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The Sufficiency of Scripture

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Chapter 5: The Sufficiency of Scripture: Early English Protestant Belief in the Bible

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Bryan W. Ball

English Protestantism in its entirety, from the earliest appearance of Anglicanism in the reign of Henry VIII, through Puritanism and on to the various manifestations of Nonconformity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was thoroughly and unequivocally based on the Bible. It could not have arisen, existed or multiplied as it did without its unambiguous commitment to what it believed was the divinely revealed Word of God. When the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571) referred to the “sufficiency of Scripture”² they spoke for all English Protestants then and for at least three hundred years to come. A distinguished Puritan theologian, William Perkins,³ used identical language in explaining the claims of 2 Timothy 3:16-17. He, too, spoke of “the sufficiency of Scripture”. The phrase seems an appropriate title, then, for this account of early English Protestant belief in the Bible.

Perkins was a fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge, from 1584 to 1595 and for much of that time a regular preacher at Great St Andrews, a church frequented by many from the university fraternity. His influence in perpetuating the biblical emphasis among succeeding generations of English preachers is beyond question. His fame abroad as a writer was scarcely less than his reputation at home as a teacher and preacher. Many of his works were translated into various

1 Earlier versions of this chapter were published in *The English Connection: The Puritan Roots of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1981); and in its revised 2nd edition, also published by James Clarke, 2014.

2 “The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion” (1571), Article 6. The place of publication of all seventeenth-century English works is London, unless otherwise stated. Names of publishers are usually unavailable.

3 Vignettes of Perkins and many of the Puritan preachers and writers cited in this chapter can be found in J. R. Beeke and R. J. Patterson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2006).

European languages and most of them, particularly those published in English, were read long after his untimely death in 1602. We may be certain that what Perkins said about Scripture fairly represented the view of mainstream English Protestantism for many years to come. Some fifty years later, John Ball, who was deprived of his Staffordshire living and who more than once was imprisoned for his Puritan sympathies, declared plainly, “the Word of God is the ground of all our faith, whereby we live, be directed, and be upheld in our trials”.⁴ The influential Thomas Adams, chaplain to Sir Henry Montagu, the Lord Chief Justice and Lord High Treasurer of the realm, described Scripture as “a perfect and absolute rule”.⁵ It would not be difficult to find a hundred such restatements of the position Perkins had outlined earlier. Puritanism, as Protestantism as a whole, held that the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments together, was “sufficient to prescribe the true and perfect way to eternal life”.⁶

Authority

The question underlying the European Reformation in general and the English Puritan movement in particular, as the preceding comments suggest, was that of authority. From what source did the Church and the individual believer receive the faith, and against what standard could that faith be measured? Who formulated doctrine and on what grounds? And who defined duty? The insistence within Puritanism on Scripture as the answer to these fundamental questions and many others like them cannot be understood without reference to the centuries of tradition and prescribed religion from which the Church had so lately emerged. John Owen and Richard Baxter, perhaps the two greatest seventeenth-century Puritan theologians, both drew attention to the subordination of Scripture to tradition which had characterised mediaeval Catholicism.

Owen’s defence of the Bible, published in 1659 with the cumbersome title, *Of the Divine Originall, Authority, Self-evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures*, stated openly that it had been written principally as a corrective to renewed attacks by Roman Catholic scholars on Scripture. Owen was particularly concerned to refute sug-

4 John Ball, *A Treatise of Faith* (1632), 198.

5 Thomas Adams, *The Workes of Tho. Adams* (1630), 903.

6 William Perkins, *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ . . . Mr. William Perkins* (1626), I, 581.

gestions that the Bible was only a partial revelation of God's will (and hence, by implication, not wholly sufficient), and that Scripture was not valid unless accepted and interpreted by the Church.⁷ No self-respecting Protestant theologian of the day could allow such claims to go unchallenged, and the gist of Owen's reply, conveyed in the title of his book, is that the authority of Scripture is above that of the Church, since in Scripture God speaks authoritatively and directly to the individual. Baxter similarly argued that the subjection of Christian belief to the authority of the Church rather than to Scripture was the most injurious of all doctrines emanating from Rome.⁸ In making this assertion, Baxter clearly understood how crucial the question of authority was to the whole structure of belief, as well as to the freedom of the individual before God.⁹

Perhaps the case was stated most clearly by the learned James Ussher who, prior to his elevation to the archbishopric of Armagh in 1625, had for the previous fourteen years held the chair of Divinity at Dublin. There is no doubt in this thoroughly Protestant mind about the place of Scripture:

The books of Holy Scripture are so sufficient for the knowledge of Christian religion, that they do most plentifully contain all doctrine necessary to salvation. . . . It followeth that we need no unwritten verities, no traditions or inventions of men, no canons of councils, no sentences of Fathers, much less decrees of popes, to supply any supposed defect of the written Word, or to give us a more perfect direction in the worship of God and the way of life, than is already expressed in the canonical Scriptures.¹⁰

The "doctrine necessary to salvation" of which Ussher here speaks, points to the dual nature of the authority held by Protestantism to reside in Scripture. It is an authority which extends equally to the formulation of doctrine by the Church and to the regulation of the life of the individual believer. For Puritans, the two cannot be separated. Those who become impatient with the doctrinal controversies which characterised Puritanism fail to understand this relationship. Doctrine

7 See John Owen, *Of the Divine Originall, Authority, Self-evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures* (Oxford, 1659), Ep. Ded., sig. A4v.

8 Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1669), 199.

9 The question of biblical authority remains a critical factor in the determination of Christian authenticity, if revelation and inspiration are foundational to Christian identity.

10 James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie, or the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion* (1647), 18.

is important precisely because in the end it is concerned with salvation and with the individual. Sound doctrine is therefore to be pursued and false doctrine to be avoided and Scripture is the final court of appeal, the objective standard by which the faith of both Church and individual believer are to be measured. So Ussher adds, “From them only [the Scriptures] all doctrine concerning our salvation must be drawn and derived”.¹¹ The Baptist pastor, Henry Denne, concurs: “Wheresoever the Protestant confessions do go hand in hand with Holy Scripture, we do rejoice to follow them”. On the other hand, if the Church, even the Protestant Church, has deviated from this authoritative rule, “their example must not be our precedent”.¹² Quite clearly, most shades of opinion within the English Church of the seventeenth century agree that the Bible, as opposed to tradition and to creed, is the final source of authority.

It is at this point that Richard Baxter registers a note of disquiet. Baxter, learned, moderate and devout, and widely regarded as one of the most eminent divines of his age, was a prolific writer and an indefatigable preacher. Later generations have acknowledged his profound influence on the religious life of the times. *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* must be regarded as one of the most significant works of Puritanism, if not of Protestantism as a whole. Published first in 1650, and re-issued in numerous editions well into the nineteenth century, this book, written ‘by a dying man to dying men’, has exerted a lasting influence on countless thousands of readers. *The Saints’ Rest* is an admirable example of Puritanism’s concern with the salvation of the individual and with practical godliness rather than with institutional and credal Christianity. Coming as it did a century or more after the beginnings of the English Reformation, it points out the danger, as real to established Protestantism as to established Catholicism, of assigning authority to the establishment rather than to Scripture. Baxter sees clearly the paradox of Protestantism’s continuing protest against Rome’s subjection of the authority of Scripture to that of the Church, while at the same time being guilty on a similar count. “The Papists believe Scripture to be the Word of God, because their Church saith so”, he maintains. Yet Protestants have adopted a similar attitude to

11 *Ibid.*

12 Henry Denne, *Antichrist Unmasked in Two Treatises* (1645), 52.

Scripture, “because our Church or our leaders say so”.¹³

Baxter’s argument, of course, is that it is not sufficient for any Christian to accept the authority of the Bible merely on the basis that this may be the official position of the Church as a whole, or of that section of the Church to which he may have given his allegiance. There must be a personal conviction, a personal knowledge of the issues involved. George Lawson, a contemporary and often a critic of Baxter, pressed this particular point further. Assent to the authority of Scripture is a fundamental article of faith, yet no Christian should accept that authority blindly “further than he hath certain reason so to do”.¹⁴ It is a matter, not merely of faith, but also of reason, of understanding. It is necessary for the believer as an individual to know for himself why he should accept the authority of the Bible and why he should regard it as an inspired revelation.

The ground for accepting the authority of Scripture is its own claim to be the Word of God, and it is therefore desirable to understand the “certain reasons” which led English Protestants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to accept without hesitation the Bible’s claim to inspiration, and hence its authority in dogma and in life. Why was the Bible so strongly held to be the Word of God rather than a collection of mere human writings? What precisely did William Perkins have in mind when he stated that the evidences for the divine origin of the Bible were “not to be found in any other writings in the world”?¹⁵

Inspiration

We may begin, as Puritanism itself began, with the fact of the Bible’s existence. There was nothing fortuitous in the fact that the Bible had survived through centuries of history. It was, in fact, little short of a miracle. No other book had aroused such universal antipathy. No other book had outlived such sustained and rigorous opposition. Richard Baxter asks rhetorically if there was ever a time when all the Bibles in the world had been destroyed?¹⁶ If the blood of martyrs was the seed of the Church, so too were the ashes of Scripture. “They could burn these witnesses by thousands, but yet they could never either hinder

13 Baxter, *Saints’ Rest*, 199

14 George Lawson, *Theo-Politica or, a Body of Divinitie* (1659), 7

15 Perkins, *Workes*, I, 484

16 Baxter, *Saints’ Rest*, 222.

their succession or extinguish their testimonies”,¹⁷ Baxter writes in *The Saints’ Rest*. It may be difficult for those who live in the twenty-first century, with the Bible translated into hundreds of languages and dialects and with free access to an almost bewildering variety of versions, to understand the force of this argument to those who lived so much nearer the age of Bible-burning and persecution. John Goodwin, whose *Divine Authority of Scriptures* (1648) proved to be an able defence of the traditional Protestant doctrine of Scripture, saw the position clearly enough. History bore witness to the fact that the best brains, the strongest hands and the most plausible eloquence had united in sustained attempts to eradicate the Scriptures and to counter their influence:

And yet we see that they stand, and are as mighty, and as like to stand still in the world, as ever; all their enemies, with all their councils, imaginations, attempts, and machinations against them, from first to last, are fallen, and ready to fall before them; whereas many other books and writings, which had no enemies, no opposition, either from devils or men, nay, which had friends in abundance which loved them and looked after them, are wholly perished and lost.¹⁸

The continuing existence of the Bible, despite the repeated and determined attempts of its enemies to destroy it, spoke strongly of a providential care.

Not only had the Bible itself been guarded from destruction, but its message similarly had been preserved from corruption. To demonstrate this particular truth was the object of John Owen’s *Divine Originall*, the title page of which declared it to be a “vindication of the purity and integrity of the Hebrew and Greek texts”. Owen’s learning well suited him for this task, and it is to his credit that he recognised the importance of textual accuracy to any respectable defence of scriptural authority. It is of more than passing interest that the reliability of the text was questioned long before the nineteenth century. Owen castigates those who “with a show of learning have ventured to question almost every word in the Scripture”,¹⁹ and among the reasons which he presents for accepting the received text of Scripture as authentic and reliable are the following:

1. The concern of the original writers to be accurate;

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 226

¹⁸ John Goodwin, *The Divine Authority of the Scriptures Asserted* (1648), 251-52.

¹⁹ Owen, *Divine Originall*, 220.

2. The care taken by the Jews, before and after Christ, to preserve authentic copies of the Old Testament;
3. The concern of the Masorettes²⁰ to preserve the textual accuracy of the Old Testament;
4. Christ's attitude to the Old Testament, thereby giving it the final seal of approval;
5. The determination of the Christian Church to preserve accurate copies of Scripture;
6. The care taken by copyists to ensure accuracy;
7. The concurrence of available manuscripts.²¹

Time has not diminished the combined strength of these arguments, and we can understand what Owen means when he says that in all this the providence of God may be seen in preserving His Word and ensuring its essential accuracy. Of course, variations do appear in the texts of differing manuscripts, but these are of no great significance as they do not affect the Bible's essential message. In this Baxter agrees with Owen that any errors caused by copyists or printers are "of no great moment, as long as it is certain that the Scriptures are not *de industria* corrupted, nor any material doctrine, history, or prophecy thereby obscured or depraved".²² As Baxter further somewhat dryly remarks, God had not taken it upon Himself to supervise every printer to the end of time; what did matter was that the text had survived without material corruption.

Further testimony to the unique character of the Bible could be found by those who were willing to read it and consider its message. John Owen contended that sufficient internal evidence could be seen within Scripture itself to convince the honest reader of its divine origin. "The authority of God shining in them, they afford unto us all the Divine evidence of themselves",²³ Owen wrote of the collected books of Scripture. William Perkins had put forward a similar arguments years earlier. Let any discerning person read the Bible, let him duly note the content, the style and the purpose of each part and of the whole together, "and he shall be resolved that Scripture is Scripture, even by the Scripture itself".²⁴ The intrinsic character of the Bible is better appreciated in the light of its design, its unity, its "sweet concord and perfect coherence", as James Ussher described it, which stood out as a more objective testimony to its supernatural origin. Referring to the unity of theme and purpose evident in the various books of the Bible, Ussher pointed

20 Rabbinical scholars working between the 7th and 11th centuries, who took great care to ensure the accurate transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible.

21 Owen, *Divine Originall*, 175-78.

22 Baxter, *Saints' Rest*, 206.

23 Owen, *Divine Originall*, 34.

24 Perkins, *Workes*, I, 582.

out that they had been written by some forty men of different backgrounds, under different circumstances, and at different times. Yet, as Ussher says, “There is a most holy and heavenly consent and agreement of all parts thereof together, though written in so sundry ages, by so sundry men, in so distance places”.²⁵ It was difficult to disregard the unique character of the Bible when considering the question of its origin.

One of the most telling arguments in favour of the inspiration of the Bible was fulfilled prophecy. The capacity to foretell the course of future events “whilst there is yet nothing at all in being . . . likely to produce them, or to contribute towards their being”²⁶ is beyond human ability, and is a mark of divine foreknowledge. Human beings are unable to predict future events with any degree of detailed accuracy. Yet the Bible contains such predictions, many of them concerning events which were to occur hundreds of years in the future, and which have been accurately fulfilled. Richard Baxter mentions in this respect the Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ. “There is scarce any passage of the birth, life, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, or glory of our Saviour”, he says, “which are not particularly prophesied of in the Old Testament”.²⁷ It is the verifiable fulfilment of these and other prophecies that gives confidence in Scripture, and also of course in those prophetic utterances which have yet to be fulfilled. The knowledge of fulfilled prophecy led William Perkins to declare:

Now there is no man able of himself to know or foresee these things to come. Therefore this knowledge must rest in Him alone who is most wise, that perfectly understandeth and beholdeth all things that are not, and to whom all future things are present, and therefore certain.²⁸

John Goodwin adds that only He who can “read the long roll of time from the one end of it unto the other” can truly foretell the future.²⁹ The conclusion which Puritanism drew from the fulfilment of prophecy was that God had spoken to man through His Word.

A further consideration which brought strength to the other arguments supporting inspiration was found in the inherent power of the Bible. Here was a living force over the minds and lives of men and women such as no other book or collection of books could provide. “No writings of man”, says John Ball, however persuasively set forth “with wit, words, orders, or depth of learning, can so enlighten the

25 Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 9.

26 Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 320.

27 Richard Baxter, *The Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1667), 263.

28 William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (1651), 126.

29 Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 320.

mind, move the will, pierce the heart, and stir up the affections, as doth the Word of God".³⁰ Although contrary to man's nature and disposition, the Bible, when preached and explained under the power of the Spirit, "convinceth and condemneth men of sin, it turneth and converteth them to itself, and causeth them to live and die in love and obedience thereof".³¹ This it could never do were it simply of human origin – so argues William Perkins. John Goodwin is even more specific: "The covetous man it makes liberal, the oppressor it makes merciful, the earthly-minded it makes heavenly, the fearful it encourageth, the proud it humbleth, the unclean it purifieth, the profane it sanctifieth . . . it takes away the heart of stone, and gives men an heart of flesh".³² Such testimonies to the intrinsic and unique power of Scripture are to be found in abundance on the pages of Puritan doctrine and devotion. They are the testimonies of experience and of observation. We may pause to note one more. John Flavel, cast in the mould of the true spiritual shepherd, and bound with invisible ties of concern for the eternal welfare of his people in Dartmouth, had seen the power of this living Word at work in the lives of his congregation:

Can the power of any creature, the word of a mere man so convince the conscience, so terrify the heart, so discover the very secret thoughts of the soul, put a man into such trembling? No, no, a greater than man must needs be here. None but a God can so open the eyes of the blind, so open the graves of the dead, so quicken and enliven the conscience that was seared, so bind over the soul of the sinner to the judgement to come, so change and alter the frame and temper of a man's spirit, so powerfully raise, refresh, and comfort a drooping, dying soul.³³

We sense Flavel's conviction, and understand his conclusion. This must be the power of God and if there were no other arguments to bring forth, "yet this alone were sufficient to make full proof of the divine authority of the Scriptures".³⁴

For such reasons English Protestants believed in the inspiration of the Bible and hence in its authority as the living Word of the living God. This did not lead, as some have suggested, to bibliolatry. That

30 John Ball, *A Short Treatise Containing all the Grounds of Christian Religion* (1654), 26.

31 Perkins, *Workes*, I, 484.

32 Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 148-149

33 John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Reverend Mr. John Flavel* (1716), I, 325.

34 *Ibid.*

might have been the case if the dominant concept of inspiration had been that which later became known as “verbal inspiration”. It was widely agreed in Puritan theological circles, however, that this view, which held that each word of Scripture had been given directly to the original writers, was too narrow. “The true and proper foundation of Christian religion is not ink and paper, not any book or books, not any writing or writings whatsoever, whether translations or originals”, John Goodwin argued. The Christian faith, he continued, was “that substance of matter . . . concerning the salvation of the world by Jesus Christ which [is] represented and declared both in translations and the originals but [which is] essentially and really distinct from both”.³⁵ Baxter made a distinction between the basic doctrine of Scripture and the words which gave that doctrine expression: “The one is as the blood, the other as the veins in which it runs”.³⁶ To Goodwin, again, the concept of Scripture means, “The matter and substance of things contained and held forth in the books of the Old and New Testament”, but not “all the letters, syllables, words, phrases, sentences, and periods of speech” found either in manuscript or translation.³⁷

A favourite expression with Puritan theologians was that the original writers of the Bible were God’s “penmen”.³⁸ This conveyed the thought that their role in the formulation of Scripture was not entirely passive, in the sense that they received the words of God in much the same way as a secretary might receive a dictated letter. Rather, the mind of each writer had been subject to the operation of the Holy Spirit, thereby receiving in thought-form the message of God, with the freedom to transmit that message in words and phrases of his own choosing. The message was then wholly the message of God, transmitted through human personality in human language. The Puritan theologians readily saw that this in no way detracted from the doctrine of inspiration, and John Goodwin representatively declares without hesitation, “I fully and with all my heart and all my soul believe them

35 Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 17.

36 Baxter, *Saints’ Rest*, 201.

37 Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 13.

38 E.g., Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 8; Richard Baxter, *More Reasons for the Christian Religion* (1672), 56. The same phrase was used by Ellen White in her frequently-cited essay, ‘The Inspiration of Prophetic Writers’, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), I, 21.

to be of divine authority”.³⁹

In practice, this meant that no particular version of the Bible could claim to be the Word of God more than another. The Authorised Version of 1611, the Geneva Bible of 1560, Coverdale’s version of 1535 and, beyond them, translations in other languages, all contained what Goodwin described as the “substance” of Christian faith, and were therefore equally to be esteemed as “the Word of God”. It was the authority of this Word, prized above that of priest or prelate, which gave character and meaning to English Protestantism, and John Flavel spoke intelligibly to both Church and believer when he advised “Keep the Word, and the Word will keep you”.⁴⁰

The Purpose of Scripture

In offering this advice Flavel makes it clear that he is thinking more of the individual believer than of the church corporate: “As the first receiving of the Word regenerated your hearts, so the keeping of the Word within you will preserve your hearts”.⁴¹ Flavel captures in this sentence the two fundamental purposes of Scripture. The Word of God led a man initially to the experience of salvation and then enabled him to proceed in that experience. It converted him and kept him. The emphasis in both cases is on that personal religion for which Puritanism strove and which is one of its chief characteristics. The authority of Scripture was only worked through to its logical conclusion as it was demonstrated in the lives of people, and that demonstration was to be seen in both unbelievers and believers. It was to be seen in leading the unbeliever to faith and in leading the believer to greater faith.

To the unbeliever, Baxter addressed one of his best-known and influential works, *A Call to the Unconverted*, in which he explained that the normal method by which God worked to bring a man to the saving knowledge of Himself was through the Bible. “If you will be converted and saved, attend upon the Word of God”, he advises. “Read the Scripture, or hear it read and other holy writings that do apply it. Constantly attend on the public preaching of the Word”.⁴² In this way the purpose of Scripture is to be fulfilled and men will be “born again . . . by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever” (1 Peter

³⁹ Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 13.

⁴⁰ Flavel, *Works*, II, 39.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted* (1660), 231.

1:23). Perkins says that the Word “being preached by the Minister appointed by God, converteth nature, and turns the heart of man”.⁴³ To those who have already responded to the saving Word of Scripture, Flavel offers similar counsel: “Let the Word of Christ dwell richly in you; let it dwell, not tarry with you for a night, and let it dwell richly or plentifully; in all that is of it, in its commands, promises, threats; in all that is in you, in your understandings, memories, consciences, affections and then “twill preserve your hearts”.⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that the lives of countless Englishmen and their families were ennobled and enriched by the preaching ministries of Baxter and Flavel who sought to confront saints and sinners alike with the living, saving truths of Scripture.

The desire to convince men and women of their need of the Bible and its message understandably resulted in certain emphases. Chief among these, if we analyse Puritan theology aright, was that the main design of Scripture is to reveal Christ and to lead men and women to a personal knowledge of the salvation which God had provided in Him. Flavel declared, “The knowledge of Jesus Christ is the very marrow and kernel of all the Scriptures”, and went on to show how both Old and New Testaments were “full of Christ”, how “the blessed lines of both Testaments meet in Him”.⁴⁵ Thomas Adams, who on account of his preaching and writing later came to be known as ‘the Shakespeare of Puritan theologians’, maintained that Christ was “the sum of the whole Bible; prophesied, typified, prefigured, exhibited, demonstrated; to be found in every leaf, almost in every line”.⁴⁶ The great characters of sacred history were types of the Christ who was to come, stars shining in a light borrowed from the sun which was, in the fullness of time, to arise on a darkened world. And William Perkins, whose theology, though expressed with less rhetoric, was good theology nonetheless, succinctly concluded, “The scope of the whole Bible is Christ with His benefits, and He is revealed, propounded, and offered unto us in . . . the Word”.⁴⁷

The relationship between doctrine and salvation in Puritan theology has already been noted. The repeated emphasis on sound doc-

43 Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 133.

44 Flavel, *Works*, II, 39.

45 Flavel, *Works*, I, 12.

46 Adams, *Workes*, 1209.

47 Perkins, *Workes*, I, 484.

trine in the Pauline epistles did not pass unnoticed in the seventeenth century. Those who remembered their Church history were reminded of many who had made shipwreck of the faith and who had wrought havoc in the Church through doctrinal deviation, particularly concerning Christology or those doctrines relating to the person and work of Christ. If it was necessary to believe in Christ for salvation, it was equally necessary to believe correctly. And since the practice of religion depended upon a correct understanding of duty and obedience as set forth in Scripture, it was also necessary that the specific doctrines relating to the Christian life should be clearly understood. Flavel, again, speaks of “many honest, well-meaning, but weak Christians . . . easily beguiled by specious pretence of new light” and “pliable to many dangerous errors”.⁴⁸ The seventeenth century undoubtedly had its share of such “well-meaning” believers – Ranters, Muggletonians, Seekers, Diggers, Levellers, Fifth Monarchy Men, to name a few – whose sincerity could not generally be questioned, but whose interpretations of Scripture were at the best doubtful and whose Christology was generally distorted. It was to guard the feet of the saints from such slippery paths that moderate religious opinion in the seventeenth century expressed its concern for sound doctrine. Thus, in answer to a question about the purpose of a written revelation such as the Bible, John Ball replied, “That it might be an infallible standard of true doctrine, and . . . that it might be the determiner of all controversies”.⁴⁹ It must be conceded that had the Church at all times stood by that axiom there might have been less division and less misunderstanding.

One cannot read far into Puritan theology, or for that matter into Puritan history, without recognising the importance accorded to individual conscience in the outworking of salvation and the application of doctrine. Much has been written about freedom of conscience and the freedom of the individual in matters of faith, and of the contribution made in the seventeenth century to human progress in this respect. Without detracting in any way from what is certainly a basic human freedom, it must be understood that in moderate Puritan eyes the conscience was only truly free as it was captive to the Word of God. Conscience was that inner light given to every man, as part of the general revelation of God in the world, to prompt him to seek and

48 Flavel, *Works*, I, 626.

49 Ball, *Short Treatise*, 7.

follow ways of truth and goodness, yet insufficient of itself to lead to a saving knowledge of Christ. Conscience can only be completely effective in the context of knowledge, that is to say in spiritual terms, when enlightened with truth. The light within, Joseph Alleine specifically states, is incapable of leading a man to salvation “without the direction of God’s Word”. On the other hand, “a well informed conscience”, Alleine argues, “instructed in the Scriptures, and well studied in the mind of God . . . may be a great help to a Christian”.⁵⁰ The Bible, therefore, finds a further important function as a guide to conscience. A Christian instructed in Scripture will not only know in general terms that he ought to do right, but he will know from the Word of God what to do. Flavel says, “If Scripture and conscience tell you such a way is sinful, [you] may not venture upon it”.⁵¹ It is Scripture and conscience together which provide constraint. Alleine, prevented from serving his congregation by the harsh legislation which followed the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, therefore declares, “My brethren, if God deprive you of the preacher in the pulpit, take the more earnest heed to the preacher in your bosom”.⁵²

Understanding the Bible

Given that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the most important question of all comes at the level of personal understanding. How shall the Bible be interpreted? By what method is the water of life to be drawn from the well of salvation? Thomas Adams, with a characteristic turn of phrase, chides those who are willing to accept the applications of Scripture pressed upon them by the preacher, without understanding the reasons thereof for themselves, “as if they had only need to have their hearts warmed, and not to have their minds warned, and enlightened with knowledge. But alas, no eyes, no salvation”.⁵³ One writer complains bitterly of “the prattling housewife and the old dotard” taking it upon themselves to interpret Scripture, “readily teaching that they never learned, and abundantly pouring out that which was never infused into them”.⁵⁴ He is, of course, making

50 Joseph Alleine, *Remains of that Excellent Minister of Jesus Christ, Mr. Joseph Alleine* (1674), 76.

51 Flavel, *Works*, II, 185.

52 Alleine, *Remains*, 76.

53 Adams, *Workes*, 663.

54 Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt* (1647), sig. B3r.

the observation that false conclusions can be reached as a result of incorrect and uninformed methods of interpretation. Hence the need for a ministry trained, among other things, in the principles of biblical interpretation and with knowledge of the original languages in which the Bible was written. Hence the need for preachers to expound Scripture to the people of God and for the Church to expect such exposition.

Children of the English Reformation believed, then, that God speaks to man immediately in the Bible and mediately by those who understand Scripture and who are called to teach and expound it. George Lawson, a moderate Anglican, says for example, that God speaks “immediately” to the Prophets, “mediately” by the Prophets who are inspired and “mediately” by those appointed to teach Scripture but who are not inspired.⁵⁵ For all that, however, the Bible was essentially an open book and each individual believer could attain to “that knowledge of the mind and will of God revealed in the Scripture, which is sufficient to direct him in the life of God, to deliver him from the dangers of ignorance, darkness, and error, and to conduct him into blessedness”.⁵⁶ For this reason personal Bible study must complement the public preaching of the Word.

Two factors, the Holy Spirit and reason, combine in bringing honest seekers and willing listeners to a saving knowledge of Scripture. The great importance of the Holy Spirit in the study of the Bible must never be forgotten. “The Word alone, though never so excellently preached, conduces no more to the conviction and salvation of a sinner than the waters of Bethsaida did, when the angel came not down to trouble them”, but when one is under the tutelage of the Spirit mediating the written word, “then Christ speaks to the heart”.⁵⁷ Thus John Flavel explains the relationship of Word and Spirit. “The Word and Spirit go together . . . the Word is dead without the Spirit”, argues Richard Sibbes, “Therefore attend on the Word, and then wait on the Spirit to quicken the Word, that both Word and Spirit may guide us to life everlasting”.⁵⁸ The inspiration of Scripture had been directly effected by the working of the Spirit on the minds of the original writ-

55 George Lawson, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1662), 3.

56 John Owen, *The Causes, Waies and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word* (1678), 5.

57 Flavel, *Works*, II, 72.

58 Richard Sibbes, *A Fountaine Sealed* (1639), 98-99.

ers. Now that same Spirit illuminates the minds of those who read and hear the Word. So the Spirit becomes both author and interpreter, ensuring that the divine message contained in Scripture is both available and intelligible. The illumination of the human mind by the Spirit is therefore crucial in the process of understanding the Bible.

Yet the Spirit does not supersede reason. Human beings are rational creatures and God approaches them through their rationality, the Spirit enlightening the mind in a manner that does not dispense with the normal processes of human thought. So John Flavel speaks of those “natural qualifications” necessary to arrive at an understanding of the Word, “clearness of apprehension, solidity of judgement, and fidelity of retention”.⁵⁹ Those who would deny us the use of reason in understanding the Scriptures “would deal with us”, says John Owen, “as the Philistines did with Samson, first put out our eyes, and then make us grind in their mill”.⁶⁰ Richard Sibbes, one of the great Puritan devotional preachers, points out “There is strong reason in all divine truth . . . and it is a part of wisdom to observe how conclusions rise from principles, as branches and buds do from roots”.⁶¹ It is the free access of the Spirit to the mind and the full use of reason which together result in the understanding of Scripture.

In practice, however, the tendency to lean to one’s own understanding in seeking to arrive at a correct interpretation of the Bible is always present. It is easier, even for the regenerate, to think their way through to a conclusion than to consciously seek, or wait for, the enlightenment of the Spirit. We have previously noticed Thomas Adams’ strictures against those who submissively accept suggested interpretations without taking the trouble to examine for themselves the scriptural evidence. John Flavel is equally anxious over those who come to the Bible in order to substantiate views already held. “They bring their erroneous opinions to the Scriptures . . . and force the Scriptures to countenance and legitimise their opinions”,⁶² he says. John White offers appropriate counsel:

We must be very careful that we bring with us our minds free, and not prepossessed with any opinion which we have either framed in our own fantasy, or received from others. A mind forestalled by an errone-

59 Flavel, *Works*, I, 613.

60 Owen, *Causes, Waies and Means*, 10-11.

61 Richard Sibbes, *Christs Exaltation Purchast by Humiliation* (1639), 47-48.

62 Flavel, *Works*, I, 615.

ous conceit is no fit judge of any truth, or of any testimony concerning truth, but as coloured glass transmits the light, and represents it to the eye infected with the same colour with which itself is dyed . . . so happens it with a mind prepossessed with any fantasy, it apprehends and judgeth all things according to that opinion which itself hath entertained.⁶³

The quest for spiritual truth is impeded by coming to Scripture with prejudice and pre-conceived opinion. John Owen speaks more strongly yet, contending that most of the heresy which has infected Christian doctrine through the ages has arisen from men “lighting on some expressions in Scripture, that singly considered seem to give countenance to some such opinion as they are willing to embrace”.⁶⁴ The clear implication is that coming to the Bible with pre-conceived opinions results in less than an objective study of the text, and hence in the perpetuation of error. The Bible must always be approached with an open mind to seek the consensus of Scripture as a whole, with a willingness to learn and to change one’s opinion if the honest study of all the relevant textual evidence leads in that direction.

Puritans in general were particularly disturbed by two influences from the past which tended to shape biblical interpretation in a manner likely to restrict the full discovery of truth. The first of these influences was tradition, that immense body of comment and exposition which had been handed on from generation to generation and which found its fullest expression in the writings of the Church Fathers. It must not be thought that Puritanism wanted to discard these writings altogether. On the contrary, it was generally agreed that much truth and wisdom could be found in patristic literature. But the Fathers also had been human, and on that count liable to error and their writings must be read with discernment. Humphrey Hody, an outstanding Oxford professor of the late seventeenth century, who was not a Puritan at all, stated the case as clearly as any Puritan writer could have done. “I desire as much as any man to pay a just deference and regard to the judgements of the ancient Fathers”, he said, “but it must be confessed that though their authority be great in matters of tradition, yet the reasons and arguments which they produce to confirm their doctrines are not always convincing”.⁶⁵ John Owen spoke with equal clarity for

63 John White, *A Way to the Tree of Life* (1647), Ep. Ded., sigs. A3v, A4r.

64 John Owen, *An Exposition of the Two First Chapters of . . . Paul . . . unto the Hebrews* (1668), 111.

65 Humphrey Hody, *The Resurrection of the (same) body Asserted* (1694), 210.

Puritanism when he argued that an exaggerated deference to the opinions of the past had been the major weakness in Judaism at the time of Christ and in Catholicism at the time of the Reformation.

What their forefathers have professed, what themselves have imbibed from their infancy, what all their outward circumstances are involved in, what they have advantage by, what is in reputation with those in whom they are principally concerned, that shall be the truth with them and nothing else. Unto persons whose minds are wholly vitiated with the leaven of this corrupt affection, there is not a line in the Scripture whose sense can be truly and clearly represented. . . . If men will not forego all pre-imbibed opinions, prejudices and conceptions of mind however riveted into them by traditions, custom, veneration of elders, and secular advantages . . . they will never learn the truth, nor attain a full assurance of understanding in the mysteries of God.⁶⁶

Tradition, therefore, may be given its due place, but no more, in the interpretation of Scripture.

The related danger to correct interpretation from which Puritanism withdrew was that of philosophy. It recognised the threat to sound doctrine contained in a system of interpretation which was influenced by the presuppositions and methods of Greek philosophical speculation. There was little doubt in thorough-going Protestantism that influences of this nature had been brought to bear on biblical interpretation in the past, and the significance of Puritanism's desire to be free of all such doubtful influences and to achieve a purer understanding of the Word must not be underestimated. We turn here to Francis Bampfield, yet another learned and godly Nonconformist divine who, after the Restoration, was frequently imprisoned for preaching without the required authorisation and who died in Newgate gaol in 1683. Seven years before his death Bampfield had published an unusual treatise on Scripture as the revelation of God's will, applicable to all aspects of human learning and experience, in which he argued that the divisions in the Christian Church were a consequence of human interpretations placed on the Bible and that ministers and preachers were responsible for perpetuating such error. Concerning the influence of philosophy on the interpretation of the Bible, Bampfield writes:

What an enemy to the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ was the Grecian philosophy! What a disfigured face has it put upon religion by its mythologising vanity! . . . And what is yet further matter of more lamentation, those who have the name of the scholastic learned among Christians, do still pertinaciously adhere unto many of the philosophic

66 Owen, *Causes, Waies and Means*, 146.

errors . . . subjecting theology to philosophy and Christianity to sophistry.⁶⁷

The argument that underlies the whole of Bampfield's interesting treatise is that the principles and presuppositions of pagan philosophy have been allowed to mould the interpretation of the Bible and hence the formulation of Christian doctrine. Possibly nothing characterised Puritanism as a whole so much as its desire to come to grips with the real meaning of Scripture and to submit to its authority, and in order that this might be achieved, the dangers inherent in both traditional interpretations and philosophical principles were to be avoided.

Progressive Revelation

One final factor of immense significance must be mentioned if we are fully to appreciate the desire for truth which so characterised the Puritan quest. The possibility, noted earlier, that the Fathers of the Christian Church might have erred in their understanding of the Bible unavoidably implied that later interpreters, Puritan theologians among them, could also reach erroneous conclusions. No individual or generation could claim to have arrived at a perfect knowledge of Scripture. Truth, or more correctly, the understanding of truth, is progressive. God reveals Himself and His will to human beings as He sees fit and in accordance with the divine purpose. Men and women must seek continually for further light, their minds must ever be open to receive more knowledge, deeper insights. Thus the future continually beckons those who desire to progress in the way of truth. "Well may it be conceived", wrote John Goodwin, "not only that some, but many truths, yea and those of main concern and importance, may be yet unborn and not come forth out of the mother's womb (I mean the secrets of the Scriptures)". Goodwin goes on to speak of the "endless variety of the riches" contained in Scripture, of "the unknown abyss of truth" to be found in the Bible.⁶⁸ All this is but the fuller expression of the conviction voiced by John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers on their departure for the New World in 1620 that God had more truth and light yet to break forth from His Holy Word.

This belief that the future would bring greater understanding of the truths of the Bible was deep-rooted in Puritan theology and fun-

67 Francis Bampfield, *All in One* (1677), 59-61.

68 John Goodwin, *Imputatio Fidei, or a Treatise of Justification* (1642), sig. b3v.

damental to its very existence. It is found in writings representative of all shades of opinion, but few express it as forcefully as Goodwin. At the beginning of time, Goodwin argued, truth made its entry into the world “like the first dawning of the day”. The light, though perceptible, was barely so, shrouded yet by darkness. Again, it was “like the corn, [which] when it first sprouts and peers above ground, hath nothing of that shape and body which it comes to afterwards”. In such an undeveloped manner the Gospel had been first proclaimed to man. Then, as time passed, God’s message to humanity became clearer, further editions of the truth appeared, revised and enlarged, as for example in the time of Noah and in the time of Abraham and notably in the time of Moses, until eventually God revealed Himself more fully than in any previous age in the person of His own Son “to be published and preached throughout the world”.⁶⁹ Yet even this, the ultimate revelation of God, confronts men and women in himself with undiscovered truth, calling each succeeding generation to a richer and more enlightened faith. “The knowledge of Christ is profound and large . . . a boundless, bottomless ocean”, says John Flavel. In seeking to arrive at this knowledge in its fullness men go through an experience akin to that of discovering and inhabiting a new and unexplored country. At first they colonise the coastal region, gradually penetrating further inland until at length the whole land is traversed and occupied.⁷⁰ So with the knowledge of Christ, suggests Flavel. But there is a difference: “The best of us are yet on the borders of this vast continent. . . . Though something of Christ be unfolded in one age, and something in another, yet eternity itself cannot fully unfold Him”.⁷¹

So, too, with the knowledge of Scripture in its challenging and beckoning fullness. The redemptive truths of the Bible are not completely comprehended at one time, or even by one individual, but rather as God chooses to reveal their significance to those who seek. Thus, in the age succeeding Constantine, marked as it was by Christological controversy, the truth to be asserted concerned the deity of Christ. At the Reformation, when the emphasis had for so long been placed on works and merit as the way of salvation, the time had come

69 Goodwin, *Divine Authority*, 48, 51.

70 Flavel, writing from Dartmouth in Devon, would have understood the hopes of those who in his day left England’s shores, perhaps from Dartmouth itself, in search of conditions in distant lands more conducive to the practice of religion.

71 Flavel, *Works*, I, 2.

to emphasise the redemptive work of Christ and justification by faith. In the latter ages the emphasis was to be placed on the hope of the coming kingdom of God.⁷² Thus at no time in the past or in the present had the Church possessed an absolute knowledge of truth. Only as she remembers her fallible humanity and responds to the promise of the future will she move forward towards a complete understanding and fulfilment of Scripture.

For those who lived in the latter ages of world history – in the immediate context, this applied to those living in the seventeenth century, who believed that theirs was the last age and that Christ would soon establish his kingdom – the doctrine of progressive revelation and progressive understanding had a special significance. At that time truth was to come to ultimate fruition. “God’s people went into mystical Babylon gradually”, argued Henry Danvers, referring to the mediaeval suppression of the Bible and the ensuing decline in biblical theology. “So must their coming out be, some at one time, and some at another”,⁷³ he continued. Goodwin believed that the Bible itself foretold a discovery of truth and sound doctrine before the final consummation. Commenting on Daniel 12:4, which refers to an increase of knowledge at the end of time, Goodwin explained that the text promised a greater understanding of Daniel’s prophecies in particular and a deeper knowledge of the Scriptures as a whole in the last days.⁷⁴ “All spiritual light is increasing light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day”,⁷⁵ said Flavel. Each generation within the Church, therefore, must be open to the future, open to the Word of God and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus led, both the Church as a body and believers as individuals, may rightfully anticipate a deeper knowledge of the Word, written and incarnate, continuing growth towards maturity in Christ and lasting satisfaction and enlightenment in the pursuit of truth.

72 See Nathaniel Homes, *The Resurrection-Revealed* (1661), 278-79.

73 Henry Danvers, *Treatise of Baptism* (1674), sigs. A3v, A4r.

74 Goodwin, *Treatise of Justification*, sigs. b4r,v.

75 Flavel, *Works*, I, 392.

