

Church History (36): An Overview of Puritan Belief and Practice (3)

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

I. An Overview of Puritan Belief and Practice

1. *Assurance*. "Assurance is a precious gift, which many that live in these days do undervalue, and tread under foot" (Gray).¹ "It is the very drift and design of the whole Scripture, to bring souls first to an acquaintance with Christ, and then to an acceptance of Christ, and then to build them up in a sweet assurance of their actual interest in Christ" (Brooks).² "What is assurance? It is not any vocal audible voice, or brought to us by the help of an angel or revelation. Assurance consists of a practical syllogism, in which the word of God makes the major, conscience the minor, and the Spirit of God, the conclusion. The Word says, 'He that fears and loves God is loved of God;' there is the major proposition; then conscience makes the minor, 'But I fear and love God;' then the Spirit makes the conclusion, 'Therefore thou art loved of God;' and this is what the apostle calls 'The witnessing of the Spirit with our spirits, that we are his children' (Rom.8:16)" (Watson).³ "Assurance is a reflex act of a gracious soul, whereby he clearly and evidently sees himself in a gracious, blessed, and happy state; it is a sensible feeling, and an experimental discerning of a man's being in a state of grace, and of his having a right to a crown of glory; and this rises from the seeing in himself the special, peculiar, and distinguishing graces of Christ, in the light of the Spirit of Christ, or from the testimony and report of the Spirit of God, 'the Spirit bearing witness with his spirit, that he is a son, and an heir-apparent to glory' (Rom.8:16-17)" (Brooks).⁴ "The WCF distinguishes between a *primary objective ground* ('divine truth of the promises of salvation') and one or two *secondary, subjective grounds* ('the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made,' and 'the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits')" (Beeke).⁵ "This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption."⁶

(1) Divine promises. This is the primary grounds of our assurance; the promises of God in Christ. Thus, while the WCF spoke of "the divine truth of the promises of salvation," the Savoy Declaration said the primary grounds of assurance is "founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel."⁷ "The believer does not gain assurance by looking at himself or anything he has produced apart from God's promises but primarily by looking to God's faithfulness in Christ as revealed in the promises of the gospel" (Beeke).⁸ "This assurance did not arise nor was taken from any thing that was peculiar unto the believer, but merely from the consideration of the faithfulness of God Himself" (Owen).⁹

¹ Andrew Gray, *The Works of Andrew Gray*, 183

² Thomas Brooks, *Works*, 2:319

³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 251

⁴ Thomas Brooks, *Works*, 2:316

⁵ Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 124

⁶ WCF, 18:2

⁷ Savoy Declaration of Faith, 18:2

⁸ Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 125

⁹ John Owen, *Works*, 3:367

(2) Inward evidences. "The Puritans were convinced that the grace of God within believers confirms the reality of faith. They viewed the grace of God within believers in terms of syllogisms which use the so-called reflex or reflective act of faith" (Beeke).¹⁰ "There are first the direct acts of the soul, whereby it is carried out immediately to some object. And there are secondly reflect acts, whereby the soul considers and takes notice of what acts it does. It's as if the eye were turned inward to see itself. The Apostle John expresses it fully, 'We know that we know' (1Jn.2:3). So that when we believe in God, that is a direct act of the soul; when we repent of sin, that is a direct act of the soul; but when we know that we do believe, and that we do repent, this is a reflex act" (Burgess).¹¹ "There may be direct acts of faith without assurance; these direct acts of faith are shown when a Christian closes with the offers of the gospel for salvation, and embraces Christ in them. The reflex acts of faith are those by which a Christian understands that he is in the state of grace and believes that he has passed from death to life" (Gray).¹² "One way God provides assurance is by the effects of salvation, inward as well as outward, by which, as by certain marks imprinted in us, He does seal us to Himself in Christ" (Perkins).¹³ "These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God" (WCF).¹⁴

Every real Christian has in some measure every sanctifying grace in hm. As a child so soon as it is born is a perfect man for integrity of parts and entireness of limbs, though not for bigness and bulk of body, so every regenerate person, at the very first hour of his conversion, he is in part renewed in all parts; all the habits of grace are infused into the soul by the Spirit at once. At first conversion the soul is bespangled with every grace, though every grace is not then grown up to its full proportion or perfection; so that where there is one grace in truth, there is every grace in truth. That soul that can truly and seriously conclude that he has any one grace in him, that soul ought to conclude that there is every grace in him. Such as diligently search the Scripture shall find that true blessedness, happiness, and salvation is attributed to several signs: sometimes to the fear of God, sometimes to faith, sometimes to repentance, sometimes to love, sometimes to meekness, sometimes to humility, sometimes to patience, sometimes to poverty of spirit, sometimes to holy mourning, sometimes to hungering and thirsting after righteousness; so that if a godly man can find any one of these in himself, he may safely and groundedly conclude of his salvation and justification, though he cannot see all those signs in him. There is no saint but may perceive one sign in him, when he cannot another. Now, he that can groundedly be persuaded of any one sign of grace, he may safely conclude he has all the rest, though for the present he can neither see them nor feel them in himself.¹⁵

(3) Testimony of Spirit. While all the Puritans agreed the Spirit's work is essential for assurance, they did not agree on how the Spirit assures. Men like Thomas Goodwin, believed the Spirit not only gave assurance through our evidences (as mentioned above), but also through a direct testimony. "There is, first, an assurance by sense, by conditional promises, whereby a man, seeing the image of God upon his heart, to which promises are made, comes comfortably to believe that he is in the estate of grace.

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 132

¹¹ Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining: The Anatomy of True and False Conversion*, 672

¹² Andrew Gray, *Loving Christ and Fleeing Temptation*, 64

¹³ William Perkins, *Works*, 8:620

¹⁴ WCF, 16:2

¹⁵ Thomas Brooks, *Works*, 3:254

But then, secondly, there is an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost, by a heavenly and divine light, of a divine authority, which the Holy Ghost sheds in a man's heart, whereby he seals him up to the day of redemption."¹⁶ And yet, the Spirit never directly gives assurance apart from evidences. "If assurance be by the immediate testimony of the Spirit, it never testifies a good condition where good fruits are not. No assurance can be had, no testimony of the Spirit will be given of a saving state, where there are not good fruits. All persuasions of a good condition, without good fruit, are but vain, groundless presumptions; all hopes of heaven are but dangerous delusions" (Clarkson).¹⁷

The Puritans believed you can be a true Christian and yet lack a strong assurance. "The Puritans taught that *saving faith* must be distinguished from *assurance*. Though saving faith includes assurance by definition, full assurance of salvation must be regarded as a *fruit* of faith rather than of faith's *essence*" (Beeke).¹⁸ "There may fall out an eclipse in a Christian's assurance, to put him upon longing after heaven, where there shall not be the least doubting; where the banner of God's love shall be always displayed upon the soul; where the light of God's face shall be without clouds, and have no sun-setting; and where the saints shall have an uninterrupted assurance, and be ever with the Lord" (Watson).¹⁹ "It is one thing for me to have grace, it is another thing for me to see my grace; it is one thing for me to believe, and another thing for me to believe that I do believe; it is one thing for me to have faith, and another thing for me to know that I have faith" (Brooks).²⁰ "A man may be truly holy, and yet not have assurance that he shall be eternally happy. A man may be God's, and yet he not know it; his estate may be good, and yet he not see it; he may be in a safe condition, when he is not in a comfortable condition. All may be well with him in the court of glory, when he would give a thousand worlds that all were but well in the court of conscience" (Brooks).²¹ Thus, the Puritans believed it was the duty of every Christian no cultivate a deeper assurance, as well as avoid those things that erode assurance. Andrew Gray (1633-1656), suggested two primary obstructions of a Christian's assurance: "First, our mistaking of the Lord's dealing toward us; and, secondly, our untender and unsuitable dealing towards Him."²² He then provided four helps to increase assurance: "1. Be much in the exercise of faith—I mean the direct acts of faith, whereby the sinner, from the sense and feeling of his wants, lays hold on Jesus Christ, closing with Him, and leaning upon Him for a full supply out of His fulness. 2. Be much in believing the general truth and promises of the gospel, and frequently meditating on them. 3. Be diligent in the exercise of all spiritual graces, and Christian duties; that this is among the best means of attaining to assurance, is manifest from 2Peter 1:10—'*Give all diligence to make your calling and election sure.*' 4. Be tender and circumspect in your walking; that is, a clear word in Psalm 50:23, '*To him that orders his conversation aright, will I show the salvation of God.*' Ah! The untender walk that many of us have—it is no wonder to see us walk in darkness."²³

One of the difficulties of the topic of assurance is its relation to faith. Some have so connected these two, that the absence of the one (assurance) argues the absence of the other (faith). But the Puritans, while they closely related these two (faith and assurance), they distinguished them. The WCF said, "This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it."²⁴ "Though it be possible for a man

¹⁶ Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, 1:233

¹⁷ David Clarkson, *Works*, 2:416

¹⁸ Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 113

¹⁹ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 251

²⁰ Thomas Brooks, *Works*, 2:316

²¹ Thomas Brooks, *Works*, 2:336

²² Andrew Gray, *The Works of Andrew Gray*, 186

²³ Andrew Gray, *The Works of Andrew Gray*, 193-194

²⁴ WCF, 18:3

to attain to full assurance of God's love, yet he may have saving faith that has no assurance. Faith and assurance differ; and therefore says the apostle, 'Draw near with full assurance of faith.' Assurance of faith comforts, but the reliance of faith saves" (Bridge).²⁵ "The Puritans taught that *saving faith* must be distinguished from *assurance*. Though saving faith includes assurance by definition, full assurance of salvation must be regarded as a *fruit* of faith rather than of faith's *essence*" (Beeke).²⁶ Anthony Burgess (1600-1663), in a treatise called, *Spiritual Refining: The Anatomy of True and False Conversion*, distinguished between "the faith of adherency to Christ and the faith of assurance in Christ." "Faith of adherence is many times where this faith of assurance is not. By sin we often chase away our assurance; many times, the people of God may walk without this comfortable persuasion of the faith of assurance."²⁷ "There is a faith of evidence as well as a faith of adherence. The faith of evidence is building upon the conditional promise of the book of life, and the faith of adherence is when a Christian lays hold upon the absolute promises of the gospel for salvation" (Gray).²⁸

2. *Spiritual warfare*. The Puritans wrote many treatises on temptation and spiritual warfare. For example, *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*, by John Owen (1616-1683); *The Christian in Complete Armor*, by William Gurnall (1616-1679); *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, by Thomas Brooks (1608-1680); *The Devil Resisted and Put to Flight*, by Andrew Gray (1633-1656); *The Christian Warfare Against the Devil, World, and Flesh*, by John Downname (1571-1652); and *The Combat Between the Flesh and the Spirit*, by Christopher Love (1618-1651). The Puritans believed in a literal devil who controls legions of demons, who have influence over the world, which tempts our flesh. William Gurnall said Satan has two main designs: "His first main design is to draw into sin. The second main design is to accuse, vex, and trouble the saint for sin. As the Holy Spirit's work is not only to be a sanctifier, but also a comforter, whose fruits are righteousness and peace, so the evil spirit Satan is both a seducer unto sin, and an accuser for sin, a tempter and a troubler, and indeed in the same order."²⁹ Thomas Brooks provided twelve ways Satan draws souls to sin: "He presents the bait, and hides the hook; he paints sin with virtue's colors; he extenuates and lessens sin; he presents to the soul the best men's sins, and hides their virtues; he presents God as one made up all of mercy; he persuades the soul the work of repentance is an easy work; he makes the soul bold to venture upon the occasions of sin; he presents to the soul the outward mercies that vain men enjoy, and the outward miseries that they are freed from, while they have walked in the ways of sin; he presents to the soul the crosses, the losses, reproaches, sorrows, and sufferings that daily attend those what walk in the ways of holiness; he works them to be frequently in comparing themselves and their ways with those that are reputed to be worse then themselves; he encourages them to enjoy and engage in wicked company."³⁰ "There are these two things I would press upon you as a subject of study. First, you must understand the desperate deceitfulness of your own heart. Second, you must know the desperate devices of the devil. These are depths that no one has been able to fathom" (Gray).³¹

(1) Resist the devil. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jas.4:7). "It is a tragedy that this most excellent command, to resist the devil, should be so little obeyed by the majority of us" (Gray). Gray then expounded four important things from this text: "1. It is every Christian's duty to engage in serious, diligent, and active resistance of the devil. 2. Resisting the devil is attended with many excellent victories over him: 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.' 3. Drawing near to God and living with

²⁵ William Bridge, *Works*, 2:139

²⁶ Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 113

²⁷ Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining: The Anatomy of True and False Conversion*, 672

²⁸ Andrew Gray, *Loving Christ and Fleeing Temptation*, 64

²⁹ William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 1:71, 85

³⁰ Thomas Brooks, *Works*, 1: 10-62

³¹ Andrew Gray, *Loving Christ and Fleeing Temptation*, 457

sight of the Almighty is an excellent help for a Christian resisting the devil. We may gather this by connecting the seventh verse with the beginning of the eighth; the apostle, pressing them to resist the devil, immediately subjoins, 'Draw near to God' (Jas.4:8). The apostle is saying that the best way to practically obey this command is for you to draw near to God; that is, never live outside of the sight of the invisible God if you desire help resisting the devil. 4. Humility and submission of spirit are excellent ways for a Christian to resist the devil; therefore, these two duties are put together in the verse: 'Submit yourselves therefore to God,' and then the apostle adds, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Thus, humility and active effectual resisting of the devil often go together. Nothing more weakens a Christian to resist the devil than pride and presumption of spirit."³²

After providing reasons Satan so often obtains a victory over us, and eight ineffectual ways of resisting temptations, Gray then provided "seven excellent helps by which you may be enabled to wrestle with, yes, even to overcome the devil and his temptations." "1. Let this excellent grace of faith lead the way to all the graces of the Spirit, and the spiritual army that marches against this prince of darkness. Let faith be Christ's lieutenant general, marching just at His back, with Christ always coming in front. Let faith buckle with the devil and his temptations. Yet, one may ask, 'How can faith defeat the devil and his temptations?' First, faith reveals the beauty of Christ, which makes a Christian have a strong enmity to his idols. Secondly, faith takes hold of the strength of Christ and uses that strength in battle. Thirdly, faith exercises itself upon the promises; those promises convey spiritual life and strength, by which Christians are made more than conquerors." "2. That which marches next to faith is watchfulness. Faith may grow presumptuous if watchfulness is not with it; let therefore watchfulness be engaged so that you do not take up the motions of the enemy. 'Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt.26:41); it is not said, 'Lest temptation enter into you,' but, 'Lest you enter into temptation.' This tells us that we often enter into temptation before temptations enter into us." "3. We must be aware of the excellent grace of prayer. Sometimes faith will begin to faint, watchfulness will begin to sleep, hope will begin to languish, and prayer will go up to Him who is Captain of salvation to cry for help. Prayer is the messenger of the soul that goes up to Christ to seek strength; therefore, let prayer be kept in exercise for overcoming your temptations." "4. The faith of the omniscience of God is an excellent help to keep a Christian from committing sin. Therefore, Christians, as you desire to be helped in the fight with your temptations, consider the omniscience of God whose eyes are as a flame of fire; He sees how you behave yourselves." "5. Endeavor always to live near God. If you desire to effectually oppose and wrestle with your temptations, then be never outside of the sight of God." "6. Resist temptations by endeavoring in all things, and above all things, moderation in the things of the world. Nothing gives the devil so much advantage, and makes him so often a conqueror, as our ardent and earnest pursuit after the things of the world." "7. You may also be helped to wrestle with your temptations and corruptions by endeavoring to crush your temptations at their first assault, and to crush your lusts in the very bud."³³

(2) Walk in the Spirit. "Scripture speaks about 'receiving the Spirit' (Gal.3:2), 'living in the Spirit' (Gal.5:25), being 'led by the Spirit' (Gal.5:18), and 'walking in the Spirit' (Gal.5:16). Receiving and living in the Spirit is set out to us as the first implantation or work of God's Spirit on us in our regeneration. And by the other two phrases, of being led by the Spirit and walking in the Spirit, these two are one and the same, and set out to us the progressive work of the Spirit upon the soul in the work of sanctification. So that he who would walk in the Spirit must follow the motions and instructions of Him" (Love).³⁴ Christopher Love then answered this question: "How may we know the Spirit's motions from the natural motions of our own consciences?" "1. When the Spirit moves a man to good, He not

³² Andrew Gray, *Loving Christ and Fleeing Temptation*, 508

³³ Andrew Gray, *Loving Christ and Fleeing Temptation*, 541-544

³⁴ Christopher Love, *Works*, 1:91

only excites him to it, but also assists him in doing it. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of power to enable us in good duties. As He excites, so also He assists in what He moves to. But though natural motions from conscience may put a man upon the doing of a good thing, yet it cannot give any power for its performance." "2. The Spirit moves a man to do good more out of the loveliness and beauty that is in holiness than out of fear of hell's torments. So the Apostle Paul says, 'As many as are led by the Spirit are the sons of god; for ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.' The Spirit of God makes a man do a thing like a child: out of love to his father and not out of fear. This is the effect of the Spirit of God." "3. The Spirit of God moves a man to do good in things not only good for the matter, but to make conscience of the end why he does such a thing, that he is sound in his aim. Therefore the Apostle says, 'We have received the spirit of a sound mind;' that is, the Spirit puts a man not only upon the doing of a good duty, but makes him have a sincere end in the doing thereof." "4. The Spirit of God moving men to do good regulates them in the manner of doing good. The duty must be done with affection, with love, with faith, fervency and composedness of mind." "5. The Spirit of God moves a man so powerfully that He carries him to do good, notwithstanding difficulty and danger, and neither shall hinder him in its performance. The Spirit's motions are like new wine in a barrel that, wanting vent, is ready to burst. Holy motions will break forth into holy actions."³⁵

Love then answered another question: "How may we know the Spirit's motions from satanic delusions?" "1. The motions of God's Spirit are always agreeable to the written Word. The Word's prescript and the Spirit's motions correspond one to the other. You have both joined together by Solomon, 'I will pour out My Spirit upon you, I will make known My words unto you.' So the prophet Isaiah, 'My Spirit that is upon thee, and My words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth.' The motions of the Spirit of God are always suitable to the Word of God, and therefore all that are contrary are the delusions of the evil spirit." "2. The motions of God's Spirit in men are not now to foretell future events, but they are holy motions pressing to duty. Therefore the Papists who boast of a prophetic spirit, and of foretelling things to come, and your star-gazers and sooth-sayers who pretend to tell future contingent events are diabolical delusions and not from the Spirit of God. Since the canon of Scripture has been established, He refers us to the Word as the rule of our obedience." "3. The motions of God's Spirit stir up grace and keep under sin. They stir up grace, and therefore we read of the assisting, exciting, and supplying work of the Spirit. Those motions which stir up sin and cherish corruption are diabolical. Therefore, said the Apostle Paul, 'If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.' Motions from the Spirit of God are holy motions, exciting grace and depressing sin."³⁶

(3) Put on the armor of God. "In order to prepare ourselves for combat, we must arm ourselves against the encounter and to this end let us take the counsel and advice of the Apostle Paul, one of Gods chief champions and expert soldiers, as he sets it down in Eph.6:10-22, where first he describes the quality, and as it were the metal of our armor; in which respect he tells us, that we must put on the armor of God which is spiritual, and that our weapons and armor must not be carnal. For being of this nature, though they were never so strong, they were to no purpose, seeing our enemy is spiritual." "The Lord has given us this armor, and we put it on, to the end that we may be enabled to resist Satan; and therefore seeing it is amor of God's own making and bestowing, we may assure ourselves that He will not suffer His workmanship and gift to be so much disgraced, as that Satan should pierce through it and wound us. For the Lord knows the force of Satan's darts and bullets of temptation; and he has made his armor high proof; and therefore strong enough to repel all the battery of Satan's suggestions." (Downname).³⁷

³⁵ Christopher Love, *Works*, 1:96-98

³⁶ Christopher Love, *Works*, 1:98-100

³⁷ John Downame, *The Christian Warfare*, 44-46