

THE EVANGELICAL ANSWER TO THE CONFSSIONAL

THE ROMANISTS and Anglo-Catholics believe that Evangelicals have a great weakness in their religious system, namely the absence of the Confessional. Moreover, they can point to the fact that there are few, if any, scholarly works written by Evangelicals concerning the way to help troubled souls. Our emphasis has been on evangelism, and after conversion we seem to think that by a process of natural growth, and with a minimum of assistance, the converts will progress satisfactorily and with little difficulty. Catholic theologians quite naturally, and with some justification, point out that by our actions, or lack of action, we imply that we underestimate the forces of evil, within and without, that oppose the pilgrim's progress, or that we think that conversion is the beginning and ending of Christian experience and that we have little place for discipline or 'a rule of life' in our conception of the Christian life. The result of our 'brand' of Christianity is a shallow Christian experience which apparently requires so little pastoral care. Whereas this is not an entirely true picture of the situation, it has more than a grain of truth in it. In fact it clearly outlines one of our greatest weaknesses as Evangelicals — our failure to work out our theological position with its detailed application to life. This fact is corroborated by the dearth of modern books written by conservative scholars in the realm of Pastoral Theology. A situation such as this did not exist in the time of those outstanding Evangelicals of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Puritans were essentially pastors who applied their theology to particular cases of conscience.

The Puritan Pastor

To the Puritan pastor the caring of the flock was a vital part of his ordained task. No price was too great for them to pay to become able pastors of their sheep, whether they were old or young, diseased or healthy, maimed or

virile, staid or straying. All were the objects of his love and care; they were beloved of God and therefore precious. They were so precious that no slipshod, vague counsel was to be given to them, but rather that which had been deeply dug from the 'Counsel of God', written in the Scriptures. This pastoral concern was probably the most powerful motive which compelled the Puritan pastors to become great theologians. They saw clearly, far more clearly than modern Evangelicals, that their treatment of souls in all conditions was governed by their theological beliefs. Therefore it was imperative for them to know what they believed and why they believed as they did. In other words, they were theologically minded. I have no doubt that they would be extremely distressed and appalled at the recent attitude in vogue among us, that theology, even conservative or reformed, is irrelevant or merely a theoretical exercise, in fact, almost a snare to be avoided and deprecated. Compare this our attitude with Baxter's dictum in his *Reformed Pastor*: 'Certainly, Brethren, experience will teach you that men are not made learned or wise without hard study and unwearied labours and experience' (Sect. iv, 3).

His Equipment

The equipment of the Puritan pastor, as for all pastors, was his knowledge of God and his understanding of divine action in human life. His textbook was the Bible, from which he learned in three different ways. Firstly, in the systematic study of it which gave him his theological system. There were numerous systematic treatises available, such as are found in the works of Owen, Charnock on 'The Attributes of God', the works of the Reformers. In fact, Baxter gives a most formidable list in his *Directory* under his advice for 'The Poor Student's Library'. Secondly, the Puritans possessed an extremely detailed knowledge of biblical characters, especially those from the Old Testament; from these they learned how God dealt and still deals with man; e.g. Sibbe's four sermons on 'The Tender Heart', 'The Art of Self-humbling', 'The Art of Mourning', 'The Saint's Refreshing' were based upon the experience of King Josiah (2 Ch. xxxiv. 26-28). Thirdly, there was the knowledge of the Scriptures which comes from its personal devotional study and application. These great pastors knew sin and its subtleties because they knew it within themselves. One often feels that their insight into the things of the Spirit comes from their own experience of the Holy Spirit using 'the sword of the Spirit' upon themselves.

The second great branch of his knowledge was derived from the treatises on all manner of topics related to the Christian life and experience. There were many experienced shepherds from whom one could learn. Think of a generation which included Owen, Baxter, Preston, Goodwin, Sibbe, Manton, Perkins and Ames! These were shining lights by which enquiring men could be enlightened. It is evident from the writings of the Puritans that they were exceedingly well-read. In the above-mentioned section of *The Directory*, Baxter advised the student to obtain 'As many affectionate practical English writers as you can get, especially Mr. Richard Allen's works, Mr. Gournall's . . .', to which we find added a further fifty authors. Thus Baxter wrote in the *Reformed Pastor*: 'It is common with us to be negligent in our studies . . . some men have no delight in their studies but take only now and then an hour, as an unwelcome task which they are forced to undergo and are glad when they are from under the yoke. Will neither the natural desire of knowing, nor the consciousness of our great ignorance and weakness, nor the sense of the weight of our ministerial work, will none of all these keep us closer to our studies and make us more painful in seeking after the Truth?' It is in this spirit that the Puritan pastor equipped himself under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for his ordained task of dealing with the souls of men.

The Occasions

There are three ways or occasions when the pastor exercised this part of his ministry.

a. The normal expository preaching of the Word of God, during which he dealt with problems and questions which he knew were in the minds of the people. These addresses were often published and made available to a

larger public. Good examples of this type of preaching may be found in the recently published work of William Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armour* (The Banner of Truth Trust).

b. Addresses delivered to the local congregation answering questions raised by them: e.g. Owen's 'Cases of Conscience Resolved; Delivered in Some Short Discourses at Church Meetings'.

c. Personal interviews in the study or at the homes of his flock. The sub-title of Baxter's *Reformed Pastor* will in itself substantiate this point; it is 'The Nature of the Pastoral Work; especially in *Private Instruction and Catechizing*'.

His Method

The Puritan pastor divided troubled souls into three different categories. The unconverted who were troubled about their sins. The Christian troubled by sin. The Christian who was experiencing an exceptionally difficult walk, due to lack of assurance, a period of darkness, or some other hindrance to comfortable walking in faith. In all these various types of troubled souls the answer was to be found in the application of the pastor's theological principles to each particular case. In order to illustrate and to examine their methods let us consider this summarized account of John Owen's treatment of the question: 'When may any one sin, lust or corruption be esteemed to be habitually prevalent?' (*Disc.*, viii, p. 533. Vol. 16).

- a. Owen first states some general truths regarding sin in the believer.
1. All lusts and corruptions have their root and residence in our natures (James i. 14). 'Every man hath his own lust, and every man hath all lust in him; for this lust or corruption is the depravation of our nature, and it is in all men. And in the root and principle of it, it is in all men even after their conversion.' 'The flesh lusteth to all those things (i.e. works of the flesh in Gal. v. 17) in believers, the worst things that can be mentioned.'
 2. The root of sin abiding in us will, upon advantage, work unto all sorts of evil (Rom. vii. 8).
 3. Mortification of sin is a continual duty, that we ought to be exercised in all our days (Col. iii. 3).
 4. A particular sin does not gain a specially strong hold without having special advantages. Owen mentions two advantages in particular: (a) The inclination of constitution, i.e. by nature some people are more passionate than others, others more worldly, others wrathful, etc. But, he adds, 'To plead the inclination of their constitution to the extenuation of their sins, when indeed it is an aggravation, is a fallacy of the devil'. 'This I say as my judgment, that if grace does not cure constitution sins, it hath cured none.' 'If grace being habitual doth not change the very inclination of the constitution, I know not what it doth.' (b) Outward occasions. Again Owen only gives two examples. (i) Education. If we, in the process of education, develop pride in the young, we can expect a proud generation. (ii) Worldly society 'is that which inflames particular corruptions'.

Thus far Owen has given his hearers in brief form truths which involved at least the Doctrine of Man, the Doctrine of Grace, the Doctrine of Sanctification, the Doctrine of Regeneration, the Doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints and, through all, the Doctrine of the Work of the Holy Spirit.

From this foundation Owen proceeds to answer the question directly, first negatively and then positively.

- b. A lust has not the mastery:
1. 'If the soul be more grieved than defiled by a corruption, it is a temptation and not a lust habitually prevalent.'
 2. When the soul looks upon that particular corruption as its greatest and mortal enemy.
 3. When a man maintains 'his warfare and his conflict with it constantly, especially in those two great duties of private prayer and meditation'. Then it is a temptation.

- c. A lust has the mastery:
1. When a man chooses known occasions of sin. 'Sin is to be rejected in the occasion of it, or it will never be refused in the power of it.'
 2. When a man finds arguments against the particular sin in question losing their force.
 3. When 'a man upon conviction is turned out of his course, but is not turned aside from his design'.
 4. When a soul no longer finds itself 'under the conduct of renewing grace, but is at best under the evidence of restraining grace'; e.g. fear of shame or danger.
 5. 'When there is a predominant will in sinning; then lust is habitually present.' 'When sin hath laid hold on the will it hath the mastery.'

It seems to me that in section *b* of his answer, Owen has given some of the positive signs of a Christian fighting against sin. It could well be a summary of Romans vii and viii. Here is a soul conscious of the power of lust, yet resisting, praying, earnestly seeking deliverance, and displaying the spirit advocated in Hebrews xii. 4. Similar records of experiences can be found in the Psalms. No doubt both in this section and in section *c* Owen is drawing from not only his knowledge of the Scriptures, but his own experience either personal or otherwise. In fact section *c* displays the marks of a backslider.

In this brief treatment of a troubled soul, Owen has dealt with the spiritual problem analytically, like a physician examining a patient. First he has reviewed the normal functioning of the member in question, then he has examined his patient for signs of this normal functioning and finally he has ascertained whether there are signs of disease resulting in malformation or atrophy. The physicians of our bodies must study both the theory and the practice of Medicine. It should be obvious that the physician of souls must also acquire, through disciplined study, the knowledge of the plan of salvation and its application in human life, i.e. systematic theology and its pastoral application. I fully recognize that it is not learning only that is required, but it is learning by using all the means at our disposal under the guidance, direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. You may recall that a physician usually gives a prescription to his patient, so too you may have observed that Owen gives his prescription for overcoming a persistent lust in section *b* above. Baxter's *Christian Directory* is a monument to the Puritan pastor's ability to give detailed directions for every aspect of Christian living.

I am aware that what is being outlined in this short article is contrary to much accepted evangelical practice, especially to that of 'counselling' as in recent missions. Moreover, I also wish to query our vague and superficial treatment of troubled souls when we dismiss them as oddities with 'a promise', or 'Don't rest on your feelings', or 'You need to get victory', or 'You need to repent' — without a patient and, if necessary, painstaking analysis of the enquirer's condition, some constructive explanation and subsequent directives to enable them to live to the glory of God. The Rev. H. M. Carson wrote truly in the last issue, 'All our theologians should be pastors and all our pastors theologians.' I would add that all pastors *must* be theologians, whether theologians are pastors or not.

Finally, the Puritans have pointed out the way, and it remains for us to apply our common biblical theological foundation to living in our generation as they did in their day. Baxter exhorts ministers in these words: 'O Brethren do you not shrink and tremble under the sense of all this work!' 'Will a common measure of holy skill and ability of prudence and other qualifications serve for such a task as this? I know necessity may cause the Church to tolerate the weak, but woe to us if we tolerate and indulge our own weakness. Doth not reason and conscience tell you that, if you dare venture on so high a work as this you should spare no pains to be fitted to perform it? It is not now and then, an idle snatch or taste of studies that will serve to make a sound divine.' 'O Brethren, lose no time: study and pray, and confer and practise. For by these four ways your abilities must be increased.' Surely this must be our answer to the Confessional and its place in the life of the Church of God.

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