The Role of Preaching in English Puritanism.

My library consists of thousands of books, of all stripes and genres. However, most of them fall into two categories: theological, and military/general history. Within my theological section, I have several bookshelves (yes, several!) of strictly Puritan writings and works. The works of Thomas Goodwin, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Manton, Thomas Boston, John Owen, David Clarkson, John Bunyan, George Swinnock, Thomas Adams, Thomas Watson, Richard Baxter, and many others. I could go on and on. Many of these works are predominantly sermons. Sermons written 400 years ago still impact my Christian life and thought. While Charles Spurgeon did not live in the Puritan era in England, he was also known as the last of the Puritan preachers. I have several volumes of his in print, and his entire sermon collection in digital form. I know many Arminians and Pentecostals that would disagree whole-heartedly with much of the theology in these Puritan sermons, but every one of them agree that these sermons touch the heart and the mind with the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Peter Lewis notes that “the real and larger Puritan revolution was bloodless, spiritual, and verbal. In this greater conflict the Puritan pulpit proved to be the place of mightiest assault on world, flesh, and devil.”¹ Lewis wrote that, without being exhaustive, essential Puritanism arose out of three areas: the New Testament pattern of personal piety, sound doctrine, and a properly ordered church life.² It was Puritan preaching that weaved all of these three areas together into one fabric. The importance of preaching the Scriptures in the life of Puritanism cannot be overstated. It was of supreme importance in

the reform of the church, the life of the Christian, and in the evangelism of the unsaved. It crossed boundaries, created bridges, clarified thought and doctrine, and was used by the Holy Spirit to convict sinners and Christians alike with the gospel of Christ. This paper will be a brief attempt to examine the importance and place of preaching in Puritanism in general. It will briefly explore the origins of the doctrine of Puritan preaching, the foundation of preaching in the Puritan view of Scriptures, and the purpose, character, demands, and content of Puritan preaching. Finally, this paper will look at the role of preaching in Puritan evangelism. Much could be written on this topic, but this paper will attempt a short survey of the important points.

Puritan preaching did not arise out of a vacuum. While preaching came and went from the time of the Apostles, it was in decay until the 14th century. Dargan notes that “along with the decline which we have to observe in the general power of the pulpit we shall have to trace the rise of that wave of mighty reformatory preaching which began with Wiclif in the latter part of the fourteenth century, increased in volume with Savonarola near the close of the fifteenth, and reached its crest in Luther and his fellow reformers in the first half of the sixteenth.” Wyclif preached reform, but he also set in motion a spark with regards to preaching that would gradually lead to the reformation. His Lollards would roam the county to expound the Word of God and teach people the truth of Scripture. Dargan notes that even after the death of Wyclif, they “went on preaching among the people, and sowing the seeds of his evangelical doctrine.” In

\[\text{2 Lewis, 11.}\]
\[\text{4 Dargan, 341.}\]
England, Wyclif provided a foundation on which other reform-minded preachers, such as John Colet in England and John Hus in Bohemia, would build. Preaching was making a comeback in many areas of Europe. Under Luther, Calvin, Bullinger, Zwingli, and others, the foundation would be laid for the Puritans in England in the 17th century.

With the translation and printing of the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular by such men as Wyclif, Tyndale, and Luther, the Bible was finally getting into the hands of the laity, was being read, and was being used by the Holy Spirit to change lives. Bickel notes that, “Because the Puritans held that the pure Word of God was the criterion to which doctrine, worship, and church government must conform, proclamation of the Scriptures occupied the central position in their worship.”

It was their high view of Scripture and their high view of God that provided the basis for the Puritan’s high view of preaching. Horton Davies states that “the importance of preaching consisted in the fact that it was the declaration by the preacher of the revelation of God, confirmed in the hearts of believers by the interior testimony of the Holy Spirit.”

The Puritans, like Calvin and Luther and other reformers, insisted that the Church was bound by the Word of God.

Lloyd-Jones explains further that the reason Puritan preaching was so central was that it was the exposition of the Word of God. Therefore, it must control everything. He notes that some Puritans even went so far as to say that in a faithful exposition of Scripture, God himself is preaching, and that if a man was giving a true exposition of the Word, God is speaking, because it is the Word of God and not the word of man. So the

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Puritans urged that preaching must be central, supreme. Because of the strongly held conviction of the origin, divinity, and authority of the Scriptures, it follows that the Puritans would place so much emphasis on the preaching of the Word. The gospel message permeates all of the sermons of the Puritans, and it is the Word of God that contains this gospel message. Bickel points out explicitly that Puritan “reverence for the Bible as the only standard for worship produced the Puritan appreciation of the sermon as the culminating point of the worship of God.” This high view of the Scriptures as the very Words of God was the foundation on which their doctrine of preaching was built.

The Puritan Robert Traill preached a sermon in 1682 as part of the morning exercises at Cripplegate called, “By What Means May Ministers Best Win Souls?” In it he states, very specifically, “The principle work of a minister is preaching; the principle benefit people have by them is to hear the Lord’s word from them.” This entire sermon is devoted to the object of preaching, which he states very clearly, “…the ministry of the word is the main instrument for winning souls….” In fact, Traill, as well as other Puritans, believed that to be a minister, one had to be a preacher, because the sole purpose of the ministry was the winning of souls. He states emphatically elsewhere in this sermon, “Art thou a minister? Thou must be a preacher; an unpreaching minister is a

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8 Bickel, 12.
sort of contradiction." Preaching was clearly considered the primary means through which God convicted sinners and saved souls.

Traill wasn’t the only Puritan who was convinced that God used the sermon to convict and save people. Thomas Brooks, in his lengthy exposition of Ephesians 3:8 on “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ,” states that “It is the great duty of preachers to preach Jesus Christ to the people.” He makes several observations on why it is the great duty of ministers to preach Christ to the people, and how they are to preach to the people. His first reason regarding the “why” question is, “Because that is the only way to save and to win souls to Jesus Christ.” While the saving and winning of souls is the first and primary reason for preaching Christ to the people, Brooks gives several other reasons:

- It is the choicest and chiefest way to ingratiate Christ with poor souls.
- The preaching up of Christ is the only way to preach down antichrist, or whatever makes against Christ.
- Otherwise they contract upon themselves the blood of souls (men take it upon themselves the saving of souls rather than giving them to Christ).
- The preaching of Christ contributes most to their comfort here, and to their reward hereafter.11

Brooks clearly demonstrated that it was the preaching of Christ through the exposition of Scriptures that was the primary means of salvation, as well as other benefits and reasons for the good of both Christians and unbelievers.

10 Ibid, 204.
Lewis quotes John Downname from his book *The Christian Warfare*, stating that preaching is “God’s own ordinance which he hath instituted and ordained for the gathering of the saints, and building the body of his Church, as appeareth Eph. 4:11, 12. Neither doth he use ordinarily, any other means (especially where this is to be had) for the true conversion of his children, and for the working of the sanctifying graces of his Spirit in them.”\(^\text{12}\) Additionally, in his sermon called “Of Effectual Calling” given during the morning exercises at Cripplegate, Rev. Thomas White emphasizes this same theme that has permeated the sermons of many other Puritans. He states that, “But the most ordinary means of our effectual calling is the preaching of the word. …And though by other means men *may be* called, yet seldom or never any *are* called that neglect and contemn this.”\(^\text{13}\)

One last example occurs in the writings of Thomas Goodwin. Goodwin, in explaining Romans 10:17, asks, “Why this way rather than any other?” regarding Paul’s statement that faith comes by hearing, and hearing is by the Word of Christ. Goodwin responds, “It is so appointed and ordained by God, for that is what is meant by *word* here, his word being all one with his commandment and appointment.” Additionally, because God ordained it, Jesus Christ prayed for it, and the Holy Spirit is “by promise and covenant engaged to accompany it with his blessing unto the seed of Christ for ever.”\(^\text{14}\) Many other citations could be found that supported the fact that the Puritans first and foremost believed that the purpose of preaching was none other than the primary means

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\(^\text{12}\) Lewis, 39.
by which God moved on the souls of men to regenerate them and bring them into the Kingdom of God. This was an awesome responsibility, and the Puritan pastors took their calling seriously. This seriousness is reflected in their sermons and writings.

If the *preaching* of the Word of God was the foundation from which God saved souls, then the content of that preaching was of grave importance. The content of the preaching of Puritan sermons was none other than the Word of God itself. Bickel states that the main complaint that the Puritans had against Anglican sermons was that they were not evangelical in content.\(^{15}\) Davies quotes a Puritan pastor who claimed that Anglican sermons do not declare the “pure Word of God.” Rather, they are orations “of the excellent Constitution of their Church, or of Passive Obedience, or an Exclamation against Schism, or a Discourse of Morality, or only exclaiming against such vices as the very light of Nature condemns.” In contrast, this Puritan claims that the true function of preaching is “to preach Jesus Christ, and sinners need of an Interest in Him, and of His justifying Righteousness, and to magnify the Riches of Divine Grace in man’s salvation: it is to preach the Doctrines of Faith, Repentance, Regeneration, and Sanctification, and the Necessity of the Power of the Spirit of God….”\(^{16}\) Lloyd-Jones says something similar about the Roman Catholics, stating that to the extent that they did any preaching, they simply expounded and expanded the dogma of their church.\(^{17}\)

The Puritans on the other hand, as Davies points out, were concerned with “light and heat.” Their dominating desire was to win souls, and the Puritan who supplemented his preaching with diligent visitation, determined like Paul to know nothing but Christ

\(^{15}\) Bickel, 17.
and Him crucified. The preaching of the Word of God was not a moral homily, or a philosophical discourse. It was the authoritative proclamation of the blessed gospel of God. The message they were declaring was not their own, but the authoritative and revealed words of the almighty God. Thomas Goodwin wrote, “It is not the letter of the Word that ordinarily doth convert, but the spiritual meaning of it, as revealed and expounded…. There is the letter, the husk; and there is the spirit, the kernel; and when we by expounding the word do open the husk, out drops the kernel. And so it is the spiritual meaning of the Word let into the heart which converts it and turns it unto God.” The content of the sermon, being the very words of God, was critical in that it was the cause of potential conversion in the hearers.

The content of Puritan preaching again concerned light and heat – light from the pure Word of God to penetrate the darkness of the heart and the soul of the hearer, and heat from the pathos and passion of the heart and soul of the preacher to bring about conviction. If the main work was the winning of souls, then the content was that of the law for conviction, and Christ for redemption. They placed a strong emphasis on grace – the summation of the matchless love of God’s holy nature – and pressed it on to others. Sermons were an agency of redemption. The content of their sermons, to both sinner and saint, was the doctrine of grace. Bickel notes that the realization of God’s grace in their own lives inspired them to magnify the grace of God when they preached, and to

16 Davies, 202.
17 Lloyd-Jones, 379.
18 Davies, 202.
19 Goodwin, II:361.
20 Bickel, 30.
seek the conversion of others.\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, they preached against all self-effort with regard to man’s efforts at salvation. Man’s efforts would never work unless they were actively assisted by grace. It was grace alone through Christ alone by faith alone that was the subject of many Puritan sermons.

What were the characteristics, if any, of Puritan preaching? One, noted by many, was the “plain style.” Lewis notes that, “It was the genius of the Puritan preaching that in style it was plain without being dull; in emphasis, an admirable balance of doctrine and practice; in character, faithfully devoted to the exposition of the word of Scripture, both letter and spirit, which they loved.”\textsuperscript{22} The preaching of the Puritans was plain and easily understood, relatively speaking! The Puritan sermons that we read today seem complex and long because most of those who attend evangelical churches today have been fed so much baby food that we cannot digest, or even put up with, meaty yet plain sermons.

John Flavel, in his sermon entitled, “The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ,” states plainly, “a crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ…. Prudence will choose words that are solid, rather than florid: As a merchant will a ship by a sound bottom, and capricious hold, rather than a gilded head and stern. Words are but servants to matter. An iron key, fitted to the wards of the lock, is more useful than a golden one, that will not open the door to the treasure.” He continues later on with, “Prudence will cast away a thousand fine words, for one that is apt to penetrate the conscience, and reach the heart.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Bickel, 30.
\textsuperscript{22} Lewis, 47.
Along these same lines, Richard Baxter in his *The Reformed Pastor*, states, “If you would not teach men, what do you in the pulpit? If you would, why do you not speak so as to be understood?” The Puritans did preach to be understood, because their subject was no less than the eternity of men’s souls. Baxter continues that while some men may not understand the matters of Scripture no matter how plain one can make it, it is utterly sinful to cloud the issue with strange words and fancy sentences in order to make people admire him for his profound learning and knowledge. The issue of salvation is a serious matter, one in which a pastor must do everything in his power to make sure his people are instructed in the ways of Christ and his salvation.

Because of the seriousness of the matter, Puritan preaching was profoundly practical. There was not a doctrine that couldn’t be practiced, and there were not applications or practices that were not based on sound Biblical doctrine. Lewis states that the chief end of preaching was the glorification of God in the restoration of his image in the souls and lives of men. Application was related to those everyday events and objects that the congregation would know. Puritan sermons have a variety of references to nature and common objects that would aid in the application of the doctrine to the lives of the congregation. In Thomas Manton’s exposition of James, he writes, “That the doers of the word are the best hearers. That is good when we hear things that are to be done, and do things that are to be heard. That knowledge is best which is most practical, and that hearing is best which endeth in practice…. The hearer’s life is the preachers’ best

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25 Lewis, 47.
Puritanism was life as well as thought, and Puritan preaching aimed at not only educating its hearers in the Scriptures and doctrines of grace, but also influencing the will, changing the heart, and reforming the life!

The importance placed on preaching also placed demands on the preacher. John Flavel warned his fellow preachers, “Believe it, brethren, it is easier to declaim, like an orator, against a thousand sins of others, than it is to mortify one sin, like Christians, in ourselves; to be more industrious in our pulpits, than in our closets; to preach twenty sermons to our people, than one to our own heart.” Puritan pastors had a strong sense of vocation, of calling, and were known for taking the calling of minister very seriously. Since God had revealed his Word to man, and it was the one authority for Christians and the church, and since God used the preaching of His Word as the primary means of convicting and saving men’s souls, it was of utmost importance and dignity to preach this Word both verbally and in action, in word and in deed. Puritan ministers were adamant about living what they preached, and expected of their congregation who were Christians no less.

Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor* is a wonderful manual for ministry, and clearly defines and explains the demands of the ministry upon pastors. The demands for personal piety, to preaching to one’s own heart, are clearly proclaimed in this book, which is a must-read for all pastors. There are 71 occurrences of the phrase, ‘take heed,” exhorting pastors to make sure they know their calling and their duty. Again, the demands upon the preacher regarding his own salvation come out strongly in Baxter’s

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26 Manton, Thomas. A Practical Exposition of James. in *The Works of Thomas Manton*. Birmingham, AL:
work. He writes, “Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach. … Many a preacher is now in hell, who has a hundred times called upon his hearers to use the utmost care and diligence to escape it. … Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade your hearers to be, and believe that which you persuade them to believe, and heartily entertain that Savior whom you offer to them.”

This section of Baxter’s work is filled with a number of passages that exhort the preacher and pastor to be sure of his salvation, in order to fully and faithfully proclaim that salvation to others.

Baxter also exhorts preachers to make sure that, even though they are saved, that they lead a life worthy of the calling of pastor and minister. He writes, “Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. … Will you proclaim Christ’s governing power, and yet condemn it, and rebel yourselves? Will you preach his laws, and willfully break them? If sin be evil, why do you live in it? if it be not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? if it be not, why do you tell men so?”

Baxter hits hard and cuts deep in his writing, but this only describes the seriousness with which the Puritans took preaching and the role of the minister. How many pastors today need to hear this advice from Baxter, who is just as relevant today as it was 400 years ago? Pastors who do not live their lives according to the Scriptures yet preach to their

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27 Flavel, VI:568.
28 Baxter, 53.
29 Baxter, 67.
congregation to do so, will give up what credibility they do have, and will harden the hearts of the hearers to the real message of the gospel. Therefore, Baxter and other Puritans admonish their fellow ministers to be assured of their salvation, and be aware of their life, lest they shame themselves as well as the gospel they are preaching.

Assurance of salvation and a holy life are clearly demands of the pastorate, but the Puritans also stressed the study and learning of a pastor. Puritan pastors were scholars as well as ministers, a combination that appears rare in the modern day. Again, using Baxter, who is so clear on these matters, he writes:

Take heed to yourselves, that you not lack the qualifications necessary for your work. He must not be himself a babe in knowledge, that will teach men all those mysterious things which must be known for salvation. O what qualifications are necessary for a man who has such a charge upon him as we have! How many difficulties in divinity to be solved! and these, too, about the fundamental principles of religion! How many obscure texts of Scripture to be expounded! … To preach a sermon, I think, is not the hardest part; and yet what skill is necessary to make the truth plain; to convince the hearers, to let irresistible light in to their consciences, and to keep it there, and drive all home; to screw the truth into their minds, and work Christ into their affections; to meet every objection, and clearly to resolve it; to drive sinners to a stand, and make them see that there is no hope, but that they must unavoidably either be converted or condemned…

… therefore, brethren, lose no time! Study, and pray, and confer, and practice; for in these four ways your abilities must be increased. Take heed to yourselves, lest you are weak through your own negligence, and lest you mar the work of God by your weakness.30

30 Baxter, 68 – 71.
This is a long quotation, but is provides a small picture of the seriousness in which Baxter took his calling. All of this cannot be done by man alone, and he does not even insinuate this. However, he admonishes the minister to be diligent in his study and learning, so that he does not, by his ignorance, quench the Spirit nor does he confuse his congregation and put up barriers to their own conversion.

J.I. Packer stated that the reigning message of the Puritan preacher was, “Conviction of sin, induced by the preaching of the Law, must precede faith, since no man will or can come to Christ to be saved from sin until he knows what sins he needs saving from.”31 This was the foundation for Puritan evangelism. However, evangelism today is like a taboo. It is one word that every church member really wants to do, but doesn’t know how, or doesn’t understand what it really is. Many evangelism courses teach evangelism like it is a sales pitch. The church has a product that they are selling, and, using marketing techniques, cute little graphics, or some sentimental story from our own lives, we can sell this product to the public, our consumers, and they will buy it. Most of today’s evangelism methods are a far cry from the gospel itself, and certainly the methods are nowhere near those that were used by the Apostles or the Puritans. On the other hand, preaching was a major part of the Puritan method of evangelism.

Joel Beeke in his small but weighty book, *Puritan Evangelism*, provides five characteristics of Puritan preaching, which were critical to their evangelism: 1) thoroughly Biblical, 2) unashamedly doctrinal, 3) experimentally practical, 4) holistically

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evangelistic, and 5) studiously symmetrical.\textsuperscript{32} Puritan evangelism was how the Puritans proclaimed through the word of God, God’s salvation of sinners from sin and its consequences, granted by grace, received by faith, grounded in Christ, and reflective of the glory of God. While there are several good books\textsuperscript{33} on the topic of Puritan evangelism, suffice it to say that the primary methods of this evangelism were the plain preaching of gospel sermons, and the catechetical instruction of the congregation. The Puritan method of evangelism was not a boxed course with steps and content outlined in a neat one-stop shopping package. The Puritan preacher was not called to make a quick sale, but to preach a message, the gospel. The Puritans felt that if they were diligent and committed to preaching the gospel message contained in the Word of God, then the Holy Spirit would take care of the results.

One last point regarding Puritan evangelism was that their doctrine and view of God determined much of their evangelistic style, so to speak. Because they were strictly Calvinistic, and held to a high view of God and to Scripture, they believed that salvation was not due to man-made methods or decisions, but to the Word and work of God. Therefore, the Puritan method was basically to preach the gospel message in whatever venue they were in, and this included the whole counsel of God from sin to redemption, and pray that the Holy Spirit would work its regenerating act in those hearers.

Evangelism was the proclamation of the Gospel in the Word of God, not a five-step

\textsuperscript{33} Three that come to mind are Beeke’s book cited above; J. I. Packer’s \textit{The Quest for Godliness} as cited above; and Sidney H. Rooy’s \textit{The Theology of Missions in the Puritan Tradition}, Laurel , MS: Audubon Press, 2006.
method geared towards appealing to the emotions of the hearer and getting a decision on a card. Evangelism was more of a message than a method.

In conclusion, the Puritans held to a high view of preaching because they held to a high view of Scripture and a high view of God. Preaching was the God-ordained method that He used to convict sinners of their sin and to create children of God. Preachers were the conduit for that message of the gospel, and the Puritans considered their role in God’s method with great seriousness and zeal. They were adamant about their own assurance of their salvation, and endeavored to live a holy life as an example to their congregation. They studied with diligence and preached with zeal and patience both, because they knew that the work of the Spirit may not be immediate, though they begged and pleaded with their congregation to come to the Lord. Modern day ministers have much to learn from Puritan preaching in a day when preaching has fallen out of favor with both the congregation and the minister, in favor of drama, music, video, and all sorts of trite and often shallow explanations of pop psychology or guarantees of prosperity rather than the gospel of Christ. While the Puritans were human, too, and had their faults like everyone else, they developed a seriousness about preaching that deserves to be emulated today, for the glory of God and the salvation of sinners.