tradition that this part of Scripture describes the love of Christ for his church. James Durham in his Exposition of the Song of Solomon (1669) urges the Christian to love his saviour more with these words:

A heart that knows Jesus Christ will love to dwell on the thoughts of his worth, and to present him often to itself as the most wonderful object. It will stir itself up to seek after his love. The more a soul dives into the love of Christ, the more wonderful it becomes to him. He longs to know more of Christ. The exercise of love strengthens faith; but when love for Christ weakens, then faith dies.

John Collinges also wrote a long commentary on the Song of Solomon called The Intercourses (Fellowship) of Divine Love Between Christ and His Church (1676). Commenting on the Song of Solomon (chapter 2, verse 8), Collinges gives several very practical rules on how Christians can know the voice of Jesus Christ, and distinguishes it from other false voices:

1. The Scriptures reveal the mind of God to us. They contain general rules for every action.
2. Those doctrines which tend most to cast down (humble) fallen nature and exalt Christ and Free Grace, are the voice of Christ;
3. Those doctrines which give least liberty to the flesh and its natural feelings, are the voice of Christ.

These warnings are as relevant today as they were 300 years ago when they were written. They show that the Christian's knowledge of Jesus Christ is not subjective mysticism, but must be anchored firmly in Scripture. They also show that for the Puritans, knowledge of Jesus Christ must be based on sound doctrine and lead to holy living.

Perhaps the Puritan who best shows the perfect harmony between theological scholarship and sound doctrine on the one hand, and the warmest experience of the love of Christ on the other, was Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661). His Letters have often been reprinted and ought to be standard reading for every Christian. Rutherford wrote under fierce persecution and he took a strong stand for the Lordship of Christ over the church. From his personal experience, he knew the close link between suffering and growing in grace:

'I see grace grows best in winter.'
'Our pride must have winter weather to rot it.'
'I know no way to heaven but by free grace and hard trials together, and one of these cannot be had without the other.'

Yet it was Rutherford who wrote a book condemning the arbitrary power of the Stuart monarchs. His book, Lox Rex, was publicly burnt but had a great influence on the development of parliamentary democracy in Britain. Thus there was no contradiction between Puritan piety and full participation in the social and political actions of their day. For Rutherford, King Jesus reigned in the church and over all the affairs of men, and must be obeyed whatever the cost. In 1661 he was summoned by the King for almost certain trial and execution, but died on the journey. He told the
government messengers: 'Tell them I have a summons from a higher judge and court, and soon I will be where few kings or great ones come'. He died with these words on his lips: 'I shall sleep in Christ, and when I awake I shall be satisfied with his likeness'. The assurance of eternal life in heaven gave Puritans strength of character to face suffering and death with calm joy.

The Puritan doctrine of the Holy Spirit

The Puritans developed a deep interest in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. For them, the Spirit 'takes of the things of Christ and reveals them unto us'. Because of their intense but balanced desire to discover all that the Bible teaches about the work of Christ and the way of man's salvation, they knew that it is the Holy Spirit who practically applies the benefits of Christ's atoning work to the believer. Indeed, the conversion of a sinner to Christ is from first to last the work of the Holy Spirit. In this they differed from much modern 'evangelical' teaching which gives a prominent place to man's 'free will' and sees Christ as powerless to save souls without man's permission. The Puritans followed the teaching of Luther and Calvin and all the Reformers concerning the complete depravity and fallenness of human nature and the total bondage of the human will regarding spiritual things and salvation. Only the Holy Spirit can give life to men 'dead in trespasses and sin' and so produce faith and repentance.

John Owen was the greatest Puritan theologian of the Holy Spirit. His work, Discourse on the Holy Spirit (1674), has never been surpassed. Owen proves conclusively the deity and personality of the Spirit and systematically describes the work of the Spirit in regeneration, conversion and sanctification. He steers a careful, biblically-based course between fanaticism and the claim to direct inspiration, which was as common in the seventeenth century as in the twentieth. On the other hand, he avoids a cold rationalism which denies the supernatural working of the Spirit and the possibility of the Christian knowing the Spirit's divine influences.

The Puritans and Calvinism

The Puritans were almost to a man Reformed and Calvinistic in their theology. They accepted the 'Five Points of Calvinism' as set forth at the Synod of Dort in the Netherlands in 1619. These may be summarised in the acronym TULIP: Total depravity of the human race; Unconditional election to salvation by the sovereign work of God; Limited atonement (Christ died for his elect people); Irresistible grace (the Spirit works regeneration in the elect); Perseverance of the saints (God's elect can never fall from grace).

This theology was further developed in the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, it is important to realise that the 'Five Points' were drawn up in opposition to rationalistic Arminianism, and, while important, do not reflect the total biblical grandeur of Puritan theology which is of much wider scope. For instance, the Puritans developed 'Covenant theology', based on clear teaching in both the Old and New Testaments.

Simply put, the 'Covenant of Works', as given in the Law, cannot save man, although it sets forth God's holy demands. The 'Covenant of Grace' was decided by the Trinity in eternity: God the Father out of his grace sent the Son to redeem sinners. Only through substitutionary atonement could the Son fulfil the Law's holy demands and obtain salvation for the elect. The Holy Spirit applies this salvation to sinners through the free offer of the Gospel, primarily through the preaching of the Word. The Puritans have been accused of legalism, but as Ernest Kevan shows in his work The Grace of Law, this is a fundamental misunderstanding. Rather, it is modern theologies which are at fault because they deny the holiness of God, and make grace cheap. Often, too, they also deny the eternal relevance of God's law.

Puritan theology simply 'let God be God'. If God is sovereign, as he is portrayed by the Scriptures to be, and men are helpless sinners who can only be saved by grace through the atonement of Christ, then the system of theology known as 'Calvinism' necessarily follows as the only adequate solution to man's needs as a fallen creature.
Again John Owen was one of the greatest defenders of this aspect of the Reformed faith. *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* shows the biblical basis of effective atonement for God’s elect. As J.I. Packer states in his introduction to the modern reprint, Owen’s work has never been answered. If Christ can only remain helplessly outside the door of the sinner’s heart, waiting pathetically to enter, he is not the sovereign Saviour described in the Scriptures. Owen shows that Christ did not just make possible the way of salvation, giving men the opportunity to be saved depending on their free will. In that case, none can be saved, being dead in sin. If they could, then they are basically saving themselves, in which case salvation is not by grace but by works. But Christ actually obtained salvation by his death, for those for whom he died and out of his great love. Here Puritanism offers a necessary critique of much modern evangelism which has strayed far from biblical teaching. The Puritans resisted scholastic discussion of the mysteries of election but they sought to explore all that God had revealed in Scripture. The 39 Articles of the Church of England declare that this doctrine of election is ‘comfortable’ and is given in Scripture to strengthen the believer’s assurance of salvation. Election is a deeply humbling truth and one which bows the soul down in adoration and love before the God of grace.

On the continent of Europe in the seventeenth century, some Calvinist theologians tended towards a somewhat scholastic approach to theology. But the Puritans were primarily pastors and preachers. They were concerned to see their flock grow in holiness and were determined to preach the ‘whole counsel of God’. Puritan practical theology was the envy of European Reformed Christians, and many Puritan works were translated into German and Dutch. Books of sermons, prayer books, and countless practical treatises poured from the presses of Puritan England. They dealt with such practical questions as: ‘How can I know that I am truly saved?’ ‘Why does God seem far away?’ ‘Does God always answer prayer?’ ‘If I sin, have I fallen from grace?’

The Puritans were masters in dealing with those suffering from spiritual depression. There is a short work called *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul* by Joseph Symonds (1639) which teaches Christians the different reasons why God sometimes seems absent and shows how to come back to him through prayer and the Word of God. Robert Bolton, another popular author, wrote *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God* (1625) and many other books to help Christians know God better. Samuel Rutherford wrote *The Influences of Divine Grace*, in which the case of spiritual desertion was shown to be sometimes due to sin, to prayerlessness, to Satan’s attacks, but sometimes to God deliberately withdrawing himself so as to test the Christian’s love. While showing that faith does not depend on feelings, the Puritans in their teaching stressed the importance of the emotions. God can be ‘tasted’ and ‘enjoyed’ by the spiritual senses. This led to a healthy dynamic in the spiritual life, of sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s leadings, and to a cycle of repentance for sin, renewal, and growth in grace. The Puritan would scarcely have considered many modern Christians, with their ‘decision’ for Christ but with no evidence of a godly life, as truly born again at all. Rather, such ‘Christians’ would be sternly warned of the dangers of being hypocrites or Pharisees and urged to repent and turn to God in reality. Puritan theology was therefore both solidly doctrinal and eminently practical. It is an emphasis we need to recover today.

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