

# A PURITAN THEOLOGY

*Doctrine for Life*

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AND

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# Introduction

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The word “Puritan” originated in the 1560s as a bit of pejorative hurled at people who wanted further reformation in the Church of England. While some social historians think the term should be abandoned due to the various ways it was used during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, others who identify themselves as Reformed or Calvinistic defend the continuing use of the terms “Puritan” and “Puritanism.”

This book is about Puritan theology. Its chapters will address various areas of the systematic theology of Puritanism. Fine studies on Puritan theology already exist. Some address the Puritans in general,<sup>1</sup> and some focus on the work of a particular Puritan theologian.<sup>2</sup> To date, however, there has been no single work that provides an overview of Puritan thought concerning Scripture’s major doctrines, historically and systematically considered. We hope this book will fill that gap. We will begin by stating what we will and will not cover—and why.

## Puritans and Puritanism

One of the most difficult tasks for the church historian is to define Puritanism.<sup>3</sup> It would be no overstatement to suggest that a thorough definition would double the length of this introduction. Nonetheless, a few thoughts are in order.

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1. See, e.g., Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Ernest Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (1964; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

2. See, e.g., J. I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2000).

3. On this question, see Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 82n1; Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans, With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), xiii–xix; Ralph Bronkema, *The Essence of Puritanism* (Goes: Oosterbaan and LeCointre, 1929); Jerald C. Brauer, “Reflections on the Nature of English Puritanism,” *Church History* 23 (1954): 98–109; A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1991), 313–21; Basil Hall, “Puritanism: The Problem of Definition,” in *Studies in Church History*, ed. G. J. Cumming (London: Nelson, 1965), 2:283–96; Charles H. George, “Puritanism as History and Historiography,” *Past and Present* 41 (1968): 77–104; Richard Mitchell Hawkes, “The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 247; William Lamont, “Puritanism as History and Historiography: Some Further Thoughts,” *Past and Present* 42 (1969): 133–46; Richard Greaves, “The Nature of the Puritan Tradition,” in *Reformation, Conformity and Dissent: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Nuttall*, ed. R. Buick Knox (London: Epworth Press, 1977), 255–73; John Morgan, *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes towards Reason, Learning, and Education, 1560–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9–22; D. M. Lloyd-Jones, “Puritanism and Its Origins,” *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 237–59; J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 21–36; Tae-Hyeun Park, *The Sacred Rhetoric of the Holy Spirit: A Study of Puritan Preaching in Pneumatological*

According to John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, “Puritanism was a variety of Reformed Protestantism, aligned with the continental Calvinistic churches rather than with the Lutherans.”<sup>4</sup> They say Puritanism was a “distinctive and particularly intense variety of early modern Reformed Protestantism which originated within the Church of England, and was a product of that unique environment and its tensions. Under Elizabeth I, the Church of England was widely regarded as a Reformed Church.”<sup>5</sup> No doubt Puritan theologians were for the most part Reformed, or Calvinistic. Even so, we do not insist that the Puritans were exclusively Reformed. Defining Reformed orthodoxy is complex, but confessional documents such as the Three Forms of Unity<sup>6</sup> and, more relevant to this book, the Westminster Standards<sup>7</sup> provide us with an accurate summation of Reformed theology.

Richard Baxter (1615–1691) was certainly a Puritan, but he was not Reformed in the way of William Perkins (1558–1602), Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679), and John Owen (1616–1683). Intense theological debates between Baxter and Owen reveal that their differences went far beyond semantics. Baxter thought he could affirm the Canons of Dort, but he did not have the same sympathy for the Westminster documents, which excluded several of his views, most notably on the atonement and justification. And while he contributed with other ministers to the writing of *A New Confession of Faith, or the first Principles of the Christian Religion necessary to be laid as a Foundation by all such as desire to build on unto Perfection* (1654), Baxter did not approve of its final form. What is more, he accused Owen, Goodwin, and Thomas Manton (1620–1677) of lacking the judgment required for such a work.

Puritanism was more diverse than it may seem from our vantage point today. The use of the word as a theological term in this book must be carefully understood. Not only does Baxter defy classification, but so do John Goodwin (1594–1665), an Arminian; John Milton (1608–1674), possibly an Arian; John Bunyan (1628–1688), a Baptist; and John Eaton (c. 1575–1631), an Antinomian—all of whom are often considered Puritans. Coffey and Lim suggest that “Calvinistic Baptists, for example, were widely recognized as orthodox and pious, and the Puritan national church of the Cromwellian era incorporated some Baptists alongside Presbyterians and Congregationalists.”<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the vast majority of Puritans were part of the larger theological movement called Reformed orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> The English Parliament certainly wanted the nation’s faith to be understood as Reformed and Protestant. The great design of the calling of the Westminster Assembly

*Perspective* (Proefschrift: Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, 2005), 73–75; Leonard J. Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 37–57.

4. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

5. Coffey and Lim, “Introduction,” 3.

6. Doctrinal standards of the Dutch Reformed churches and their kindred denominations outside the Netherlands: the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort.

7. Major (Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms) and minor (Directory for the Public Worship of God, Form of Presbyterian Church Government, and *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*).

8. Coffey and Lim, “Introduction,” 5.

9. Carl Trueman, speaking of the 1662 Act of Uniformity, whereby the Puritans were ejected from the Church of England, notes that this “guaranteed that the Reformed theology for which most of them stood would no longer be a significant force in these three [political, educational, and ecclesiastical] realms.” “Puritan Theology as Historical Event: A Linguistic Approach to the Ecumenical Context,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 253. For a brief discussion of Reformed orthodoxy, see Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 33ff.

was to secure “uniformity of religion” in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. But that did not mean the Puritans always agreed on matters of theology. They held spirited debates on several doctrines (not to mention matters of liturgy and church polity), as will be shown in forthcoming chapters.<sup>10</sup> But they were united in seeking to demolish the errors of the semi-Pelagian Roman Catholics, anti-trinitarian Socinians, and freewill Arminians. They opposed Roman Catholics such as the Jesuit preacher Robert Cardinal Bellarmine (1542–1621). They rejected Socinianism, particularly the views of Laelius (1525–1562) and Faustus (1539–1604), and the Polish Racovian Catechism (1605). And they fought against the Arminians, especially their erroneous views on predestination, the doctrine of God, the atonement, the Trinity, and the doctrine of justification.<sup>11</sup>

Besides their strong polemics with the aforementioned groups (and others), the Puritans provide evidence of an ever widening divide between Reformed and Lutheran theologians. Lutheranism had been very influential in the earliest beginnings of the English Reformation, but as Coffey and Lim note, the Lutherans were not part of the Puritan movement. There are some references to Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) in Puritan writings, but generally references to Lutheran theology are negative, especially in the areas of Christology and the Lord’s Supper. John Owen’s massive corpus is strikingly absent of quotes from Lutheran writers, though he seems to quote from almost everyone else!<sup>12</sup> The Puritans believed that Lutheran worship retained too many unbiblical pre-Reformation practices.<sup>13</sup> That is perhaps the principal reason the Lutherans were regarded as theologically suspect, notwithstanding their contribution to and general agreement on the understanding of justification by faith alone.

Puritanism must be understood as a movement that sought further reformation of the Church of England in conformity with the Word of God. The Puritans were successful for a time in achieving this goal, as is evident in the work done by the Westminster Assembly, the introduction of Presbyterian ordination and church government in divers places, and the accession of Puritans to positions of influence in church and state and in the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. But Puritanism was dealt a severe blow as a reform movement inside the Church of England, as Carl Trueman notes: “In 1662, with the passing of the Act of Uniformity, those within the Church of England who wished for a more thorough reformation of its practices, and who found themselves unable to accept what they regarded as the popish aspects of the Book of Common Prayer, were forced to make a difficult choice: either they should conform and give up their deeply-held beliefs about the church; or they should leave the church in protest. Nearly two-thousand chose the latter option and thus Puritanism made the transition to nonconformity.”<sup>14</sup>

What became of Puritanism? Norman Sykes once gave this concise summation:

The eighteenth century witnessed a marked decline of the religious fervor of its predecessor among all churches. With the accession of the house of Hanover,<sup>15</sup> an

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10. On this matter, see also Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones, eds., *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

11. See Aza Goudriaan, “Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy,” in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*, eds. Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot & Willemien Otten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 155–78.

12. Incidentally, he does, however, take a “Lutheran” view of the old covenant’s relation to the new covenant.

13. “With the Reformed, Puritans believed that the Lutheran church remained too ‘popish’ in its liturgy, its sacramental theology and its church government.” Coffey and Lim, “Introduction,” 2.

14. Trueman, “Puritan Theology as Historical Event,” 253.

15. In 1714 George Louis, Elector of Hanover, took the British throne as King George I.

age of moderation, sobriety and convention began. The established Church was safeguarded by the Test and Corporation acts;<sup>16</sup> and the Protestant Dissenters,<sup>17</sup> secure in their toleration<sup>18</sup> and much divided by theological controversies, settled down to a position of passive acquiescence. Politically their organization into the Dissenting Deputies<sup>19</sup> enabled them to preserve the *status quo* as regards legal toleration, but not extend it; and their acceptance of the royal bounty, the *regium donum*,<sup>20</sup> as an annual contribution to their charities, signified their settling down to be at ease in Sion.<sup>21</sup>

Some, like Trueman, suggest that 1662 was the end of the Puritan era, since attempts to reform the Church of England ended with the threefold restoration of the monarchy, the historic episcopate, and the Book of Common Prayer. Others, as Sykes, argue that the transition from Puritanism to Protestant Dissent came after 1689 with the Act of Toleration. And some would say that Puritanism ended with the death of John Howe (1630–1705), minister of the Silver Street Presbyterian Church in London. Whatever the year, Puritanism has special reference to issues of church and state, theology and worship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After 1689, all parties to the great conflicts of earlier decades laid down their weapons and began peacefully to coexist, more or less.

This is important because although Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was a Puritan in theology and piety and is sometimes regarded as the last of the Puritans, he was not a Puritan in the strict historical sense. This book therefore does not include chapters on Edwards's theology, however fascinating they would have been. The Marrow men and Seceders of Scotland, the "Old Princeton" worthies, Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847), Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), John Charles Ryle (1816–1900), Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981), James I. Packer (b. 1926), and other luminaries, though deeply sympathetic to the Puritans, cannot be regarded as Puritans in the sense that the Westminster divines were. If they were, Puritanism would lose any specific historical meaning.

In understanding the Puritans, we should note what Tom Webster says about the three distinctives of a Puritan. He says, first, Puritans had a dynamic fellowship with God that shaped their minds, affected their emotions, and penetrated their souls. They were grounded in something and someone outside of themselves: the triune God of the Scriptures. Second, Puritans embraced a shared system of beliefs grounded in the Scriptures. Today we refer to this system as Reformed orthodoxy. Third, on the basis of their common spiritual experience and unity in the faith, the

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16. Laws which, until 1828, imposed a religious test for holding public office, requiring, *inter alia*, public officials and employees to receive Holy Communion in the Church of England once a year.

17. Soon to be known merely as "Nonconformists," and "Nonconformity."

18. In 1689, the Act of Toleration granted freedom of worship to trinitarian Protestant dissenters, provided that they met in houses of worship registered with the authorities.

19. Beginning about 1732, each Baptist, Congregational, and Presbyterian congregation within ten miles of London appointed deputies to act in concert as a political action committee or lobby, to protect the rights and interests of Nonconformity. The repeal of the Test and Corporation acts was largely the fruit of their labors.

20. Beginning in 1721, an annual "royal gift" from public funds to assist impoverished Nonconformist ministers and their widows, distributed by representatives of the Baptist, Congregational, and Presbyterian churches. That was discontinued in 1857.

21. Norman Sykes, *The English Religious Tradition: Sketches of Its Influence on Church, State, and Society* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 66.



Puritans established a network of relationships among believers and ministers.<sup>22</sup> This fellowship of cooperative brotherhood was born in sixteenth-century Elizabethan England, and developed in seventeenth-century England and New England. The distinctive character of Puritanism was its quest for a life reformed by the Word of God. The Puritans were committed to search the Scriptures, organize and analyze their findings, and then apply them to all areas of life. They had a confessional, theological, and trinitarian approach that urged conversion and communion with God in personal, family, church, and national life.

So, in calling Thomas Goodwin a Puritan, for example, we mean that he was part of a spiritual network of leaders grounded in Reformed beliefs and experiential fellowship with God. Goodwin worked with other Puritans for Bible-based reformation and Spirit-empowered revival on personal, familial, ecclesiastical, and national levels in England from the 1560s to the 1660s and beyond. His writings, and the writings of his contemporaries, were about “doctrine for life,” holding the belief, as American Presbyterians later declared, “that truth is in order to goodness: and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness.”<sup>23</sup>

In summary, the late sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century movement of Puritanism was a kind of vigorous Calvinism. Experientially, it was warm and contagious; evangelistically, it was aggressive, yet tender; ecclesiastically, it sought to practice the headship of Christ over the faith, worship, and order of His body, the church; politically, it was active, balanced, and bound by conscience before God, in the relations of king, Parliament, and subjects.<sup>24</sup> J. I. Packer says it well: “Puritanism was an evangelical holiness movement seeking to implement its vision of spiritual renewal, national and personal, in the church, the state, and the home; in education, evangelism, and economics; in individual discipleship and devotion, and in pastoral care and competence.”<sup>25</sup>

## Book and Chapter Aims

Some chapters in this book refer to many Puritans, some to a few, and some to only one. This is deliberate on our part, for a variety of reasons. Chapters that discuss many Puritans offer a picture of what might be called the “Puritan Position” or “Puritan Consensus.”<sup>26</sup> When only a few Puritans are discussed, we can discuss each author’s thought in more detail but also note differences, nuances, and emphases in each author. Finally, chapters that focus mainly on one Puritan, though in interaction with his contemporaries, enable us to provide a fairly comprehensive view of how a particular theologian thought through a particular doctrine. The authors treated as the chief subject of a chapter are typically reflective of basic Puritan theology, or, in the case of the chapter on Thomas Goodwin’s christological supralapsarianism, a position that was acceptable within the Reformed tradition. In some cases, a chapter devoted to a single Puritan author provides us with a closer look at Puritans whom others have ignored, such as Thomas Manton, Christopher Love (1618–1651), and Stephen Charnock (1628–1680).

Some chapters also interact with theologians from the Continent. This too is deliberate on our part. Anyone familiar with the writings of the Puritans will discover that they quoted

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22. Tom Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement, c. 1620–1643* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 333–35.

23. “Preliminary Principles,” *Form of Government of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839), Bk. 1, Ch. 1, Sec. 4.

24. Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, xviii–xix.

25. J. I. Packer, *An Anglican to Remember—William Perkins: Puritan Popularizer* (London: St. Antholin’s Lecture-ship Charity Lecture, 1996), 1–2.

26. In the chapters on the covenant of works and the old and new covenants, for example, we see unity and diversity.

hundreds of authors from many different traditions and all periods in ecclesiastical history. We have chosen to interact mainly with Continental Reformed theologians since the Puritans we discuss considered themselves part of the wider international movement of Reformed orthodoxy. John Calvin (1509–1564), Johannes Maccovius (1588–1644), Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669), Francis Turretin (1623–1687), Herman Witsius (1636–1708), and others are frequently brought into discussions to show the similarities or occasional differences between the Puritans and Reformed theologians on the Continent.

In many chapters, we feel we have just scratched the surface. For example, trying to give an overview of Stephen Charnock's mammoth tome, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in one chapter is almost impossible. Our hope is that these chapters will offer a general yet accurate picture of various doctrines, while whetting the appetite of students of Puritanism to engage in further study of these doctrines in greater detail.

We have tried to be fairly comprehensive, but we must acknowledge that we have not covered all areas of Puritan theology.<sup>27</sup> Large, single-volume works typically suffer from a lack of the breadth and depth possible in a multivolume work. Nonetheless, nearly all of the major Puritan doctrines are discussed, and some chapters cover topics that could easily be expanded into an essay or dissertation (e.g., the beatific vision, or Puritan preaching).

In this book we have also attempted to do responsible, historical theology. The chapters are designed to give an accurate picture of what the Puritans said, not what we would have liked them to say. We recognize that there were strengths and weaknesses in Puritan theology. There is no question that Thomas Goodwin's eschatology, fascinating as it is, had many problems. In the latter part of his life, Goodwin regretted setting a date for the beginning of the millennium (supposedly 1666). The Puritans did not excel in eschatology. Reformed theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have provided the church with a more exegetically sustainable account of how to understand, for example, the book of Revelation. That said, we believe that the Puritans were not only correct but that they excelled in most areas of theology. Few theologians prior to the Puritans could write with such theological precision while also applying theology to the hearts and minds of those who listened to their sermons and read their books. "Doctrine for life" was a constant emphasis in the writings of Puritans who were almost all highly trained theologians as well as pastors of churches. Many forget that most of the greatest theologians God has given to the church were also pastors and teachers in the local church.

We are hopeful as well that this book will lay to rest many misconceptions about the Puritans. This explains our emphasis on the primary sources in each chapter. We are grateful for sound secondary literature on the Puritans, but we have (by far) relied on primary documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in writing this book. For example, the criticism that the Puritans were "legalistic" never seems to go away.<sup>28</sup> If people paid attention to the whole of Puritan

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27. Nor have we introduced much biographical material concerning the Puritan authors being expounded or bibliographical material of their reprinted books, since that has been done by Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*. That volume tells the life story of all the nearly 150 Puritans who have been reprinted since the resurgence of Puritan literature in the 1950s and provides short descriptions of the nearly 700 reprinted Puritan titles, serving as a kind of companion volume to this book.

28. Coffey and Lim seem to imply the Puritans were legalists: "And like the Reformed, they typically qualified Luther's antithesis between law and gospel, emphasising the role of God's law within the Christian life and the local community, and trying (sometimes with conspicuous success) to recreate godly Genevas in England and America. This legalism provoked an 'antinomian backlash' from within, but even when radical Puritans rejected orthodox Reformed ideas about the moral law or predestination or infant baptism, they still defined themselves in relation to the Reformed tradition." "Introduction," 3.

theology, however, they would likely find themselves rethinking that criticism. We are also hopeful that we may discredit so-called “Calvin *versus* the Calvinists” historiography with this book, if indeed it was not already discredited long since. And we hope that a careful reading of the chapters in this book will present you with what the Puritans actually said on a given doctrine, which might then be compared to what others may think or claim that the Puritans said.

This book concludes with eight chapters showing a variety of ways in which the Puritans put their theology into practice. Though “doctrine for life” runs throughout this book (the Puritans could not escape their “uses” of each doctrine, and neither could we as we expounded their beliefs), we consider it fitting and true to Puritan theology to have such a concluding section. J. I. Packer, in the introduction to his excellent work, *A Quest for Godliness*, commented that the essays in his book “are not just history and historical theology; they are themselves, in aim at least, spirituality, as much as anything else I have written.”<sup>29</sup> We echo that sentiment and pray that this work will not only affect the minds but also the hearts of its readers. The Puritans would find this a most desirable outcome.

We trust that this book on Puritan theology will appeal to many types of people. Scholars will find this book useful, given our attention to primary sources and efforts to accurately reflect what the Puritans believed about various doctrines. But the target audience for this book is not primarily academic. Rather, we hope this book will also appeal to Christian laypersons, students of theology, seminarians, and ordained church leaders, such as pastors, ruling elders, and deacons. Reaching these varied groups is not easy, but we have done our best to put together a book that allows—to quote one well-known phrase—“elephants to swim and children to play in the water.” Nearly all Latin, Greek, and Hebrew words, phrases, and sentences have been translated for the reader. In the end, we are reminded of Archbishop James Ussher’s (1581–1656) comment that it takes all of our learning to make these things plain. We have done our best to do that.

Most of the chapters we have written are original to this book. Some have been reprinted from other places, and we are grateful for permission from various publishers to include them here; however, in nearly all such cases we have rewritten and edited those formerly published chapters—in most cases, substantially so. It should also be noted that we have taken the liberty to modernize spellings in quotations from antiquarian books.

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29. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 16.

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To the Triune God who has loved me with an everlasting love, and who will continue to love me forever because of Jesus Christ, I join with the apostle Paul in doxology: “for of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

—Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones

*Chapters written or co-authored by Dr. Beeke:* 3, 6–7, 10–12, 23–27, 31–37, 41–43, 45–47, 51–59  
*Chapters written or co-authored by Dr. Jones:* 1–2, 4–5, 8–9, 13–22, 28–30, 38–40, 44, 48–50, 59



## Chapter 55

# The Puritans on Conscience

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*We can do nothing well without joy, and a good conscience, which is the ground of joy.*

—RICHARD SIBBES<sup>1</sup>

Protestant theology is known for its focus on conscience. Consider Martin Luther, whose insight into justification by faith came to him while he was agonizing over matters of conscience. He was so broken by knowing his sin that he could not quiet his conscience no matter how he tried. Luther's Christianity was a religion of conscience, not only in the matter of sin and guilt, but also in the matter of Scripture and the obedience that it required.

At Worms, when Luther was asked to recant the views he had expressed in his books, he replied, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe."<sup>2</sup> By using the word *safe*, Luther meant that going against one's conscience endangers one's very soul. So he stood before men and surrendered himself to the hands of God to show how far he was willing to go to confess what Christianity was about.

John Calvin treated conscience within the context of Christian liberty. He said conscience stands between God and us as we appear before the tribunal of God. He defined conscience as "a sense of divine justice, as an additional witness" that will not allow people "to conceal their sins or to elude accusation at the tribunal of the supreme Judge."<sup>3</sup>

From Luther through the Puritan era, nearly all leaders of the Reformation stressed that the conscience of man must correspond with the Word of God. The Word of God is given to us to instruct our consciences, and consciences are given to us so that we may live in subjection to God's Word. The Puritans focused on this relationship and fleshed it out more fully than the Reformers had done. The Puritan preacher's most momentous task was awakening and guiding the human conscience. Conscience was a tremendous and inescapable reality to the Puritans.

Several Puritans wrote books on conscience. William Perkins (1558–1602) wrote *A Discourse of Conscience Wherein is Set Down the Nature, Properties, and Differences Thereof: as Also the Way to Get and Keep a Good Conscience*,<sup>4</sup> William Ames (1576–1633) wrote *Conscience, with the*

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1. Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart 7 vols. (1862–1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 3:223.

2. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 185.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.19.15.

4. William Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience* (London, 1596).

*Power and Cases Thereof*,<sup>5</sup> William Fenner (1600–1640) wrote *The Souls Looking-Glasse, Lively representing its Estate before God: With a Treatise of Conscience; Wherein the Definitions and Distinctions Thereof Are Unfolded, and Severall Cases resolved*,<sup>6</sup> and Nathanael Vincent (1638–1697) wrote *Heaven upon Earth: or, a Discourse Concerning Conscience*.<sup>7</sup> These books helped formulate a Puritan theology of conscience, which is critical for understanding the importance of the conscience for Puritans and the distinctive Puritan approach to counseling.

In this chapter, we will first look at the Puritan view of the nature of the conscience as created by God, second the corrupt state of the conscience due to man's sin, and third the restoration of conscience by the Word and Spirit of Christ.

### The Nature of the Conscience

According to the Puritans, the conscience is a universal aspect of human nature by which God has established his authority in the soul for men to judge themselves rationally.

#### *Everyone Has a Conscience*

The Puritan authors began their works on conscience by stressing, first, that Scripture, experience, and “the light of nature” affirm that every person has a conscience.<sup>8</sup> For example, Nathanael Vincent wrote,

*This thing, called conscience, is in everyone; there is no man without it. You may as well suppose a man without an understanding as without a conscience; and without a power to know anything, as without a power to reflect upon himself. Every reasonable soul, being capable both of sin and grace, is endued with a power of reflecting upon itself, that sin may be condemned and grace may be approved. All are called upon to “consider their ways” (Hag. 1:5, 7), but to take our own ways into consideration is the work of conscience; conscience therefore is in all.*<sup>9</sup>

Vincent went on to say, “This conscience, *when awakened, will deal plainly with the greatest... Conscience is not to be escaped; we can no more fly from conscience than we can run away from ourselves.*”<sup>10</sup>

Fenner added, “The Lord engraved conscience in man when he created him at first. True it is, since the fall of man conscience is miserably corrupted; but man can never put it off: Conscience continueth forever in every man whether he be in earth or heaven or hell.”<sup>11</sup> He went on to stress that conscience is irrepensible (witness Joseph's brothers' guilt twenty years after their crime), supreme (both as a witness and a commander), and intimate (i.e., privy to and spying out everything that we think, say, and do).<sup>12</sup>

Those who deny the existence of a conscience are motivated more by their sin than their conviction. Vincent wrote, “The true cause why stupid sinners say there is no such thing as conscience,

5. William Ames, *Conscience, with the Power and Cases Thereof* (London, 1639).

6. William Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse...* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, for John Rothwell, 1643).

7. Nathanael Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth* (London: for Thomas Parkhurst, 1676).

8. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 5–17.

9. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 17–18.

10. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 18–21.

11. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 23.

12. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 23.



is this, Conscience does accurse, and reproach, and disquiet them, and they first wishing there were no such thing, employ their corrupt reason to argue against it.”<sup>13</sup>

Normal Clifford writes that for the Puritans,

The witness of conscience in man’s soul was the means by which all natural knowledge of God was sustained. The presence of conscience meant the presence of God’s witness and ambassador in the soul of man ever reminding him of his responsibility towards God. This served to deprive man of every excuse for not believing in God and for not fulfilling His lawful will (Rom. 1:19, 20).<sup>14</sup>

### *Conscience Empowers Self-Knowledge and Self-Judgment*

Samuel Ward (1577–1640), following the medieval theologians Hugo of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), wrote of conscience as the soul’s God-given ability to reflect upon itself.<sup>15</sup> Earlier, Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) had written, “For what is conscience, but the soul itself reflecting upon itself? It is the property of the reasonable soul and the excellency of it, that it can return upon itself.”<sup>16</sup>

Most Puritan theologians, from William Perkins on, defined conscience as a rational faculty that provides moral self-knowledge and moral judgment dealing with questions authoritatively as God’s voice in terms of right and wrong, duty and desert.<sup>17</sup> In making this point, the Puritans sometimes appealed to the word *conscience* itself. They argued that conscience is derived from two Latin words: *scientia*, which means “knowledge,” and *con*, a prefix implying community or joint sharing in something—in this case, knowledge shared jointly with God. *Conscientia* thus means knowledge that is shared with God, or knowledge of us that God shares with us.

So conscience expresses the moral consciousness or self-knowledge that we have, under God and in the presence of God, of having done right or wrong. Simply put, conscience is judgmental knowledge of our thoughts, words, and actions as God Himself knows us.<sup>18</sup> Thus, knowledge and conscience inform each other. As Thomas Adams (1583–1652) wrote, “Knowledge directs conscience; conscience perfects knowledge.”<sup>19</sup>

William Ames begins his book on conscience with this definition of conscience: “A man’s judgment of himself according to the judgment of God on him.”<sup>20</sup> Variations of this definition keep surfacing in Puritan writings. The Puritans followed Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in viewing conscience as a part of practical reason, that is, an exercise of the mind of man passing moral

13. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 5.

14. Norman Keith Clifford, “Casuistical Divinity in English Puritanism During the Seventeenth Century: Its Origins, Development and Significance” (PhD diss., University of London, 1957), 149.

15. Samuel Ward, “Balm from Gilead to Recover Conscience,” in *Sermons and Treatises* (1636; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 97. See Gary Brady, “A Study of Ideas of the Conscience in Puritan Writings, 1590–1640” (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2006), 46.

16. Sibbes, *Works* 3:208.

17. Most Puritans taught that the seat of the conscience is rooted in the reasonable soul or the understanding, in harmony with the Dominican and Thomistic tradition; a minority placed the seat of the conscience in the will, in accord with the Franciscan tradition. A few, such as Richard Baxter, refused to take sides (*The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, ed. William Orme [London: James Duncan, 1830], 6:96–97). Practically speaking, this variance of views made no substantial difference (Clifford, “Casuistical Divinity,” 149–56; cf. Thomas Wood, *English Casuistical Divinity During the Seventeenth Century, With Special Reference to Jeremy Taylor* [London: S.P.C.K., 1952], 67–69).

18. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 111.

19. Cited in John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), 107.

20. Ames, *Conscience*, 1. Packer says that Ames’s definition comes from Aquinas (*Quest for Godliness*, 109).

judgments.<sup>21</sup> They did not view conscience as a faculty distinct from the ordinary exercises of reason. They would not have accepted any analysis that separated reason and conscience. That is sometimes done in later philosophy, but the Puritans did not do it.<sup>22</sup>

Rather, the Puritans viewed conscience as reason in action on practical moral matters—that is, reason passing judgments upon what is right and wrong. So when the Puritans call conscience “God’s deputy and vice-regent within us,” “God’s spy in our bosoms,” and “God’s sergeant he employs to arrest the sinner,” we must not dismiss these ideas as quaint fancies. They represent a serious attempt to do justice to the human and biblical conception of conscience which our experience reflects; seeing conscience as a *witness* declaring facts (Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:12); a *mentor* prohibiting evil and prescribing standards (Acts 24:16; Rom. 13:5); and a *judge* telling us of our ill desert (1 John 3:20f). The New Testament confirms that definition. For example, Paul testifies in Romans 2:15: “Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.”<sup>23</sup>

In short, the Puritans taught that the conscience functions as a spiritual nervous system, which uses guilt to inform us that something is wrong and needs correction. Failing to heed the warnings of conscience can only lead to the hardening or searing of the conscience which in the end will bring us to destruction. Sibbes compared the authority of the conscience to a divine court within the human soul, where it serves as witness, accuser, judge, and executioner.<sup>24</sup>

### *Conscience Reasons Syllogistically*

The Puritans depicted the reasoning of conscience as a syllogistic form, much as Thomas Aquinas did.<sup>25</sup> Syllogistic reasoning as a method dates back to Aristotle (384–322 BC), who claimed it is the only valid form of reasoning about facts or values.<sup>26</sup> This form of reasoning includes a major premise stating a general principle, then a minor premise stating an observation or fact, then a conclusion that results from putting these premises together.

In his treatise on conscience, Ames illustrated the reasoning of conscience with two syllogisms; the first which conscience condemns, and the second which offers comfort. The major premise of the first syllogism is: *He that lives in sin shall die*. The minor premise is: *I live in sin*. The conclusion is: *Therefore I shall die*.<sup>27</sup>

Ames also offered a syllogism of conscience that arrives at a happier conclusion. The major premise is: *Whoever believes in Christ shall not die but live*. The minor premise is: *I believe in Christ*. If this is established as true, the believer is free to draw the conclusion: *Therefore I shall not die but*

21. Vincent quoted Aquinas’s definition of conscience as the application of our knowledge to our actions to testify regarding our past actions, to judge and bind regarding possible future actions. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 30. He cited Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 79, Art. 13. William Ames had a copy of the works of Thomas Aquinas in his library. Keith L. Sprunger, “The Learned Doctor Ames” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1963), 206.

22. Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 111.

23. For a succinct summary of the nature and kinds of conscience, see Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience: Tending to Resolve Doubts* (London: R. I. for Andrew Crook, 1649), 1–22.

24. Sibbes, *Works*, 3:210.

25. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 235–37.

26. “A syllogism is a discourse in which, certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so. I mean by the last phrase that they produce the consequence, and by this, that no further term is required from without in order to make the consequence necessary.” Aristotle, *Analytica Priora*, trans. A. J. Jenkinson, 1.1, quoted by Brady, 64, and available online at: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/> (accessed January 17, 2011).

27. Ames, *Conscience*, 3.

live.<sup>28</sup> The Puritans say all the reasonings of conscience have this syllogistic form and end up either excusing or accusing us.

Perkins summarized these reasonings of conscience as follows:

To *accuse* is an action of conscience giving judgment that this or that thing was evil done.... To *condemn* is another action of the Conscience joined with the former, whereby it giveth judgment that a man by this or that sin hath deserved death.... To *excuse*, is an action of conscience giving judgment that the thing is well done. To *absolve*, is an action of the conscience giving judgment that a man is free or clear from fault and so from punishment.<sup>29</sup>

How applicable is syllogistic reasoning today? Packer says,

Syllogistic reasoning may seem a bit rationalistic to us today, but the reasonings of conscience, like most of our thinking processes, are often so compressed that we do not recognize the mechanics by which they are operating. They flash through our mind as fast as messages flash through computers. All we are consciously aware of is the conclusion. But if you examine the conclusions of conscience, you will find that the Puritan doctrine is vindicated. The conclusions of the conscience all have behind them major premises concerning general truths and minor premises concerning matters of particular fact. Check it out and see.<sup>30</sup>

In short, conscience is largely autonomous from our will in its tasks and reasonings. Though we may suppress or stifle conscience, it normally speaks independently of our will and sometimes even contrary to our will. It speaks up when we would really rather it keep silent. And yet when it speaks, it is strangely distinct from us. It stands over us, we feel, addressing us as if it had an absolute authority which we did not give it and which we cannot take from it. So, like the Puritans, we still personify conscience and speak of it today as God's spokesman in the soul. Conscience is not a mere flight of fancy; it is a necessary part of our moral nature and experience.

#### *Conscience Represents God in Our Soul*

The Puritans illustrated the divinely authorized role of conscience in the soul with a number of lively pictures and personifications.

Conscience is God's *ambassador* or *deputy*. Conscience must constantly remind man of his duties as a human created in God's image. David Clarkson (1622–1686) wrote, "Conscience is God's deputy, and must in the exercise of this office confine itself to the orders and instructions of the sovereign Lord."<sup>31</sup> George Swinnock (c. 1627–1673) said, "Conscience is the deputy-deity in the little world, man."<sup>32</sup>

So, too, conscience serves as God's *preacher*. John Trapp (1601–1669) called conscience God's "domestic chaplain."<sup>33</sup> And William Fenner said,

28. Ames, *Conscience*, 3.

29. William Perkins, *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (London: John Legatt, 1612), 1:535–36.

30. J. I. Packer, class lecture on the Puritans at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.

31. David Clarkson, *The Works of David Clarkson*, 3 vols. (1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 2:475.

32. George Swinnock, *The Works of George Swinnock*, 5 vols. (1868; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 5:64.

33. Cited in Blanchard, *Complete Gathered Gold*, 106.

[Conscience] is a preacher also to tell us our duty both towards God and towards man: yea, it is a powerful preacher; it exhorteth, urgeth, provoketh: yea, [it is] the most powerful preacher that can be; it will cause the stoutest and stubbornest heart under heaven to quake now and then; it will never let us alone till it have brought us either to God or to the devil. Conscience is joined in commission with God's own Spirit to be an instructor unto us in the way we should walk, so that the Spirit and it are resisted and obeyed together, grieved or delighted together. We cannot sin against conscience but we sin also against God's Spirit; we cannot check our own conscience but we check and quench the Holy Spirit of God.<sup>34</sup>

Conscience is God's *register* or *notary*. Conscience is associated with memory. Thus Immanuel Bourne (1590–1672) said, "In the memory [conscience] is a register, to witness what is done or what is not done."<sup>35</sup> Fenner says conscience acts as God's "register-book that should be opened at the Day of Judgment, wherein is set down our thoughts, words and deeds."<sup>36</sup> This register of our internal and external activities will serve as the basis upon which we are excused or accused on Judgment Day.

Conscience is God's *executor of judgment*. Conscience is associated with judgment both today and in the future judgment. In a sense, conscience helps the Spirit arrest the sinner. William Gurnall (1616–1679) wrote, "Conscience is God's sergeant he employs to arrest the sinner."<sup>37</sup> Clifford writes, "Conscience was God's present witness or voice in man's soul possessing the power to give testimony of God's Judgment of man here and now. In this sense conscience was described as the internal executor of either God's wrath or His peace."<sup>38</sup> Vincent wrote,

Here 'twill be needful to note a difference between consciences condemning a sinner now, and the Lord's condemning him hereafter: that sentence which Christ will pronounce at the last day, will be peremptory, unalterable; therefore that judgment is called *Eternal Judgment*, Heb. 6.2. There is no appeal from that Tribunal, no reversing of the sentence.... But when conscience does at present condemn a sinner, it does not preclude and shut up the door of hope against him; its sentence of condemnation is but conditional, in case of continuance and obstinacy in sin, but if the unbeliever will believe in Jesus, and the impenitent will mourn for their iniquities, and turn from them to God, then they shall no longer be under condemnation.<sup>39</sup>

Conscience is our *overseer*. Conscience governs our entire life, the Puritans said. When it functions properly, conscience controls all of our faculties. Richard Bernard (1568–1641) wrote, "Conscience meddles with our understanding, our thoughts, our memory, our wills and the affections of our hearts."<sup>40</sup> John Robinson (1575–1625) was grateful for this work of the conscience, saying, "And surely, a great good work of God it is that he hath created, and set such an overseer

34. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 33.

35. Immanuel Bourne, *The Anatomie of Conscience* (London: G. E. and M. F. for Nathaniel Butter, 1623), 9.

36. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 33.

37. William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, 2 vols. in one (1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 1:522.

38. Clifford, "Casuistical Divinity," 158.

39. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 50–51.

40. Richard Bernard, *Christian See to Thy Conscience* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1631), 57ff.

as this conscience is, in the soul of man, by which, if he do anything amiss, he is checked in secret, that so by repentance he may find mercy at God's hands."<sup>41</sup>

Conscience is our *mirror*. The Puritans taught that conscience serves as a looking glass or mirror so that we can determine our true spiritual state in accord with the mind of God. According to Robert Harris (1581–1658), “[Conscience] ’tis set in man to make known to man, in what terms he stands with God, thence its name; thence its name; therefore fitly termed the soul’s glass, the understanding’s light.”<sup>42</sup> Thomas Adams (1583–1652) simply said, “Conscience is to the soul as the stomach is to the body; sin doth distemper the one, as unwholesome meat or surfeits [overeating] do the other.”<sup>43</sup>

Normally the judgment of conscience is supreme, impartial, faithful, and private, Fenner said. He went on to say, “Ye need not go far to know what state you are in: there is that in your bosom that can decide the matter.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, we ought to use our conscience regularly to examine ourselves, for with the Spirit’s assistance, our conscience will either accuse us and call for fresh repentance before God, or excuse us, which will provide us with peace that passes understanding.

In summary, the Puritans taught that human nature universally includes a conscience, that is, the representation of the voice of God, authoritatively leading us to judge ourselves by rational deductions from our knowledge of God’s will and knowledge of ourselves.

## The Corruption of Conscience

Conscience no longer functions rightly in man because of the Fall. Daniel Webber writes that the Puritans were thorough in their understanding and diagnosis of the fallen human condition.<sup>45</sup> So when they dealt with the doctrine of sin, the Puritans called sin *sin*, declaring it to be moral rebellion against God. They preached about sins of commission and sins of omission, in thought, word, and deed. Works such as Jeremiah Burroughs’s (c. 1600–1646) *The Evil of Evils: The Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin*, stress the heinousness of sin. In sixty-seven chapters, Burroughs teaches that the least sin involves more evil than the greatest affliction; sin and God are contrary to each other; sin opposes all that is good; sin is the poison of all evils; sin bears an infinite dimension and character; and sin makes us comfortable with the Devil.<sup>46</sup> Sin is not merely a choice; it is a condition of depravity inherited from the Fall of Adam in Paradise, a depravity which makes us unfit for God, holiness, and heaven.<sup>47</sup>

41. John Robinson, *Observations Divine and Moral* (Amsterdam, 1625), 244.

42. Robert Harris, *The Works of Robert Harris* (London: James Flesher for John Bartlet, 1654), 2:18.

43. Thomas Adams, *An Exposition upon the Second Epistle General of St. Peter*, ed. James Sherman (1839; repr., Ligonier, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 588.

44. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 34–47.

45. Daniel Webber, “The Puritan Pastor as Counsellor,” in *The Office and Work of the Minister, Westminster Conference papers*, 1986 (London: Westminster Conference, 1987), 84.

46. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Evil of Evils* (1654; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995). Cf. Ralph Venning, *The Plague of Plagues* (1669; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965); Thomas Watson, *The Mischief of Sin* (1671; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994); Samuel Bolton, “Sin: the Greatest Evil,” in *Puritans on Conversion* (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 1–69.

47. The most powerful Puritan work on the dread condition of original sin is Thomas Goodwin, “An Unregenerate Man’s Guiltiness Before God in Respect of Sin and Punishment,” vol. 10 of *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (1865; repr., Eureka, Calif.: Tanski, 1996). The classic doctrinal Puritan work on the subject is Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, vol. 3 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1758; repr., New Haven: Yale, 1970). The best secondary source on the Edwardsean view is C. Samuel Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985). Thomas Boston’s classic, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (1720; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), focuses on the four states of innocence, depravity, grace, and glory, but his section on imputed and

The Puritans viewed the conscience as profoundly affected by man's fall into sin and misery. The Puritans wrote about bad, evil, or guilty consciences. Fenner said a guilty conscience is like "a hell to men here on earth."<sup>48</sup> It points to an eternal hell to come, where the memory of a guilty conscience will never fade.<sup>49</sup> "A guilty conscience is like a whirlpool, drawing in all to itself which would otherwise pass by," Thomas Fuller (1608–1661) quipped.<sup>50</sup> He wrote, "A wounded conscience is able to un-paradise paradise itself."<sup>51</sup> John Flavel (1628–1691) wrote that a guilty conscience "is the devil's anvil, on which he fabricates all those swords and spears with which the guilty sinner pierces and wounds himself."<sup>52</sup> And John Trapp said, "One small drop [of guilt] troubles the whole sea of outward comforts."<sup>53</sup>

But worse than a conscience that terrifies the soul is a conscience that pacifies a soul still under condemnation. The Puritans taught that, due to our fall in Adam, human nature is prone to be self-deceiving and to backslide.<sup>54</sup> Unbelievers live with an "evil conscience," either because they convince themselves they are at peace with God when they are not or because they settle for a lifestyle in which they are not at peace with God. Even believers are prone to live with a conscience that is less than "good"—that is, a conscience that is not at peace with God through the gospel and does not examine itself so as to remain alert and tender to every moral infraction. When the conscience is not good, it can also prompt actions and reasonings that are unscriptural and unreliable. Both believers and unbelievers try to talk their consciences into a false sense of peace.

The Puritans wrote a great deal about various types of evil consciences. Here is a summary of six kinds of evil consciences that they described, moving from the least to the most evil.

### 1. *The Trembling or Doubting Conscience*

This type of conscience was included by the Puritans in the list of evil consciences as long as it does not drive its owner to Jesus Christ for salvation. The trembling or troubled conscience accuses the soul of sin and threatens the soul with God's wrath and the expectation of death and judgment. The doubting soul hangs in suspense, scarcely knowing whether it is more sinful to believe or to doubt and not presume. Though this conscience is the most hopeful of evil consciences because it is awake enough to have some serious impressions of eternal truths, and therefore is most likely to be saved, it is still evil because it cannot give its owner peace and assurance until it finds rest in Christ.<sup>55</sup> Fenner's first solution for this type of conscience is that you should not allow it to doubt but are called to believe and embrace the offer of grace in the gospel, using the means of grace diligently and casting yourself upon the gospel grace of God, waiting upon God to make His calling and His Son's grace effectual.<sup>56</sup>

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inherited depravity is especially poignant. He details how Adam's original sin broke man's relationship with God as well as each of the Ten Commandments.

48. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 124.

49. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 125–26.

50. Thomas Fuller, *The Holy and Profane States* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865), 102.

51. Thomas Fuller, *The Cause and Cure of a Wounded Conscience* (London: G. D. for John Williams, 1649), 28.

52. John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 5:455.

53. John Trapp, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Hugh Martin (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1868), 3:39 [on Prov. 10:22].

54. Bernard, *Christian See to Thy Conscience*, 238.

55. Clifford, "Casuistical Divinity," 176–77.

56. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 143–44.

## 2. *The Moralistic Conscience*

This conscience has some good elements, for it is grounded upon God's law and thus, wrote Richard Bernard, it "produceth much good for the exercise of moral virtues in men's living together in societies, to preserve justice, equity, to do good works, and to uphold a common peace among them."<sup>57</sup> The moralistic conscience can exercise outwardly moral virtues and good works due to the common work of the Holy Spirit. Vincent wrote,

There is some light remaining in the conscience, and though the heart be extremely evil, willing to deceive, [and] will be deceived, yet the conscience has some kind of tenderness and faithfulness left in it, unless by long custom in sin it be made senseless and stupid. I readily yield that conscience is corrupted also in a great measure by the Fall. . . . But yet still 'tis a great mercy that conscience does so much as it does; the light might have been totally extinguished, and the Lord might have suffered us to have run full speed in our wicked ways to destruction without any monitor within to check or control us.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its admirable qualities, a moralistic conscience is substantially different from the good conscience of the regenerate. The conscience of the moralistic falls short in God's book of reckoning. Bernard said,

A moralistic may lift up himself, as the young rich man in the Gospel did, yet can it not give him assurance of eternal life; for first, the law cannot bind the conscience of a Christian to believe his salvation by the law, because the law is weak in this through man's faultiness, and the Gospel teaches salvation another way. Secondly, the heathen, we see, have this moral conscience, [as do] many unregenerate persons in the church. Thirdly, an excellent moralistic, in his own apprehension, for the love of the world, may leave Christ, as the young man did, Matt. 19:22. Fourthly, because a moral righteousness cannot exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees; but the righteousness, by which we must be saved, must exceed that, Matt. 5:20.<sup>59</sup>

The moralistic conscience is not transformed by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ's blood. It is only illuminated by the light of nature, whereas the conscience of the regenerate is illuminated by the gospel and then, in the words of Ephraim Huit (c. 1608–1644), bound by "the law written anew in the mind and heart (Heb. 8:10)."<sup>60</sup> Thus, the conscience of the moralistic never can do any real, abiding, spiritual good, for his conscience is never motivated by loving God above all and his neighbor as himself. It does not operate by saving faith and thus does not serve God's glory.<sup>61</sup>

## 3. *The Scrupulous Conscience*

The scrupulous conscience is in many ways a counterfeit form of the good conscience, making much out of religious duties and moral trifles. It is scrupulously religious but does not look to Christ alone for salvation nor find peace in Christ. The scrupulous conscience "determines a thing to be lawful, yet scarcely to be done, lest it should be unlawful," as Samuel Annesley

57. Bernard, *Christian See to Thy Conscience*, 246.

58. Vincent, *Heaven Upon Earth*, 63–64.

59. Bernard, *Christian See to Thy Conscience*, 246–47.

60. Ephraim Huit, *The Anatomy of Conscience* (London: I. D. for William Sheffard, 1626), 187.

61. Clifford, "Casuistical Divinity," 163–67.

(c. 1620–1696) said.<sup>62</sup> In other words, it is so afraid of sinning that it avoids even doing what is good and upright.

Then, too, the scrupulous conscience engages in the kind of self-examination that produces aimless introspection and inner gloom. Some morbid souls practice such inward ruminations even today. That ought to be discouraged, the Puritans said, for it does no good to examine ourselves apart from Christ and the gospel.

The Puritans said self-examination, though necessary, should never be divorced from:

- *Jesus Christ*—for every look you take to yourself, take ten looks to Christ, for Christ alone can be the object of true faith;
- *The Word of God*—which provides the proper grounds of self-examination and marks and fruits of grace; and
- *The Holy Spirit*—who alone can shed light upon His own saving work by means of the Word.

The Puritans would agree with Calvin who said that if you contemplate yourself apart from Christ, the Word, and the Spirit, “that is sure damnation.”<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, if you contemplate yourself in Christ by God’s Word and Spirit, much good can accrue, for self-examination can assure us that our salvation is based on the right foundation, Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and that we have a personal stake in that salvation.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. *The Erring Conscience*

This conscience includes various forms of ignorance and misperception because it wrongly applies God’s Word. Samuel Annesley wrote, “Conscience is sometimes deceived through ignorance of what is right, by apprehending a false rule for a true, an error for the will of God: sometimes, through ignorance of the fact, by misapplying a right rule to a wrong action. Conscience, evil informed, takes human traditions and false doctrines, proposed under the show of Divine authority to be the will of God.”<sup>65</sup>

The Puritans debated much about whether an erroneous conscience forces its owner to obey error. Most Puritans agreed with Annesley, who wrote,

The plain truth is, error cannot bind us to follow it; an erring conscience may so bind, as it may be a sin to go against it; but it can never so bind, as it may be a virtue to follow it. To follow an erring conscience is for the blind sinner to follow his blind conscience, till both fall into the ditch. The violation of conscience is always evil, and the following of an erring conscience is evil; but there is a middle way that is safe and good; namely, the informing of conscience better by God’s Word, and following of it accordingly.<sup>66</sup>

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62. Samuel Annesley, “How May We Be Universally and Exactly Conscientious?” in *Puritan Sermons, 1659–1689* (1661; repr., Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 1:14.

63. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.24. Cf. David Foxgrover, “John Calvin’s Understanding of Conscience” (PhD diss., Claremont, 1978); Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 59–63, 84–87.

64. Beeke, *Quest for Full Assurance*, 140–41.

65. Annesley, “How May We Be Universally and Exactly Conscientious?” in *Puritan Sermons*, 1:13.

66. Annesley, “How May We Be Universally and Exactly Conscientious?” in *Puritan Sermons*, 1:14.



As Philip Craig points out, “this dilemma underscores what Fenner has called ‘the infinite necessity of knowledge’ as well as the ‘sacred sovereignty of conscience.’”<sup>67</sup>

### 5. *The Drowsy Conscience*

Based on Romans 11:8, which speaks of God giving sinners over to “the spirit of slumber,” the Puritans had numerous names for a drowsy conscience, including a sleepy, stumbling, or benumbed conscience. Annesley wrote of people with such a conscience, “*One of the worst kinds of conscience in the world, is the sleepy conscience.*—Such is the conscience of every unconverted person, that is not yet in horror. Their spirit, that is, their conscience, is asleep (Rom. 11:8); that as bodily sleep binds up all the senses and animal spirits, so this spiritual (or rather unspiritual) sleepiness binds up the soul from all sense of the evil of sin, and want of grace; and therefore, in conversion, Christ doth awaken the conscience.”<sup>68</sup>

The drowsy conscience makes sinners indifferent to the reality of Scripture’s truths. Such sinners live in a fog, unaware of impending death and judgment and unmoved by the horrors of hell. A drowsy conscience produces a silent conscience, making it like a “sleepy careless coachman who giveth the horses the reins and letteth them run whither they will,” Fenner said.<sup>69</sup>

### 6. *The Seared Conscience*

This is the worst of all consciences because it puts people almost beyond the hope of salvation. As Perkins wrote, “Now the heart of man being exceedingly obstinate and perverse, carrieth him to commit sins even against the light of nature and common sense: by practice of such sins the light of nature is extinguished: and then cometh the reprobate mind, which judges evil good, and good evil: after this follows the *seared conscience* in which there is no feeling or remorse; and after this comes an *exceeding greediness* to all manner of sin (Eph. 4:18; Rom. 1:28).”<sup>70</sup>

The seared conscience belongs to those whose destiny is determined by their hardness. It often belongs to people who have sinned against the Holy Spirit and are irrevocably lost already in this life. Fenner says that a seared conscience can “swallow down sin like drink and without any remorse.” It is God’s greatest judgment this side of hell: “By this the only means of repentance is taken away. It is a 1000 to 1 if they ever do” repent.<sup>71</sup>

## **The Restoration of Conscience**

In God’s restoration of His image in the soul, He also restores the conscience. This takes place in awakening the conscience by preaching, informing the conscience by Scripture, healing the conscience by the gospel, and exercising the conscience in self-examination.

### *Conscience Must Be Awakened by Preaching*

We today might say that the best preachers teach doctrine most effectively, but the Puritans believed the supreme excellence of a preacher was both his ability to teach doctrine clearly and his power to apply the Word to everyday living.

67 Philip A. Craig, “William Fenner: ‘The Soul’s Looking Glass,’” in *The Voice of God, Westminster Conference 2002* (London: Westminster Conference, 2003), 29.

68. Annesley, “How May We Be Universally and Exactly Conscientious?” in *Puritan Sermons*, 1:8–9.

69. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 70.

70. Perkins, *Works*, 1:550.

71. Quoted in Craig, “William Fenner: ‘The Soul’s Looking Glass,’” in *The Voice of God*, 30.

One mark of a powerful preacher, according to the Puritans, was the way he would “rip up” men’s consciences to show them what was at the bottom of their hearts.<sup>72</sup> The purpose is to see what is inside, or underneath, as you would rip up a cushion to get all the feathers out. Puritans valued preachers who would rip up the conscience, search the heart, and make Hebrews 4:12 real for their listeners: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” The best preachers, the Puritans said, show us how the Word of God goes to the very core of our being.

How does a minister learn to do this? By letting the Word of God minister to the pastor in his conscience and in his life. Deep will then call to deep; if you have experienced the Word of God ripping up your conscience, you will use it to rip up the consciences of others. That’s one reason why the Scottish Puritan, David Dickson (1583–1662), said to a young man being ordained, that he should spend all of his ministry studying two books: The Book of Scripture and the book of his own heart. Likewise, John Owen (1616–1683) said, “If the Word does not dwell with power in us it will not pass with power from us.”<sup>73</sup> And the biographer of Robert Bolton (1572–1631) says that he never taught a godly point without having first worked it out in his own heart.

These are all ways of saying that, for the Puritans, application begins at home. You learn how to apply the Word of God by first letting it apply to you. Then you will know how to use it to rip up the consciences of others. Application is the preacher’s highway from the head to the heart. Good preaching does not stop short with the head; it runs down into the heart.

The Westminster Directory for Public Worship says application is difficult for the preacher, for it requires “much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant.” Yet application is necessary so that a preacher’s listeners “may feel the Word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart; and that, if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest and give glory to God.”<sup>74</sup>

#### *Conscience Must Be Informed by Scripture*

For the Puritans, conscience is the faculty that God puts in us to be a sounding board for applying His Word to our lives. Our consciences should be weighted with the Word of God; they should be educated by what is taught in Scripture and trained to judge according to Scripture. Then the voice of conscience will be the voice of God indeed.

If conscience is not guided by Scripture, it will still function, but according to inadequate standards. It will fail to condemn when it should, it will justify things that ought not to be justified. What appears to be the voice of God will not be the voice of God. The sense of being judged by someone external to yourself will still be apparent, but the standards by which the conscience is operating will be inadequate. The falsely instructed conscience may justify what has been done, but the person may still be an unpardoned sinner in God’s sight.

The Puritans believed the only cure for a falsely calibrated conscience is for the conscience to be thoroughly educated in Scripture standards. Our conscience must be controlled by God, they say. The Westminster Confession (20.2) strongly emphasizes that God alone is Lord of the

72. Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 48.

73. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 16:76.

74. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 380

conscience. One person may try to tyrannize another's conscience, but only God may absolutely control our conscience.

It is imperative that our conscience be tuned to the mind and will of God. Otherwise we cannot help but go the wrong way. If you flout conscience you err because conscience should never be resisted. If you follow an errant conscience you again go astray because an errant conscience should not be followed. There is no way out of the situation except to get your conscience properly educated and trained.

Richard Baxter (1615–1691) explained,

Make not your own judgments or consciences your law, or the maker of your duty; which is but the discerner of the law of God, and of the duty which he maketh you, and of your own obedience or disobedience to him. There is a dangerous error grown too common in the world, that a man is bound to do everything, which his conscience telleth him is the will of God; and that every man must obey his conscience, as if it were the lawgiver of the world; whereas, indeed, it is not ourselves, but God that is our lawgiver.<sup>75</sup>

Baxter said that “an erring conscience is not to be obeyed, but to be better informed.”<sup>76</sup> Since conscience represents God's authority to us, unless a Christian informs his conscience by the Scriptures he is trapped in a moral dilemma by his erring conscience. Baxter wrote, “If you follow it you break the law of God in doing that which he forbids you; if you forsake it and go against it, you reject the authority of God, in doing what you think he forbids you.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore we must compare the book of our conscience with the book of Scripture. Where conscience is lacking, let us copy Scripture's words into it. Where conscience differs from Scripture, let us correct the book of human conscience with the book of God.<sup>78</sup>

The dependence of conscience on Scripture reflects the Puritan esteem for the Bible in all things. Consider that your theological basis determines your approach to counseling. The Puritans never forgot that one's approach to every area of life must be based upon theology. William Ames said, “There is no precept of universal truth relevant to living well in domestic economy, morality, political life, or lawmaking which does not rightly pertain to theology.”<sup>79</sup> Ken Sarles concludes, “As far as the English Puritans were concerned, every conceivable psychological need could be met and every imaginable psychological problem could be solved through a direct application of biblical truth.”<sup>80</sup>

The Puritans considered the doctrine of conscience critical for theology, ethics, and counseling. That allowed the Puritans to cross the bridge from theology to ethics,<sup>81</sup> just as their theological counterparts, such as Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706) and Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711),

75. Baxter, *Works*, 2:336.

76. Baxter, *Works*, 2:337.

77. Baxter, *Works*, 2:339.

78. Swinnock, *Works*, 5:64.

79. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (1968; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 78. Cited in Ken Sarles, “The English Puritans: A Historical Paradigm of Biblical Counseling,” in *Introduction to Biblical Counseling: A Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Counseling*, John F. MacArthur, Jr., Wayne A. Mack, et al. (Dallas: Word, 1994), 25.

80. Sarles, “The English Puritans: A Historical Paradigm of Biblical Counseling,” 25.

81. Coleman C. Markham, “William Perkins' Understanding of the Function of Conscience” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1967), 12, 223.

did in the Netherlands. Both wove together systematic theology with spiritual experience and Christian ethics in their massive works.<sup>82</sup>

The Puritan doctrine of conscience also reflected their tremendous awareness of the glory of the God revealed in Scripture. The Puritans preached the doctrine of God without equivocation. They proclaimed God's majestic being, His trinitarian personality, and His glorious attributes with reverential fear, zeal, and obsession.<sup>83</sup> Their counseling was rooted in a robust biblical theism, unlike modern counseling which too often approaches God as a next-door neighbor who can adjust His attributes to our feelings, needs, and desires. Puritan counseling shows how everything in the world is based on Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God," and is designed for God's glory. The Puritans understood that the doctrines of atonement, justification, and reconciliation are meaningless apart from a true understanding of God who condemns sin, atones for sinners, justifies them, and reconciles them to Himself. The theological basis of how we view God determines our approach in counseling. A God-centered approach to the human condition begins by informing the conscience with Scripture.

As God's representative in the soul, a good conscience nourished by Scripture works a constant awareness that we live in the presence of the God of glory. Vincent wrote, "A good conscience will make men set themselves as before God continually. 'I have lived,' says the Apostle, 'in good conscience before God' [Acts 23:1]."<sup>84</sup> Vincent said, "There is no attribute of God that we are less able to deny, than his omniscience, and yet how rarely are our hearts awed by it. We should watch our hearts and thoughts, and strive against the vanity, and wickedness, and impertinency of these, as those that are persuaded we are before an Heart-Searcher."<sup>85</sup>

#### *Conscience Must Be Healed by the Gospel*

Since all men are fallen sinners, only a gospel-applied conscience can bring inner peace. The Puritans exposed sin both from the pulpit and in private to bring sinners to contrition, confession, and repentance, and to drive them to Jesus Christ. In works such as Thomas Taylor's *Christ Revealed*, Thomas Goodwin's *Christ Our Mediator*, Alexander Grosse's *Happiness of Enjoying and Making a Speedy Use of Christ*, Isaac Ambrose's *Looking Unto Jesus*, Ralph Robinson's or Philip Henry's *Christ All in All*, John Brown's *Christ: the Way, the Truth, and the Life*, John Owen's *The Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, and James Durham's *Christ Crucified*, the Puritans preached the whole Christ to the whole man.<sup>86</sup>

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82. Petrus van Mastricht's *Theoretico-Practica Theologia*, which Jonathan Edwards said was the best book ever written beside the Bible, is presently being translated by Todd Rester under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, with Joel Beeke and Nelson Kloosterman serving as general editors (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, forthcoming in 3 or 4 vols.); Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999).

83. The classic work on God's attributes is Stephen Charnock's massive *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God* (1682; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). See also William Bates, *The Harmony of the Divine Attributes in the Contrivance and Accomplishment of Man's Redemption* (1674; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1985).

84. Vincent, *Heaven on Earth*, 277.

85. Vincent, *Heaven on Earth*, 283.

86. Thomas Taylor, *Christ Revealed: or The Old Testament Explained; A Treatise of the Types and Shadowes of our Saviour* (London: M. F. for R. Dawlman and L. Fawne, 1635) is the best Puritan work on Christ in the Old Testament. Thomas Goodwin, "Christ Our Mediator," vol. 5 of *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (1865; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006) ably expounds primary New Testament texts on the mediatorship of Christ. Alexander Grosse, *The Happiness of Enjoying and Making a True And Speedy Use of Christ* (London: Tho: Brudenell, for John Bartlet, 1647) and Isaac Ambrose, *Looking Unto Jesus* (1658; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1988) are experiential Christology at its best. Ralph Robinson, *Christ All and In All: or Several Significant Similitudes by which the Lord Jesus*

The gospel application results in a good conscience, which is at peace with God and the demands of His Word. The Puritans wrote much about a good conscience. “Conscience, it is either the greatest friend or the greatest enemy in the world,” Richard Sibbes said.<sup>87</sup> He called conscience our “best friend,” and wrote, “We can do nothing well without joy, and a good conscience, which is the ground of joy.”<sup>88</sup>

Thomas Fuller said, “A good conscience is the best divinity”;<sup>89</sup> Matthew Henry (1662–1714): “If we take care to keep a good conscience, we may leave it to God to take care of our good name”;<sup>90</sup> Thomas Watson (c. 1620–1686): “A good conscience and a good name is like a gold ring set with a rich diamond”;<sup>91</sup> and William Gurnall: “Peace of conscience is nothing but the echo of pardoning mercy.”<sup>92</sup>

A good conscience finds peace through the gospel and its promises. The promises of God are the means by which peace, pardon, acceptance, reconciliation to God, and affection between God and a person are offered to the conscience. The conscience must believe and rest in these promises. According to the Puritans, the most blessed thing in the world is to have a good conscience through the application of biblical promises. The saddest thing in the world is not to have a good conscience. The gospel invites us to apply to ourselves the word of grace, just as we are to apply to Christ for pardon according to the word of grace. Then conscience will tell us that because we have believed and have sought pardon in the appointed manner, we are now forgiven for Jesus’ sake.

What joyous peace this produces! Joseph Hall (1574–1656) said, “Happy is that man, that can be acquitted by himself in private, by others in public, and by God in both.”<sup>93</sup> Such a man has a relieved and pacified conscience that removes doubts and fears and promotes assurance that all is well with his soul.<sup>94</sup>

It is important to note that it is by the Holy Spirit that the conscience lays hold of the gospel by faith in Christ’s blood, finds peace with God, and has growing assurance of salvation. Perkins said, “The principal agent and beginner thereof is the Holy Ghost, enlightening the mind and conscience with spiritual and divine light: and the instrument in this action is the ministry of the Gospel whereby the word of life is applied in the name of God to the person of every hearer and this certainty is by little and little conceived in a form of reasoning or practical syllogism framed in the mind by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>95</sup> Gurnall said that the conscience is like a stiff lock—even if the

*Christ is Described in the Holy Scriptures* (1660; repr., Ligonier, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), Philip Henry, *Christ All in All, or What Christ is Made to Believers* (1676; repr., Swengel, Pa.: Reiner, 1976), and John Brown, *Christ: the Way, the Truth, and the Life* (1677; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995) contain precious sermons extolling Christ in all His relations to believers. John Owen, *A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ* in vol. 1 of *Works of Owen* (1679) is superb on the relation of Christ’s natures to His person. James Durham, *Christ Crucified; or The Marrow of the Gospel in 72 Sermons on Isaiah 53*, 2 vols. (1683; repr., Glasgow: Alex Adam, 1792) remains unrivaled as a scriptural exposition of Christ’s passion.

87. Sibbes, *Works*, 7:490.

88. Sibbes, *Works*, 3:219, 223.

89. Thomas Fuller, ed., *Gnomologia: Adagies and Proverbs; Wise Sayings and Witty Sayings* (London: B. Barker, 1732), 6.

90. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* (Hendrickson, 1991), 3:302 [on Ps. 37:1–6].

91. Cited in Blanchard, *Complete Gathered Gold*, 109.

92. Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, 1:534.

93. Joseph Hall, *The Works of the Right Reverend Father in God, Joseph Hall*, ed. Josiah Pratt (London: C. Whittingham, 1808), 1:292.

94. Clifford, “Casuistical Divinity,” 96–97.

95. Perkins, *Works*, 1:547; for Puritan thinking on syllogistic reasoning, see below, and also Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 131–42, 259–62.

key of God's promise fits it perfectly, it takes the strong hand of the Holy Spirit to turn the key, unlock the conscience, and quiet and fully satisfy the soul.<sup>96</sup>

The Puritans often address the question: If we have found peace in Christ, what must we do to maintain that peace? Fenner said,

First, we must labour to prevent troubles of conscience by taking heed that we do nothing contrary to conscience.... Nothing that we get in any evil way will cheer and comfort us in time of need.... Secondly, if we will maintain our peace we must labor to have our hearts grounded in the assurance of the love of God.... Thirdly, we must use the exercise of faith in applying the blood of Christ. We must labour to purge and cleanse our consciences with it. If we find that we have sinned we must run presently [that is, immediately] to the blood of Christ to wash away our sin. We must not let the wound fester or exulcerate [become an infected sore] but presently [that is, immediately] get it healed.... As we sin daily, so he justifieth daily, and we must daily go to him for it.... We must every day eye the brazen serpent. Justification is an ever-running fountain, and therefore we cannot look to have all the water at once.... O let us then sue out a daily pardon.... Let us not sleep one night without a new pardon. Better sleep in a house full of adders and venomous beasts than sleep in one sin. O then be sure with the day to clear the sins of the day. Then shall our conscience have true peace.<sup>97</sup>

A good conscience is based upon Christ, but is guarded by our obedience (1 John 2:1–2, 5). Fenner was careful to say that our obedience is not the cause of our justification before God. Christ alone is our righteousness and the ground of a peaceful conscience. But sin hinders our fellowship with Christ and invites God's fatherly discipline; obedience testifies that we are reconciled to God and pleases our Father.<sup>98</sup> Thus a good conscience is not just a matter of a legal status but of a living relationship with God. Fenner also wrote, "Absolute perfection in obedience is not required unto evangelical peace."<sup>99</sup> Instead, a good conscience arises from a life of integrity and the fear of the Lord, where we seek to obey God with sincerity, in every area of life, and with humility over our sins and dependence on Christ and His Spirit.<sup>100</sup>

Fenner said there is no better friend than a conscience that knows peace with God by constantly going back to the cross. He elaborated on that thought, saying,

A quiet conscience maketh a man to taste the sweetness of things heavenly and spiritual. It makes the Word to be to him as to David, *Sweeter than honey*.... A good conscience maketh a man taste sweetness in prayer...in a Sabbath...in the sacrament.... What is the reason so few of you taste sweetness in these things? The reason is this: Because ye have not the peace of a good conscience.<sup>101</sup>

We must search our hearts here. Do we think of our experience in worship, prayer, the Lord's Day, or anything else that pertains to godliness as sweetness? Fenner said that people who enjoy

96. Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, 1:525.

97. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 134.

98. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 134–38.

99. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 139.

100. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 140–41.

101. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 111.

the peace of a good conscience experience *sweetness*. What is going on if we do not experience that kind of sweetness?<sup>102</sup>

Fenner continued, “A good, quiet conscience maketh a man taste sweetness in all outward things: in meat, in drink, in sleep, in the company of friends.... The healthy man only can take pleasure in recreations, walks, meets, sports and the like; they yield no comfort to those that are bedridden, or sick, or half dead. But when the conscience is at peace the soul is all in good health.”<sup>103</sup>

The Christian is more capable of enjoying God’s good gifts than any unbeliever. That is to say, the Christian’s pleasures are doubled because he is a Christian. Fenner said Christians have that sweetness even in times of trouble. He wrote,

[A good conscience] sweeteneth evils to a man, as troubles, crosses, sorrows, afflictions. If a man hath true peace in his conscience it comforteth him in them all. When things abroad do disquiet us, how comfortable it is to have something at home to cheer us? So when troubles and afflictions without [i.e., outside of us] turmoil and vex us and add sorrow to sorrow, then to have peace within, the peace of conscience to allay all and quiet all, what a happiness is this? When sickness and death cometh, what will a good conscience be worth then? Sure more than all the world besides.... The conscience [that has laid hold of pardon in Christ] is God’s echo of peace to the soul. In life, in death, in judgment, it is unspeakable comfort.<sup>104</sup>

A person with a good conscience has an enlightened, tender, and faithful conscience, and therefore can face death with peace. At the end of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Mr. Honest is about to cross the River Jordan. He had asked Good Conscience to meet him at the river, and Good Conscience was there to help him through the final trial of death. Likewise, it is through the gift of a good conscience that God answers Simeon’s prayer in Luke 2:29, saying, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”

#### *Conscience Must Be Exercised by Self-Examination*

The Puritans insisted that a conscience should be exercised in the discipline of self-examination, according to the Scriptures in general and to the moral law or Ten Commandments in particular. Self-examination is a discipline, the Puritans said. It includes asking yourself questions to know whether you truly are walking in obedience to the Word of God, asking yourself how you are progressing along the road of obedience to the Ten Commandments and their summary in the two great commandments of loving God above all and your neighbor as yourself. It is asking yourself questions that help you see how you measure against the standards set in the Sermon on the Mount. Watson wrote, “Self-examination is the setting up a court in conscience and keeping a register there, that by strict scrutiny a man may know how things stand between God and his own soul.... A good Christian begins as it were the day of judgment here in his own soul.”<sup>105</sup>

The Puritans believed self-examination should be undertaken at least once a week on Saturday to prepare for public worship. In such self-examination, you ask where you are spiritually, where you have been last week, and what particularly needs attention in terms of repentance and reformation, as well as making new commitments, new plans, and new resolves for a closer walk

102. On the pervasive theme of sweetness in Calvin’s theology and piety, see I. John Hesselink, “Calvin, Theologian of Sweetness,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (2002): 318–32.

103. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 112.

104. Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 112–13. See also Fenner, *The Souls Looking-Glasse*, 129.

105. Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 30.

with the Lord. Only after such examination will you have a good conscience for worship on Sunday. This is doubly important if you are going to the Lord's Table.<sup>106</sup> Keep your conscience tender by constantly measuring yourself by the Word, and as you study the Word daily, keep your conscience tender in working out how these teachings apply to you now, but also for direction on what you should become. If you would keep your conscience in quiet peace, purge your conscience daily by repentance and by faith that appropriates Christ's blood, ground your conscience in the assurance of God's love, remain constant in obeying conscience, and don't act against your conscience in any way.

### **Conclusion: The Courage of a Good Conscience**

By its very nature, conscience must be active. But a good conscience acts out of knowledge of God's Word, promoting both scriptural obedience and scriptural liberty rather than legalism or carelessness about sin.

When the Puritan Richard Rogers (1551–1618) and an Anglican were riding horses one day, the Anglican commented, "I like you and your company very well, only you are too precise." Rogers explained why. "O sir," he said, "I serve a precise God!"<sup>107</sup> That was a marvelous answer, for the Puritans realized that we cannot be any less precise in obedience to God's Word than God is in His commanding. Remember that story when you encounter accusations brought against the Puritans or yourself for being too attentive to the details of Christian righteousness. A good conscience raises up the fear of God, but releases from the fear of men with their criticisms and complaints against the supposed rigors of obedience.

A good conscience does not promote legalism. Rather, it finds the greatest liberty: liberty to obey God despite great opposition. In the words of Vincent,

A good conscience steels a man's heart with courage, and makes him fearless before his enemies. Paul earnestly beheld the council. He was not afraid to face them, because his conscience was clear. Nay, we read that Felix the judge trembled, while Paul the prisoner was confident. The reason was, because the judge had a bad conscience... but the prisoner being acquitted by a good conscience, did not tremble but rejoice at the thoughts of judgment to come.<sup>108</sup>

May God grant us all the steely backbone of a good conscience before Him.

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106. Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (1692; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 230–36.

107. "Rev. Richard Rogers," *RootsWeb.com*, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyterry/rogers/richard1/richard1.html>, accessed June 14, 2010. See M. M. Knappen, ed., *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries by Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward* (Chicago: American Society of Church History, 1933), 34n31.

108. Vincent, *Heaven upon Earth*, 306.