

# Elizabethan Puritans

by J.I. Packer

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*J.I. Packer explores the foundational principles of Puritan preaching, emphasizing the significance of intellect, the power of biblical truth, and the role of the Holy Spirit in ministry.*

**Duration:** 55:17

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 4:7, John 14:6, Acts 17:11, Romans 10:17, Ephesians 4:14, 2 Timothy 3:16-17

**Topics:** "Divine Sovereignty", "Human Responsibility"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the certainty of God's truth, emphasizing that it is confirmed by God's solemn oath. He highlights how the Lord repeatedly commands and persuades the wicked to turn from their sinful ways. The preacher explains that God even reasons with the wicked, asking them why they would choose death over life. Despite all of God's efforts, if the wicked refuse to repent, it is not because of God, but because of their own choice. The sermon encourages listeners to take these teachings seriously and to reflect on them, even suggesting taking notes to remember the key points.

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## Transcript

There were four axioms which underlay their philosophy of preaching. And this, again, was something that was true from the very first. And you can find these axioms written into Perkins' *On the Art of Prophesying*.

Though he doesn't make points of them in the way that I'm going to do now, to try and focus the approach for you. Axiom number one, belief in the primacy of the intellect. It was a Puritan maxim that grace enters by the understanding.

They were not rationalists in any vicious sense, but they did believe that God was rational, and that he'd made man in his own image to be rational, and that he treats man as rational, and that, in ministry, the preacher must treat his congregation as rational. The intellect is primary. In other words, God doesn't move men to action by physical violence.

He addresses their mind by his word, and he calls for the response of deliberate consent and intelligent obedience. It follows that every man's first duty in relation to the word of God is to understand it, and the preacher's first duty is to explain it. The only way to the heart that he's authorized to take runs via the head.

From which it followed that the minister must, in all his preaching, be teaching, instructing. And if he isn't preaching sermons, which are systematic instruction in the contents of scripture, if he's not a didactic expositor in every sermon he preaches, well, he's off the rails. And when, in the mid-17th century, when fanaticism broke out under the commonwealth, and a lot of untrained preachers began standing up and erupting verbal rhapsodies in the name of the Lord, this was the point which the Puritan preachers made against them.

You are not teaching the scriptures. These enthusiastical raptures, as they called them, are simply not a fulfilling of the preacher's calling. Primacy of the intellect, then.

You must, from which it follows, you must teach. Second axiom? Belief in the supreme importance of preaching. To the Puritans, the sermon was the liturgical climax of public worship.

Nothing, they said, honors God more than does the faithful declaration and the obedient hearing of his truth. Preaching, under any circumstances, is an act of worship, and must be performed as such. And furthermore, second thought here, preaching is the prime means of grace to God's people.

I quote from a late-17th century Puritan named David Clarkson, who, in a sermon entitled Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private --it's a provocative title, isn't it? Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private, wrote this, The most wonderful things that are now done on earth are wrought in the public ordinances. Hear the dead, hear the voice of the Son of God, and those that hear do live. Here he cures diseased souls by a word.

Here he dispossesses Satan. These are wonders, and would be so counted, were they not the common work of the public ministry. It's true, indeed, the Lord has not consigned himself to work these wonderful things only in public, yet the public ministry is the only ordinary means whereby he works them.

This does not mean that the Puritans downgraded what we call personal work. It does mean that they upgraded preaching, the public ministry of the word, far beyond what most of us, I think, would do with prompting and a good deal of instruction. We are conditioned not to regard preaching as too significant.

The Puritans regarded it as supremely significant. It's from David Clarkson, Public Worship to be Preferred, three volumes of it. You see, to the Puritans, preaching is a very solemn and a very momentous enterprise, the most solemn and momentous enterprise in which any servant of God ever takes part in this life.

And that's true whether he's a preacher or whether he's a hearer. Both the minister and the congregation, you see, should, on the Puritan view, should recognize that Sunday sermons are the most important and significant events of the week. And the Puritan insistence was that whatever else is neglected, sermons must not be.

The minister mustn't allow anything to divert him from preaching them and preaching the best he can, and equally the congregation mustn't allow anything to divert them from going to church to hear them. God works in sermons in a way that he doesn't work elsewhere. You may be interested to know that the preachers, that the Puritan preachers regularly had full manuscripts or pretty full manuscripts before them in the pulpit.

Perkins, to be sure, advises that if you can, you should memorize your sermon and simply deliver it entirely from memory. I suppose that what happened, though it's not possible to check this up, is that a lot

of people tried it and found that God simply hadn't made them capable of it. Just as I have, and I dare say you have, tried to preach without any notes at all and found that God hasn't made us capable of it.

And so what they used to do was to take a pretty full manuscript into the pulpit. I spoke of the mid-17th century enthusiasts. Among them were the Quakers, Richard Baxter got into controversy with the Quakers and they accused him, among other things, of not having the spirit and not preaching in the spirit because they said, you read your sermons out of a paper, you use notes, you have a script.

And Baxter replied, as wisely should the Quakers argue that because we use spectacles or hourglasses and pulpits that we have not the spirit. It is not want of your abilities that makes ministers use notes, but it's regard to the work and the good of the hearers. I use notes as much as any man when I take pains and as little as any man when I am lazy or busy and haven't leisure to prepare.

And then, interesting, it's easier to preach three sermons without notes than one with them. He is a simple preacher that isn't able to preach all day without preparation if he preached at your rest. In other words, you see the thought, if you contend to get up and blather in the name of the Lord, well, there's no limit to what you can do.

But the Puritans insisted, sermons should be thought out. The preacher is an extremely solemn business and requires premeditation, preparation, and care. And you shouldn't speak lightly in the name of the Lord.

Well, all this is part is the expression of their conviction that preaching is supremely important. So that they would say what I imagine your homiletics instructors say to you, although I certainly hope they say to you, that a minister who knows his priorities will plan his week around the allotted time for sermon preparation. And he will take care not to skimp his.

When I used to teach in Bristol, brethren, I don't know whether the idea gets around here, but it got around there, that after you've been preaching a few years, sermons will begin to come easily so that it won't take you anything like as long to prepare them. Well, that's a very dangerous doctrine. The Puritans would have warned us against it.

I'm going to warn you against it. Preachers in the Puritan tradition have not found that it works out that way, nor have they encouraged other people to. Another aspect, another expression of the Puritan conviction that preaching is supremely important is the congregations, said the Puritans, must be taught how to listen to sermon.

And from time to time in their writings, you find instruction given on this point. Memorize the heading. Have your Bible with you.

Look up the texts that the man is expounding. By looking at them, you help to fix them in your mind. If you find that you can't recall all the headings, well, don't be ashamed to come into church with a piece of paper and a pencil and make some notes.

And when you get home, in the family, repeat the sermon. Go over. Indeed, one of Father's jobs on Sunday after church is to make the members of the family repeat the sermon and ensure that they all of them remember what was said and have understood what they've heard.

The great thing, you see, that the Puritans make of the congregation taking note of the sermons they hear and then when they've got it clear in their mind, praying over what they've heard, meditating on what

they've heard, making the sermons that they heard on Sunday staple diet in their devotional life for the next week and putting in their own private Bible reading as, well, to use a modern phrase, in the nature of supplementary snacks. But the main food congregations must realize is given in the sermon. That's what God has given preachers and sermons for, says the Puritans, times without number, to feed you.

And you've got to come with open ears and you've got to attend and memorize and repeat and meditate and pray. This is part of the Puritan way of life, taking sermons seriously. Well, there's the second axiom, belief in the supreme importance of preaching.

Third, a point that we've already touched in other connections, belief in the life-giving power of biblical truth. We had this point, remember, when we spoke of William Tyndale. The Bible is the word of God.

Light for the eyes, food for the soul, God's rule, God's directive, God's word of life. Preachers must, we've already said, instruct their congregations in the Bible because the intellect is primary and God deals with men through their minds. Now, another complementary way of putting that thought, preachers must feed their congregations by teaching them the contents of the Bible because the contents of the Bible are life-giving words of God.

And by teaching the scriptures, you quicken and sustain and deepen spiritual life. So, they would say, don't preach anything but the Bible because that won't be food, but be confident of the value of what you're doing when you do preach the Bible because that is food and even if people don't realize at the time they're being said, they'll profit from the hearing of the word. The Puritans, all the way along, defined pastoral work in terms of preaching.

For they said, pastoral work is shepherd's work and the shepherd's business or at least the first fundamental element in the shepherd's business is to see that the flock gets food, to see that they get to pastures where there's food to be had, to see that they don't starve for want of nourishment. This, I think, is a good word for our times because we're inclined to think of pastoral work in terms of visiting and personal dealing only. The Puritans thought of pastoral work primarily and fundamentally in terms of preaching.

A man pastors his people by preaching to them and teaching them the word of God. If we had said to a Puritan, a man may be a good pastor and yet a bad preacher, they would have said that's a contradiction in terms. I'm going to quote you from John Owen on this because honestly, I do regard this as a very important point for us all.

It's missed by so many in these days. Quote Owen, The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word. It's a promise relating to the New Testament that God would give unto his church pastors, that is shepherds, according to his own heart, which should feed them with knowledge and understanding.

He's quoting Jeremiah 3.15. And this, says Owen, is by preaching or teaching the word as no otherwise. This feeding is of the essence of the office of a pastor. The care of preaching the gospel was committed to Peter and in him to all true pastors of the church under a name of feeding.

Feed my sheep, feed my lambs. John 21.15. And according to the example of the apostles, they are to free themselves, that is pastors, are to free themselves from all encumbrances that they may give themselves wholly unto the word and prayer. Acts 6. They are to labor in the word and doctrine, 1 Timothy

5.17, and thereby to feed the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made them overseers.

Acts 20. This work and duty, therefore, as was said, is essential unto the office of a pastor. It's worth thinking about.

The Puritans would have said, you see, that what we would call a pastoral call wasn't strictly a pastoral call unless when you got into the home you'd been able in some form to minister and teach the word of God. This is how the Puritans understood the meaning of pastoral work. And it sprang directly from their belief that it's only biblical truth that gives life.

And where biblical truth isn't being given, well, life isn't being conveyed and the shepherd's work is not being done. Final axiom. Belief in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit.

The Puritan preachers were strong, lively, impassioned, pointed in the pulpit, but they never allowed themselves to impersonate the Holy Ghost. And they never allowed themselves to ask for a response to them, themselves, God's messengers, as distinct from calling for a response to God's word. You see, they believed that the ultimate effectiveness of preaching is out of man's hands altogether.

Man's task is simply to be faithful in teaching and applying the word. But it's God's work to convince men of its truth and right it at the heart and elicit the response. So you see, they didn't think in terms of appeals, they thought in terms of application.

Important distinction there. I appeal, but when an application of Scripture is made, well, it's Scripture appealing, if appeal is the right word to use. It is Scripture, certainly, that's called Scripture truth that's calling for response.

It's a very striking difference between the Puritan outlook and our own. They believed that when the preacher had finished his sermon, applied the word as sharply and pointedly as he could, called for response to it in the name of God, well, then he'd done his job, and the thing for him to do was to close the service and leave the church and go and pray for God's blessing on the word in private. And they would rather have goggled, I think, if they had known of some of our contemporary techniques for, as we say, drawing in the net.

They just were operating on a different wavelength altogether. Belief in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. The Puritans were confident, you see, that if it was Scripture being faithfully expounded and faithfully applied, the Spirit would be active and good would be done.

There would be fruit. And they were content to leave it to God's time for the fruit to appear. There's the Puritan, then, is the Puritan philosophy of preaching.

Helps to give you a sense of the kind of preaching situation which these men created for themselves in this period from 1570 on for the next 100 years. From this, we move to a further heading. The Puritan type of sermon.

Here again, some more general characteristics of their preaching. We can go through this more rapidly because we've already made some of these points in other ways. Puritan preaching was expository in its method.

That we've already said in different ways. Texts must be put in their context. Texts must not be rested.

Bring out of the word what is there. Don't read into the text something that isn't there. The comment that a text without a context is a pretext is 20th century, not 17th century, but the Puritans would have nodded their head.

The comment that preaching is not juxtaposition, putting a truth alongside a text, nor imposition, reading a truth into a text, but exposition, getting out of the text the truth that's already in it, that also is a 20th century comment, but that too would have won the agreement of the Puritans. The method of handling texts, as I think I indicated to you yesterday, Wednesday, talking about Perkins, was to extract from the text one or more statements of doctrinal truth and to confirm those statements by other scriptures and argument from other scriptures and then application, or as the Puritans used to call it, use, the Latin word, the idea of the Latin word *usus*, putting something to what we call practical use. They would draw out so many uses or practical applications of the truth that they taught, applying them either in their character as law or in their character as gospel, to the needs of different people.

And this is one of the reasons why Puritan expositions ran to such tremendous length. You must have been surprised sometimes at how long a Puritan exposition of a comparatively short passage of scripture could be. For instance, I know that some of you in homiletics this last term, semester, have been using Manson on Jude, 500 and more pages on 24 verses of scripture.

But you see, it follows from the method. Out of a single text, you can draw a whole series of truths. And if you state each of those truths on its own and confirm it from other scripture and then apply it, well, you can see how a little scripture can provide you with a lot of preaching.

And the Puritans regarded this as perfectly proper, perfectly acceptable. They taught their congregations to regard it as perfectly acceptable too. Let's take time to be thorough, said the Puritans in effect.

And they preached their way through books of scripture slowly and majestically, shaking out of each text all the doctrinal truths that they found taught or exhibited in it, and going through them and applying them one at a time. Let me give you one or two illustrations of this. Here you have, for instance, John Owen, working on Romans 8 verse 13.

If ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. And he raises from that three doctrines as follows. Doctrine 1. The choicest believers who are assuredly free from the condemning power of sin ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.

Doctrine 2. The Holy Ghost only is sufficient for this work, and it cannot be done without him. Doctrine 3. The vigor and power and comfort of our spiritual life depends upon our mortifying the deeds of the flesh. Well, developing those three doctrines and making application of them, John Owen rapidly has quite a sizable and solid little treatise on the mortification of sin in believers.

Or take another work, the most famous of all the Puritan evangelistic tracts, Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, from which some of you will be interested to know, Joseph Allen lifted a lot of the ideas that you now find in his *Call to the Unconverted*. His alarm, I should say, to the unconverted. Baxter's work, which went into literally hundreds of thousands and was translated into several European languages, and even, you'll be interested to know, into the Red Indian language by John Eliot, who at that time was doing missionary work amongst the Indians in New England.

Baxter's Call to the Unconverted is an extended exposition of seven doctrines derived from Ezekiel 33, 11. I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Turn ye, why will ye die, O house of Israel? And here are the seven doctrines.

One, it is the unchangeable law of God that wicked men must turn or die. Two, it is the promise of God that the wicked shall live if they will but turn. Three, God takes pleasure in men's conversion and salvation but not in their death or damnation.

Four, this is a most certain truth which God hath confirmed solemnly by his oath. Five, the Lord doth redouble his commands and persuasions to the wicked to turn. Six, the Lord condescendeth to reason the case with them and asketh the wicked, why will they die? Seven, if after all this the wicked will not return, it is not long of God, that is, not because of God, that they perish but of themselves.

They die because they will die. Well, there you've got seven good divisions of an argument, haven't you? And I'm sure that you or I could write a fair evangelistic tract along the line of following through that sequence of seven thoughts. Seven doctrines that Baxter derives from his text.

Well, this is how the Puritans do it. This is what they understood the task of exposition to mean. Draw out your doctrines, you state them, and then you apply them.

Second feature of Puritan sermons, they were doctrinal in their content. As we said a moment ago, the Puritans stood in the pulpit to teach the word of God, and they demanded that their congregation should sit in the pews, working away, listening to learn the word of God. So that if you had said to a Puritan, should I preach doctrine? The Puritan would have said, what on earth else do you suppose there is to preach? Doctrine is what God has put into the scriptures.

Doctrine is what you as a preacher must bring out of them. Doctrine is what your congregations must learn from the scripture. Baxter, Richard Baxter, had a working class congregation at Kidderminster in the 1640s and 50s, and they apparently behaved very much as a modern congregation would in these circumstances, and tried to excuse themselves from bothering about doctrine on the grounds that, quote, we are not learned, and therefore God will not require much knowledge at our hands.

All right for you chaps in the pulpit, you get on with your theology, but don't bother us with it. That's not what we come to church for. And so Baxter takes a deep breath and reasons with them like this.

Have you not souls to save or lose as well as the learned have? God has made plain his will to you in his word, and he's given you teachers and many other helps. You have no excuse if you're ignorant. You must know how to be Christians even though you are no scholars.

You may hit the way to heaven in English, though you have no skill in Hebrew and Greek, but in the darkness of ignorance, you can never hit it. Well, that was the line of thought, you see. Preaching must be doctrinal.

Congregations must understand why it's doctrinal. They must come to church to learn the way of the Lord. Certainly doctrinal preaching bores the hypocrites.

The Puritans knew that. But then it's only doctrinal preaching, they believed, that saved the sheep. And preachers are there to feed the sheep, not entertain the goats.

Third point, only a moment on this. Puritan preaching was orderly in its arrangement. Do you preach sermons with headings that stick out? Well, the Puritans did, and they thought it was very good for the memory of the congregations that the headings should stick out so that people could get them and memorize them.

A sermon that was needlessly hard to remember, the Puritans would have said, is a bad sermon. And they're often found extolling the value of what they call method. Orderly arrangement of ideas.

Orderly arrangement of truth. Your sermon must have method. Otherwise you won't be teaching effectively.

Fourth quality, Puritan preaching, though profound in its content, was popular in its style. Or to use the Puritan word, plain in its style. There's an implied contrast here.

The early 17th century, to which we're now coming on, was the great age of what came to be called witty preaching. That doesn't mean jokes in the pulpit, it means something more. Wit in those days was a word for liveliness of mind.

The capacity to play with words. The capacity to make smart remarks. They didn't have to be funny to be witty.

And in the early 17th century, learned pulpiteers vied with each other in stuffing their sermons with what Thomas Goodwin called the eminentist farrago of all sorts of flowers of wit. Pulpit pyrotechnics, letting off fine phrases and smart remarks and artful alliterations and all the rest in the pulpit. So that preaching degenerated into a kind of sophisticated entertainment for the cultured.

And an occasion, of course, for the preacher to show off. Well, the Puritans condemned this as making light of holy things. Let's hear Baxter again.

He condemned witty preaching as, quote, proud foolery, which savoureth of levity and tendeth to evaporate weighty truths. And he complained that its practitioners, quote, deal liker to players, that is actors, than preachers in the pulpit. In any case, the Puritans said, preaching that exalts the preacher is unedifying and sinful on that very account.

The preacher should, so far as possible, obliterate himself and call all attention to God and the truth of God and of Christ. Baxter went on in the passage from which I've quoted to lay down the principle that determines the Puritans' own homiletical style. And here's the principle.

The plainest words are the profitablest oratory in the weightiest matter. Bishop Ryle said of himself that in the early years of his ministry, in order to learn to preach plainly, he crucified his style. Striking phrase.

The Puritans did just the same. They eschewed any sort of rhetorical display. They talked to their congregations in plain, straightforward, homely English.

Their speaking wasn't slipshod or vulgar. I don't mean that. Their ideal was rather of dignified simplicity.

You remember the bit I quoted to you yesterday from John Geary? The old English Puritan could distinguish between studded plainness and ignorant rudeness. Baxter, in the passage I was quoting from, it's the preface to his treatise of conversion actually, goes on to say, look, if you were going to tell a man that his house was on fire, you wouldn't make up a fine speech full of elaborate alliterations and so on.

You'd simply open your mouth and talk to him in plain, homely, honest, straightforward language.

John, the house is burning. Take action at once. And this is how the Puritans understood preaching.

In other words, this is an aspect, an expression of their conviction that preaching is an urgent business. That the warning of people to flee from the wrath to come and to seek Christ till they find him is an urgent warning. And Baxter, in that same passage, says that he aspired to be nothing other than a plain and pressing downright preacher.

Talking to people in a way that would help them to believe that he was just as serious as he wanted them to believe he was. That he was behaving like a serious man on an urgent mission. And that he wasn't showing off or entertaining or doing any such thing, but simply bringing them a life and death message spoken in plain language because that's the only sort of language that's appropriate when it's something really serious at stake.

Well, that's the fourth feature of Puritan preaching. Fifth feature, it's practical and experimental interest. The Puritans preached in order to bring men and women to know God and serve God.

Do you remember Baxter's phrase, of practical, sorry, affection of practical English authors, the young minister is to get of many affection of practical English authors as he can. Well, this is what I mean when I speak of a practical and experimental or experiential interest. This is experimental in the old sense.

Not in the sense of try it and see, but in the sense that your whole being, including the emotions, is engaged in response to God's truth. And it's experiential in that sense. And the things about which they were always preaching were sin on the cross, and the work of the Holy Spirit, faith and hypocrisy, repentance, assurance and the lack of it, prayer, meditation, temptation, sin and mortification of sin, growth in grace, death, heaven.

You can take Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress as a kind of pictorial index to the central content of Puritan preaching. They preached about all the things that the Pilgrim's Progress deals with, all the themes that come up for treatment, in other words, at any stage in the Christian life. They taught the scriptural doctrine on these issues, and then they applied it in order to lead men on in their pilgrimage the right way and bring them back from traveling the wrong way.

It was a Puritan, David Dixon, who, once when a young minister was being ordained, charged him to study two things. One, the Bible, the other, his own heart. Because you must know, Sir Dixon, how human nature works in order to know how the word of God applies to it.

And this is something which, like charity, ought to begin at home. Learn to know what's in your own heart and how the word of God applies there. And that will help you to apply it to the hearts and lives of others.

The Puritans made it a matter of conscience to prove for themselves the saving power of the truth that they were preaching to others. They knew that, as John Owen puts it, quote, a man preacheth that sermon only well to others, which preacheth itself in his own soul. If the word do not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us.

And it was said of Robert Bolton, one of this brotherhood, that he never taught any godly point, but he first wrought it on his own heart. Practical and experiential preaching, then, beginning at home. And when the, and when one had tasted something of the power of the message, then one was ready to proclaim it.

Proclaim it to others. Further quality. Puritan preaching was realistic in application.

The Puritans just didn't declaim at random about sin and things like that. They made it their business, they thought it was part of a preacher's job to consider, so far as he could, the congregation to whom he was preaching, to try and form a judgment as to what they needed and the different types of person in the congregation would need and apply the word with some sense of where it was supposed to go and what good it was supposed to do in the hearts of those people. The application must be realistic.

The expositor must take care to make the Bible address men where they are. Yesterday's application may not speak to their condition today. Quote Thomas Manton, it is but a cheap zeal that beclaimeth against antiquated errors.

And things now out of use and practice. We are to consider what the present age needeth. This is why the Westminster Directory for Public Worship speaks of application as, quote, a work of great difficulty to the preacher himself requiring much prudence, zeal and meditation and to the natural and corrupt man it will be very unpleasant.

Which consideration, of course, then as now will sorely tempt God's messenger to pull his punches because no normal man likes giving offence. And in the Lord's name the preacher often has to give offence by challenging the sin that he knows is there in men's hearts and minds. Yet, goes on the directory, the preacher is to endeavour to perform it, this work of application, in such a manner that his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart and that if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest and give glory to God.

So, a man must work and seek the grace of God to achieve a realistic application to people's real spiritual needs. Do you remember the different classes of people whom Perkins listed for us? We went through them yesterday. The proud, unhumiliated, ignorant.

The teachable ignorant. The proud, knowledgeable people. The humble, knowledgeable people.

Those who'd lapsed or fallen from grace, well, from orthodoxy or from right living. And the church of a mixed assembly in which there'd be all these different classes of people. You could bet your boots listening to every sermon and you ought to try and mix in something for all of them.

Puritans thought the application through. The one way of putting this is to say that they thought their sermons through both forwards and backwards. Forwards, from the text, which gives the doctrine, which gives you your theme, your topic, which you develop and lay out before people.

That's thinking it through forwards. Thinking it through backwards is starting at the other end and starting your thinking with the people, saying, well now, what's their condition? What's their need? What is there here in this message of mine to help them? How must I draw out the application to make sure that the truth comes home in a way that will touch them and do them some good? If you don't think your sermon through backwards, brethren, it will always be weak at the point of application. You'll never carry the application far enough.

I've been listening to preachers and preaching long enough to tell you they're quite categorical. If you don't think it through from the standard, starting with the people of the receiving end, you will never carry the application far enough. Well, the Puritans insisted that you should think your messages through

backwards as well as forwards and carry the application right home.

And final quality of Puritan preaching, it was, or at least the preachers aspired to be powerful in manner. The Puritan coveted unction in the pulpit. He aspired to be, as I quoted the phrase from Baxter earlier, a plain and pressing downright preacher speaking from a full heart.

I quote their phrase now. Baxter's phrase, in good sadness, and another phrase of Baxter's, with life and light and weight. He thought to preach, as it was once said of Puritan minister, as if death were at his back.

Or as Baxter put it in a poem of his called *The Preacher*, he preached as one that ne'er should preach again and of the dying man to dying men. Now this quality of unction, of course, it's the spiritual quality of something which you never have, which you never see unless prayer has been made. The difference between the Puritans and very many of us today is that we do regard it as adequate preaching if a man preaches clearly and scripturally without unction.

We're content, in other words, with orthodox sermons and we feel that's good enough, whereas the Puritans weren't. And if there wasn't unction, the power of God on a man's ministry, they were reluctant to say that he was preaching at all. They would describe him as an honest, weak minister or something like that.

That's the phrase I found in Puritan writing. They coveted unction. They prayed for God's blessing on their sermons.

They prayed for God's power in their preaching. You read Baxter's *Reformed Pastor* on this. I won't go any further into it, but just to give you one quote out of the *Reformed Pastor* in which I may say there's a great deal on this subject.

A minister should take some special pains with his heart before he's to go to the congregation. If he be then cold, how is he like to warm the hearts of his hearers? And it's not enough just to bring light into their minds. He must warm their hearts.

That's part of his job. Go therefore then especially to God for life. And read some rousing awakening book or meditate on the weight of the subject you're going to speak of and the necessity, that is the need of your people's souls, that you may go in the zeal of the Lord to his house.

Well, that's the Puritan type of sermon so far as we can describe it in this generalized way. Finally, subhead five, the content of Puritan sermons. This in effect, we've already dealt with in talking about the philosophy and the style of them.

All that we need to say to round the exposition off therefore is this. That the Puritans who lived in the age before everyone had become history conscious in the way that happened in the 19th century. The Puritans approached the Bible as primarily a book of doctrine.

I suppose that you here like students in other seminaries are taught right from the start to regard the Bible as an inspired interpretative history of redemption. And historical biblical theology, the historical unfolding of truth through God's dealings with his people down the centuries. This is made central in your thinking and I suppose it's central in the teaching you get in your Bible courses.

Well, I only say that in order to make the point that it wasn't so with the Puritans. They lived before the age when everyone felt that the historical approach was the primary one. They knew indeed that the Bible was an interpretative record of a historical redemption.

But the line of approach to the Bible that they followed was not the historical line it was rather this. That to them the Bible was a book of doctrine. It contains three things.

Law. Gospel. That is to say precepts and promises.

Together with illustrations. Narratives which illustrated the principles of law and gospel working out in people's lives. Narratives that is of people who either had or hadn't obeyed God's law.

Had or hadn't believed the promise. And what happened to them. How God dealt with them.

This is the substance of the scripture of the Puritans. As a matter of fact this formulation goes right back to Tyndale and I think it's true to say that it goes back to at least the thought of the Bible as being doctrine plus illustrations that's a formula that goes back to the medieval preachers. Certainly Tyndale gives you the formulation law and gospel precepts and promises plus a great deal of narrative matter illustrating these various principles in action.

So that the Puritans approached the Bible as first and foremost a book of a book of doctrine with the illustrative narrative backing it up. And when they preached it they taught first and foremost doctrine and they illustrated the doctrine from the Bible stories Bible history. I told you yesterday I think how Perkins distinguished between milk and strong meat in Pulpit Instruction.

I did give you that yesterday didn't I? Yes I thought so. But you will have noted that both the milk and the strong meat are what they called heads of doctrine. And even the milk starts with a trinity.

You begin with the Triune God in himself and you go on by proclaiming his law and his works of redemption. So the Puritan line was quite simply to focus on what the Westminster Directory called a profitable points of doctrine. So I'm sorry what Perkins' art of prophesying called profitable points of doctrine.

Extract these from the text prove them apply them. This meant that in Puritan preaching you find what I think by absolute standards must be judged a lack of preaching directly from biblical stories particularly gospel stories. By absolute standards it's a lack but the balancing point to make is that Bible stories including gospel stories were constantly brought in to illustrate doctrinal points in sermons from more directly doctrinal texts.

As for the particular doctrines well I've already given them to you. You can see from what we've said already that broadly speaking you can sum it up by saying the Puritans preached their way through the economy of redemption and they preached their way through the economy of redemption the law and the gospel for conversion edification and the promotion of practical religion. They didn't preach a great deal on problems of Christian ethics.

The only person who really did a job in that department from the pulpit was William Perkins who spent a year and more towards the close of his ministry preaching through the whole sum of the cases of conscience. But in general Puritans took for granted a general knowledge of ethical standards just as they took for granted a general knowledge of Bible stories and they didn't devote their sermons to telling the

stories and crystallizing the standards rather they assumed that these things were known and devoted their sermons to enforcing them where appropriate. If you ask what was the gospel the Puritans preached well the short answer is it's the milk followed by the strong meat of Perkins's distinction.

It starts with the trinity it starts with God it's God centered first to last it moves from the trinity to the explanation of sin it moves from the explanation of sin to the proclamation of Christ on to repentance, faith then the Christian conflict with indwelling sin and the path of pilgrimage and warfare as the Christian travels home to God. One particular area in which the Puritans preached a great deal is the area of preparation for conversion.

The Puritans believed that there were ordinarily various preliminary things that God had to do in men's hearts before they were capable of true repentance and true faith that is he had to humble them for sin he had to humble them for sin and the Puritans as I say devoted a lot of time to preaching through texts a lot of texts and the psalms and others which deal with a man how a man is humbled by God for his sin made to hate it made to desire a new heart made to long for forgiveness restoration and the rest and so prepared for the working in his heart of regeneration and the dawning in his consciousness of faith and assurance and the realization that God is now enabling him to turn from sin to give himself to Christ and in the fullest sense to become a Christian this teaching on preparation for conversion has sometimes been accused of being legalistic as if the Puritans had said what in actual fact some English hyper-Calvinists did say in the 18th and 19th centuries that the fact of being humbled for sin was itself the warrant of faith in other words that not until you knew you'd been humbled enough could you regard yourself as being included in the invitation to come to Christ an invitation to those that are that labor and are heavy laden not till then could you believe that the promise was for you and that you were entitled to claim it well of course when you put it like that it's obvious at least I hope it's obvious to you I certainly think it ought to be that this is a mistake the warrant of faith is quite simply the universal promise and command of God in fact I only mention this in order to dismiss it though writers like Alan Joseph Alan Richard Baxter John Rogers the New England divine Thomas Shepherd Thomas Hooker have all been accused were accused by no less a man than Spurgeon of making the fact that one's been humbled for sin the warrant and the qualification um for believing that the promise is extended to you a study of their work shows that it was not so you can show this quite shortly in a sentence simply by pointing to the fact that they all quote texts like 1 John 3 23 this is the commandment this is God's commandment that we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as he gave us commandment the warrant of faith is the command of God that men should believe and the only significance of this preparatory humbling is that it's God's way of bringing a man to the point where he's able to believe it's simply the divine act that makes him seek seek in a way that leads him to find well if you like next time we can talk more about that I simply mention it in order to dismiss it if you want to go into it by all means we can but we can't do it this afternoon for our time has gone thank you for listening

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