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# GROWTH IN GRACE IN PURITAN THEOLOGY

## I

To the Puritan pastor and theologian, growth in grace is central and all-important because it is concerned with and necessarily affects the whole of man's life. It is the centre of the redemptive plan, both in the sense that it lies between the state of sin into which we are born and the state of glory into which we are finally to be delivered, and in the sense that it is the most active and glorious concern of God the Holy Spirit on earth. The unbeliever and the believer in glory are static in a way that the believer here below is not—the one is without God and without hope in the world, the other is with Christ. But the Christian on earth is continually the subject of divine action, by which he is enabled to work out his own salvation; he is ever moving along the pilgrim's path of progress. This progress is normally viewed from two standpoints by the Puritan teachers: as a battle with hostile elements within and without, and as the growth of a living organism.

The whole Puritan concept of growth in grace springs naturally from their parent theology as set forth by the Reformers, notably Calvin. Both in the *Institutes* and in his sermons and commentaries, Calvin is clear and positive on the work of the Holy Spirit not only in regeneration and conversion, but also in restoring the image of God in man. A Christian is a new creature, he is now able to mirror the excellencies of his Creator. It is on the firm basis of the believer's regeneration that the Puritans expound, in more detail and with more practical advice than Calvin ever gave, their teaching on growth in grace.

Richard Rogers writes thus of the weak Christian troubled about his salvation: "He cannot miscarry nor be forsaken of the Lord in the lowest depth of his distress. For some one or other testimony and property of the new birth shall ever be found in him, although he always feeleth it not, neither perceiveth it himself, whereby it shall be manifest that he liveth to God the life of God; even as hearing, breathing, moving, feeling and such like are infallible tokens of life in the body which by many likelihoods appeareth to be dead."

This is perhaps the place to say something of Richard Rogers and his work. Born about 1550, he became a Bachelor of Arts at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1571, and ministered at

Wethersfield, Essex, from 1577 until his death in 1618. His *magnum opus* was the first comprehensive practical treatise ever written on the Christian life. Published first in 1603, its full title runs *Seven Treatises: containing such direction as is gathered out of the Holy Scriptures, leading and guiding to true happiness, both in this life and in the life to come: and may be called the practice of Christianity. Profitable for all such as heartily desire the same: in the which, more particularly true Christians may learn how to lead a godly and comfortable life every day, notwithstanding their tribulations.* The second edition of 1605 contained a dedication to King James. All references are from the 5th edition of 1630, when the work was corrected and enlarged. There are two introductions to the book by other divines. One of these, Stephen Egerton, explains that many works have been written "tending to insnare and entangle the minds of ignorant and simple Christians in the corrupt and filthy puddle of Popish devotion". Richard Rogers has written "as a counterpoise to all such enchantments of Papists, who would by these means bear men in hand, that all true devotion dwelt among them and were inclosed and tied to their Cels and Cloysters: in which uncleane cages it is impossible for any true spirituall and holy meditations to have their abiding, forasmuch as the very minds and consciences of such uncleane birds are filled with damnable errors and idolatries". In the book we shall find "good precepts and holy direction, not delivered by rote (as from a Parrat) out of the books and writings of other men: but confirmed by the singular experience of one who hath long laboured the conversion and confirmation of many others; but especially the . . . quickening of his owne soule and conscience". The other preface by Ezechiel Culverwell contains the opinion that the book "might in one principall respect be called the anatomie of the soule, wherein not only the great and principall parts are laid open, but every veine and little nerve are so discovered that we may, as it were with the eye, behold the right constitution of the whole and every part of a true Christian". Rogers himself (in his Preface or Entrance to the book), admits that he was partly moved to write by the fact that "the Papists cast in our teeth that we have nothing set out for the certain and daily direction of a Christian, when yet they have published, they say, many treatises of that argument". While we have catechisms, sermons and other treatises, Rogers admits that there is nothing "gathered together

in one volume". His massive *Seven Treatises* certainly altered that situation. The names of them are as follows:—

- I. sheweth who be the true children of God.
- II. declareth at large what the life of the true believer is and the conversation of such as have assured hope of salvation.
- III. layeth forth the means whereby a godly life is holpen up and continued.
- IV. directeth the believer unto a daily practice of a Christian life.
- V. the lets which hinder the sincere course of the Christian life before described.
- VI. setteth down what privileges belong to every true Christian, and how he may have his part in them.
- VII. containeth the objections and cavils which may be brought against the doctrine before set down.

For Richard Rogers the doctrine of growth in grace is a great encouragement. "Whatsoever good things God's people have and enjoy," he writes, "yet he hath much more in store for them. He maketh them to grow in understanding of his will, in more assurance of faith and strength of hope, in more patience under the cross, more moderation in the use of their lawful liberties and benefits of this life; he giveth them a better rule over their hearts and affections, and *that* in more things than at the first, and oftener, and easilier; and so over their lives and actions, their tongues, their hands, their eyes, their ears. . . . And (to comprehend much in a few words) the whole course of their life is much better governed than it was wont to be, and the image of God more lively and clearly restored". A true Christian, in fact "may have much more conquest over his rebellious heart in subduing the affections thereof than ever he thought had been possible for him; which, whoso enjoyeth not is justly deprived of so great a commodity as—besides the salvation of his soul—hath none like it upon earth, and yet cannot be separated from that act neither".<sup>1</sup> This doctrine of the necessity of growth, its inseparable connection with the new birth and our justification, is common to all Puritan writers. Here is what Dr. Thomas Manton has to say commenting upon verse 2 of Jude:

Where there is life there is growth; and, if grace be true, it will surely increase. A painted flower keepeth always at the same pitch and

<sup>1</sup> Treatise 6, "Privileges"—Chapter XII, The 8th.

stature; the artist may bestow beauty upon it, but he cannot better life. A painted child will be as little ten years hence as it is now. So a pretence at religion always keepeth at the same stay; yea, when their first heats are spent they are fearfully blasted. But now they that have true grace are compared to a living plant which increaseth in bulk and stature (Psalms xcii. 12-13) and to a living child, which groweth by receiving kindly nourishment (1 Peter ii. 2). If we do not grow, we go backward. In Hebrews vi, compare the first with the fourth verse "Let us go on to perfection" and presently he treateth of apostasy. We cannot keep that which we have received if we do not labour to increase it. They that row against the stream had need ply the oar, lest the force of the water carry them backward; or as he that goeth up a sandy hill sinketh down if he do not go forward. He that would not improve his talent lost it . . . there are no stunted trees in Christ's garden; if they leave off to grow, they prove doated or rotten trees. An active nature such as man's is must either grow worse or better.

Manton continues in this strain, insisting that it is a bad sign if a man is content with little grace. It is he that was never good who has no desire to be better. "Spiritual things do not cloy in the enjoyment" he remarks. We cannot have too much grace; God has made ample provision and ample reward; to grow and to seek more accords with his bounty and is a necessary act of gratitude, though time is required, and different Christians grow at different speeds. John Owen says much the same thing, though with less fervour. In speaking of sanctification as a progressive work, in his *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*, he notes how often Scripture uses the growth of trees and plants as a similitude, and remarks: "The progress of sanctification and holiness . . . hath a root, a seed, a principle of growth and increase in the soul of him that is sanctified. All grace is immortal seed, and contains in it a living growing principle. That which hath not in itself a life and power of growth is not grace." The same writer says elsewhere, "The constitution of spiritual life is such as is meet to grow and increase unto the end. Hereby it doth distinguish itself from that faith which is temporary".<sup>1</sup> Not even persecution can stop this. Afflictions themselves may encourage growth and become a means of grace. (Goodwin's treatise, *Patience and its perfect work*, is an exposition of this theme.) Brooks notes that

the troubles, afflictions and persecutions that Christians meet with in their pursuit after holiness will further the increase and growth of

<sup>1</sup> *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*.

their grace. Grace never rises to so great a height as it does in times of persecution. . . . Many a man had not been so good if the times had not been so bad. . . . As stars shine brightest in the darkest nights, and as spices smell sweetest when pounded and as vines are the better for bleeding and gold the brighter for scouring, and palm trees the better for pressing; so the graces of the saints shine the brightest and smell the sweetest and rise highest in times of affliction and persecution.<sup>1</sup>

## II

We turn now to the nature and criteria of growth in grace. What exactly is this growth; wherein does it consist? How does it manifest itself in the personality? On these questions the Puritans had definite answers. Thomas Goodwin, for example, wrote *A Trial of a Christian's Growth . . . a treatise handling this case, how to discern our growth in grace. Affording some helps rightly to judge thereof*. This is a book of "case divinity" founded on an exposition of John xvii.

Firstly, the effects of grace should be clearly visible in the mind. Owen writes as follows on the need of the mind of fallen man: "It were easy to evince, not only by testimonies of Scripture, but by the experience of all mankind, built on reason and the observation of instances innumerable, that the whole rational soul of man since the fall, and by the entrance of sin, is weakened, impaired, vitiated in all its faculties and all their operations about their proper and rational objects." Thus men cannot receive, understand or believe spiritual things without the Holy Spirit creating "a new saving light in them". Grace acts on the mind, and Manton, commenting on Isa. liii. 11, explains how grace sanctifies the understanding and enlightens the mind: "The understanding is the great wheel of the soul and the guide of the whole man. Usually there the business of salvation sticketh: either we do not rightly apprehend Christ, or not rightly determine concerning Christ and therefore we do not close with him. The rest of the faculties follow that same *dictamen intellectus*."

The most comprehensive work on this subject is Owen's treatise *The Grace and Duty of being spiritually minded*, based

<sup>1</sup> *The Crown and Glory of Christianity, or Holiness the only way to happiness*, 1662.

on Romans viii. 6. It was written during an illness, when Owen was expecting to die. In this work Owen describes "the minding of the Spirit" in three ways: (1) The actual exercise of the mind in thought and meditation about things spiritual and heavenly. (2) The inclination and disposition of the mind by which it is brought to such thoughts. (3) The relish or savour the mind finds in spiritual things. The two great truths enunciated from the text are: A. Spiritual mindedness is the great distinguishing character of true believers from all unregenerate persons. B. Where any are spiritually minded, there alone is life and peace. Involuntary thoughts, he suggests in the course of the work, are a good test—where does the mind tend to go when unoccupied? "There is a certain track and course of thoughts that men ordinarily betake themselves unto when not affected with present occasions." That is one test. He deals with other tests, including prayer, then examines the proper objects of spiritual thoughts. Rules and motives for steadiness in meditation are given, also directions for attaining a more spiritual mind, and advice for those who find difficulty in meditation.

Secondly we come to the affections. The emotional side of man's nature is certainly touched by the new birth, and just as certainly involved in the growth in grace which follows. "True grace," says Owen, "*fixeth* the affections on spiritual things."<sup>1</sup> The importance of the affections is shown by what the same writer says elsewhere: "Affections are in the soul as the helm in the ship: if it be laid hold on by a skilful hand, he turneth the whole vessel which way he pleaseth. If God hath the powerful hand of his grace upon our affections, he turns our souls into a compliance with his institutions and instructions."<sup>2</sup> But our need is great, for "by nature our affections, all of them, are depraved and corrupted. Nothing in the whole nature of man, no power or faculty of the soul is fallen under greater disorder or deprivation by the entrance of sin than our affections are."<sup>3</sup> The result is an aversion from God and spiritual things and an inordinate love of things earthly and sensual. Shock, change of environment, age, habit, education, philosophy or affliction

<sup>1</sup> *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*, Book III, Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> *On Spiritual Mindedness*, Chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapter 12.

may all change our affections somewhat, but more than this has been begun in a Christian, for he is internally renewed. God now becomes the chief object of the affections; "He who loves not God and God in Christ has no true spiritual affection for anything at all."

In chapter 10 of his first treatise, Richard Rogers deals with what he calls the Eight Companions of Faith. Many of these are simply renewed affections. The first is joy, "for how can a man be persuaded by good and infallible grounds, that greater happiness is given him than all the world is worth, but he must needs rejoice with joy unspeakable?" The second is holy admiration—a continual reverent wonderment. The Christian will marvel "to see his state so changed; himself to be brought from so low a depth of extreme misery to so high a degree of honour, and so to be enriched by this favour of God". Thirdly, there is love. "But when we see indeed what great things God hath done for us, from what dreadful bondage he hath delivered us, unto the which in all our life we were in danger, and to what gracious liberties and privileges he hath restored us by forgiving us all our sins; then we see just cause to say with the prophet, 'I love the Lord because He hath done so great good things for my soul'." Again, there is the desire to be with Christ and see Him in glory, a desire to forsake the world and willingness to die, and a desire to convert and help others.

Manton mentions a desire and a love for God's word as one of our new affections: "Trees that receive life from the earth and the sun send forth their branches to receive the sun and stretch their roots into the earth which brought them forth . . . appetite is an effect of life. By natural tendency the new creature is carried out to its support from the word of God, there to be comforted and nourished. It shows that all who have not such a kindly appetite to the word of God . . . were never acquainted with this new nature."<sup>1</sup> There there is hatred of sin which may be properly termed an affection. Manton asserts "Grace produces a hatred of sin, not a bare abstinence from it. Sin may be restricted by foreign reasons not proper to grace, as a dog that hath a mind to the bait may abstain for fear of the cudgel. Men may refrain from sin when there is not a rooted enmity against it; whereas in the saints there is a constant

<sup>1</sup> Sermon on Ps. cxix. 20.

principle of resistance against it".<sup>1</sup> As the affections are so important, and always changed in some measure by grace, a man's spiritual condition may be tested by the state of his affections. Richard Sibbes maintains:

There is nothing that characterizeth and sets a stamp upon a Christian so much as desires. All other things may be counterfeit. Words and actions may be counterfeit but the desires and affections cannot, because they are the immediate issues and productions of the soul; they are that which come immediately from the soul, as fire cannot be counterfeit. A man may ask his desires what he is. Desires are better than action a great deal; for a man may do a good action that he doth not love, and he may abstain from an ill action that he hates not. But God is a spirit and looks to the spirit especially. It is a good character of a Christian that his desire for the most part is to do good; the tenor and sway of his desire is to good. "One thing have I desired." The Spirit of God is effectual in stirring up these desires.<sup>2</sup>

More shortly, to conclude this section, we may quote the same author speaking on the same topic: "Let us examine and try ourselves oft by our affections, how they stand biassed and pointed, whether to God and heavenward, or to the world; for we are as we love."<sup>3</sup>

Grace affects not only the mind and the affections, but also the will. Owen describes the will thus: "The will is the ruling governing faculty of the soul, as the mind is the guiding and leading. Whilst this abides unchanged, unrenewed, the power and reign of sin continues in the soul."<sup>4</sup> The new birth affects the will then, and a man in whom saving grace is operative will find his will being renewed. Thomas Goodwin puts this most forcefully in his quaint way: "When God turns any man to him, he fasteneth that man's will. He trusted to the will of man first, and was deceived by it; now he is resolved to make sure work with him when he comes to save him, and therefore he puts man's salvation out of himself. And therefore now, when he both work upon him, he works especially on the will; the Holy Ghost sits there, as in the centre of the soul, and hath a chief hand upon the stern of man's spirit."<sup>5</sup> Thus there is a

<sup>1</sup> Sermon on Matt. xxv. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon on Ps. xxvii. 4—"A Breathing after God" (1639).

<sup>3</sup> *A Glance of Heaven* (1618).

<sup>4</sup> Owen, *A Discourse on the Holy Spirit*, Book III, Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> From a Sermon on Ephesians ii. 3.

radical difference between the will of the believer and that of the unbeliever. The following words of Owen are echoed in many other passages in Puritan writings: "The will in unbelievers is under the power of the law of sin. . . . But in believers there is a will of doing good, an habitual disposition and inclination in their wills unto that which is spiritually good; and where this is, it is accompanied with answerable effects."<sup>1</sup> The believer thus has a new liberty to choose and to do what is right, and this is wrought by the Holy Spirit. "Any liberty and ability to do that which is good is from the Spirit. . . . The Spirit of God puts new life into the soul of a man . . . he alters the judgment by presenting greater reasons and further light than it saw before . . . (yet) the soul doeth things freely."<sup>2</sup> Or, as Owen puts it in a few words, "Believers have free will unto that which is spiritually good. For they are freed from that bondage and slavery unto sin which they were under in the state of nature."<sup>3</sup> Thus when Baxter describes the constitution of a believer's character, he writes that one of "the three great essential constant parts of the new creature" is "a resolved choice and adhesion of the will by which (a Christian) preferreth God and Christ and heaven and holiness above all that can be set against them, and is fixedly resolved here to place his happiness and his hopes".<sup>4</sup>

Another important criterion of true growth in grace is the increasing strength of faith. Faith is of course the essence of the Christian's response to God, as the Puritans saw it. "No man," says Richard Rogers, "can lead a godly and a Christian life before he have some measure of true faith . . . so it is (also) on the contrary to be marked, that no man who believeth, and nourisheth and preserveth his faith can live wickedly nor fashion himself after men of the world, or return to the offensive and unsavoury course, which he walked after before: but as he is new born, so he is a new creature".<sup>5</sup> Two treatises (and there are others) on the subject show the importance which the Puritans attached to faith. Manton's *Life of Faith* shows how in sanctification, faith grasps the promises, encourages us in

<sup>1</sup> *On Indwelling Sin*, Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> R. Sibbes, *The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law*.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Holy Spirit*, Book IV, Chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup> *The Character of a sound confirmed Christian*, para. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, *Treatise II*, Chapter 1.

our conflicts and inspires patience, increases our confidence, applies the blood of Christ, purifies the heart, quickens our spiritual life, breeds joy and overcomes the world. He shows how vital it is to "keep the eye of faith clear". Thomas Goodwin's treatise on *Justifying Faith* is perhaps the most exhaustive. Part I concerns the object of Faith—Christ; Part II deals with the Acts of Faith, and Part III delineates the Properties of Faith. Some words from Manton's sermon on Hebrews xi. 8 show why the Puritans considered faith so all-important in the Christian life: "It is the property of faith to subject all our wills and all our interests to God's pleasure. Faith, where it takes, it gives; with one hand it takes Christ, with the other it resigns and gives up ourselves, our relations and all our comforts to the will of Christ."

This section may be fittingly ended with some words of Brookes on the excellencies of a growing faith.

Faith that accompanies salvation is a working faith, a lively faith . . . it is of a growing and increasing nature. . . . A gracious soul knows that if he be rich in faith he cannot be poor in other graces; he knows the growth of faith will be as the former and the latter rain to all other graces; he knows that there is no way to outgrow his fears but by growing in faith; he knows that all the pleasant fruits of paradise, viz., joy, comfort and peace flourish as faith flourishes, he knows that he hath much work upon his hands, that he hath many things to do, many temptations to withstand, many mercies to improve, many burdens to bear, many corruptions to conquer, many duties to perform. . . . A growth in faith will render a man glorious in life, lovely in death and twice blessed at the resurrection. So will *not* a growth in honours, a growth in riches, a growth in notions, a growth in opinions. The faith that accompanies salvation unites the soul to Christ and keeps the soil up in communion with Christ. And from that union and communion that the soul hath with Christ flows much divine power and virtue that causes faith to grow.<sup>1</sup>

Another sign of growth in grace is victory over sin. But the battle rarely goes as we hope, so the Puritans provided comfort for the defeated and advice on fighting the battle rather than vague promises of victory alone. Sibbes, for instance, explains: "Though Christ hath undertaken this victory, he accomplisheth it by training us up to fight his battles." We are to be trained by watchfulness and diligent use of means, also by keeping grace exercised, looking to Christ. If we seem to make no progress, we must remember that "grace grows slowly and secretly

<sup>1</sup> *A Glance of Heaven*, Chapter 5.

like a seed, and the tree falleth upon the last stroke, yet all the former strokes help it forward".<sup>1</sup> Owen's treatise on "The Dominion of Sin and Grace" is concerned with this theme, based on an exposition of Romans vi. 14. In it, he shows that though the condemning power of sin has gone, its being and operation still continue. The Gospel gives spiritual strength to the believer so that "we are absolved, quitted, freed from the rule of sin . . . its pretended right and title". Further, "the Gospel, or the grace of it, is the means and instrument of God for the communication of internal spiritual strength unto believers. By it they do receive supplies of the Spirit, or aids of grace for the subduing of sin and the destruction of its dominion". We must not forget, however, to "consider the ends for which aids of grace are granted and communicated by the gospel. Now this is not that sin may at once be utterly destroyed and consumed in us, that it should have no being, motion or power in us any more. This work is reserved for glory in the full redemption of body and soul, which we here do but groan after. But it is given unto us for this end, that sin may be so crucified and mortified in us, that is, so gradually weakened and destroyed, as that it shall not ruin spiritual life in us (nor) obstruct its necessary acting in duties of prevailing against such sins as would disannul the covenant relation between God and our souls". This sober and realistic view, consonant with Scripture and with Christian experience, is characteristic of the Puritan doctrine of growth in grace.

*Sheffield.*

O. R. JOHNSTON.

<sup>1</sup> *The Bruised Reed*, Chapter 23.