

BACKDROP  
*for a*  
GLORIOUS GOSPEL



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The Covenant of Works according to William Strong

Thomas Parr



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*Backdrop for a Glorious Gospel*

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## Introduction

In 1654 the Presbyterian minister Obadiah Sedgwick preached at William Strong's funeral. In his sermon Sedgwick made the following remarks about the man who was a fellow member of the Westminster Assembly and whom he knew and respected: "Only this I will say of him; That one so plain in heart, so deep in judgment, so painful in studies, so frequent and powerful and exact in preaching, so laborious with and useful to his congregation, so able to convince the gain-sayer, so zealous in contending for the truths of Christ, so fit for all ministerial services...of his time, I have not known the like."<sup>1</sup>

Deep, powerful, exact, laborious, incomparable—other contemporaries of Strong refer to him in similar laudatory terms. For example, Theophilus Gale (1628–1678) said, "He was...a Miracle of Grace for deep insight into the more profound Mysteries of the Gospel: He had a Spirit capacious and prompt, sublime and penetrant, profound and clear; a singular Sagacity to pry into the difficult Texts of Scripture, and incomparable Dexterity to discover the Secrets of corrupt Nature, a Divine Sapience to explicate the Mysteries of Grace."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps people of that era were accustomed to referring to their dead contemporaries in hagiographic terms, but it is remarkable that so many speak of Strong in near superlatives. Henry Wilkinson (1610–1675), another assemblyman, also spoke highly of Strong: "He made preaching his work, he was so much taken up in his work, that to my knowledge he was often in watching a great part of the night, besides his pains in his daily studies.... He came to be of very great note,

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1. Obadiah Sedgwick, "Elisha, His Lamentation, upon the Sudden Translation of Elijah" (London, 1654), 28.

2. William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants* (1678; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), n.p. See Theophilus Gale's unpaginated "A Summary of the Two Covenants" at the beginning of Strong's book.

and cried up beyond his Brethren, by reason whereof, had not God given him much grace he might have been puffed up.”<sup>3</sup>

If the above quotations reveal anything (and there is no reason to discount them), they reveal that William Strong was a powerful preacher, a committed scholar, and a profound thinker. A perusal of his works reveals that he delved deeply into whatever subject of study that lay before him.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Puritans were reflective and meticulous, but Strong seems to have had these qualities in spades. He concentrated much of his attention on covenant theology and was considered a chief authority on the subject, as Gale explained: “He was... familiarly acquainted with the deepest points in Theology.... As he transcended the most of this Age in the Explication of Evangelical Verities, so in his Intelligence and Explication of the two Covenants he seems much to excel himself; this being the great study of his life.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite these high praises, recent treatments of Strong’s theology are scarce, just like treatments of his life, and most who cite him do not comprehensively evaluate his work.<sup>6</sup> His thoughts on covenant theology remain mostly neglected, and this is a pity since he was considered one of the important Puritan thinkers on the subject. It is high time to recover and examine his contribution to covenant theology—*A Discourse of the Two Covenants*.

### Questions and Purpose

Modern students of theology will have certain interests and questions: How did Strong teach covenant theology? What did he think about the covenants of works and of grace? How did he view the relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the

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3. Ira Boseley, *The Independent Church of Westminster Abbey (1650–1826)* (London: The Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1907), 90.

4. “The Careful perusal of Strong’s discourses on the two Covenants will satisfy the judicious reader that the author was one of the greatest divines of his age.” This is a comment made by nineteenth-century editor John O. Choules in a later edition of Daniel Neal’s *A History of the Puritans*, vol. 2, ed. John O. Choules (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 154.

5. Strong, *Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 1.

6. The following volumes show to what degree Strong’s theology has been studied in recent times. John Von Rohr quotes Strong’s *Discourse of the Two Covenants* seven times in his *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1986), 35, 37–38, 43, 45, 85, 104, 179. Brenton C. Ferry quotes Strong four times in his essay “Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Reformed Taxonomy,” in *The Law Is Not of Faith*, ed. Bryan Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2009), 357. Joel Beeke and Mark Jones quote Strong four times in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 1050. Ernest F. Kevan cites Strong’s *Discourse* more than two dozen times in *The Grace of Law* (1964; repr., Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2015), 292. Kevan quotes many other Puritans more often than he quotes Strong, and even his comparatively fuller treatment is far from a comprehensive evaluation of Strong’s work.

covenant of grace? Which ideas did he think were most important and thus spend most of his time on? Proportionately, where did his interests lie? How do his covenantal views compare to his contemporaries' views? What was distinctive about Strong's covenant theology?<sup>7</sup> These are the questions that will guide this study.

Rather than attempt to enlist Strong to champion a certain viewpoint, this study discovers what Strong said about covenants in the proportions he himself laid out and compares his views with those of other Puritans.

### Challenges and Methods

William Strong's magnum opus, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, has been largely neglected for centuries, and it does not take the reader long to discover why this is the case. In "penetrating Strong's tome,"<sup>8</sup> a reader will immediately notice two things: it is profound yet extremely difficult to read. The book is filled with insights on the covenants, but these are locked up in 447 roughly octavo-sized pages, each of which is a dense wall of small print filled with organizational blunders and typographical errors.

This difficult presentation no doubt has contributed to the book's state of neglect. The tome's profundity, extreme difficulty, and state of neglect demand a particular approach; therefore, this book examines Strong's covenant theology in three special ways.

First, Strong's ideas are meticulously "re-presented" in context. His profundity demands an approach that carefully follows his sequence of thought and copiously cites his words. Strong is by nature a theological explorer. He plumbs the depths of ideas. He is a theological spelunker, and in his tome he very carefully explores and maps out every cave, side chamber, and vein. Thomas Carlyle defined genius as "an infinite capacity for taking pains." It was said of David Martyn Lloyd-Jones that "he thinks a thing through to its bottom."<sup>9</sup> These sentiments accurately describe Strong in a *Discourse of the Two Covenants*. He displays immense patience in thinking things through. No matter how involved the discussion becomes, he is meticulous and unhurried.<sup>10</sup> He is the antithesis of the person that Thomas Watson warned against: "Some have light, feathery spirits; they run over the most weighty

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7. Most of these questions were taken from a phone conversation in 2016 with Chad Van Dixhoorn when he was asked "if you were to read a book on William Strong's covenant theology, what would you want to find in it?" Most of the questions listed here came from his reply. Some others were brought up in a subsequent phone call with Joel Beeke.

8. Chad Van Dixhoorn, introduction to Strong, *Discourse of the Two Covenants*, n.p.

9. Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 55, 77.

10. At one point in his discussion of the covenant of works, he shows that he is aware of how his approach might provoke impatience; he humorously tells his hearers that they will be blessed

truths in haste.”<sup>11</sup> Henry Wilkinson said of Strong, “There is an excellent vein in his sermons; the farther you search, the richer treasure you are like to find.”<sup>12</sup>

Because this is how Strong wrote his tome, this book carefully traces his unfolding argument and liberally cites his words. To do anything else would ensure that his ideas would be minimized or cherry-picked. Instead they will be conveyed in context and in the proportions he himself laid out. At points Strong’s argument has been traced very closely indeed, each step forward being noted. Where Strong’s reasoning is not as tight, and where the needs of the pulpit required extensive application or topical expansion, the book summarizes paragraphs in a sentence or two, or whole pages in a paragraph. In this way the book does not overemphasize details, miss the main ideas, or oversimplify things. The goal is to present Strong’s covenant theology in the proportions he himself laid out; attention was given to *how* Strong taught covenant theology as well as to *what* he taught. Thus, this book’s themes, emphases, and progression of thought are Strong’s own.

Second, the book offers a fresh outline of Strong’s tome, which can be seen throughout in the headings and subheadings; these are not found in Strong’s tome but represent in many cases a complete reanalysis of it. Undoubtedly the vast majority of those reading *A Discourse of the Two Covenants* will find that the poor outlining and presentation make it difficult to follow Strong’s flow of thought. The reader encounters pages of dense exposition peppered with numbers representing multiple levels of subordination. If the problem were only density and levels of subordination, it would not be so difficult. Unfortunately, there are many places where the outlining fails, sometimes critically. Other places have pagination problems introduced by missing page numbers (not missing pages, thankfully!). The outlining problems are far worse than the pagination problems, however, because they confuse any reader who tries to follow the train of thought, which is an absolute must in reading Strong’s tome.<sup>13</sup> This book offers a fresh analysis and outline so that Strong’s train of thought is easier to follow.

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by a certain teaching “if ever we come to handle this property of the covenant of grace.” See Strong, *Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 77.

11. Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm* (1810; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 118.

12. Daniel Neal, *A History of the Puritans*, vol. 2, ed. John O. Choules (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 2:154.

13. Theophilus Gale took the stack of sermons that constituted Strong’s series on the covenants and adapted them into the tome we have today. Gale gave himself “the liberty of casting it into this method of Books, Chapters, Sections and half-sections.” See the final paragraph of Gale’s unpaginated “A Summary” at the beginning of *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*. Gale’s comment is at least a partial explanation for why the tome is so poorly organized. In the same paragraph Gale admitted there were “many imperfections” in the manuscript but defended himself by saying that he had denied himself many hours from his “natural refreshments” to organize it.

Third, because Strong's theology has been neglected for hundreds of years, his ideas are compared to other, more well-known Puritan covenant theologians. This book compares Strong to John Ball, Francis Roberts, and Ezekiel Hopkins as well as other seventeenth-century sources, such as the Westminster Standards, and Puritans, such as Samuel Bolton and John Flavel.<sup>14</sup> Comparing Strong to other respected and well-known thinkers allows his theology to be evaluated in the context of his era. Ball wrote earlier than Strong, Roberts was roughly a contemporary of Strong, and Hopkins wrote later. The reader should give special attention to the footnotes, where passages from the writings of other Puritans (as well as several important modern studies<sup>15</sup>) will be found. A section called "Notable Themes" at the end of each chapter will highlight important ideas from Strong.

Given the massive size and complexity of Strong's tome, this book is limited to examining *Of the Covenant of Works*, which is the first "book" out of three in it. The eight chapters of this book correspond to Strong's eight chapters. The conclusion does not correspond to any chapter in Strong's work but instead collects his main themes and offers them as a help to Christians, theologians, and ministers today.

### Overview of Strong on the Covenant of Works

In sum, Strong's handling of the covenant of works shows the terrifying reality of that broken covenant and exposes the power that fallen nature has over those under the covenant's condemnation. Strong seeks to use this grim situation as a dark backdrop that sets off God's gracious covenant to advantage; he desires to allure unbelievers to Christ and to edify believers in Christ so that God is praised for His glorious grace. This is the purpose that Strong fulfills throughout his book; it is therefore what will occur in the heart and mind of the Spirit-filled and motivated reader.

In chapter 1, Strong teaches that the covenant of works is quite real and not at all a theological fabrication. He explains its basics, provides various proofs of its reality, and dwells on its continued ramifications now that it is broken—its

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14. The Puritan works referenced most often throughout the thesis are John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1645); Francis Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum: The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible, viz God's Covenants with Man* (London, 1657); Ezekiel Hopkins, "The Two Covenants," in *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins*, vol. 2. (1874; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997); John Flavel, *The Method of Grace* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); and Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1645; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010).

15. The modern works that have proved most helpful are von Rohr, *Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*; Beeke and Jones, *Puritan Theology*; and Kevan, *Grace of Law*. Two others that were also quite helpful at certain points are Carl W. Bogue, *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008); and Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

metes out death to all men. In chapters 2–4, Strong discusses various experiential ramifications of being in the covenant of works. These chapters linger on how the fall affects how unbelieving people think and feel and act. Chapter 2 shows that people in the covenant of works actually prefer it to grace in Christ. They desire to establish their own righteousness. Chapter 3 shows that people in the covenant of works are profoundly irritated by law, and thus fallen people’s relationship to law only aggravates and worsens sin in their lives. Chapter 4 explains that people in the covenant of works are in a relationship to law that is one of “rigor”; they must obey perfectly or be cursed forever. This chapter also explains that people in the covenant of works do not have a heart that is conformable to the law. Therefore, any obedience they offer is forced and is the result of coercion.

The rest of Strong’s first “book” concentrates on the reality and importance of being transferred out of the covenant of works into that of grace in Christ; it explains how such a transference occurs and dwells on its profound ramifications. Chapter 5 discusses the reality of covenantal transference and why it is utterly crucial to undergo it experientially. It is crucial to undergo it because the covenants are mutually exclusive, and the first covenant is broken but ever afoot, enforcing death as the penalty for sin. Chapter 6 explains that transference takes place by being united to Jesus Christ by the Spirit and by faith. Chapter 7 discusses how the law is abolished as a covenant to everyone who is united to Christ. Jesus fully satisfied the law for believers, and everyone united to Him is free from the law’s “rigor” and condemnation. Chapter 8 goes into great detail about how God has made the matter and the form of the first covenant to serve the gracious covenant. This last chapter has much to say on matters such as the Mosaic covenant’s relationship to the covenant of works and the covenant of grace; it is a theological odyssey, and its depth and detail must be experienced to be believed.

It is quite easy to presume that a treatment of the condemning covenant of works must be very grim reading. But Strong ensured that it would not be so. All along the way, he provides evangelistic contrasts in which he uses the broken first covenant as a dark backdrop to set off God’s grace to advantage. Though he is discussing the covenant of works, Strong desires to show his reader the glory of the covenant of grace and thus wants to attract his reader to Christ. Therefore, in Strong’s hands the subject of the covenant of works becomes, by way of skillful contrasts, a feast of edifying gospel.

## Prologue: The Life of William Strong

Not much is known about William Strong except what can be gathered from old, obscure books. His industrious life in the era of Oliver Cromwell is buried in obscurity, just like his body, which was exhumed from Westminster Abbey and cast into a mass grave in 1661. Details about his life can indeed be found, but only a few sources compile them into an extended account, and only one source has done so in the last hundred years.<sup>1</sup> It is intriguing that one must hunt for and gather an array of sources in order to learn about a man who was buried in no less a place than the abbey and whose disinterment was an act of revenge by an English king.

Whether one discovers a single clue in a modern volume or digs up some ancient tome from the Puritan era, the investigator often finds tantalizing glimpses about the man's greatness. Strong achieved renown as a minister—Thomas Manton called him “a burning and shining light.”<sup>2</sup> Restorationists considered him a leading figure among the leaders of the Interregnum—his body was, after all, exhumed in the same purge that carried out Cromwell's body. A nineteenth-century editor of Daniel Neal's *History of the Puritans* extolled Strong's status as a theologian, claiming that a “careful perusal of Strong's discourses on the two Covenants will satisfy the judicious reader that the author was one of the greatest divines of his age.”<sup>3</sup> Whether one looks at Strong's friends or enemies, ancient or modern, he was notable.

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1. For an informative two-page biography on Strong, see H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53:105–6 (hereafter *DNB*; all citations from this source are from these pages). For the most recent full-length treatment of Strong, see Ira Boseley, *The Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church (1650–1660)* (London: James Clarke, 1911), 39–136. Boseley's section on Strong runs nearly a hundred pages, but this appears more thoroughgoing than it is—the book's word count is small.

2. Manton, introduction to William Strong, *Heavenly Treasure, or Man's Chiefest Good* (London, 1656), n.p. Strong's sermons and treatises can be found on the website Early English Books Online, <https://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>.

3. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:154.



Why, then, do so few people today know about William Strong, even those who are familiar with many of the other Puritans? As Boseley put it, “Why has the memory of this devoted minister, so courageously consecrated to his work, been allowed to shade off into obscurity, and almost toward oblivion?”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the demise of the Puritan movement in general brought the curtain down on him, although others such as Baxter and Owen have avoided oblivion. Did his early death cause him to be forgotten? No, Thomas Manton and John Rowe saw to it that many of Strong’s unpublished works were issued after his death,<sup>5</sup> and therefore many people were reading Strong into the 1680s. Ira Boseley’s view may have the most to commend it—Restoration England deliberately defaced the memory of leaders in the Interregnum, and therefore it was Strong’s association with the Protectorate that led to his marginalization: “The career of Charles II and the corruptions of his court came between the commonwealth and the country. In consequence, such preachers as Mr. Strong had discredit cast upon them. The nation’s attention was diverted from the characters of its noblest sons, and the people’s views of their aims were distorted. A corrupt press, which was at the service of the King and his associates, also misrepresented them, and sought to efface the remembrance of the reforms they had wrought for their country’s welfare.”<sup>6</sup>

But Strong’s prominent position in the Interregnum cannot be the complete explanation for his later obscurity, for, again, Owen also had a premier position due to the ascendancy of the Independents, and Owen is well known today. One might surmise that the subjects of study that consumed Strong’s energies made him uninteresting to later people—many who lived afterward thought that the era of the Puritans was fraught with an “old mystical divinity...distracted...with pious conundrums.”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, it is difficult to know why Strong is still buried in obscurity, especially now that interest in the Puritans has revived since the days of David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Even during this revival of interest, when so many other artifacts

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4. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 54.

5. J. F. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660: A Royal City in a Time of Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 244. Strong’s wife, Damaris, worked hard to put Strong’s works into print as well. In fact, the only record we have of Damaris is a short, one-page notice she published in an unknown source in 1655, around a year after Strong’s death, in which she discusses his works. The *Dictionary of National Biography* also mentions Damaris in connection with this short notice.

6. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 54.

7. An anonymous British reviewer from the eighteenth century said of Jonathan Edwards’s book *A History of the Work of Redemption*, “It is merely an attempt to revive the old mystical divinity that distracted the last age with pious conundrums.” See Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 455.



have been dug up and brought out into the light, Strong remains buried, at least until now.

### **Birth, Education, and First Pastorate**

There are no records about Strong's parents, although one Timothy Strong is a possible candidate for his father.<sup>8</sup> No one knows the year of William's birth, but it was probably around 1611.<sup>9</sup> There is next to nothing extant about William's childhood, though the most recent theory says he was born in Dorset.<sup>10</sup> Strong's parents were probably people of at least moderate means, for he was educated at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge (when it was still called Katharine Hall).<sup>11</sup> The celebrated Richard Sibbes was the college's headmaster at the time.<sup>12</sup> Strong was an excellent student; he graduated in 1631 with a BA and was elected a fellow of St. Catharine's. In 1634 he graduated with an MA from the same institution.<sup>13</sup>

Although he had the promise of a great career ahead of him, Strong was a man of convictions who was willing to suffer for them, if need be. In July of 1634 he spoke out quite boldly against Archbishop Laud and against prelacy: "He was alleged to have said that Archbishop William Laud had sinned against the Holy Ghost, and perhaps more subversively, that there would soon be no bishops in England."<sup>14</sup> Due to these puritanical statements, Strong was stripped of his position at St. Catharine's and of his academic degrees in 1634.<sup>15</sup> It is not known what Strong did for the next few years, but in 1640 he became the rector of a small parish in Dorset called Moor Crichel.<sup>16</sup> He ministered there for three years.

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8. *DNB*; See also Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 40.

9. This date presumes that Strong was twenty when he graduated with the BA in 1631, which was very commonly the age at which men graduated; we can therefore estimate that he was forty-three years of age at his death in 1654.

10. *DNB*. However, Boseley says, "His early life appears to have been spent at Abbots Langley, in Hertfordshire." *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 39.

11. Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (London: James Black, 1813), 3:196.

12. Brook, *Lives of the Puritans*, 3:196.

13. *DNB*.

14. *DNB*.

15. *DNB*.

16. *DNB*; Moor Crichel is mentioned in the Domesday Book as having thirty-eight households in 1066; today its population is around two hundred people. Its population size apparently has not changed much in a thousand years. See "Moor Crichel," Open Domesday, <http://opendomesday.org/place/ST9908/moor-crichel/>, accessed February 12, 2019.

### **Flight to London and Early Preaching Ministry at the Abbey**

In 1643, Strong fled Royalist forces, which were active in Dorset, and went to London.<sup>17</sup> Strong may have traveled from Moor Crichel to London in winter—a distance of around one hundred miles.<sup>18</sup> London was firmly in the hands of the Puritan sympathizers who made up Parliament at the time.<sup>19</sup> When Strong arrived, the Westminster Assembly had recently met for the first time on July 1, 1643. He must have had friends in London who respected his abilities as a preacher and a theologian. Although he had not been in an academic post since 1634, and had spent the previous three years pastoring a very obscure parish, he quickly became well known once he arrived.

London had recently undergone dramatic changes. After many years of struggle under Charles I (and under his archbishop William Laud), the Puritans in Parliament had successfully challenged the authority of the King, who had fled London out of fear for his safety in early 1642.<sup>20</sup> The English Civil War was under way, and there would be no king in London until 1660. The Puritans had finally gained the ascendancy, and the time was right for them to have substantial influence.

Puritan influence deeply affected religious life. Since 1642, the character of ministry in Westminster Abbey (and elsewhere) began to transform. Charles I and William Laud had promoted a high church, ceremonial religion, and when the Puritans drove Charles out of London, they ousted the Laudians and their penchant for ceremonies along with him. J. F. Merritt notes that “Puritan values were writ large in the religious life of the nation.”<sup>21</sup> As early as 1641 Parliament began ordering the “removal of monuments of idolatry and the leveling of chancels.”<sup>22</sup>

Merritt describes the transformation as both practical and theological: “The transition... was clearly a matter of adjusted priorities.”<sup>23</sup> Horton Davies points out that the differences between Laudianism and Puritanism were not only practical, such as how to “do” church, but also doctrinal. This observation counters the claim that the two parties agreed on doctrine but not on practice: “From Calvin

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17. Brook, *Lives of the Puritans*, 3:196; Bosely notes that “Woods, in his ‘Athenae Oxoniensis,’ says that in 1643 Mr. Strong was forced to flee before the Cavaliers when they obtained ascendancy in the country.” See also Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 47.

18. According to the historian Lacey Baldwin Smith, it was in the winter of 1643 that the cavaliers came close to controlling Dorset. See Lacey Baldwin Smith, *This Realm of England: 1399 to 1688* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1966, 1996), 284.

19. Smith, *This Realm of England*, 280.

20. Ivan Roots, *The Great Rebellion: 1642–1660* (Gloucestershire, UK: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1998), 54–55.

21. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 219.

22. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 220.

23. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 105.

the Puritans inherited two important tenets: the all-sufficiency of Scripture and a thorough-going restatement of the doctrine of original sin. And it was precisely on these grounds that the Puritans differed from the Anglicans.... Thus the Anglican's claim to institute ceremonies and customs that were not contradicted by Scripture, was an affront to the Divine Majesty in the Puritan's eyes. It was, moreover, a denial of the doctrine of original sin."<sup>24</sup>

The regulative principle as held by Calvin and the Puritans made an absolute claim: only that which is commanded in God's Word ought to be practiced in corporate worship. This exclusive approach contrasted with the position of the Lutherans and Laudians, who felt that they had freedom to include things of their own devising as long as those practices were not condemned by the Word.<sup>25</sup>

The Puritans not only got rid of icons and ceremonies but also added a robust preaching ministry. The churches were recommissioned as "spaces for the preaching of God's Word."<sup>26</sup> John Vicars, an eyewitness of these changes at the abbey, adds further detail using quite colorful language:

Whereas there was wont to be heard, nothing almost but roaring boys and squeaking organ pipes, and the cathedral catches of Morley, and I know not what trash; now the popish altar is quite taken away, and bellowing organs are demolish, and pulled down, the treble, or rather trouble and base singers, chanters or inchanters driven out; instead thereof, there is now set up a most blessed orthodox preaching ministry, every morning throughout the weeke, and every weeke through the whole yeare a sermon is preached by most learned grave, and godly ministers, of purpose appointed thereunto, and for the gaudy, gilded crucifixes, and rotten rabble of dumb idols, popish saints and pictures, set up and placed, and painted thereabout, where that sinful singing was used: now a most sweet assembly, and thick throng of God's pious people, and well-affected, living teachable saints there is constantly and most comfortably, every morning to be seen at the sermons.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 7–8.

25. The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) made the following statement of the regulative principle as it concerns worship: "The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture." See WCF 21.1.

26. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 222.

27. Edward Carpenter, ed., *A House of Kings: The Official History of Westminster Abbey*, rev. ed. (London: John Baker, 1972), 172. Whether or not Vicars's language is cordial, the quotation is valuable historically, for it tells us firsthand what the changes were that occurred as well as the extreme feelings that existed in those times.

Instead of chanting and ceremonies, seven different Puritan divines preached sermons at the abbey every morning of the week, all year long. In 1645 William Strong was appointed one of those seven preachers.<sup>28</sup> Strong, who had been so isolated in Moor Crichel, quickly became a central part of the religious transformation that occurred during this tumultuous age.

The daily sermons at the abbey were quite well attended—“servants had to petition for room to hear the daily preaching.”<sup>29</sup> This high demand for preaching shows that the changes were not made only from the top down; it was a grass-roots movement. Many people of the era were passionate about preaching, and in William Strong people found someone who was tailor-made for the times. In addition to his weekly ministry at the abbey, Strong also began giving lectures at St. Dunstan-in-the-West, Fleet Street, as early as June 1644.<sup>30</sup> From the beginning of his time in London, Strong enjoyed a busy life where he had greater and greater opportunities to use his gifts.

### **Humble, Astute Preaching before Parliament**

On December 31, 1645, Strong preached his first sermon to the House of Commons on a day they had established as a solemn fast. In this sermon, titled *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, *The Day of Revelation of the Righteous Judgment of God*, Strong reminded the parliamentarians that at God’s judgment each person will be seen to be “what manner of man he is.”<sup>31</sup> In the dedication to the sermon, Strong gave a rare biographical glimpse into his conception of himself. He confessed, “When I first heard that I was designed unto this solemn service, I could not entertain the motion without fear and many misgiving thoughts, both of mine own unworthiness of so great an honor, and unfitness for so public a work, being both by parts and place, rather destined to privacy and obscurity.”<sup>32</sup> The years at Moor Crichel had apparently seasoned him for quiet, out-of-the-way duties. Nevertheless, he answered the call to minister, and it quickly became obvious that Strong had not used “privacy and obscurity” for self-indulgence. His powers, which had been

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28. *DNB*. J. F. Merritt comments, “Those appointed when the exercise was set up in February 1644 were Stephen Marshall, Charles Herle, Edmund Staunton, Herbert Palmer, Philip Nye, Jeremiah Whitaker and Thomas Hill. By 1648 Palmer was dead and William Strong had taken his place.” See Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 104. The *Dictionary of National Biography* gives the year of Strong’s placement among the seven preachers as 1645, while Merritt says that it was “by 1648.”

29. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 223.

30. *DNB*.

31. William Strong, *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, *The Day of Revelation of the Righteous Judgment of God* (London, 1645), 6.

32. Strong, *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, first page of the dedication, which is unpaginated.

recognized a decade earlier at St. Catharine's, had not been dulled by neglect; Parliament thanked him "for the great paines he took" in the sermon.<sup>33</sup>

The insightful and convicting nature of Strong's preaching can be discerned nearly anywhere one looks among his sermons. Consider the following excerpt from his first sermon preached to Parliament in 1645, in which Strong warns against wrong motives. One can hardly imagine a better caveat to leaders of any sort:

A man may by his end destroy that which he doth by his action most pretend to build, and by his end he may establish that which by his act he seems to endeavor to destroy: Jehu in his act seemed a great reformer, but though he proved Ahab's executioner, yet by reason of his corrupt end, in his idolatry he proved his successor. A man may love the tyranny when he hates the tyrant: oppose the oppressor and yet love the oppression: A man may endeavor to cast out Episcopacy, root and branch, and yet love preeminence, desire priority, and effect to be called Rabbi.<sup>34</sup>

This is insightful thinking, and it points out how inaccurate many descriptions of Puritan preaching can be. The book *House of Kings*, published by Anglicans in the twentieth century, speaks of the Interregnum preaching ministry at the abbey as follows: "So, as the preachers raved and ranted, and one after another the leaders of the Commonwealth and Protectorate passed to their temporary resting place within her walls, St Peter-in-Westminster watched and waited for better days."<sup>35</sup>

After reading Strong, one realizes that "ranting and raving" is (at the least) a misleading way to describe his sermons. Boseley is more accurate when he states, "Such heroic patriots [the men of the parliamentary cause] became intolerant of priests and ceremonies. They demanded that only preachers with robust intellects, transparent characters and unflinching courage, should become occupants of pulpits,"<sup>36</sup> and also "Marsden, referring to 'the pulpits of the metropolis,' declared that they 'displayed a galaxy of light and genius such as it had never before, and perhaps has never since, exhibited.'"<sup>37</sup> By 1646, Strong was well on his way to becoming one of the brightest lights in that galaxy.

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33. Strong, Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως, frontis, which is unpaginated. Strong was often thanked for taking great pains. It seems to be a mark of his particular ministry, and it shows what sort of minister the Puritans respected—someone who handled the Word with great diligence and care.

34. Strong, Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως, 14–15.

35. Carpenter, *House of Kings*, 175.

36. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 35.

37. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 37.

### Loyalty to Parliament and Growing Criticism of It

It was not long before Strong was preaching to Parliament again; he not only displayed great ability in the pulpit but also made it clear that he was quite committed to the parliamentary cause against the Royalists. In his first sermon to the Commons, Strong affirmed, “I have been from the beginning devoted in this great cause of God and his church.”<sup>38</sup> On the last page of the epistle dedicatory, he referred to Parliament’s recent acts as “all the service you do towards this shattered kingdom.”<sup>39</sup> On the final page of the sermon proper, Strong notes that many people imputed false motives to Parliament, such as hungering for power, but “in that day God will clear you from all these, then shall every man... have praise of God: And then, he who will wipe away all tears from your eyes will also wipe off all blots from your names.”<sup>40</sup> At least at the end of 1645, Strong was convinced that Parliament was committed to a righteous course.

Nevertheless, Strong reserved the right to criticize Parliament if he, as a church minister, felt that it was going astray. Strong became more and more critical of Parliament as the years went by, and a careful reader of his sermons to Parliament can trace these changes in attitudes, which seem to reflect others’ sentiments as well—Cromwell famously turned out the Rump Parliament on April 21, 1653, claiming, “You are no parliament; I will put an end to your sitting!”<sup>41</sup> This is a remarkable change since Parliament was the moving force of the land only a few years before and had even brought about the execution of Charles I in 1649. Although it is conceivable that Cromwell’s position toward Parliament changed because of his own desire for power,<sup>42</sup> William Strong’s changing attitudes seem to reflect his decreasing satisfaction with Parliament’s commitment to the Reformation.

In May of 1648, Strong still seemed quite content with Parliament. He preached a sermon celebrating the parliamentarian victory in a battle at St. Fagons (St. Fagans) in Wales in which he claimed that any who chose to remain neutral and not support the parliamentary cause were enemies.<sup>43</sup> Strong was convinced of the rightness of Parliament’s cause.

But by June 9, 1652, Strong’s view had clearly changed. He openly rebuked both England and Parliament itself:

38. Strong, *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, epistle dedicatory.

39. Strong, *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, epistle dedicatory.

40. Strong, *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, 35.

41. Smith, *This Realm of England*, 294. See also Roots, *Great Rebellion*, 164.

42. Cromwell’s own explanation was that Parliament had become a seedbed of cronyism and was ruinously “self-seeking.” Roots, *Great Rebellion*, 163.

43. William Strong, “The Vengeance of the Temple” (London, 1648), 14–15.

There is a great forsaking of God in the middle of us: look but upon the generality of the Nation, and for all manner of profaneness we go beyond the worst of times: and under a pretence of liberty, every man doth that which is right in his own eyes; and there is no master of restraint to put them to shame; It may be the fault is immediately to be laid upon inferior officers, but ye know their neglects, and yet you do not force your own Laws.... The oppressions amongst you are horrible: the delays of Justice, putting things out of one hand into another... what abatement of men's salaries... and how strangely carnally confident are we?... And we think to have an army, and a navy, that is able to defend against all our enemies; but let me tell you, if you live upon these, though they be as the breath of your nostrils, yet it shall be as fire to consume you.... Now as for the truths of God and his Ordinances, how are they forsaken?<sup>44</sup>

By this point Strong believed that the country and Parliament had been corrupted and had turned from the ways of the Reformation. Although he loved his country and had spent himself for its good, he had no illusions about its spiritual state: "There are few Ages that you shall read of, wherein the name of God hath been higher, in a more impudent way dishonored."<sup>45</sup>

Strong could be quite daring in his sermons, no matter whom he preached to. In February of 1646, Strong preached a sermon to the House of Peers titled "The Way to Highest Honour," in which he explained to all the assembled nobles how they could become truly noble.<sup>46</sup> It was daring, but from his days at St. Catharine's when he had spoken out against Laud, Strong had shown himself to be courageous.<sup>47</sup> Despite his own humble origins, Strong could preach very pointed and timely messages to the greatest persons in the land. The nobles too, like the Commons, thanked Strong for the "great paines taken in his sermon."<sup>48</sup>

### Opposition to Popery

Throughout Strong's sermons, and in his magnum opus, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, are many statements about and against "popery." Strong considered the tenets of Roman Catholicism to be "that doctrine of devils,"<sup>49</sup> and saw the Roman Catholic Church as the greatest of all threats to Puritan England. Strong

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44. William Strong, *XXXI Select Sermons* (London, 1656), 261–62.

45. "Holiness the Only Way to Happiness," in Strong, *XXXI Select Sermons*, 51.

46. William Strong, *The Way to Highest Honour* (London, 1647).

47. Boseley describes Strong's preaching as "daring" in *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 52.

48. Strong, *Way to Highest Honor*, frontis.

49. Strong, *XXXI Select Sermons*, 18.



was not alone in this sentiment. The Puritans could point to a long list of events demonstrating the malignity of the Roman church: the bloody reign of the Catholic Mary Stuart (1553–1558), the Catholic-inspired St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of Protestants in France in 1572, the attempt of Roman Catholic Spain to take over England in the failed Spanish Armada (1588), the failed Gunpowder Plot in 1605, and the oppression of Anglo-Catholic William Laud under Charles I during the 1620s and 1630s. These are only a few of the many commonly known instances. Many in England considered Roman Catholicism to be the primary antagonist to English welfare and religion.<sup>50</sup>

In his 1648 sermon “The Vengeance of the Temple,” Strong linked Rome to the fourth beast of the book of Daniel, the worst and most demonic of all world systems: “All that power of Rome, which hath for many hundred years, as the fourth beast tyrannized over the churches.”<sup>51</sup> In the same sermon Strong rejoices at the lengths to which the Reformation in England had gone in rejecting the Roman church:

The enemies shall never be able to set up Popery in this kingdom again.... Christ will surely keep the ground that he hath won in a way of Reformation.... Whatever of Popery the Lord hath shaken and removed, I do conclude, that all the power of the enemy shall never set up again. I do not doubt that there will be many and desperate attempts for it, but they shall never be able to prevail.<sup>52</sup>

Strong identified popery as the great spiritual and theological evil, and this identification influenced his thinking at its deepest points. He considered the tenets of Roman Catholicism as a reflection of humanity’s attempt to relate to God by means of the broken covenant of works and as a repudiation of the covenant of grace. “We see what Doctrine has been found out by the Papists, that good works do justify a man in the sight of God.... And so under Popery at this day many do fast and macerate their bodies, watch and pray, and chastise themselves... give away all their Goods to the poor, and betake themselves unto a voluntary Poverty... and all upon this ground, that these shall be *opera satisfactoria*, satisfactory works, and so expiatory for their former sins.”<sup>53</sup>

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50. For further discussion of why England at the time looked askance at Rome, see J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context & Theological Insights* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 38ff.

51. Strong, “Vengeance of the Temple,” 45.

52. Strong, “Vengeance of the Temple,” 43–44.

53. Strong, *Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 24, 27.



Popery, according to Strong and many of the Puritans, is a particularly widespread manifestation of corrupt nature in Adam: fallen men reject the grace of the mediator Jesus Christ and attempt to please God by their own works. One is reminded of John Owen's comment: "Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world."<sup>54</sup>

### A Member of the Westminster Assembly

By the time Strong preached to the Peers in February of 1646, he had already become an additional member of the Westminster Assembly. Edward Peale of Dorset had passed away, and Strong was chosen to replace him: "He appeared in the assembly on 13 January 1646 and took the protestation, and on 16 January he took the solemn league and covenant and subscribed."<sup>55</sup> Boseley states that "his first appearance was at Meeting 571, and as there were 1163 gatherings in all, this leaves 592 at which it was possible for him to attend."<sup>56</sup>

It is important to note that Strong was quite involved in the deliberations among the assembly members even before he joined. The first page of his first sermon to the House of Commons shows that he was already very familiar with the assembly's debates about church government: "My purpose is not to ingage my self or weary this honourable assembly with any of the busie and perplex controversies about church-government on foot among us; wherein its not easie for a man not biased to satisfie either his own conscience or his auditory."<sup>57</sup>

Strong's words imply an acquaintance with the "Grand Debate," and he clearly had taken his usual pains to be informed.<sup>58</sup> Strong's words also indicate that he was not decided on a particular position regarding church government at this time—he could not "satisfie... his own conscience." Those who would claim the early Strong for either Presbyterianism or Congregationalism must account for his words here.<sup>59</sup>

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54. John Owen, *Works of John Owen* (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 6:7.

55. *DNB*.

56. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 108.

57. Strong, *Ἡμέρα Ἀποκαλύψεως*, 1. Strong preached this sermon on December 31, 1645, two weeks before he officially joined the Westminster Assembly.

58. He may have attended the assembly's meetings, although it is possible that he heard about the deliberations secondhand or had read about them in pamphlets, which were distributed throughout London.

59. Ira Boseley implies that Strong aligned himself with the Independents from his earliest times on the assembly: "It is evident from a comparison of the dates, that Mr. Strong was not a member of the 'Assembly' when the 'Dissenting Brethren,' as they were called, made their historic declaration of Independency. But when settled in London he soon rose into eminence, and was

The minutes of the Westminster Assembly mention Strong in various connections, some more or less significant. Strong, we are told, recommended *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the book that Thomas Boston appreciated and that caused a stir in Scotland in the early 1720s.<sup>60</sup> On June 30, 1645, Strong was one among many ministers called on to pray for the parliamentary forces.<sup>61</sup> Strong was called on to pray several times,<sup>62</sup> and once he was ordered to visit another divine, a Mr. Perne, in the name of the assembly.<sup>63</sup>

The minutes also reveal that Strong took important roles in deciding theological questions. First, among many other divines, Strong voted for the resolution that “it is the will and appointment of Jesus Christ that notorious and scandalous offenders should be kept away from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>64</sup> This wording did not appear in the Westminster Confession in this form, although the idea did (see WCF 29.8). Some of the wording did appear in the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), however: “Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord’s Supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament by the power which Christ hath left in his church” (WLC 173).

Strong dealt with a second theological question when he was placed on a committee for examining more closely an issue that the assembly recommitted “concerning the use of the promises and threatenings of the Law.”<sup>65</sup> The question focused on how the regenerate were supposed to relate to passages that seemed so disparate—promises of bliss as opposed to threats of wrath. Thomas Goodwin was on this committee as well.<sup>66</sup> The confession’s final wording on this topic is as follows:

It [the law of God] is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what

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chosen to co-operate with them.” See *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 106–7. Boseley apparently thought that Strong was chosen by Parliament to work on the side of the Independents, but this seems to contradict Strong’s actual statements on the matter.

60. Joseph Caryl and Jeremiah Burroughs are two other “members who recommended” it. See Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers, *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), lvii, fn. The later “stir” was the Marrow Controversy.

61. See Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 108.

62. See Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 497, 515, 532. “Think of his prayers in the Assembly! The fact that soon after he was elected as one of its members he was asked to lead its devotions was a testimony to his known spirituality.” Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 110.

63. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 351.

64. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 256–57.

65. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 273.

66. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 273.

even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. (WCF 19.6)

It is difficult to know the degree to which Strong influenced the final wording here, but the confession's position is clearly in agreement with Strong's own statements on the subject: "Threatenings and promises are of great necessity and use...even the purest Creatures may and ought to make use of them, and to fear to offend God, because of his wrath."<sup>67</sup>

The minutes also tell us that Strong was placed on several committees, including one "to prevent the coming in of scandalous ministers."<sup>68</sup> He was placed on a committee along with Samuel Bolton and Andrew Perne to write the Larger Catechism's exposition of the eighth commandment.<sup>69</sup> He was added to "the committee for the Scriptures" along with men such as Henry Scudder and Obadiah Sedgwick.<sup>70</sup> This committee busied itself with the task of finding the most appropriate proof texts to support the Larger Catechism's assertions, the results of which still edify those who study the catechism.<sup>71</sup> Finally, Strong was on the committee for the answer of queries.<sup>72</sup>

It appears from the above evidence that Strong's influence on the Westminster Standards was not insignificant, especially his involvement on the committee for the Scriptures.

### Pastorates in London

On October 14, 1647, the House of Commons appointed Strong to be the minister of St. Dunstan in the West when Andrew Perne resigned from the pastorate there.<sup>73</sup> Strong had lectured there since 1644, and he was a friend of Perne's, so the

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67. Strong, *Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 3. Strong points out that God's threats to believers are fatherly and disciplinary, not punitive, and that believers should take them seriously and "stand in awe of" them (p. 164).

68. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 329.

69. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 388.

70. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 502–3.

71. See Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 336, where this committee's work refers to the assembly's earlier proof texting of the confession. Strong was not a part of this earlier work, but he did help with proof texting the Larger Catechism, which "exhibits the Assembly's most mature theological reflection and insight," according to John Bower in *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010). Bower's quote is found on the front flap of the dust jacket.

72. Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, 518.

73. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 48; and *DNB*.

choice was sensible.<sup>74</sup> Not much is known about Strong's pastorate at St. Dunstan other than he conformed to the Presbyterian form of church government while ministering there.

By 1647 Presbyterianism had been decreasing as an influence in Parliament,<sup>75</sup> and Strong was influenced by this state of affairs. Boseley tells us that Presbyterians first officially "withdrew from the Independents after the King's defeat at Marston Moor" in 1644.<sup>76</sup> The divide between Independents and Presbyterians grew, and eventually the Presbyterian Stephen Marshall could no longer minister at the abbey, and so the congregation chose Strong to replace him and to reorganize on Independent grounds.<sup>77</sup>

Strong did not simply leave his former church at St. Dunstan in the West in order to become the minister at the abbey. Thomas Bakewell, an otherwise unknown writer and contemporary of Strong, tells us in a short tract that in 1650 Strong tried to force his congregation to become Independents. Bakewell's tract claims that Strong threatened to bar from the sacrament any member who resisted the move to independency, and he claims that Strong threatened to resign if the church would not follow him.<sup>78</sup> If Bakewell's testimony is to be believed, Strong had either become very convinced of independency or he felt pressured to conform to it by outside forces. Given the political climate and the general swing toward independency under Cromwell, Strong's choice to adopt independency is not as remarkable as his alleged attempt to force it on his people.

The reasons for Strong's move to Congregationalism will probably never be fully known, but it may be that, with the rise of Cromwell's Independents and the demise of Presbyterian hopes in England, Strong simply saw no future in Presbyterianism; it appears that he was undecided on the "Grand Debate" and considered Presbyterianism as one acceptable option alongside independency, not as the only godly form of church government.<sup>79</sup>

Strong left St. Dunstan to become the first pastor of the Independent church, which met at one of the finest religious buildings in the Western world—Westminster Abbey. He was called to ministry there on December 9, 1650, and he pastored

74. *DNB*.

75. Roots, *Great Rebellion*, 114.

76. See Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 71.

77. See Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 71–72.

78. Thomas Bakewell, *A Plea for Mr. Strong's Church Members* (London, 1650), 1. The *Dictionary of National Biography* also takes note of Bakewell's tract in its article on Strong.

79. The *Dictionary of National Biography* notes, "In spite of the fact that Strong eventually embraced the Independent church polity, he was a moderate and perhaps even a conservative man in his religious thought." Regarding church polity, this comment is correct, although Strong was dogmatic, even vehemently so, in many areas of doctrine.

this congregation till his death in July of 1654.<sup>80</sup> According to Edmund Calamy, “The congregation which Mr. Strong had there gathered...were many of them parliament men, and persons of quality residing in Westminster.”<sup>81</sup> Boseley adds, “Generals in the army, commanders in the navy, and magistrates, were among its members.”<sup>82</sup> He also tells us that Oliver Cromwell himself attended Strong’s ministry from time to time, as did John Milton, who would later pen *Paradise Lost* and was Cromwell’s secretary at the time.<sup>83</sup> Strong regularly preached to the cream of London’s crop and thus had a position of great influence and responsibility.

When Strong took up this pastorate, he preached his inaugural sermon on the topic of church order. This was not a sermon about Congregationalist principles.<sup>84</sup> Strong was concerned about the duties of the pastor to the people and the duties of the people to the pastor. The Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan world put a premium on the idea that things worked well when everyone knew their place and functioned in their role: “Order is opposed to confusion, when no man knows or keeps his own place and station in the body.”<sup>85</sup>

There were times when Strong found himself obligated to mind his own place in the order of things. The House of Commons sometimes appointed ministers to preach single sermons on special occasions at the abbey, and services were not necessarily directly associated with the church that met there. On one occasion, a governor asked a man named Bridock, “who had been chaplain to the late earl of Derby and had been at a royalist garrison,”<sup>86</sup> to preach at the abbey. Strong objected strenuously to a Royalist preaching in his pulpit, but he was overruled, and therefore Bridock did indeed preach in the Abbey, to the great consternation of his hearers.<sup>87</sup> One man reported that Bridock’s message was “little less than popery.”<sup>88</sup>

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80. *DNB*.

81. Edmund Calamy, *An Account of the Ministers, Lecturers, Masters, and Fellows of Colleges and Schoolmasters Who Were Ejected or Silenced after the Restoration in 1660* (London, 1713), 2:41.

82. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 69.

83. Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 91.

84. Contra an implication made by Boseley. See *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 71.

85. Strong, *XXXI Select Sermons*, 93. Strong also speaks about order in *XXXI Select Sermons*, 155–56. His statements on this topic comport with Eustace Tillyard’s theory that the Elizabethan worldview was dominated by the concept of a top-down spiritual and cosmic order, from God to the angels, to kings, nobility, and commoners. See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), 8–17.

86. Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 249.

87. Merritt tells us that this happened in 1655, but there appears to be a discrepancy, since Strong died in July of 1654.

88. Carpenter, *House of Kings*, 174. Merritt tells us that this comment came from a vestryman of St. Margaret’s named Scobell. Merritt relates the quote differently: “was litell less than pooperly.” Merritt, *Westminster 1640–1660*, 249.

Boseley comments on the character of Strong's pastorates, and the evidence paints a portrait of Strong as a very heavenly minded man who worked unusually hard at preaching and pastoring. When he was minister at St. Dunstan in the West, the church voted to raise his salary because of the great pains he took to minister: "After one record as to his being paid quarterly, it is stated that £6 extra was voted with each payment in acknowledgement of his 'extraordinary paines' in conducting some afternoon services.... At St. Dunstan's he was evidently so engrossed in daily duty as to feel little concern about his future, being content to leave it in the Divine Hands."<sup>89</sup>

Strong preached three or four times a week at the abbey and expended a great deal of energy to prepare for each message.<sup>90</sup> God's "presence was very real to him," and the crowds who heard him felt that they were ushered into the presence of the Lord.<sup>91</sup> As Boseley comments, "All alike speak of his intense spirituality and unceasing devotion to his work."<sup>92</sup> He also appears to have managed to sustain a very demanding ministry of watchcare over his flock: "Much...pastoral vigilance 'for correction and reproof' was also exercised, and in ways such as make us wonder that it was ever tolerated."<sup>93</sup> All in all, Strong's ministry appeared to produce grounded church members who evidenced unity among themselves and "steadfastness of purpose."<sup>94</sup>

### Ministry as Trier

For five months before his death, in addition to his pastoring work at the abbey, Strong became one of Cromwell's Triers, a committee of men who examined pastoral candidates for church ministry throughout England.<sup>95</sup> As Presbyterianism declined, its influence over religion in England waned. In the late 1640s, the approval "of public ministers had been...reserved to the several presbyteries in city and country."<sup>96</sup> But in the early 1650s Cromwell decided that Presbyterians alone should not approve candidates for the ministry. In March of 1654 Cromwell "contrived a middle way of...intrusting the affair with certain commissioners of each denomination."<sup>97</sup> Triers had "the power of ultimate confirmation of appoint-

89. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 49, 65.

90. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 59–60.

91. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 61.

92. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 64.

93. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 74. Unfortunately Boseley does not supply any details.

94. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 74.

95. *DNB*.

96. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:144.

97. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:144.

ments to benefices.”<sup>98</sup> Boseley explains the state of the culture that made the Triers necessary: “Easy-going clergymen were tolerated and pointless sermons were accepted. Those who never reproved their hearers for sin, who practically allowed them to live as they pleased, and willingly gave them absolution at last, they were the ministers to whom the people listened, or altogether ignored. Large numbers of these preachers could not reprove their congregations because they needed reproof for their own lives.”<sup>99</sup>

The list of Triers, as Daniel Neal relates it, included mostly Independents but also several Presbyterians and even a couple of Baptists. William Strong served as a Trier alongside Independents such as John Owen, Joseph Caryl, Thomas Goodwin, and William Greenhill, and alongside Presbyterians such as John Arrowsmith, Obadiah Sedgwick, and Thomas Manton.<sup>100</sup> There were approximately thirty Triers, some of whom were laymen.

It took five Triers to approve a candidate for the ministry, but nine to reject one.<sup>101</sup> The Triers required three persons to testify to a candidate’s godliness, one of whom had to be a minister.<sup>102</sup> There were no standards for distinguishing between Independents or Presbyterians, but prelacy was disallowed,<sup>103</sup> and the Triers drew the line at Arminianism too: “Mr John Goodwin, an Independent divine of Arminian principles, observes, the triers made their own narrow Calvinian sentiments in divinity the door of admission to all church preferments; and that their power was greater than the bishops.”<sup>104</sup>

Richard Baxter in general spoke very highly of the Triers:

To give them their due, they did abundance of good to the Church: They saved many a congregation from ignorant, ungodly, drunken teachers: that sort of Men that intended no more in the ministry than to say a sermon as readers say their common prayers and so patch up a few good words together to talk the people asleep with on Sunday; and all the rest of the week go with them to the ale-house and harden them in their sin. . . . Though they were many of them somewhat partial for the Independents, Separatists, Fifth-Monarchy-men and Anabaptists, and against the Prelatists and Arminians, yet so great was the benefit above the hurt, which they brought to the

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98. Roots, *Great Rebellion*, 176.

99. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 85–86.

100. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:145.

101. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:145.

102. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:145.

103. John Brown, *The English Puritans* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 147.

104. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:145.



church, that many thousands of souls blest God for the faithful ministers they let in, and grieved when the prelatists afterward cast them out again.<sup>105</sup>

### Death, Burial in Westminster Abbey, and Disinterment

Strong passed away at the height of his powers in July of 1654.<sup>106</sup> Because no one knows the year of his birth, we cannot know how old he was when he died. Nevertheless, some speculation surely hits near the mark. If Strong was twenty when he graduated with the BA in 1631 (and this seems a reasonable guess<sup>107</sup>), that puts his birth in 1611, making him approximately forty-three at his death in 1654. Regrettably we can do no more than speculate.

There is no hint of any proposed cause of death, and it is Boseley who conjectures that Strong's pulpit ministry at the abbey, "combined with unceasing devotion to his Ministry in such anxious days, hastened his end."<sup>108</sup> Surely this is a good guess too, given what we know of Strong's study habits. He seems to have been obsessed with studying the Word of God. Strong's defining characteristic was to plumb things, and he always "took pains." The word *pains* is always cropping up in regard to Strong's studious ways. Sedgwick describes him as "painful in studies."<sup>109</sup> Henry Wilkinson elaborates, "He was often in watching a great part of the night, besides his pains in his daily studies."<sup>110</sup>

An anecdote that smacks of legend is nevertheless worth relating in regard to Strong's labors; it tells of a peculiar habit Strong had when preparing sermons—he would pace up and down the abbey's triforium, or upper gallery, which looms seventy feet above the main floor. "While there he appeared restlessly eager to become dominated by the discourse he had prepared."<sup>111</sup> Strong did this so often that people said after his death his ghost haunted the triforium.<sup>112</sup> The apocryphal ghost story aside, the anecdote about Strong's pacing, whether factual or not, certainly fits with the evidence about his study habits, and it adds a rare visual detail showing how a person who takes pains stirs himself to shake off lethargy; one can

105. Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), 72.

106. *DNB*.

107. It seems that it was common for people of the era to graduate with a BA at around nineteen or twenty years of age. Obadiah Sedgwick was twenty when he received his BA from Magdalen Hall, and Thomas Watson and Thomas Manton were nineteen when they received theirs. See Joel Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 517, 605, 407.

108. Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 97.

109. Sedgwick, "Elisha, His Lamentation," 28.

110. Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 90.

111. Boseley, *Ministers of the Abbey Independent Church*, 77.

112. Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 100.



imagine Strong as he paced, surrounded by the medieval architecture, the sweeping views of the abbey below, and the ornate windows behind him, his eyes alive with thought and prayer.

Whether or not the anecdote has any truth to it, it is clear that Strong was single-minded, and he took his preaching and writing very seriously. It has been said of John Calvin that overdiligence in his studies hurt his health and led to what can be said to be an early demise.<sup>113</sup> It may be the case that William Strong was cut from the same cloth as Calvin, but he did not hold out as long as Calvin did.

Strong's funeral sermon was preached by fellow assemblyman Obadiah Sedgwick, with whom he had served on the "committee for the Scriptures." Sedgwick said of the funeral, "I never preached a sermon (in this kind) with more grief of heart, and never did I discern a Sermon heard, and attended, with more weeping eyes. Certainly God had given him the affections of many persons, who loved him in life, and bitterly lamented him at his death."<sup>114</sup>

On July 4, 1654, Strong was buried in Westminster Abbey.<sup>115</sup> Others were buried in Henry VII's chapel, but Strong (along with William Twisse) was buried in the South Transept, also called the poet's corner.<sup>116</sup> After the restoration of Charles II, Strong's body was exhumed from the abbey in 1661.<sup>117</sup> Along with Strong went many others whose memories had become odious, including Oliver Cromwell's mother, Elizabeth; John Pym, a key member of the Long Parliament who had been instrumental in Parliament's success against Charles I; and William Twisse, the prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly. Neal notes that "these, with some others of lesser note, both men and women, were thrown together into one pit in St. Margaret's churchyard, near the back door of one of the prebendaries."<sup>118</sup> Cromwell himself had been distinterred a few months earlier, and his head was to adorn a pike near Westminster Hall until 1685. As one historian noted, "Even the grave is no protection from the ghoul."<sup>119</sup>

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113. Theodore Beza comments, "Calvin, having become comsumptive through excessive study and abstinence, died at Geneva." See John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 1, *Hosea* (1567; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 21. This comment by Beza is part of the "Portrait of Calvin" found at the beginning of the commentary.

114. Boseley, *Independent Church of Westminster Abbey*, 98. Boseley is quoting the epistle dedicatory in Sedgwick's funeral sermon.

115. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:154.

116. Arthur Stanley, *Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey* (London: John Murray, 1868), 224.

117. *DNB*.

118. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 2:236.

119. William Carlos Martyn, *A History of the English Puritans* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 451.

### Strong's Published Books

The character of William Strong's ministry is probably best discerned by reading his works. He published many volumes during his lifetime, and others were published posthumously due to the efforts of his wife, Damaris, of whom we know next to nothing, as well as the efforts of John Rowe and Thomas Manton.

Many of Strong's single sermons as well as several full-length books still exist. He wrote on a variety of theological subjects. The following is a short survey of the principal larger works that were published, aside from smaller tracts and single sermons, all of which still languish in their original seventeenth-century format. Interestingly, a survey of his works demonstrates that he published complex discourses as well as devotional books that were accessible to common people, a feature not very noticeable in Strong's lengthy *Discourse of the Two Covenants*. When comparing the *Discourse* to many of Strong's other works, it is apparent that he could write simple works as well as demanding, theological treatises. Thomas Manton perhaps said it best: "In a Treatise, who more copious and full? In shorter discourses, who more quick and sinewy?"<sup>120</sup>

*The Worm That Dyeth Not, or Hell Torments in the Certainty and Eternity of Them*, is a shorter book published in 1672, with an introduction by Thomas Manton and John Rowe. It is a compilation of several sermons, and its title speaks for itself as to the theme of the work.

*Jesus Christ, God's Shepherd and the Man God's Fellow*, published in 1658, is an exposition of Zechariah 13:7 and explains the many ways in which Jesus shepherds God's flock.

*XXXI Select Sermons* was published in 1656 and included a foreword by Thomas Manton, John Rowe, and George Griffith as well as a lengthy introduction by Henry Wilkinson. This book is a model of editorial excellence, and it includes many helpful features—a somewhat "biographical" table of contents telling us brief bits about the provenance of each of the thirty-one sermons, an apparently comprehensive Scripture index, and an extensive subject index. The table of contents explains that many of Strong's sermons in this volume were preached before Parliament, also indicating the day, month, and year. One sermon (not preached before Parliament) of particular interest is "The Two Covenants" preached on June 22, 1652, in a place called Bartholomew-lane. *XXXI Select Sermons* is a large book, reaching 754 pages.<sup>121</sup>

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120. Strong, *XXXI Select Sermons*, n.p. The quotation is found in the first address to the reader toward the beginning of the book. There are two unpaginated addresses to the reader, the first by Manton, Rowe, and Griffith, and the second by Henry Wilkinson.

121. The word count is less than half of Strong's *Discourse of the Two Covenants*. *XXXI Select Sermons* has approximately 223,000 words.

Another of Strong's works is *Heavenly Treasure, or Man's Chiefest Good*, published in 1656. This book encourages readers to lay up their treasure in heaven and to quicken their desire to go there. It has four introductions by John Rowe, Richard Vines, George Griffith, and Thomas Manton, respectively. It appears to have been written and edited with the common person in mind. Indeed, this book, perhaps more than any other of Strong's works, shows his ability to teach simple messages that anyone could understand. Added at the end of *Heavenly Treasure* is the sermon preached by Obadiah Sedgewick at Strong's funeral.<sup>122</sup>

*The Saints Communion with God and God's Communion with Them in Ordinances* was published in 1655. In this short work, Strong assists the common man to see God's purpose in giving public ordinances, helping people to appreciate public worship and to draw near to God in it. Just like the book mentioned previously, Strong shows how he excelled at ministering to the average person.

Finally, the seemingly impenetrable *A Discourse of the Two Covenants* was published in 1678, although it was written in the early 1650s and perhaps had its origins earlier than that. This colossal tome is Strong's magnum opus.<sup>123</sup> It seems that Strong died before finishing it. According to his own comments as to his plan for the tome, it appears to be unfinished in its present state because it does not contain the section about man's obligations in the covenant that Strong intended to add.<sup>124</sup> Damaris Strong mentions an "unstitched" manuscript left in Strong's study at the time of his death, and it is probably this book.<sup>125</sup> The *Discourse* does not have the benefit of Strong's own editorial hand. Theophilus Gale made a few

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122. Sedgewick's sermon was titled "Elisha, His Lamentation, upon the Sudden Translation of Elijah."

123. *A Discourse of the Two Covenants* has around 1,000–1,100 words per page, and the total word count is approximately 450,000–500,000.

124. At the beginning of "Book III," Strong says that he planned to structure the rest of the book based on the mutuality of the covenant. "Now God's part of the Covenant consists in promises and rewards, and mans part of the Covenant consists in services...and these will be our three general heads to be spoken to." Strong, *Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 242. An analysis of the rest of the book demonstrates that Strong never arrives at the third point. The rest of Strong's tome lingers on the promises, the blessings to be found in the covenant. Thus, either Strong did not finish his tome or part of the book was lost. I know of no one who describes Strong's *Discourse* as incomplete, but it is apparently undeniable based on Strong's own statement.

125. The only record we have of Damaris Strong is a short, one-page notice she published in an unknown source in 1655, around a year after Strong's death, in which she discusses Strong's works. The first words of the notice serve to give it a title: "Having Seen a Paper Printed." She mentions "one discourse, lying unstitched (his other things being all stitched by his own hand) in his study at the time of his death; and so displaced by the sad confusions thereof." This may be *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, referred to by Damaris in its unfinished state. The fact that Damaris describes the book as "displaced" may also shed light on why the book is unfinished. Did Strong indeed finish the book but part of it was lost in the tumultuous days following his death?

editing decisions, and he did extensive organizational and layout work. Gale says that the book “was penned as delivered in a popular way of Sermons, but I gave my self the liberty of casting it into this method of Books, Chapters, Sections and half-Sections, as that which to me seems most natural, proper, and adequate to its matter.”<sup>126</sup> It appears that the presentation problems of the book reflect Gale’s work on the stack of sermons he tried to adapt.

Strong’s great tome is valuable because it represents his thought on the covenants, but his death in the middle of the Interregnum, the later defaming of the leaders in the Protectorate, and the difficult editing and layout decisions made by Theophilus Gale undoubtedly led to the tome’s being neglected. This neglect is regrettable because Strong was one of the more profound theologians of the 1650s. Therefore, he constitutes an important contributor to English covenant theology. Strong’s *Discourse of the Two Covenants* deserves to be rediscovered.

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126. See the final paragraph of Gale’s unpaginated “A Summary” in *Discourse of the Two Covenants*.