

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE MEANS OF GRACE IN PURITAN THEOLOGY

THE Puritan writers were essentially pastors. In practical directions for the living of the Christian life, their works abound. Their teaching on the means of grace is rich and detailed. They were insistent that there were definite means, by and through which God, in response to faith, had promised to supply the believer with grace sufficient for his growth in godly living. These means were of direct divine appointment, and men could only neglect them at their souls' peril. We have a sermon of Thomas Manton entitled *Man's Impotency to Help out of His Misery* preached on the words "yet without strength" in Romans v. 6. In answer to the objection "If man is so impotent, why press him to the use of means?" he replies that there are these reasons:

- (1) That we may practically see our own weakness.
- (2) Because we owe it to God—we are morally obliged thereto.
- (3) To lessen our guilt (here the story of the slothful servant of Matthew xxiv. 48 ff. and Paul's phrase "ye judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life" in Acts xiii. 46 are quoted).
- (4) If we do not something, we shall grow worse.
- (5) Without the use of means we can never hope for anything.

He gives an example:

Marriage is instituted for the propagation of mankind, yet the soul is of God only. No man abstaineth from marriage because he cannot beget a reasonable soul. So grace is of God; but hearing, reading, praying are the instituted means; and we must not abstain from these means because grace is not of ourselves, but God. It may be God will meet with us.

Or, as a writer later in the century puts it:

Although all holiness be effectually attained by the life of faith in Christ, yet the use of any means appointed in the word is not hereby made void, but rather established.¹

The same author is also quick to add this remark about the means of grace:

We must use them as helps to the life of faith, in its beginning, continuance and growth; and as instruments subservient to faith, the principal instrument, in all its acts and exercises, whereby the soul receiveth Christ, and walketh in all holiness by Him.²

¹ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (1692), ch. 13.

² *Idem.*

Indeed, use of the means of grace is one way of testing the truth of a profession of Christian faith. Sibbes writes:

Christ maketh us likewise careful to attend to all means whereby fresh thoughts and affections may be stirred up and preserved in us. Christ so honoureth the use of means, and the care he putteth into us, that he ascribeth both preservation and victory unto our keeping ourselves ("He that is begotten of God keepeth himself," 1 John v. 18) but not by himself but by the Lord, in dependence upon him in the use of means.¹

Commenting on the text, "It is the voice of my beloved," Sibbes observes:

The church of God, and every Christian, takes notice of the means God useth for their salvation. To a dead heart it is all one whether they have means or no means, but a Christian soul takes notice of all the means.²

In their lists of the means of grace, the Puritans differed but slightly. Richard Rogers, for example, distinguishes in his third treatise (a) three ordinary public means: the Ministry of the Word, the Administration of the Sacraments, and Prayer with thanksgiving and psalms; (b) seven private daily means: Watchfulness, Meditation, the Armour of a Christian, Experience, Company and family exercises, Prayer and Reading; (c) lastly, two extraordinary helps: Solemn thanksgiving and Fasting. Some of these did not find their way into later lists, as they are not strictly means of grace. It is interesting to note that Marshall, in his *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, lays particular emphasis on the musical side of worship:

Another means appointed of God, is singing of psalms,—i.e., songs of any sacred subject composed to a tune, hymns or songs of praise, and spiritual songs of any sublime spiritual matter.

We shall now examine the various means of grace, beginning with public means, then going on to the private, as Rogers does.

I

i. We begin with sermons, or the word preached and heard. "It must be observed" writes Owen, "that the best of men, the most holy and spiritually minded, may have, nay ought to have, their thoughts of spiritual things excited, multiplied and confirmed by the preaching of the word."³

¹ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (1630), ch. 23.

² Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* (Sermons on the Song of Solomon, 1639), Sermon 5.

³ John Owen, *On the Grace and Duty of being Spiritually Minded*, ch. 3.

Richard Rogers, in his first treatise, deals with hindrances to faith, and urges his readers thus:

Hear them therefore who are able to deliver the Lord's message unto you, whose preaching is life or death to you: and if ye despise them in that their message, ye shall do all one as if ye despised the Lord himself that sent them. Hear them, I say, in the Lord's stead, in all that they shall say to you from him. Learn by their ministry to see yourselves to be the sons and daughters of God Almighty, who, before the ministry of the word work upon you mightily, are his enemies, your hearts being set on evil works and you under his wrath justly. Suffer yourselves to be lanced, purged, wounded, seeing ye cannot otherwise be healed.

Greenham wrote a little treatise entitled *Of Hearing the Word*, in which he speaks of its converting power, and gives directions as to how we are to hear the word. Firstly, we must prepare at home by serious earnest prayer. Secondly, "we must hear the word as good Catholics, that is, we must not hear the word by parcels and by clauses as we list, and give ear until it come to our special sin and sit quietly till our body be touched: but we must hear universally, as well the things that mislike us, as the things that please us." Thirdly, there must be continual hearing, and fourthly, we must bring a desire to practise what we hear. In his third treatise on the means of grace, Rogers says Christians should come meekly, hungrily and attentively, ready to apply it to themselves. Lack of reverent attention is the reason why many do not profit from the word.

In a treatise on Lydia's conversion¹ Sibbes gives directions for "attending and applying the mind". Firstly, "if we should come as we would to the word preached, let us search our wants before we come, and all the various occasions we shall have to encounter with; all temptations we are like to encounter with let us forecast by presenting (them) to our souls." Secondly, "when we come to hear the word let us hear it with all spiritual subjection, as that word that hath power to command the conscience. The minister of God speaks in the place of God to me. I must give an account of it. I will subject my conscience to it." Thirdly, "let us labour by all means to bring it near to us that it may be an engrafted word, that the soul may be leavened by it." Fourthly, we should "add some meditation to these practises". And always we should give way to the Spirit of God, reminding ourselves, "Perhaps I shall never have

¹ Sibbes, in *The Riches of Mercy* (1638).

such a gale of the Spirit offered again. It may be the last sermon I shall hear while I live."

And finally, the ever-practical Baxter devotes a chapter to "Directions for profitable hearing the word preached" in his great *Christian Directory*.¹ There are four main directions: (1) Hear with the understanding. (2) Remember what you hear. (3) Be duly affected with it. (4) Sincerely practise it. He considerably expounds the first two points (on understanding and memory) thus. First, directions for understanding. Private reading and meditation on the Holy Scriptures enables us to try and test the doctrine in the pulpit. Live under the clearest and most powerful preaching you can find. Do not come carelessly, but with a sense of the unspeakable importance of the word. Do not allow "vain thoughts or drowsy negligence to hinder your attention". Mark especially the design and drift and principle doctrine of the sermon. Mark most those things that are of greatest weight and concernment to your souls. Learn first your catechism at home, and the great essential points of religion contained in the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. Meditate on what you hear when you come home. Where you doubt, inquire of those who can resolve and teach you. Read holy books. Pray for wisdom. Practise what you have learned. Secondly, helps to memory. Understand the sermon. Be affected by it. Get to know the preacher's method. Numbers are an aid to the memory. Names and signal words are a great help; as much as possible should be summed up in one emphatic word. To quote Baxter here:

Some do very profitably contrive each of those words to begin with the same letter (which is good for memory, so it be not too much strained, I put them not upon great inconveniences); as if I were to direct you to the helps to your salvation and should name Powerful Preaching, Prayer, Prudence, Piety, Painfulness, Patience, Perseverance.

We should often go over the headings of the earlier sections as the sermon progresses. We should not try to take in too much. Taking notes during the address may be a great help; at any rate, we should write it down in full at home. We should also pray it over and discuss it with others.

ii. The Reformation raised the ministry of the word to its rightful place, but ran the danger of under-estimating the value of the sacraments on account of its whole-hearted aversion to

¹ Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*, Part II (1673), ch. 19.

the material, mechanical ideas of grace fostered by Rome. A careful reading of the Puritan writings show that they realized this danger, and urged their flocks to partake of the Lord's Supper regularly, reverently and with faith, and to use and be stirred up by the sacrament of Baptism. In his chapter on the Sacraments in his third treatise, Richard Rogers says that they are not so well understood as other things because they occur less frequently, and because less instruction is given on them than on other subjects, though the writings of Peter Martyr, Calvin and Beza give no ground for this neglect. He continues:

Sacraments are helps necessarily adjoined unto the preaching of the Word, and do visibly confirm and ratify that which the Word doth teach, and the Covenant betwixt God and the believer made is most surely sealed up and effected on both parts by them.

They are reminders and advisers of the Christian's profession, a continual antidote to weariness and an encouragement to him to perform his covenant obligations.

In his treatise *Of Sacraments*, Greenham explains their nature and use thus:

God might have wrought miracles without the rod which he willed Moses to use: for he used it not for himself but for Moses and the people of Israel, to help their infirmities, so must we receive the Sacraments as helps. And as the rod in itself was a common rod, but being appointed of God for more excellent use, was so to be accounted of them: so water, bread and wine, although in themselves common, yet put apart for the use of the Sacraments are to be esteemed and received as the ordinance of the Lord for the strengthening of our faith, wherein also the Lord will try our obedience, whether we will worship him in these things which have so small a show.

He mentions circumcision and the passover, then continues:

Our Baptism and the Lord's Supper answer these sacraments, therefore the neglect of them requires the like punishment.

Richard Sibbes is of the same opinion.

The blood of Christ, this is the cleanser, this washes away our sins. His ordinances make it powerful and effectual to that end (for which) he hath appointed it for the believing soul. So the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper seem weak and feeble things; ay, but they are ordained to strengthen and increase faith. Here the Christian soul believes God can strengthen faith by his Spirit, working in us a nearer communion with Christ and hatred of sin thereby, blessing his own ordinances so that, as meat and drink refreshes, sustains and feeds this mortal body, so shall his ordinances by his blessing be effectual for the refreshing fortifying and nourishing of our souls to life and endless immortality.¹

¹ Sibbes, *The Life of Faith* (1629).

In the following passage by Thomas Goodwin we see the more objective side of the Puritan view set first:

Our sacraments do primarily exhibit Christ unto a believer, and so, in him, all other promises are ratified and confirmed by them, and . . . the soul is first to look at Christ, and embrace him as tendered in them, and then at the promises tendered with him in them, and not to take the sacraments as bare seals of pardon and forgiveness.¹

This last remark is interesting as showing that the leading Puritans realized that there was more for a believing soul in the Sacraments themselves than simply an external sign and ratification. Few of them could be charged with holding the doctrine attributed to Zwingli.

It was also necessary to give directions as to how the Sacraments should be received and used by the Christian. Sibbes gives us one great golden rule, "Prayer must accompany the ordinances, because the ordinance itself is an empty thing unless the Spirit accompany it." Rogers advises the following ways of preparing to receive the Lord's Supper worthily: (1) Doctrinal meditation on the great truths of man's misery, redemption, the new birth, eternal life and the resurrection; thus consider the Lord's Supper in its context. (2) We should see we have a strong faith in the gospel. (3) All known sin should be renounced and the soul be made ready to resist all its attacks. (4) Reconciliation and peace with all men. (5) A strong desire to partake should be present. For such serious considerations men should go apart and think in secret.

iii. Public worship and prayer were assumed to be a normal part of the Christian's life by the Puritans. Calvin himself said, "Whosoever refuses to pray in the solemn assembly of the saints knows nothing of private prayer, either solitary or domestic."² Rogers attributes the unprofitableness of public prayer and psalms of praise to the ignorance of so many. Christians should come reverently, repentant, acknowledging their need and in confidence that God will answer their prayers. Rogers has no objection to set prayers, for we all need to pray for the same things daily, so why should we not all use the same words together? In the singing of psalms "such as cannot read should attend to them that are nearest them in the congregation, that they may join with them and consent to the action of praising

¹ Thomas Goodwin, *Christ Set Forth* (1629).

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, ch. 20, paragraph 29.

God with the rest of the assembly; and not to gaze and toss vain imaginations and fantasies where they should lift up pure hearts and hands to God." But he points out that our souls, like our bodies, need daily refreshment, and public duties without private duties are cold. Preparation before, musing and conference (i.e. discussion) afterwards are necessary. To a large extent, however, public worship for the Puritans was synonymous with the Word preached *plus* the sacraments and the psalms, to all of which reference has already been made.

II

We turn now to the private means. Here we are confronted by the Puritan "big three" which must be examined in some detail—i.e. prayer, reading the Scriptures and meditation, and other means which, though important, are subsidiary to the first.

i. The Puritan literature on private prayer is truly vast. Almost every sermon, certainly every treatise concerned with the Christian life, deals with some aspect or other of prayer. It is this constant reference, often incidentally, this continual mention of it as the *sine qua non* of the healthy Christian life, which is so impressive—just as impressive as the times when the subject of prayer is being explicitly and exclusively dealt with. It is noteworthy to observe the large amount of space which Calvin devotes to prayer in the *Institutes*. His emphasis was only that of the New Testament, and in following him the Puritans were only going back through him to the Scriptures themselves, as in many another instance. In the great twentieth chapter of Book III, Calvin says, "Prayer digs out those treasures which the Gospel of the Lord delivers to our faith," and the Puritan teaching on prayer is little more than a grand amplification of that theme.

Greenham ascribes the experimental part of the Christian life as coming through prayer, thus:

The word maketh known to us the riches of God's love and strengtheneth faith; prayer feeleth the power of it and confirmeth it with feelings. The word telleth us that God hath a care of his people, prayer proveth that God hath a care of his people. The word saith God is merciful: prayer findeth by practice that God is merciful. The word speaketh of the majesty, power and goodness of God: prayer obtaineth the experience of the majesty, power and goodness of God. . . . Reading getteth knowledge but prayer is that that getteth feeling and experience.

Richard Rogers explains that prayer is calling upon God according to his will, and consists of thanksgiving, request and confession of sins. By prayer three things are accomplished, viz. (1) We are made acquainted and familiar with God. (2) By the bellows of prayer the graces of God are renewed in us. (3) By prayer we reach out effectively for the good things and gifts of God which our souls desire.

Owen speaks thus of prayer:

The duty of prayer is a means . . . to excite, stir up and draw forth the principle of grace, of faith and love in the heart, unto a due exercise in holy thoughts of God and spiritual things, with affections suitable unto them. Those who design not this end in prayer know not at all what it is to pray.¹

Goodwin, as often, has an interesting analogy:

Prayer and thanks are like the double motion of the lungs; the air that is sucked in by prayer is breathed forth by thanks.²

But for the excellency of this duty, for an indication of the delight and profit which a Christian ought to find in prayer, we must turn again to Sibbes. Commenting on 2 Corinthians i. 11, he says:

There is not a grace but it is put into the fire, it is quickened and kindled by prayer. For it sets faith on work to believe the promise. It sets hope on work to expect the things prayed for. It sets love on work because we pray for others that are members of the church. It sets obedience on work because we do it with respect to God's command. Prayer sets humility on work. We prostrate ourselves before God and acknowledge that there is no goodness or desert in us. . . . It is the work of a broken heart, of a believing heart.

Sibbes also writes with great force of the power of prayer:

The way to stop God and the angel that hath his sword drawn over our heads, it is prayer. God so condescends that he will be stopped by prayer. So powerful is prayer that it hinders the Almighty. It makes the Omnipotent in some sort impotent; he cannot do that he would, he cannot execute his wrath; prayer binds him. When a company of Christians lay hold on him by prayer, he cannot do that which he threateneth. The only way to lay hold of God is by prayer.³

Prayer is an amazing privilege. "Nearer we cannot come to God while we dwell in flesh than by lifting up the heart to him in fervent prayer."⁴ Yet it has its difficulties and its hindrances.

¹ Owen, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.

² Goodwin, *The Return of Prayers*. The whole treatise will amply repay careful study.

³ Sibbes, *The Churches' Complaint* (1639).

⁴ Thomas Manton, *Second Sermon on the Transfiguration*, 1685.

Prayer is not always answered, nor is it always easy. Sibbes reminds us in one of his meditations:

When we pray God oftentime refuseth to give us comfort because we are not on good terms with him; because we should look back to our life past. Perhaps God sees thee running to this or that sin, and before he will hear thee, thou must renew thy repentance for that sin.

Manton acknowledges the difficulty of prayer.

It is no easy thing to pray and to work a lazy dead heart into a necessary height of affection. The weights are always running downward, but they are wound up by force: Ps. xxv. 1, "I lift up my heart to thee". When our affections are gotten up, it is hard to keep them up; like Moses' hands, they soon flag and wax faint. . . . A bird cannot stay in the air without a continual flight and motion of the wings; neither can we persist in prayer without constant work and labour: our faith is so weak that we are hardly (i.e. with difficulty) brought into God's presence; and our love is so small that we are hardly kept there: affections flag, and then our thoughts are scattered; weariness maketh way for wandering; first our hearts are gone and then our minds, so that we have need of much labour and diligence; all acts of duty are drawn from us by an holy force.¹

ii. The second private duty is that of reading the Scriptures. The word of God is vital for our Christian lives. Rogers states with directness:

It is necessary to the leading of a godly life, to believe and give credit to the whole of the doctrine of the word of God, to be led and guided thereby, as well as to have faith in the promises of salvation and the forgiveness of sins.²

For those who have the leisure and the ability to read, says Thomas Goodwin, it is necessary that they "should ballast their hearts with the word, and take in those most precious words and wisdom and sound knowledge to profit themselves and others, and to build up their own souls and (that) whereby they may be enabled to save their country; but now what do their curious fancies carry them unto to be versed in, but play books, jeering pasquils, romances, feigned stays, which are the curious needlework of idle brains, so as they load their heads with apes and peacocks' feathers, instead of pearls and precious stones."³ Commenting on the words of Jude verse 25, "though ye once knew this," Thomas Manton observes:

It is the duty of every Christian to be acquainted with the Scriptures; the apostle presumeth it of these Christians to whom he wrote. Now this is necessary in regard of ourselves, that we may know the solid

¹ Manton, on James, ch. 5, v. 3, in his Commentary on the Epistle, 1651.

² Richard Rogers, *Seven Treatises*, Treatise II, ch. 3.

³ Goodwin, *The Vanity of Thoughts*.

grounds of our own comfort; every man would look over his own charter. . . . In regard of others, it is necessary that we discharge our duty to them. . . . None but full vessels will run over. Ignorant Christians are barren and sapless in discourse; Christians must be full of knowledge, not only to have knowledge enough to bring themselves to heaven, but to admonish others. Not even good books should keep us from the Scriptures; water is sweetest in the fountain.

Scripture should be read in families, and with prayer. Ministers and written commentaries are quite legitimate helps in difficulties.

Here again is Brooks, extolling the Bible:

If ever you would be holy, then set in good earnest upon reading of the Holy Scripture. Many a man has been made holy by reading the holy word. The Bible is the book of books, it is the only book; all other books in the world are but waste paper to it. . . . The Scriptures are the map of God's mercy, and man's misery, the touchstone of truth, the shop of remedies against all maladies, the hammer of vices and the treasury of virtues, the displayer of all sensual and worldly vanities, the balance of equity and the most perfect rule of all justice and honesty. . . . Ah friends, no book becomes your hands like the Bible. It was this book that made David wiser than his teachers; this is the book that makes the best preachers, and this is the book that is the best preacher. This book, this preacher, will preach to you in your chambers, in your closets, yea, in your own bosoms. This book will preach to you at home and abroad, it will preach to you in all companies, whether they be good or bad, and it will preach to you in all conditions, whether they be prosperous or afflictive.¹

We must however be sure to approach this means of grace rightly. Sibbes points the way thus:

In studying the Gospel, let us come with a spirit of faith, and a spirit of humility and meekness. There is no breaking into these things by the strength of parts (i.e. natural abilities). That hath been the ground of so many heresies that have been in the church. Only Christ hath the key of David that shutteth, and no man openeth; and openeth and no man shutteth. He hath the key of the Scripture, and the key to open the understanding.²

Further, if we are to profit by our reading we should be led into prayer by it. Owen remarks that when we read Scripture we nearly always find "some particular matter of prayer or praise effectually suggested." He continues:

Christians would find no small advantage on many accounts . . . if they would frequently, if not constantly, turn what they read into

¹ Thomas Brooks, *The Crown and Glory of Christianity, or Holiness the only way to happiness* (1662).

² Sibbes, *A Glance of Heaven* (1638).

prayer or praise unto God, whereby the instructions unto faith and obedience would be more confirmed in their minds, and their hearts be more engaged into their practice.¹

Various Puritan writers give practical rules or directions for Bible reading, as for the observance of the other means. Greenham, for instance, in his *Treatise on Directions for Reading and Understanding of the Holy Scriptures* advises the following courses of action: Diligence, Wisdom, Preparation, Meditation, Conference, Faith, Practice, Prayer. Manton, commenting on James i. 25, "be not a forgetful hearer," suggests the following helps to memory: Attention, Affection, Application, Observation, Practice and the committal of the mind to the Holy Spirit. And Baxter² advises those who come to the Scriptures to come reverently, resolved to obey, with love to Christ, humbly, comparing Scripture with Scripture and praying to God for light. The best commentators should be read, and any difficulties noted down and taken to the pastor or some learned godly man for explanation.

It is interesting to note the Puritan emphasis on action. If a man does not come to the Scriptures resolved to obey God's commandments and to put into practice what he reads, then he cannot expect to be able to understand his Bible.

iii. We turn now to the third major private means of grace—a means upon which all the Puritan pastors and teachers laid great stress, a means whose true nature was little understood, a rarely practised activity in their day, rarer still in our own day. This is meditation, defined by Baxter as "the set and solemn actings of all the powers of the soul";³ by Marshall as "a duty whereby the soul doth feed and ruminat upon the Word as its spiritual food, and digesteth it, and turneth it into nourishment, whereby we are strengthened for every good work."⁴

Richard Rogers' work is of paramount importance here, since he seems to have been the first man explicitly to state the nature and aims of Meditation as a Scriptural means of grace. In the *Institutes* and in the works of Reformed writers prior to his *Seven Treatises*, there are examples of meditation, but the fact

¹ Owen, *A Discourse on the Holy Spirit*.

² Baxter, *Christian Directory*, Book II, ch. 20.

³ Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, Book IV (1649), ch. 6.

⁴ Marshall, *op. cit.*, ch. 13.

that meditation is a duty and a means of grace for all Christians, and the way to go about the business—these were set down first by Rogers. We meditate, he says,

when we do of purpose separate ourselves from all other things, and consider as we are able, and think of some points of instruction necessary to lead us forward to the kingdom of heaven, and the better strengthening of us against the devil and this present evil world, and to the well-ordering of our lives.

The object we aim at he defines as

to set our minds on work about the cogitation of things heavenly, by calling to remembrance some one or other of them which we know; and so debate and reason about the same that our affections may be thereby moved to love and delight in, or to hate and fear, according to that which we meditate upon. . . . This spiritual exercise of meditation is even that which putteth life and strength into all other duties and parts of God's worship.

It is also the great antidote to worldliness,

for by it God bringeth to pass that the sugared baits of earthly delights and the transitory pleasures of the world (though Satan kindleth an excessive and an inordinate love of them in us) become not deadly poison to us, as they do to many, the Lord teaching us to see the painted visor and deceivable picture of them by looking into them thoroughly, that we may beware of them.

For those who are perplexed and do not know where to start, four things to muse on are suggested: (1) Man's unworthiness; (2) God's goodness in saving him; (3) What must be guarded against or faithfully obeyed that day; (4) The Christian armour, and all other helps.

If work and business seem to prevent meditation, it should be taken up as soon as the business is over; those who have no quiet place to be alone should meditate wherever they find conditions most suitable. If wandering thoughts distract us, the probability is that our weakness lies in "the letting loose of our hearts oft-times in the day disorderly, without watching over them and calling them back from such endless roving, that they might not forget God, but he held within holy compass, wheresoever we become or whatsoever we go about; for there must not be in us at any time an evil heart." This must be resolutely cured.

Therefore to remedy this trifling out the time when we go about to meditate and pray privately, and to obtain that we may be fit to perform this duty and be not carried after wandering . . . we must tie up our loose hearts throughout the day.

Sibbes speaks thus of the transforming power of meditation.

That we may be changed into the likeness of Christ, let us fix our meditation upon him and we shall find a change we know not how, insensible. . . . There is a virtue goes with holy meditation; a changing, transforming virtue; and indeed we can think nothing of Christ but it will alter and change us to the likeness of itself, because we have all from Christ.¹

Brooks urges this duty if we are to make the best of our reading.

Remember it is not hasty reading, but serious, meditating upon holy and heavenly truths, that makes them sweet and profitable to the soul. It is not the bee's touching of the flower that gathers honey, but her abiding for a time upon the flower that draws out the sweet. It is not he that reads most, but he that meditates most, that will prove the choicest, sweetest, wisest and strongest Christian.²

Elsewhere, the same writer speaks even more strongly:

A man shall as soon live without his heart, as he shall be able to get good by what he reads without meditation.³

How are we to set about this duty? it may be asked. The Puritan writers are ready with advice and directions for the profitable use of this great means of grace. Rogers gives the following rules and examples, though he adds that we should grow out of slavish adherence to rules in time. The Christian must (1) realize how infinitely "slippery, fickle, bad and wandering" his heart is; this makes necessary "some set time to check, reclaim and wean it from the world": (2) watch over his heart throughout his life and have it in suspicion: (3) "draw matter of meditation and prayer from his own wants and infirmities, from God's benefits, from the changes and mortality of this life . . . chiefly of love, humility, meekness, peace of conscience, the glory of God's kingdom, his love": (4) "if he cannot thus do, let him read before some part of the 119th Psalm, some part of the Epistles of the Apostles, Christ's sermons, or some part of this direction, or some meditations which follow, so many as conveniently he may, or any good matter fit for the purpose to season and well affect his mind." If the Christian cannot read, he must not expect to progress so fast and will need others' help, since

the old subtle Fowler sets his snares and nets so thick in our way that we have no shift but to fall into them and light upon them, except

¹ Sibbes, *The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law* (1639).

² Brooks, *Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices*, in the "Word to the Reader" (1639).

³ Brooks, *The Mute Christian*, in the Epistle Dedicatory (1684).

with the wings of meditation and prayer we mount up on high above them and fly over them, which to them that cannot read will, for the most part, be found more hard and difficult.

Then we must always be ready to apply verses to ourselves in particular. He then gives suitable matter for meditation, each a short pithy sentence supported with one or two Scripture references, e.g. "If thou wilt find Christ sweet, thou must ever find sin sour," or "Look not to God in thy need, who regardest not him in thy ease."

John Owen counsels meditation as one of the means for mortifying indwelling sin. He gives the following simple rules: Meditate of God with God; meditate on the word in the word; if we come short, we should make up by frequency.¹ The same writer, in a sacramental discourse on 1 Corinthians xi. 2, advises Christians to look upon Christ, which is done "by believing meditation". He adds a further interesting practical note: if anything is a special help in meditation—set it down, for this "is as easy a way to grow rich in spiritual experience as any I know."

Richard Baxter is eloquent on the subject of meditation.

Meditation is that duty by which all other duties are improved and by which the soul digesteth truths and draweth forth their strength for its nourishment and refreshing. Certainly, I think a man is but half an hour in chewing and taking into his stomach that meat which he must have seven or eight hours at least to digest; so a man may take into his understanding and memory more truth in one hour than he is able well to digest in many. A man may eat too much, but he cannot digest too well.²

He continues with practical directions, stressing that meditation should be frequent, regular (though the word does not prescribe at what hour) and especially used on the Lord's day. The place should be private, the posture as suits the Christian.

There is one branch of this subject, one of the techniques of meditation, which is stressed by Baxter and occurs in the writings of the other Puritans also. This is the idea of meditation as including preaching to ourselves, admonishing ourselves. The root of this practice is to be found in the method of the Psalmist, who exhorts his own soul. Speaking of loving God as our Father, Felicity and End, Baxter writes:

In all thy meditations upon all these incentives of love, preach them over earnestly to thy heart, and expostulate and plead with it by way of

¹ Owen, *On Indwelling Sin in Believers*, ch. 9.

² Baxter, *op. cit.*, Book IV, ch. 6.

soliloquy till thou feel the fire begin to burn. Do not only *think* on the arguments of love, but dispute it out with thy conscience, and by expostulating, earnest reasonings with thy heart, endeavour to affect it. There is much more moving force in this earnest talking to ourselves, than in bare cogitation, that breaks not out into mental words. Imitate the most powerful preacher that ever thou was acquainted with: and just as he pleadeth the cause with his hearers, and urgeth the truth and duty on them, by reason and importunity, so do thou in secret with thyself. There is more in this than most Christians are aware of or practise. It is a great part of a Christian's skill and duty to be a good preacher to himself. This is a lawful and a gainful way of preaching. Nobody here can make question of thy call, nor deny thee a licence nor silence thee, if thou silence not thyself. Two or three sermons a week from others is a fair proportion; but two or three sermons a day from thyself is ordinarily too little.¹

One important branch of meditation is self-examination, but we cannot do more than refer to it here.

III

We turn now to consider cursorily the other means of grace which the Puritan divines and pastors urge Christians to use.

i. *Family Worship* was a regular feature of the believing household in Puritan times. Baxter deals with the subject at length in the *Christian Directory*.² Here is a summary of his conclusions. The solemn worship of God in and by families is of divine appointment. (This does not include all forms of worship, for the sacraments, for example, are proper to ministerial or organized churches.) He proves this by several arguments:—Families are societies of God's institution with special advantages and opportunities for God's worship and are under no prohibition as regards worship together; it is a law of nature that we should make the most of our opportunities; all subjects should glorify their ruler; all those who live in the presence of God ought to exercise faith and worship toward him together; families are sanctified societies, and there are many examples in Scripture of God's dealing with families, blessing all members together. Rulers of families should teach the doctrine of salvation to their people, though family teaching should always be subordinate to ministerial. Family discipline is also a part of God's worship, a service to him appointed in

¹ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, Part I, ch. 3; Grand Direction 11, Sub-direction 18.

² Baxter, *op. cit.*, Part II, ch. 3.

his Word. Solemn prayer and praises of God in and by Christian families is of divine appointment. Normally families should worship twice a day, morning and evening. Later he gives directions for family prayer in the Christian home.¹ It is to be conducted by the master of the family himself, though rather by someone else than not at all. Prayers should be apt, detailed and circumstantial, not "a few general words spoken by rote that serve all times and persons alike". As to length:

Let it not be so short as to end before their hearts can be warm and their wants expressed; nor yet so tedious as to make it an ungrateful burden to the family. Let not the coldness and dulness of the speaker rock the family asleep. Pray at such hours as the family may be least distracted, sleepy, tired or out of the way. Let other duties concur, as oft as may be, to assist in prayer, as reading and singing psalms. Do all with the greatest reverence of God that possibly you can.

Study the fitness of your expressions. Use a set form if you cannot pray well. In no way try to replace public prayer. Teach your children and servants to pray for themselves.

ii. Informal fellowship and discussion, or *conference*, as it was called, is often alluded to in Puritan writings, usually in passing. Baxter writes thus, for instance:

Another help to the heavenly life is to be much in serious discoursing of it, especially with those that can speak from their hearts and are seasoned themselves with a heavenly nature. . . . Methinks we should meet of purpose to warm our spirits with discoursing of our rest. . . . Get then together, fellow Christians, and talk of the affairs of your country and kingdom, and comfort one another with such words. If worldlings get together, they will be talking of the world; when wantons get together they will be talking of their lusts, and wicked men can be delighted in talking wickedness; and should not Christians, then, delight themselves in talking of Christ, and the heirs of heaven in talking of their inheritance?²

iii. A systematic study of doctrine, normally approached by the learning of *catechisms*, was also regarded as useful, a means of grace for young and old. Greenham says that "the office of the catechist is to make his doctrine easy to enter by giving it an edge in perspicuity, method, etc.", and the duty of the catechized,

often to go over the same thing, as a knife doth the whetstone, and to repeat and iterate it till he have made it his own. Catechizing is milk, more exact knowledge is strong meat. Catechizing is the ford wherein a lamb may wade, more exact knowledge is the gulf wherein an elephant may swim.

¹ Baxter, *op. cit.*, Part II, ch. 23.

² Baxter, *Saints' Rest*, Part IV, ch. 5, paragraph 4.

In this same treatise on Catechizing he mentions that the Pope's bull *De Motu Proprio* acknowledges the supremacy of the Reformed faith to be due to catechizing. A more modern work dealing with the Puritan era, and particularly with the work of the Westminster Assembly, speaks of "the amazing fecundity of catechetical manuals of the British churches" of the period¹ and notes that the Westminster Assembly itself "was eminently an assembly of catechists, trained and practised in the art".² Rogers, too, emphasized the importance of knowing "the Bible in order throughout" not "here and there a chapter", and advised that the grounds of religion be "by apt and fit coherences laid together in the mind", that is, that the great doctrinal structure as a whole should be grasped.

In *The Reformed Pastor* Baxter urges on ministers the duty of personally catechizing "everyone in the parish that will submit thereto". Even "the most godly people will find it worth their labour to learn the very words of a catechism". The result will be "the most orderly building up of those that are converted and the establishing them in the faith".³ But pastors should be gentle, remembering especially with old people that the sense is more important than the words. The minister should make a winning and encouraging introduction to the work in the presence of all the household, then examine them one by one in private. The Creed and the Decalogue should precede a catechism if nothing is known. Early understood questions should be put on the main points, questions with straightforward answers. Not, for instance, "What is God?"

Children are, of course, important subjects of such individual doctrinal instruction. The Puritan view of the importance of the early years is fitly expressed by Greenham in his *Sermon on the Education of Children*.

Some there be that will not have their children taught until they be ten or twelve years old because (as they say), before that age they have but an apish imitation. To whom I answer, that although they cannot deeply discern, nor profoundly conceive things, yet how many things before those years both will they receive *and* remember? And I demand, if children be apish in imitation of evil whilst they be young, which they will have the habit of when they be old, why may they not much more better do apishly good when they are young, which they may do carefully when they are old?

¹ Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (O.U.P., New York, 1931), p. 64.

² Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

³ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), ch. 6.

iv. *Experience* itself can teach us much, and in this sense it becomes a means of grace if we profit by it, recalling the lessons God has taught us. In his third treatise, Richard Rogers compares "knowledge which we learn by proof and trial" with "bare knowledge that men have by rule or instruction only", the difference between the economist and the business-man. Until we take note of God's promises and judgements working out in us and in the world, we do not really progress in the knowledge of God. There is an interesting paragraph which is worth quoting in full. It is headed "This way young Christians and preachers should begin to seek experience". He relates this story:

When I was a young man and first began to look after the life to come, I was conversant with one who began to preach, and the text that he should handle at a certain time gave the necessary occasion to him of reprovng a sin which he saw clearly himself to commit usually, but never observed it so much till that time in which he must speak against it. When he saw and better considered of it, he was sore pricked in conscience to see such a blemish in himself, and as much troubled, for that he must inveigh against that sin openly before the hearers, which he was guilty of in the sight of God and of his own conscience. He brake off his study, being in providing to preach the next day. He could not resolve to rebuke that in other, being himself an offender in the same kind, and so to lay burdens on others, and himself to seem innocent. But (he) humbled himself to God, confessed his sin and professed the forsaking of it, craving forgiveness of it before he durst proceed in his study for this sermon. And after that he was wary to do the like in his preaching, namely, that he might clear himself of that sin which he must condemn in others. Since, I have noted how rare (this) is in men of his calling.

Sibbes deals with the value of experience in this way:

For our better encouragement . . . we should often call to mind the former experiences which either ourselves or others have had of God's goodness, and make use of the same for our own spiritual good. . . . We should take notice of God's dealings with us in sundry kinds; how many ways he hath refreshed us, and how good we have found him in our worst times. After we have once tried him and his truth, we may safely trust him. God will stand upon his credit, he never failed any yet, and he will not begin to break with us. . . . It was a course much tending unto the quickening of Christians if they would communicate one to another their mutual experiences.¹

Again, the same writer says:

If we were well read in the story of our own lives, we might have a divinity of our own, drawn out of the observation of God's particular

¹ Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict* (1635), ch. 18.

dealing toward us; we might say, this and this truth I dare venture upon, I have found it true, I do build all my happiness upon it.¹

v. Other *reading*, that is, the study of books other than the Scriptures, is advocated by most of the Puritan writers. The very fact that they had so much of their work printed shows that they realized the great power of Christian books. There was to be a definite method in reading helpful books. In the preface to his *Seven Treatises*, Rogers gives some interesting directions on how to read his book. He advises the Christian reader thus:

First therefore let him read the contents of it briefly set down in the Table before the Book, to help his memory, then the marginal notes of the Chapters. And if he conceive and understand the short sum of it so set down, *then* let him read the Book, itself, till he be acquainted with and understand it: wherein, if his capacity be the weaker and shallower, he must desire the help of some which are more skilful (and better able to see the drift, scope and meaning of it) than himself, especially in such parts of it as are hard and difficult either to understand or to practice.

His final piece of advice is:

Read with a quiet, teachable and meek spirit, desirous of that which I labour to bring thee to, rather than with a curious head to carp and cavil, or censure that which thou dost not practise nor follow.

Later Rogers deals with reading as a means of grace, and deals with five questions—What? Who? When? How? Why? (1) What could be read? The Bible, the canonical Scriptures first of all, obviously, but other sound and godly books too,

And of those that are to be read, some are fittest to inform the judgment and the understanding to make wise and skilful the reader in the knowledge of divine things, as Calvin's *Institutions*, Peter Martyr's *Commonplaces*, Beza's *Confessions*, etc. Some help more specially to practise knowledge by confirming faith and endeavouring to keep a good conscience, of which sort are those which direct a Christian to a godly life, and I may not be ashamed to say, that this book in which I have travailed and taken some pains, is one tending to *that* end. And some help to both, as the worthy labours of Mr. Perkins are herein the principal of our time, containing the sum of many learned authors in a plainer manner, about the matter of Christianity.

Rogers advises Christians to prefer books to "other manner of household implements" such as "Cards and Tables and such-like stuff" without which some think their house is naked. When books have been bought, care must be taken "to see that they be not cast into bench holes nor suffered to lie inoccupid

¹ Sibbes, *op. cit.*, ch. 33.

with cobwebs". (2) Who should read? Everybody. (3) When? As often as is convenient, and the duty is binding on ministers. (4) How? Not with great learning; any soundly converted and catechized Christian with some measure of assurance and holiness can profit. We must see the parts of the book in relation to the whole, and meditate on what we have read. (5) To what end? Our object is fourfold: (1) Knowledge—instruction in the will of God. (2) Refuting of errors and false doctrine. (3) Reproof of vices in others and ourselves. (4) Comfort.

Baxter too deals with reading¹ and some of his remarks are worth noting. Of all the Puritans it was he who was most conscious of the value of books for the conversion and spiritual growth of sinful, uninstructed men. "Many an one may have a good book even any day or hour of the week, that cannot at all have a good preacher." On the whole he concludes that reading gives more knowledge than hearing, though in affecting the heart the sermon is more powerful. Reading is specially recommended for four classes of people:—Masters of families that have more souls to care for than their own; poor people and servants and children that are forced on many Lord's days to stay at home, while others have the opportunity to hear; people who live where there is no preaching, or as bad, or worse than none; vacant persons that have more leisure than others. He then gives two main directions. The first is: Keep the devil's books out of your hands and house. "I mean cards and idle tales and play books and romances or love books, and false bewitching stories." He also includes books likely to foment civil or ecclesiastical strife on his "black list". Secondly, "when you read to your family, let it be seasonably and gravely, when silence and attendance encourage you to expect success; and not when children are crying or talking, or servants bustling to disturb you." He then adds a book list, in which he mentions most of his own books by name, as well as the earlier Puritan classics.

vi. *Watchfulness* is set in the first place by Richard Rogers in his list of private means to be used daily. It is an attitude rather than a physical action or material ordinance, and because it is not strictly parallel to the other means of grace, it was not mentioned with them by other Puritans. But it is certainly one of the most necessary and admirable qualities in the Christian,

¹ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, Part II, ch. 21.

as the Puritans saw him. Surrounded by hostile influences and continually attacked by a traitor within, the Christian must lead a life of constant vigilance. In all conditions, in blessing or adversity, he must watch. Watchfulness is "worthily set in the first place, seeing it is an eye to all the rest", says Rogers. With prayer we must watch our heart and our conduct. This is not an over-strict demand, for experience proves that it brings blessing. The best men have fallen because they were not watchful. True watchfulness is nothing like Popish vigils and watches, since it comes from faith and has as its object obedience to the commandments of God. Some words of Richard Baxter (not without their humorous side) show the detailed practical outworking of this attitude. He is giving directions on how to spend the normal weekday, and advises:¹

Proportion the time of your sleep aright (if it be in your power) that you waste not your precious morning hours sluggishly in your bed. Let the time of your sleep be rationally fitted to your health and labour, and not sensually to your slothful pleasure. About six hours is meet for healthful people, and seven hours for the less healthful, and eight for the more weak and aged, ordinarily. The morning hours are to most the most precious of all the day for all our duties; especially servants that are scanted of time must take it then for prayer, if possible, lest they have none at all. Let God have your first awaking thoughts: lift up your hearts to him reverently and thankfully for the rest of the night past, and briefly cast yourselves upon him for the following day. . . . And if you have a bed-fellow to speak to, let your first speech be agreeable to your thoughts. It will be a great help against the temptations that may else surprise you, and a holy engagement of your hearts to God for all the day. Resolve that pride and the fashions of the times shall never tempt you into such a garb of attire as will make you long in dressing you in the morning; but wear such clothing as is soon put on. It is a dear-bought bravery (or decency as they will needs call it) which must cost every day an hour's . . . time extraordinary: I had rather go as the wild Indians, than have those morning hours to answer for, as too many ladies and other gallants have. If you are persons of quality you may employ a child or a servant to read a chapter in the Bible, while you are dressing you, and eating your breakfast (if you eat any). Else you may employ that time in some fruitful meditation, or conference with those about you, as far as your necessary occasions do give leave. As (for instance) to think or speak of the mercy of a night's rest, and of your renewed time, and how many spent that night in hell, and how many in prison, and how many in a colder harder lodging, and how many in grievous pain and sickness, weary of their beds and of their lives, and how many in distracting terrors of their minds; and how many souls that night were called from their bodies, to appear before

¹ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, Part II, ch. 17.

the dreadful God: and think how fast days and nights roll on! and how speedily your last night and day will come! If more necessary duties call you not away, let secret prayer by yourself alone, or with your chamberfellow, or both, go before the common prayers of the family; and delay it not causelessly, but if it may be, let it be first, before any other work of the day. Yet be not formal and superstitious to your hours, as if God had absolutely tied you to such a time: nor think it not your duty to pray once in secret and once with your chamberfellow, and once with the family every morning, when more necessary duties call you off. That hour is best for one which is worst for another: to most, private prayer is most reasonable as soon as they are up and clothed; to others, some other hour may be more free and fit.

We have now surveyed, though inadequately, the great panorama of growth in grace and the means of grace. These subjects cover the whole of the Christian life, upon all aspects of which the Puritans wrote so warmly and so practically. The amount of material available when dealing with these topics is staggering. The riches seem inexhaustible. Such an article as this can only bring to light gems and nuggets of this vast spiritual treasure, but no more. Each man can, however, dig for himself, and encourage others to dig. To-day we need the teaching which these men can give. I can do no better in conclusion than to quote some words of Richard Rogers to those seeking to grow in grace and to discover and use the appointed means:

I appoint (to them) no new or strange way, but faithfulness and constancy in keeping of that which hath already been shown them . . . assuring themselves that God will not be wanting from time to time in giving good success in the same unto them. Then, as the corn rooted in good ground, through the blessing of God by seasonable weather, becometh far unlike that (in a few months) which it was at the new coming up and appearing above the ground; so shall they, by the same means, daily continued in reverence and faith, become far unlike themselves which they were at the first beginning; and they shall find (as I have said) through the sunshine and dew of God's blessing, that increase which before they never looked for.

Sheffield.

O. R. JOHNSTON.