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Editor,
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**RENEWAL THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT:
The Burden of Puritan Theology**

Garth B. Wilson

A well-attested characteristic of seventeenth-century English Puritan theology is its absorbing interest in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Puritans emphasized the doctrine of the Spirit to a degree virtually without parallel in the history of Christian thought.¹ They bestowed upon the work of the Spirit perhaps the most elaborate exposition it has ever received. John Owen (1616-1683), for example, devoted in excess of two thousand detailed pages to pneumatology. One could say that for the Puritans the Third Article of the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," is "the article on which the church stands or falls." Indeed, they affirm as much. Says Owen:²

In the promise of the Spirit the Lord Christ founded the church itself, and by it he builded it up. And this is the hinge whereon the whole weight of it doth turn and depend unto this day...no dispensation of the Spirit, no church.

One could thus say that the burden of Puritan theology is renewal through the Holy Spirit. One source of the Puritans' emphasis on the Spirit is their

¹ Jerald C. Brauer, "Reflections on the Nature of English Puritanism," *Church History*, 22 (1954), 99-107; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "Towards a Theology of the Holy Spirit," *Congregational Quarterly*, 22 (1944), 305-313; and Thomas Rees, *The Holy Spirit in Thought and Experience* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1915), p. 191. B.B. Warfield maintained that "the developed doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is an exclusively Reformation doctrine, and more particularly a Reformed doctrine, and more particularly still a Puritan doctrine" ["On the doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John C. Meeter (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), I, 212].

² *Works*, ed. William Gould (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1853), III, 192. Unless indicated otherwise, Puritan authors will be cited hereafter by volume and page after the initial reference to their work is made.

concern for reform and renewal. Writ large on their agenda is a “second” or “further reformation.”³ At the centre of their doctrine of the Spirit and their thinking on renewal is the church. Their theology of renewal begins with the church and its ordinances. Through the church the individual is renewed. “The communion of saints” is the context in which renewal through the Spirit usually occurs. To cite Richard Sibbes (1577-1635):⁴

The Spirit of the Lord is given usually *in holy community*. The Holy Ghost fell upon them in the Acts when they were gathered together...; and surely we never find sweeter motions of the Spirit than, when we are gathered at such times...The Holy Ghost falls usually upon men when they are in holy communion.

The work of the Holy Spirit as it relates to the individual is expounded at length by the Puritans, but never in isolation from the church and its ordinances. As much, if not more, attention is given to the work of the Spirit in relation to the Word and the Sacraments. The Word and the Sacraments are the divinely appointed “means” through which the Spirit does his work in us. Renewal occurs when the Spirit accompanies and blesses “the means of grace” God has given to his church. In order to experience the renewing grace of God, one must submit to the ordinances of God in the visible church.⁵ Says Owen: “*Ordinarily*, God, in the effectual dispensation of his grace, meeteth with them who attend with diligence on the outward means of it.”⁶ To attend “the means of grace” is, in the words of Thomas Manton (1620-1677), to “lie near at hand for God’s work.”⁷

³ The plea for a “further reformation” appears in *The Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645). Cf. Owen, XVI, 20; and Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, ed. John C. Miller (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1858), III, 130-131.

⁴ *Works*, ed. A.B. Grossart (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1863), IV, 300.

⁵ Richard Sibbes, II, 242.

⁶ III, 231. cf. Thomas Manton, *Works*, ed. Thomas Smith (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1873), XXI, 311.

⁷ XXI, 311.

Among the Puritans the preaching of the Word stands to the fore. It is the foremost means of renewal by the Spirit. As H.C. Porter correctly perceived, “the Puritan tradition, in the last resort, must be assessed in terms of the pulpit.”⁸ Preaching plays a dominant role in the Puritans design for a “further reformation.” The preaching of the Word is, according to Stephen Charnock (1628-1680), “the triumphal chariot, wherein Christ rides majestically to the conquest of hearts.”⁹ That preaching holds a central place among the Puritans is evident in the fact that when they speak of the Word they emphasize the preached Word. The Puritans stand close to *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) which equated the preached Word with the Word of God.¹⁰ To cite David Clarkson (1622-1686):¹¹

The gospel preached is the word of God...(It) is the same word of God as it is read as it is preached...That therefore is the word of God which is equivalent, agreeable to, and deducible from it, when delivered by those who are sent with authority from Christ to preach it.

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) declares that the preaching of the Word is “God’s public work, and the greatest,” much to be preferred to the solitary reading of the Word.¹² A sentence from Manton captures the importance the preached Word assumed among the Puritans: “God would not leave us to a book, but hath appointed a living ministry.”¹³

A Puritan emphasis is to be noted at this point: the preaching of the Word, or for that matter, the Bible itself, is to be seen as a *means* of grace. The Puritans for all their emphasis on the Word are careful to underline that the Word is “the instrument of the Spirit.”¹⁴ The Word is absolutely essential in

⁸ *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 260. Cf. Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships: The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560-1662* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 36.

⁹ *Works*, ed. James McCosh (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1864), III, 309.

¹⁰ Chap. I. *Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*.

¹¹ *Works* (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1864), I, 432-433.

¹² *The Selected Practical Works*, (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1846), I, 398-399.

¹³ XII, 288.

¹⁴ Owen, III, 410; Charnock, III, 307; Manton, XXI, 329.



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God's dealings with us, but it must be seen for what it is intended to be. Says Charnock:¹⁵

If any...will regard the word more than as an instrument, as a partner of God in his operation, he may justly leave you to the weakness of that and deny the influx of his own strength.

Accordingly it is urged by Manton: "We must not idolize the means to shut out the work of the Spirit."¹⁶ The Puritan emphasis on the Word as a *means* recalls John Calvin (1509-1564):¹⁷

In his outward Word, God may sufficiently witness to his secret grace to us, provided only the pipe, from which the water abundantly flows out...does not hinder us from according due honour to the fountain.

Corresponding to the premium the Puritans placed upon the preached Word and their emphasis on the Word as an instrument of the Spirit is their deep concern that the Spirit accompany the ministry of the Word. Puritan theology set the necessity of a "Spirited-Word" in sharp relief. "All is to no purpose" and is "but the sounding of a voice" if the Spirit is absent from the preaching of the Word, says Sibbes.¹⁸ The Word has no efficacy but as God "is pleased to use and apply it."¹⁹ Says Owen: "Take away the Spirit from the Gospel and you render it a dead letter,"²⁰ or in the words of John Flavel (*ca.* 1630-1691): "the effect of the gospel is not in our power...whatever efficacy it hath to reconcile men to God it derives from the Spirit of God."²¹

An important dimension of Puritan theology comes into play at this point. The Puritans were concerned to underline the sovereign freedom of God

¹⁵ III, 329.

¹⁶ XXI, 333.

¹⁷ *Institutes*, III. 24. 3.

¹⁸ II, 106.

¹⁹ Owen, III, 410.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²¹ *The Method of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 63.

over the Word. He is the Lord of his Word; he is not bound to it, but it is bound to him: "It is the Spirit that gives the word all virtue it hath: he is the Lord of all saving influences: he has dominion over the word."²² The Word is *God's* Word, and it is always subject to him. That is to say, there is no necessary connection between the preaching of the Word and its effect. What occurs through the Word is not to be understood in terms of natural causality. We cite Manton:²³

The Spirit is a free agent, working where and on whom, when, and in what manner he pleaseth...the connection between the word and the power of God is not natural, necessary and perpetual. The works of nature do naturally produce their effect, but that is natural to them; whereas this is supernatural. God doth not tie himself absolutely to the means. Yet we are tied to the use of them. We are bound but God will be free.

The cause of the eventfulness of the Word says Owen,

Lieth principally in the sovereign will and pleasure of God; for although the Scripture be his word, and he hath testified it to be so by his power...yet is not that divine power included or shut up in the letter of it, so it must have the same effect wherever it comes.²⁴

The Puritans are stressing that when the words of Scripture or preaching are effective, they are so, not by their own intrinsic power, but by the power of God through the Spirit. The Spirit is dynamically related to the Word, but not perpetually united to the Word, which is to say that the Word and the Spirit are never at our disposal. The doctrine of election is quite evident here. In Puritan theology the doctrine of election and the doctrine of the Spirit are inextricably bound together. Behind efficacy of the Spirit lies the sovereign will of God. "It is a sign of election," says Manton, "when the gospel

²² *Ibid.* Cf. Charnock, III, 319; Owen, IV, 43.

²³ XXI, 329.

²⁴ IV, 23.

cometh to us not in word only...the Spirit accompanieth it, that this calling may have its effect."²⁵

In their thinking on Word and Spirit the Puritans show themselves to be standing squarely within the Reformed tradition. We cite Herman Bavinck:²⁶

Word and Spirit...might be very intimately related, but they also remain distinct...When the Spirit joins himself with the Word, He does so of His free choice.

The Puritans' understanding of the relationship of Word and Spirit may, in fact, be traced to Calvin. Calvin comments on Ezek 2:1-2:²⁷

The Prophet teaches that nothing was accomplished by his voice till the Spirit was added. God works efficiently by his own words, but we must hold that this efficacy is not contained in the words themselves, but proceeds from the secret instinct of the Spirit.

What the Puritans said of the necessity of the Spirit accompanying the Word applies equally in the case of the Sacraments. Now, to speak of the Sacraments in Puritan terms is to speak in particular of the Lord's Supper—it is "the Sacrament," the "broad seal" of "the covenant of grace."²⁸ In some respects the Lord's Supper has an advantage over preaching. In the Sacrament, says Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680),

it is the whole Christ presented as to the eye; whereas in a sermon, if it did present the whole Christ, yet it would be but to the ear; and you know things by the ear strike more dully and slowly, but by the eye more really, and make a

²⁵ XII, 293.

²⁶ *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1956), p. 406.

²⁷ *Commentary on the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1948), I, 108.

²⁸ Thomas Brooks, *Works*, ed. A.B. Grossart (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1867), II, 326.

lasting impression: 'mine eye effects my heart', as the psalmist speaks.²⁹

As E. Brooks Holifield has pointed out, "the piety of sensation" was important for the Puritans.³⁰ They regarded sensory perception as an avenue to spiritual truth and an important ingredient of spiritual devotion. The Sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper, are integral to spirituality and a distinct means of renewal. To cite Manton:³¹

Sacraments are blessed means to convey the Spirit...Especially the Lord's Supper...wait for the secret illapses of the Lord's grace; improve the Lord's Supper...now quicken your desires after the Spirit...renew your expectations. You take the cup to assure you.

The Puritans repeatedly say, "Let us lie at the pool of the ordinances, frequent the Word and the sacraments,"³² for to "lie at the pool of the ordinances" is to "lie near at hand for God's work."³³ However, they are "dead things without the Spirit." The Spirit must "enliven and give vigour to all these things."³⁴

There are certain times wherein the angel came to stir the pool...So the Spirit of God stirs the waters of the Word and the ordinances, and makes them effectual.³⁵

²⁹ VII, 312. Cf. Owen, IX, 593; Sibbes, III, 462.

³⁰ *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 135. Cf. Richard Baxter, *Practical Works* (London: George Virtue, 1838), III, 319.

³¹ XXI, 297.

³² Thomas Watson, *A Body of Practical Divinity* (Glasgow: A Fullarton & Co., 1835) p. 172.

³³ Manton, XXI, 311.

³⁴ Sibbes, IV, 295.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

Again, the doctrine of election is apparent. The efficacy of “the means of grace” is contingent upon the sovereign work of the Spirit, those “certain times” when “the Spirit of God stirs the waters.”

As a consequence of their deep concern that the Spirit accompany the ministry of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments the Puritans set a premium upon “prayer for the Spirit.” Indeed, scarcely anywhere in the history of the church is “prayer for the spirit” accented as acutely as it is among the Puritans.³⁶ The “promise of the Spirit” is “a directory for prayers of the church in all generations.”³⁷ In Baxter’s opinion our failure to experience the renewing work of the Spirit lies in “our slight thoughts of the office and work of the Holy Ghost on our souls, and our necessity of it, and our not begging and waiting for the Spirit’s special help.”³⁸ Something of the intensity of Puritan prayer for the Spirit is captured in Baxter: “The Lord teach you to beg for the Spirit, to seek and wait for it in the use of means, until the Lord Jesus be pleased to pour it out upon you.”³⁹ It is obvious to the Puritans that, if the church would be renewed, it must pray for the Spirit.

The work of the Spirit in relation to the Word and the Sacraments has a distinct focus - the renewal of the individual in “the image of God,” the Word and the Sacraments are the means whereby the individual is regenerated, sanctified and enabled to enjoy communion with God.

According to the Puritans, *regeneration* is the first work of the Spirit in us.⁴⁰ The Puritans emphasize that what occurs in regeneration is not “a piece of cloth sewed to an old garment...It is called a new creature, a new man: not an improved creature, or a new-dressed man.”⁴¹ The primary category for defining regeneration is “participation in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4),⁴² and the Puritans focused upon this category in order to set in sharp relief that regeneration involves a *real* change. It is not “a picture, but a nature: it is divine. God doth not busy himself about apparitions. It is a likeness, not

³⁶ See Goodwin, VI, 69; Sibbes, IV, 301; Owen, III, 155.

³⁷ Owen, III, 155.

³⁸ III, 1066.

³⁹ III, 638.

⁴⁰ See Goodwin, VI, 17; Owen, III, 366-367; Manton, XXI, 291-292.

⁴¹ Charnock, III, 93.

⁴² See John Howe, *Works* (London: Westley & Davis, 1832), p. 506; Charnock, III, 87; Owen, III, 208; and Manton, XXI, 303.

only in actions, but in nature.”⁴³ Regeneration is every bit as real as creation itself.⁴⁴ In fact, it is as real as, and analogous to, the conception of the human nature of Christ.⁴⁵ Regeneration has a certain end in view. We err if we view the Puritans as espousing an individualistic idea of regeneration. Regeneration issues in “union with Christ,” which means that through regeneration a person is placed in Christ’s “mystical body.”⁴⁶ Regeneration is also a renewal in “the image of God.” For the Puritans, the “attribute” of God that is foremost is “holiness”—“this attribute hath an excellency above his other perfections,”⁴⁷—and it is equally so where renewal in “the image of God” is concerned. Says Charnock:⁴⁸

Holiness is the honour of the creature...when God would be drawn to the life, as much as he can be, in the spirit of his creatures, he is drawn in this attribute, as being the most beautiful perfection of God, and most valuable with him.

To cite Charnock further:⁴⁹

As God’s nature is holy, his perfections holy, his actions holy, so holiness beautifies the nature, spirits the actions, and is writ upon the endowments of man renewed.

The Puritans, furthermore, see regeneration as initial sanctification, as the root of the matter.⁵⁰ Here we come to a cardinal concern of the Puritans. The dominant component in salvation is the sanctification of the Spirit. They emphasize that the means whereby God brings us to salvation is “the

⁴³Charnock, III, 125.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴⁵ Owen, III, 311.

⁴⁶ Owen, III, 367. Cf. Manton, XI, 62.

⁴⁷ Charnock, II, 191. Cf. Watson, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, p. 59-60.

⁴⁸ Charnock, II, 192.

⁴⁹ III, 125. Ernest B. Lowrie rightly argues that among the Puritans “the image of God” refers exclusively to “holiness”, “the internal moral image” (*The Shape of the Puritan Mind* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974], p. 142-146).

⁵⁰ See Owen, III, 223. Cf. Goodwin, VI, 389.

sanctification of the Spirit.”⁵¹ In stressing sanctification as they did, the Puritans were only echoing Calvin: “Christ cannot be known apart from sanctification of the Spirit.”⁵²

Justification and sanctification are inseparably united. “To suppose that one of these may be without the other”, says Owen, “is to overthrow the whole gospel.”⁵³ The work of the cross cannot be separated from the work of the Spirit “pardon and power” go together.⁵⁴ The “whole Christ” is the object of faith, his Person and threefold office.⁵⁵ We cannot “rend Christ’s offices, as if he were all priest, and not a king to govern; as if he were righteousness and not sanctification.”⁵⁶ As Sibbes states:⁵⁷

Where Christ saveth, he doth it not only by merit and satisfying the wrath of God for us, but also by sanctifying and effectual working in us, that he might be a perfect Saviour.

“The prime and principle gift of sanctification that we receive from Christ is the indwelling of the Spirit.”⁵⁸ The indwelling of the Spirit is essential for three reasons. First, there is a “moral reason” for his indwelling only the Spirit can make us holy and bring us into conformity with the will of God.⁵⁹ The text, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezek 36:27), occupies a prominent place in Puritan thought. Second, there is an “aesthetic reason” for the Spirit’s indwelling. Holiness, is, according to the Puritans, “the excellency and beauty of the creature.”⁶⁰ “The Spirit of holiness” is essential in order that we might be adorned with “the beauty of holiness.” In the words of Charnock:⁶¹

⁵¹ See Owen, III, 504; Goodwin, I, 80.

⁵² *Institutes*, III, 2. 8.

⁵³ V, 381.

⁵⁴ Sibbes, IV, 258.

⁵⁵ Baxter, *Selected Practical Works*, II, 66; Charnock, V, 166-167.

⁵⁶ Sibbes, IV, 258.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵⁸ Owen, II, 172.

⁵⁹ Charnock, II, 273.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

When God and his glory are made our end, we shall find a silent likeness pass in upon us; the beauty of God will by degrees enter upon our souls...If holiness be a perfection belonging to the nature of God, then,...let us labour to grow up in it, and breathe after fuller measures of it.

Third, the Spirit is necessary “in order unto the completing and perfecting of the new creation.”⁶² Through the Spirit “the saints” will reach “glorification,” that is, “sanctification consummate and completed.”⁶³

Regeneration and sanctification make one “suitable” for “communion with God.”⁶⁴ The Puritans frequently used the imagery of conjugal love to depict our great privilege: the present “enjoyment of God” through the Spirit.⁶⁵ Says Owen:⁶⁶

...Upon the Christ makes all his assemblies to be banqueting-houses; and there he gives his saints entertainment discovery of the excellency and sweetness of Christ in the banqueting-house, the soul is instantly overpowered and cries out to be made partaker of the fulness of it. She is ‘sick of love’..., even overcome, with the mighty actings of divine affection.

“Prayer in the Spirit” is the most intimate form of communion with God. “Prayer in the Spirit” is an intensely experiential matter for the Puritans. In their accounts of “prayer in the Spirit” the Puritans speak of their experience of being “overcome with the mighty actings of divine affection.”⁶⁷ The Spirit brings about those “weighty occasions” when one is

so swallowed up with the thoughts of God, and carried beyond themselves by their high love to God...so that they

⁶² Owen, III, 367.

⁶³ Manton, XII, 315.

⁶⁴ Sibbes, V, 430.

⁶⁵ See Owen, II, 54-59.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ Goodwin, VI, 281.

seem to be rapt into heaven in the admiration of God and delight in him.⁶⁸

The Holy Spirit provides “a delight in God as the object of prayer.”⁶⁹ But above all, “prayer in the Spirit” means the liberty to “pour forth the whole heart to God.”⁷⁰ “The freedom of the Spirit” is at heart the freedom to pray.

A church renewed by the Spirit bears two marks. First, it is a church that is theologically alive. According to the Puritans, theological awareness is a sign of the Spirit’s presence. The Spirit gives “a more large understanding and inward knowledge” of the truth of the Word.⁷¹ Indeed, the doing of theology is a form of life in the Spirit. The Puritans placed a premium upon orthodoxy, but their concern is for a “lively orthodoxy” theology is a “godly man’s art.”⁷² The true theologian is one who has been given to experience the truth of the Gospel. For that matter, the experience of the Spirit is a valid means of understanding.⁷³ The Spirit qualifies one for the theological task. First, in keeping with the importance the Puritans assigned to the mind in our response to God (“the head is the passage to the heart”),⁷⁴ it is necessary that the Spirit illuminate the mind. This work of the Holy Spirit is so essential, says Owen,

that this may be fixed on as common principle of Christianity...that constant and fervent prayer for the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit is such an indispensable means for attaining the mind of God in Scripture as that without it all others will not be made available.⁷⁵

A second requisite for the theologian is sanctification. Apart from sanctification of the Spirit, “If [any] should attempt to learn the truth, they

⁶⁸ Manton, I, 351.

⁶⁹ Owen, IV, 290.

⁷⁰ Goodwin, V, 412.

⁷¹ Sibbes, V, 442.

⁷² Goodwin, IV, 240.

⁷³ Sibbes, II, 495; and Owen, III, p. 38.

⁷⁴ Baxter, *Select Practical Works*, II, 541.

⁷⁵ IV, 202.

would never be able to do so,” says Owen.⁷⁶ Theological knowledge is the fruit of piety. What you are given to know is contingent upon what you are.

Then, a church renewed by the Spirit is a church with an impulse and vision for mission. Puritanism, contrary to Geoffrey F. Nuttall,⁷⁷ had a highly developed sense of mission.⁷⁸ According to Manton, the meaning of the prayer “thy kingdom come” is:⁷⁹

Let the gospel be published...where the sound of it hath not been heard, that God would come in the power of his Spirit, and draw people into communion with himself.

There are few references to “the Great Commission” (Matt 28:18-20) in the Puritans’ writing on mission. “Spirit” and “kingdom” are the dominant themes in their theology of mission. The Puritans were deeply confident that through the proclamation of the Gospel the Spirit would make the kingdom of God a reality throughout the whole earth.⁸⁰

The burden of Puritan theology is renewal through the Holy Spirit. The Puritans’ “churchly” understanding of renewal serves as a corrective to our individualism. We need to be reminded that the miracle of Pentecost is a “community of the Spirit.” In fact, we have lost confidence in the church and its ordinances as the means through which the Spirit renews and

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁷⁷ *The Puritan Spirit* (London: The Epworth Press, 1967), p. 77.

⁷⁸ See Owen, VIII, 21 and 40. Cf. Sidney H. Rooy, *The Theology of Missions in the Puritan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1965).

⁷⁹ I, 92.

⁸⁰ Goodwin, IV, 91. Cf. J.A. DeJong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea: Millennial Expectations in the Rise of Anglo-American Missions, 1640-1810* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1970); Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: Banner of Truth, 1971). The impulse to universalism that has always accompanied the Reformed tradition is present among the Puritans. As H. Richard Niebuhr noted: “Despite its doctrine of predestination, or because of its acknowledgement that only God predestinated his creatures, it resolutely refused to give up any part of human life as beyond hope of redemption” (*The Kingdom of God in America* [New York: Harper & Row, 1937], p. 39).

nourishes the people of God. It is also salutary for us to consider the Puritans' theological perspective on the person and work of the Spirit.

In the estimation of this author, the Puritans' emphasis on the Spirit, does not rest upon a mistake. The Puritans' focus on the Spirit had deep theological and biblical roots. There is, of course, a certain justification for silence about the Spirit. T.F. Torrance speaks of "the self-effacing" nature of the Spirit: "He does not show us himself, but shows us the face of the Father in the face of the Son, and shows us the heart of the Father in the heart of the Son."⁸¹ Torrance has correctly identified one important facet of the Spirit's work, his role in illuminating the Father and the Son. However, this "modesty of the Holy Spirit," to adopt a term from Richard Lovelace,⁸² should not lead us to de-emphasize the person and work of the Spirit in order to give prominence to the person and work of Christ, or, for that matter, to cease speaking of the Spirit. To do so would be less than biblical and not sufficiently Trinitarian. The Puritans rightly perceived that the present ministry of Christ is carried out through the Spirit; the Holy Spirit is "the vicar of Christ," supplying his bodily absence.⁸³ In fact, the numerous references to the Spirit in Luke and Acts show that the early Church did not hesitate to speak of the Spirit and his work. Moreover, it is important to see that the Spirit not only witnesses to Christ, but, as the Gospel of John attests,⁸⁴ that Christ points to the Spirit. In a certain sense we can say with Thomas Goodwin that Christ is "the forerunner of the Spirit".⁸⁵

Christ had John the Baptist, who 'began the gospel', to foretell his manifestation in the flesh...But the Holy Ghost hath Christ himself to foretell his coming upon flesh.

There is, in fact, a reciprocal relationship between Christ and the Spirit. They are so related to one another that they work in unity. In the words of Sibbes:⁸⁶

⁸¹ *God and Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 167.

⁸² *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1979), p. 122.

⁸³ Owen, III, 193; Sibbes, III, 480.

⁸⁴ E.g. see Jn 7:35-39, 14:15-17, 14:25-26, 15:26.

⁸⁵ VI, 9.

⁸⁶ IV, 214-215.

The more Christ is discovered, the more the Spirit is given...the more the Spirit the more knowledge of Christ; there is a reciprocal going of these two, the knowledge of Christ and the Spirit.

The Puritans prompt us to ask whether we give ample weight to the person and work of the Spirit. Is our perspective on the work of God in creation and redemption sufficiently Trinitarian?

Indeed, an emphasis on the Spirit can lead to error, to a “Spirit-monotheism,” where the reality of God is reduced to the Spirit, and the Father and the Son are pushed into the background. By virtue of their Trinitarian perspective on the person and work of the Spirit the Puritans resisted this tendency. It is axiomatic for the Puritans that God be viewed in Trinitarian terms.⁸⁷ A Trinitarian perspective on the Spirit is of signal importance, for where it is retained the gift of the Spirit is always seen as essentially related to the historical work of Christ. Over against “Quaker” or “charismatic” tendencies the Puritans emphasize that the giving of the Spirit is predicated upon the death and mediation of Christ.⁸⁸ Or, to put it another way, the Spirit first rests upon Christ in order that he might send the Spirit. All “excellencies are derived from him,”⁸⁹ says Sibbes, and therefore he “must have the Spirit in greater abundance.”⁹⁰ Jesus is the One for the many. The Puritans express this most frequently in terms of an Aaron-Christ typology: Christ as mediator

is ‘anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows’, Ps. XIV. 7, but for his fellows. The ointment is first poured forth on the head of the spiritual Aaron, and then runs

⁸⁷ *The Savoy Declaration* (1658): The Trinity “is the foundation of all our communion with God and comfortable dependence upon him” (Chap. III.iii). Says Owen, the “general order of gospel worship, the great rubric of our service” is communion with the whole Trinity (IX, 56-57).

⁸⁸ See Owen, XI, 309; Sibbes, IV, 208.

⁸⁹ Sibbes, III, 443.

⁹⁰ IV, 206.

down to all the skirts of his garment, that is to the lowest Christian.⁹¹

In Puritan thought the Spirit is frequently seen as “the purchase” of Christ. As Sibbes elaborates.⁹²

Christ could not give the Holy Ghost immediately to us, we being in enmity with God and separated from him...; but he must first take it to himself, who having by his death and sufferings reconciled us to his Father and purchased the Spirit *for* us, may now dispense and give forth his Spirit *to* us.

The Puritans emphasize what contemporary renewal movements frequently fail to take into account: the gift of the Spirit is given to those reconciled to the Father through the death of his Son.

Where “Spirit-monotheism” persists the Spirit is reduced to a principle of “inwardness,” aptly called “the heresy of the Third Article.”⁹³ We are left gazing in upon ourselves. The Puritans, however, over against this subjectivism underline that the Spirit takes us beyond ourselves. Goodwin, for example, emphasizes that it is

the property of the Holy Ghost when he doth give any man assurance and hope, not to make the heart pore upon the work in himself: but to draw his heart up to God as the worker of it...When men look upon grace in themselves, self-love rejoiceth in it, and they boast as if they had not received it.⁹⁴

For the Puritans, the Holy Spirit is God in whom we return to God and look up to Him. “All things”, says Richard Sibbes, are applied *from* God the Father, *through* the Son, by the Holy Spirit”, and “even as from God toward

⁹¹ Sibbes, III, 443; Goodwin, VI, 220.

⁹² Sibbes, IV, 208.

⁹³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), I/2, 257.

⁹⁴ I, 307.

us all things come through the Son, by the Spirit, so back again, all things from us to God must come by the Spirit through Christ.”⁹⁵ In the apt words of Goodwin: “The Spirit being come into the heart, leads us by the hand back again to Christ; and Christ leads us to the Father.”⁹⁶ Due to their adoption of the biblical and patristic “in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father,” the Puritans were able to overcome fascination with experience (a contemporary fault) and follow the movement of the Spirit to the mystery of God himself.⁹⁷ The work of the Spirit is to lead us to God-centred praise. As Thomas Smail has recently remarked:⁹⁸

We need a full orientation to the whole Trinity, to the Spirit and Son but also to the Father to remind us that man’s chief end is not to have his soul saved, or his body healed or even his church revived—but it is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

We have difficulty in speaking and thinking correctly about the Spirit, for we have a propensity to regard the Spirit as something basically internal. The Spirit, as the Puritans rightly perceived, invades the inner recesses of the person. It is “a distinct property of the Holy Ghost...in relation to the saints...that he be the indweller in us.”⁹⁹ Among the Puritans the focus and meaning of salvation is inclined to be centred upon the indwelling of the Spirit, and sanctification is understood more in terms of the indwelling of the Spirit than of Christian conduct.¹⁰⁰ However, there is a certain objectivity about the Spirit. The Puritans perceived that the Spirit is always the One who is above us, One whom we cannot simply identify with the elevation of the human spirit.

⁹⁵ IV, 208.

⁹⁶ VI, 423; VIII, 147-149.

⁹⁷ See Athanasius, *Epistle to Serapion* 1.20-21 in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. & trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford, 1969), p. 295-296; T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), p. 292.

⁹⁸ *The Forgotten Father* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), p. 28.

⁹⁹ Goodwin, VI, 64. Cf. Manton, XXI, 18-19; Howe, *Works*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁰ See Owen, II, 172; III, 421; XI, 360-361.

The Puritans argued at length for the deity of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰¹ The “Person” of the Spirit is a crucial issue for the Puritans,¹⁰² and therefore to speak of the Spirit is to speak of God himself. It is to point to the mystery of his presence among us. The Puritans emphasized that the Spirit is the *Holy Spirit*.¹⁰³ He is the Sanctifier. But the richness inherent in the realization that the Spirit is *Holy Spirit* is not exhausted in the doctrine of sanctification. The term “Holy” when applied to the Spirit involves a sense of fascination before the mystery of his presence.¹⁰⁴ The opposite of boredom is not pleasure, but fascination. To emphasize that the Spirit is “Holy” is to point to “the Beyond in our midst,” and if we are grasped by his presence we can never be bored. At this point we come to a test of the Spirit’s presence; when the Spirit is understood and encountered as the *Holy Spirit* there is a movement beyond the banality of looking at ourselves and recounting our experiences to fascination with and gratitude for his presence in our midst. In emphasizing that the Spirit is God the *Holy Spirit* the Puritans point us to the transcendence of the living God. To cite Ray S. Anderson, “We are up against the ‘wholly other’ in speaking of the transcendence of God -- because we are up against Spirit.”¹⁰⁵

The burden of the Puritans is renewal through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit they invoke is the Spirit of the Triune God. The Spirit is not some vague principle or influence indiscriminately at work everywhere and in everyone. Says John Owen: “We inquire not after *every spirit* that any one who will may make his boast of, but of that Spirit alone which instructs us in and by the written word.”¹⁰⁶ The Spirit who renews is the Spirit of the Father and the Son who applies to our lives the redemption planned by the Father and accomplished by the Son.¹⁰⁷ The Spirit is “the operative love” of the Triune God,¹⁰⁸ the redeeming God in action. The Spirit who renews is God, who

¹⁰¹ Owen, II, 26; Sibbes, IV, 294.

¹⁰² Goodwin, VI, 39.

¹⁰³ Sibbes, V, 430.

¹⁰⁴ See Heribert Muhlen, “The Person of the Holy Spirit,” in Kilian McDonnell, ed., *The Holy Spirit and Power* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 19-25.

¹⁰⁵ *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p.21.

¹⁰⁶ IV, 159.

¹⁰⁷ See Owen, III, 93; Goodwin, I, 113.

¹⁰⁸ Owen, II, 182; Baxter, III, 637; Sibbes, IV, 213.

together with the Father and the Son is to be worshipped and glorified. “The end of the dispensation of grace,” says Owen, is “to glorify the whole Trinity,”¹⁰⁹ and one might add, the purpose of renewal through the Spirit is to glorify the living God.

¹⁰⁹ II, 179.