

Church History (35): An Overview of Puritan Belief and Practice (2)

Having considered the Puritan views of hermeneutics, public worship, and walking with God, we come this week to their views on conversion and meditation.

I. An Overview of Puritan Belief and Practice

1. *Conversion*. (1) The need for conversion. Every Puritan was an evangelist. In almost every sermon, they gave a word to the unconverted. William Perkins said "a mixed people are the assemblies of our churches." They are comprised of unbelievers (teachable and unteachable) and believers (healthy and unhealthy).¹ Thus, the Puritans often preached lengthy series on the need and nature of conversion as well as the marks of true conversion. For example, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, by Joseph Alleine (1634-1668), and *A Call to the Unconverted*, by Richard Baxter (1615-1691). "Has God said, *Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*, and yet do you wonder why your ministers labor so earnestly for you? Do not think it strange that I am earnest with you to follow after holiness, and long to see the image of God upon you. Never did any, nor shall any, enter into heaven by an other way but this. The conversion described is not a high attainment of some advanced Christians, but every soul that is saved undergoes this change" (Alleine).² The need for conversion lies in the native depravity of man and God's just judgment. In answering the question "how comes it to pass that men should be so unreasonable in the matters of salvation," Richard Baxter provided a sixfold answer: "1. Men are naturally in love with earth and flesh. 2. They are in darkness, and know not the very things which they hear. 3. They are willfully confident that they need no conversion, but some partial amendment. 4. They are become slaves of their flesh, and drowned in the world to make provision for it. 5. Some are so carried away by the stream of evil company, that they are possessed with hard thoughts of a godly life, by hearing them speak against it. 6. Moreover they have a subtle, malicious, enemy, that is unseen of them and plays his game in the dark; and it is his principle business to hinder their conversion, and therefore to keep them where they are, by persuading them not to believe the Scriptures, or not to trouble their minds with these matters."³

(2) The call to the unconverted. While Puritans believed regeneration is a sovereign work of God that results in conversion (repentance and faith being gifts of God), they also stressed the freeness of the gospel invitation and the responsibility of man. For example, Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, is an exposition of Ezekiel 33:11, "Say unto them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn, turn from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel." His second doctrine is, "It is the promise of God, that the wicked shall live if they will but turn; unfeignedly and thoroughly turn." "The Lord here professes that this is what He takes pleasure in, that the wicked turn and live. Heaven is made as sure to the converted, as hell is to the unconverted. Turn and live, is as certain a truth, as turn or die. It is life and not death that is the first part of our message to you. Our commission is to offer salvation; certain salvation, a speedy, glorious, everlasting salvation, to every one of you; to the poorest beggar as well as the greatest lord; to the worst of you, even to drunkards, swearers, worldlings, thieves, yea to the despisers and reproaches of the holy way of salvation. We are commanded by the Lord our master to offer you a pardon for all that is past, if you will but now at last return and live. We are commanded to beseech and entreat you to accept the offer and return."⁴

¹ William Perkins, *Works*, 10:335-343

² Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 50

³ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted*, 43-44

⁴ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted*, 21

Baxter's third doctrine is, "God takes pleasure in men's conversion and salvation, but not in their death or damnation; He had rather they would return and live, than go on and die." After he clarified this doctrine concerns God's revealed will in Scripture, he then provided five proofs to encourage sinners to repent and return to God: "1. The very gracious nature of God, proclaimed throughout His whole word, may assure you of this, that He has no pleasure in your death. 2. If God had more pleasure in your death, than in your conversion and life, He would not have so frequently commanded you in His word to turn: He would not have made you such promises of life, if you will but turn; He would not have persuaded you to it by so many reasons. The tenor of His gospel proves the point. 3. And His commission that He has given to the ministers of the gospel, does fully prove it. If God had taken more pleasure in your damnation than in your conversion and salvation, He would never have charged us to offer you mercy, and to teach you the way of life both publicly and privately, and to entreat and beseech you to turn and live. 4. It is proved also by the course of His providence. If God had rather you were damned than converted, He would not second His word with His works, and entice you by His daily kindness to Himself, and give you all the mercies of this life, which are His means *'to lead you to repentance,'* and bring you so often under His rod to force you into your senses. 5. It is further proved, by the sufferings of His Son, that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Would God have dwelt in flesh, and have come in the form of a servant, and have assumed humanity into one person with the Godhead? And would Christ have lived a life of suffering, and died a cursed death for sinners, if He had rather taken pleasure in their death?"⁵

And think not to extenuate it by saying, that it was only for His elect; for it was your sin, and the sin of all the world, that lay upon our Redeemer; and His sacrifice and satisfaction are sufficient for all, and the fruits of it are offered to one as well as another; but it is true, that it was never the intent of His mind to pardon and save any that would not by faith and repentance be converted. If you had seen and heard him weeping and bemoaning the state of disobedient, impenitent people, or complaining of their stubbornness, *'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft would I have gathered your children together even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!'* Or, if you had seen or heard Him on the cross, praying for His persecutors, *'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do;'* would you have suspected that He had delighted in the death of the wicked, even those that perish by their willful unbelief? When God has so loved (not only loved, but so loved) the world, as to give His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, by an effectual faith, should not perish, but have everlasting life, I think He has hereby proved, against the malice of men and devils, that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but had rather that they would turn and live.⁶

Both Alleine and Baxter ended their treatises with Directions to the Unconverted. But it must be remembered, these directions are given to those who've sat under the ministry of the word for a time and yet remained unconverted. Alleine gave sixteen Directions and Baxter gave ten (I have condensed them into five). (a) Be convinced of your need for conversion. "Set it down with yourself as an undoubted truth, that it is impossible for you ever to get to heaven in this your unconverted state. Can any other but Christ save you? And He tells you He will never do it except you be regenerated and converted. Does He not keep the keys of heaven, and can you go in without His leave, as you must, if ever you go in your natural condition, without a sound and thorough conversion" (Alleine).⁷ "If you would be converted and saved, labor to understand the necessity and true nature of conversion: for what, and from

⁵ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted*, 25-26

⁶ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted*, 26-27

⁷ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 101

what, and to what, and by what it is that you must turn. Consider in what a lamentable condition you are till the hour of your conversion, that you may see it is not a state to be rested in. You are under the guilt of all the sins that ever you committed, and under the wrath of God, and the curse of His law; you are bond-slaves to the devil, and daily employed in His work, against the Lord, yourselves, and others; you are spiritually dead and deformed, as being void of the holy life, and nature, and image of the Lord. You are unfit for any holy work, and do nothing that is truly pleasure unto God" (Baxter).⁸ (b) Labor to get a lively sight and sense of your sins. "Till men are weary and heaven laden, and pricked at the heart, and quite sick of sin, they will not come to Christ for cure, nor sincerely enquire, 'What shall we do?' They must see themselves as dead men, before they will come unto Christ that they may live. Meditate on the number, aggravations, desert, deformity and defilement of your sin. But above all other sins, consider these two. 1. The sin of your heart. 2. The particular evil that you are most addicted to" (Alleine).⁹ (c) Attend upon the word of God, which is the ordinary means of salvation. "Read the Scripture, or hear it read, and other holy writings that apply it; and constantly attend on the public preaching of the word" (Baxter).¹⁰ (d) Look outside yourself to Christ for help. "Do not think your praying, reading, hearing, confessing, or amending, will effect the cure. These must be attended to, but you are undone if you rest in them. You are a lost man if you hope to escape drowning on any other plank but Jesus Christ. Accept an offered Christ now, and you are made for ever. Give your consent to Him now, and the match is made; all the world cannot hinder it" (Alleine).¹¹ (e) Strike in with the Spirit when He begins to work upon your heart. "When He works convictions, O do not stifle them, but join in with Him, and beg the Lord to give you saving conversion. '*Quench not the Spirit.*' Do not reject Him, do not resist Him. Beware of stifling convictions with evil company or worldly business. When you are in anguish on account of sin and fears about your eternal state, beg God that you may have peace only in thoroughly renouncing all sin, loathing it in your inmost soul, and giving your whole heart, without reserve, to Christ" (Alleine).¹²

(3) The nature of true conversion. After providing various mistakes about conversion, Alleine then described the nature of true conversion. "Conversion then, in short, lies in the thorough change both of the heart and life."¹³ For Alleine, true conversion included regeneration, the renovation of the whole soul, turning from sin, and turning to God in Christ. (a) The author of conversion is the Holy Spirit. "Conversion is a work above man's power. We are '*born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but God.*' Never think you can convert yourself. If ever you would be savingly converted, you must despair of doing it in your own strength."¹⁴ (b) The instrument of conversion is the word. "Christ's ministers are they that are sent to open men's eyes, and to turn them to God. This is done by the word of truth. It is this that enlightens the eye, that converts the soul, that makes us wise to salvation."¹⁵ (c) The subject of conversion is the elect sinner. "Whom God predestinates, them only He calls. This change of conversion extends to the whole man; the mind, affections, and will."¹⁶ (d) In conversion sinners turn from sin, Satan, the world, and their own righteousness. Before conversion, man seeks to cover himself with his own fig-leaves, and to make himself whole with his own duties. But conversion changes his mind; now he counts his own righteousness as filthy rages. He casts it off,

⁸ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted*, 55

⁹ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 101-105

¹⁰ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted*, 56

¹¹ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 106-107, 113

¹² Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 121-122

¹³ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 26

¹⁴ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 26

¹⁵ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 28-29

¹⁶ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 29-37

as a man would the verminous tatters of a nasty beggar."¹⁷ (e) In conversion the sinner turns to God in Christ. "Conversion brings the soul to Christ to accept Him as the only means of life, as the only way, the only name given under heaven. He does not look for salvation in any other but Him; he throws himself on Christ alone."¹⁸

Thus the poor soul ventures on Christ and resolvedly adheres to Him. Before conversion, the man made light of Christ, minded his farm, friends, merchandise, more than Christ; now, Christ is to him as his necessary food, his daily bread, the life of his heart, the staff of his life. His great desire is, that Christ may be magnified in him. His heart once said, as they to the spouse, *'What is thy beloved more than another?'* (Cant.5:9). He found more sweetness in his merry company, wicked games, earthly delights, than in Christ. He took religion for a fancy, and the talk of great enjoyments for an idle dream; but now to him to live is Christ. He sets light by all that he accounted precious, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ. All of Christ is accepted by the sincere convert. He loves not only the wages but the work of Christ, not only the benefits but the burden of Christ. He is willing not only to tread out the corn, but to draw under the yoke. He takes up the commands of Christ, yes, the cross of Christ.¹⁹

2. *Meditation.* (1) The nature of meditation. "The word *meditate* means to 'think upon' or 'reflect.' The Puritans never tired of saying that biblical meditation involves thinking upon the triune God and His Word. By anchoring meditation in the living Word, Jesus Christ, and God's written Word, the Bible, the Puritans distanced themselves from mysticism—which stresses contemplation at the expense of action, and unrestrained imagination at the expense of biblical content" (Beeke).²⁰ "Meditation is the soul's retiring of itself so that, by a serious and solemn thinking upon God, the heart may be raised up to heavenly affections" (Watson).²¹ "Meditation is the intense application of the soul unto some thing, whereby a man's mind doeth ponder, dwell and fix upon it, for his own profit and benefit" (Bridge).²² "The Puritans called meditation the halfway house between Scripture reading (or listening to scriptural sermons) and prayer. In other words, meditation is the believer's tool to glean the most benefit or profit—through recall and reflection—from the Word read and heard, and then to apply that new, fuller understanding of God and self to prayer" (Beeke).²³ "Solemn meditation is a serious applying the mind to some sacred subject, till the affections be warmed and quickened, and the resolution heightened and strengthened thereby, against what is evil, and for that which is good" (Swinnock).²⁴ The Puritans distinguished between *occasional* and *deliberate* meditation. "As solemn prayer is either set, in a constant course of duty, or occasional, at an extraordinary season; so also is meditation" (Baxter).²⁵ "Occasion meditations are such as are taken up on any sudden occasion. There is almost nothing that occurs but we may presently raise some meditation upon. When you look up to the heavens and see them richly embroidered with light, you may raise this meditation. 'If the footstool is so glorious, what is the throne where God Himself sits (Watson)!'"²⁶ But Watson called deliberate meditation "the chief form of meditation." "Set some time apart every day so that you may in a serious and solemn manner converse with

¹⁷ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 37-42

¹⁸ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 43-49

¹⁹ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 44-45

²⁰ Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 121

²¹ Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 25

²² William Bridge, *Works*, 3:125

²³ Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 121

²⁴ George Swinnock, *Works*, 2:425

²⁵ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, 104

²⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 77

God in the mount."²⁷ "For the Puritans, the most important kind of meditation is daily, deliberate meditation, engaged in at set times. Such meditation prayerfully ponders a biblical text or truth in its application to all of life" (Beeke).²⁸ "Deliberate meditation takes place when a man sets apart some time, and goes into a private closet, or a private walk, and there does solemnly and deliberately meditate on the things of heaven" (Calamy).²⁹

Occasional meditations do some good, but deliberate much more, as making a greater impression upon the soul, and abiding longer with it. They differ as a taste and a full meal, as a sip and a good drink. Occasional meditations are like loving strangers, that afford us a visit, but are quickly gone. Deliberate meditations are as inhabitants that dwell with us, and are longer helpful to us. The former, as the morning dew, do somewhat moisten and refresh the earth, but quickly passes away; the latter, as a good shower, soaks deep, and continues long.³⁰

(2) The subjects of meditation. "There is abundant matter for our meditation: as the nature or attributes of God, the states and offices of Christ, the threefold state of man, the four last things—the vanity of the creature, the sinfulness of sin, and the love and fulness of the blessed Savior, the divine word and works; out of these we may choose sometimes one thing, sometimes another, to be the particular subject of our thoughts" (Swinnock).³¹ Thomas Watson suggested fifteen subjects a Christian should meditate on: God's attributes, the promises of God, the love of Christ, sin, the vanity of the creature, the excellency of grace, your spiritual state, the small number of those who shall be saved, final apostasy, death, the Day of Judgment, hell, heaven, eternity, and your experiences.³² "The Puritans suggested various subjects, objects, and materials for meditation. But probably the most important theme for meditation was heaven—the place where God is supremely known and worshiped and enjoyed, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, and where the saints rejoice as they are transcribed from glory to glory" (Beeke).³³ "Be diligent in daily exercising your graces in meditation, as well as prayer. Retire into some secret place, at a time most convenient to yourself; and, laying aside all worldly thoughts, with all possible seriousness and reverence, look up toward heaven. Remember, there is your everlasting rest, study its excellency and reality, and rise from sense of faith, by comparing heavenly with earthly joys" (Baxter).³⁴

(3) The practice of meditation. Thomas Watson gave six rules for the practice of meditation:³⁵ "Rule 1. When you go to meditate, be very serious in the work. Let there be a deep impression upon your soul." "Labor to have the deepest apprehensions of the presence of God and His incomprehensible greatness. Labor also to understand the greatness of the work which you attempt, and to be deeply sensible both of its importance and excellency" (Baxter).³⁶ "Rule 2. Read before you meditate. Reading furnishes the mind with matter. It is the oil that feeds the lamp of meditation." "Rule 3. Do not multiply the subjects of meditation. That is, do not meditate on too many things at once, like the bird that hops from one branch to another and stays in no one place." "Rule 4. To meditation, join examination. When you have been meditating on any spiritual subject, put an inquiry to your soul; and though it is short,

²⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 79

²⁸ Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 121

²⁹ Edmund Calamy, as quoted by Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 892-893

³⁰ George Swinnock, *Works*, 2:424-425

³¹ George Swinnock, *Works*, 2:426

³² Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 32-64

³³ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 901-902

³⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, 124

³⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 97-102

³⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, 108

let it be serious. 'O my soul, is it thus with you or not?' For lack of this examination, meditation evaporates and comes to nothing." "Rule 5. Seal up meditation with prayer. Pray over your meditations. Prayer sanctifies everything; without prayer they are but unhallowed meditations. Prayer fastens meditation upon the soul. Prayer is tying a knot at the end of meditation so that it does not slip." "Rule 6. Let meditation be reduced to practice. Meditation and practice, like two sisters, must go hand in hand. The end of meditation is action. We must not only meditate on God's law, but walk in His law (Deut.28:9)."

(4) The benefits of meditation. "If, by meditation, you do not find an increase in all your graces and do not grow beyond the stature of common Christians; if you are not made more serviceable in your place, and more precious in the eyes of all discerning persons; if your soul does not enjoy more communion with God, and your life is not more full of comfort; then cast away these directions and call me a deceiver" (Baxter).³⁷ (a) Meditation enlightens the mind. "Read before you meditate. Reading furnishes the mind with matter. Reading is the oil that feeds the lamp of mediation. Reading helps to rectify meditation and furnishes the mind with right thoughts of Scripture. 'I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation' (Ps.119:99)" (Watson).³⁸ (b) Meditation stirs the affections. "Meditation, so to speak, opens the door between the head and the heart. The understanding, having received truths, stores them in memory, and consideration conveys them from there to the affections" (Baxter).³⁹ "Meditation to the word is what fires is to water; though water be naturally so cold, yet put fire under it, and it will make it hot and boiling; so, though thine heart be cold in regard of affection to the word, put but this fire under it, and it will boil with love to it. 'Oh, how love I thy law!' There is his heat of affection, but what was the fire which caused it? 'It is my meditation all the day' (Ps.119:97)" (Swinnock).⁴⁰ (c) Meditation engages the will. "Action without consideration is usually lame and defective; consideration without action is lost and abortive. Though meditation, like Rachel, be more fair; execution, like Leah, is most fruitful" (Swinnock).⁴¹ "Many professing believers have large heads, much knowledge, but yet they do not thrive in godliness. Their heart is faint, their feet are feeble, and they don't walk vigorously in the ways of God—and the cause of this disease is the lack of meditation" (Watson).⁴²

Here we learn why there are so few godly Christians in the world, namely because there are so few meditating Christians. We have many who have Bible ears: they are swift to hear, but slow to meditate. This duty is grown almost out of fashion. People are so much in the shop that they are seldom on the mount with God. Where is the meditating Christian? Where is he who meditates on sin, hell, eternity, and the recompense of reward, who takes a prospect of heaven every day? Where is the meditating Christian? It is to be bewailed in our times that so many who go under the name of professing believers have banished godly discourse from their tables and meditation from their closets. The devil is an enemy to meditation. He does not care how much people read and hear; he knows that meditation is a means to compose the heart and bring it into a gracious frame. Satan is content that you should be hearing and praying Christians, just so long as you are not meditating Christians. He can stand your small shot, provided you do not put in this bullet.⁴³

³⁷ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, 124

³⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 98

³⁹ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, 109

⁴⁰ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:249

⁴¹ George Swinnock, *Works*, 2:428

⁴² Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 85-86

⁴³ Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*, 68