

Prepared by Grace, for Grace

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The Puritans on God's Ordinary Way
of Leading Sinners to Christ

Joel R. Beeke
and
Paul M. Smalley



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To

Derek Thomas

my faithful friend and fellow-laborer in Christ

Thanks so much for all you are and have done
for me, our seminary, and book ministry.

—JRB

* * *

To

Dawn

my godly wife and faithful *ezer kenegdi*

Though you were not part of my preparation for conversion,
you have been exactly the helper I need to prepare for glory.

—PS

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Foreword

Prepared By Grace, For Grace is a welcome addition to the mounting literature on the subject of “preparatory grace” in the writings of the Puritan theologians of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It makes a very distinctive contribution to an ongoing and complex discussion, and will be eagerly read by students of seventeenth-century theological literature, whether literary scholars, historians, or theologians. Academics in all three of these disciplines have had an interest in, and made contributions to, our knowledge and understanding of the teaching of post-Reformation thinkers on the process and psychology of conversion.

The general *tendenz* of the scholarship of the twentieth century was critical to varying degrees of the way in which Puritan writers understood the morphology of conversion. This was so for a variety of reasons. On occasion any emphasis on “preparation” for conversion was seen to be inimical to the pristine theology of the Genevan Reformation whose heirs the Puritans were seen to be. As is well known, Calvin was “subdued by a sudden conversion (*subita conversione*).”¹ What room therefore for “preparation” for salvation in his theology?

Or again, especially in theology influenced by Karl Barth, the idea that anything could “prepare” for grace was seen to be a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, theologians who distrusted the federal orthodoxy of the Puritans also viewed it as a mother who gave birth to preparationism, and thus turned people back into themselves instead of pointing them towards Christ. Famously, John McLeod Campbell (1800–1872) had reworked the very nature of the atonement against a background of encountering individuals who did not feel themselves to be “prepared” to receive grace. Any

1. John Calvin, author’s preface to *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Calvin Translation Society; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:xl.

investigation of the morphology of conversion was thus seen to be either Christ-diverting, or stimulating a subjectivity that stood in the way of the free offer of Christ and the joyful acceptance of Him.

Something rather obvious, however, has been missing in almost all of these discussions. Characteristically they have been carried on by scholars whose world is that of books and journals, lecture rooms and research libraries. But the writings they have placed under the microscope have been those of pastors and preachers. These are two different universes of discourse. On occasion it seems clear that historians have not been sufficiently sensitive to theology to be able to grasp the nuances of what is being said. Calvin, for example, almost certainly meant he underwent an *unexpected* conversion, not a conversion without precursors.² In addition, most academic scholars—although they also live in a fallen environment—are not normally operating in a context in which they regularly spend time with people expressing profound spiritual need, conviction of sin, a deep sense of guilt and shame, and are seeking pastoral counsel. It is all too easy, therefore, to misjudge the kinds of analyses of the morphology of human experience that are delineated in the Puritan literature. As scholars we would be slow to discuss and critique the morphology of subjective experience to be found in psychiatric literature. We would recognize that we needed experience with many patients to enable us with any confidence to pass judgment on any morphology of psychological experience. There would be at least one significant dimension lacking—experience with and observation of the reality discussed. Is it possible there is an analogous liability in the discussion of the morphology of individual spiritual conversion?

Dr. Joel Beeke brings to this study well-honed skills in both history and theology. In addition he has already demonstrated in his other writings a prodigious and enviable familiarity with both the primary texts of the Puritan writings and the growing corpus of secondary literature.³

2. He had so understood *subita* in his *Commentary on De Clementia*. See *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's 'De Clementia,'* trans. and ed. F. L. Battles and A. M. Hugo (Leiden: Renaissance Society of America, 1969), 55–56.

3. As, for example, in his *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999) and in his trilogy, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2004), *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006) with Randall Pederson, and, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012) with Mark Jones.

But in addition to his academic expertise, Dr. Beeke also brings thirty-five years of continuous pastoral ministry to substantial congregations. During the course of these years he has been engaged in weekly preaching to and in the pastoral counseling of men, women, and young people whose stories have often been strikingly similar in morphology to those with whom Puritan pastors regularly engaged. Mr. Paul Smalley likewise served for over a decade in pastoral ministry before becoming Dr. Beeke's teaching assistant and graduating with a Th.M. in Puritan theology. This combination of authors almost inevitably creates a sensitivity to pastorally-rooted texts which may be absent in other works. For one thing, long experience in closely observing the ways of God with a wide variety of individuals inevitably creates a distinctive sensitivity to the divine morphology in conversion. Indeed, it may mean that when the writings of fellow pastor-teachers are read, albeit from another generation, there is an immediate sense that the spiritual analysis given is instantly recognizable. This in turn creates a capacity to make discriminating judgments—which the reader will discover the Puritan writers also made in relationship to each other (as, for example, in Thomas Goodwin's criticisms of Thomas Hooker).

Prepared By Grace, For Grace merits a special welcome because its authors bring this rare pastoral perspective to the table. But this is not to say that pastoral experience trumps careful research. For they have read widely on this theme and ransacked the secondary literature. Their study, which ranges beyond the English and New England Puritans to Continental divines and at least one noted Scot, is immensely valuable as a whole, and also in its discrete parts. Readers will appreciate the cameo expositions of the thought of the various Puritan authors whose works are placed under the microscope. They will also want to know what are the conclusions of Dr. Beeke and Mr. Smalley—but those should be disclosed by the authors of the book, not the writer of a foreword!

Students and scholars who think and write on the theme of "preparation" may well wish (as Calvin did with the term "free will") that the expression be laid aside because it is subject to so many interpretations and so much difference in use. The difficulty lies, of course, in coining a different term whose definition is more immediately understood and agreed upon. Until then, we must content ourselves with the vocabulary that has served now for hundreds of years. For now, *Prepared By Grace, For Grace* is an important monograph. It will surely remain a standard work

in the field for years to come and, hopefully, encourage the scholarly and pastoral balance which Dr. Beeke and Mr. Smalley seek to exhibit. It merits careful reading and, unless I misjudge its worth, should stimulate further study on the topic of preparation in general and on the theologians discussed here in particular.

—Sinclair B. Ferguson
First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, S.C.

I Would I Were Converted

When Adam was deceived,
I was of life bereaved;
Of late (too) I perceived,
I was in sin conceived.

I have in sin abounded,
My heart therewith is wounded,
With fears I am surrounded,
My spirit is confounded.

I would I were converted
Would sin and I were parted,
For folly I have smarted;
God make me honest-hearted!

Lord: thou wast crucified
For sinners, bled and died,
I have for mercy cried,
Let me not be denied.

—John Bunyan¹

1. John Bunyan, *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686; facsimile repr., London: Elliot Stock, 1889), 2–3, 5, 9 [incorrect pagination, actually p. 6].

INTRODUCTION



The Question of Preparation

For thus saith the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. —Jeremiah 4:3

This book is based on the conviction that a righteous and holy God saves sinners “by grace through faith” (Eph. 2:8). The human race fell into sin and misery when Adam despised God’s glory and disobeyed His commandment, but God has provided a way of salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son. The gospel is the good news that God saves sinners who trust in Christ alone. This gospel of grace was the heartbeat of Puritanism. Perry Miller said, “The fundamental problem of life for English Puritans was not social: it was salvation of the soul, out of which would flow a purification of the church and a regeneration of the state.”¹

This book addresses the question of how God ordinarily brings sinners to the point of trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Specifically, is conversion an event or a process? If a process, how does the work of conversion begin? There may be exceptional cases, but in general, is there a pattern to conversion? This subject has massive implications for how we preach the gospel. Should we portray God as nothing but love, and try to woo people to this loving God who can ease their pain and fill the emptiness of their lives? Or should we also tell people that emptiness and pain are symptoms of sin, and God hates sin with a burning, righteous fury? Does God ordinarily begin the work of conversion by first convincing sinners of their guilt and His coming judgment?

1. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 54.

How we answer that last question determines the role of God's law in our evangelism. If we minimize the need for conviction of sin in conversion, the law may be regarded as a distraction or hindrance to unbelievers, keeping them from Christ. But if conviction of sin is part of God's normal way of leading a sinner to salvation, then we must preach the law with the gospel.

Many Puritans of England and New England answered these questions with the doctrine known as *preparation*. People must be prepared to believe in Christ before they exercise such faith. Such preparation of the heart may be viewed as a part of the process that leads to conversion. Owen Watkins observes that, "The normal pattern of a Puritan conversion followed the sequence: peace, disturbance, and then peace again.... The casting down and raising up, the wounding and making whole, referred to the two landmarks already mentioned—conviction of sin and coming to Christ."² Complacency in sin, conviction of sin, and conversion to Christ constituted the Puritan process of personal salvation.

Most Puritans believed that God uses the law to prepare the way for the gospel in men's souls, much as John the Baptist's preaching of divine wrath and repentance prepared the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus. This doctrine of preparation for grace shaped their evangelistic preaching, their doctrine of assurance, and their personal piety. Because such preparation for salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit using the truths of God's Word, we have chosen to describe the Puritan doctrine as "preparation by grace, for grace."

Preparation for What?

The word *preparation* was used by the Puritans in many contexts. Charles Cohen writes, "Preparation has several definitions in Puritan theological discourse. While signifying the preliminaries to faith, the subject discussed here, it also refers to the activity of the Saints as they renew themselves for God's work or ready themselves to meet Christ in glory."³ The Puritans urged people to prepare for many things: prepare to hear the preaching of the Word, prepare for conversion, prepare to partake of

2. Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 37.

3. Charles L. Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 78n9.

the Lord's Supper, prepare to face trials, and prepare for the Lord's coming in glory. Lumping all these meanings together under the banner of preparation can only create confusion.

We misunderstand the Puritans if we fail to ask, in any given context, what kind of preparation is intended? For example, in critiquing Edward Taylor's (c. 1642–1729) notion of preparation for grace, David Parker uses a quotation from Taylor to support his argument: "our preparation consisting in the graces of the Spirit, oh we by preparing should stir up those shining spangles of the divine image upon our souls" so that they are "pleasing to God."⁴ Does this statement describe the preparation of the unconverted for saving faith? If so, Taylor has significantly departed from Reformed theology by ascribing the ability to please God to an unconverted, unbelieving sinner. It is far more likely that Taylor spoke not of preparation for conversion but instead, the preparation of those already converted to use the means of grace, such as the Lord's Supper, in a profitable manner.

Certainly that is the case when Parker quotes Taylor as saying, "The wedding garment is that whereby a person is evangelically prepared for fellowship with God in all gospel ordinances."⁵ Parker seizes on the phrase *evangelically prepared* as illustrative of Taylor's doctrine of preparation for conversion, while plainly Taylor was speaking of preparation for using the means of grace, such as the Lord's Supper. Rather than preparation *for* conversion, the preparation *was* conversion itself, symbolized by putting on the wedding garment (Matt. 22:11–14), which gave a person the right to join in the sacramental feast.

Mark Dever thus warns, "Ambiguity is particularly dangerous in this question because one can lose sight of the point of the preparation under discussion.... Carelessness at this point has led some to take any statement of call for human action...as proof of 'preparationism.'"⁶ Therefore let us be clear that in this book we are not talking about Puritan preparation for good works, trials, Christ's return, taking the Lord's Supper, hearing the sermon, or other such matters. We are specifically speaking of *preparation for saving faith in Christ*.

4. David L. Parker, "Edward Taylor's Preparationism: A New Perspective on the Taylor-Stoddard Controversy," *Early American Literature* 11, no. 3 (Winter 1976/1977): 263.

5. Parker, "Edward Taylor's Preparationism," 271.

6. Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000), 126.

To focus our study on preparation for faith, we must bypass other topics that the Puritans cherished. The danger of this book is that it may give the impression that the Puritans were obsessed with instilling preparatory guilt and fear. On the contrary, they generously wrote about the doctrines of God, Christ's redemptive work, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, saving faith, repentance, assurance of salvation, the Christian life, and heaven.⁷ But to dig deeply into the subject of preparation for grace, we must set aside these other matters while not forgetting that the Puritans had a full-orbed theology and a God-centered approach to all of life.

We may then address other definitional questions, such as: Does this preparation for grace consist of outward actions, such as going to church, or inward attitudes, such as grieving over our sins and longing for Jesus Christ to save us? We will focus on inward preparation of the heart, while recognizing the practical exhortations of the Puritans to be obedient to God in outward conduct. Reformed Christians have generally acknowledged that unregenerate people could perform such outward acts as attending church, hearing the Word, and praying to God, and exhorted them to do so. But this book has to do with preparing the heart for saving grace.

Furthermore, we should address the issue raised by Dever: Is there a distinction between preparation and *preparationism*? The latter is generally used as a negative term for a doctrine of preparation that contradicts the principle of salvation by grace alone. We will avoid using the label *preparationism* (and the related noun *preparationist*) with respect to the Puritans, since, as we will see, they consistently opposed any notion of preparation based upon the exercise of human free will or any supposed merit in the actions of sinful men. Prejudice and preconceptions about preparationism have often hindered people from making objective judgments about the Puritan doctrine of preparation for grace.

Some might distinguish between *God's* preparation of sinners by conviction, and *man's* preparation of himself. But this distinction is not helpful because as Reformed, experimental Christians, the Puritans believed that all of man's works are done under the sovereignty of God. Therefore

7. For an overview of Puritan teachings on most major topics of systematic theology, see Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

reality cannot be divided into two separate compartments between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, as this distinction attempts to do.

Further, as experimental Christians, the Puritans believed that God's saving plan unfolds in human life both in experiences and duties. If God is working upon people through the preaching of the Word, do not people have an obligation to respond rightly? Should not preachers press this obligation upon them? Most Christians would say yes to these questions. The inseparable connection between God's work and man's works makes it unwise to force them into opposing categories.

Finally, we must discuss how to distinguish preparation from repentance, given that both involve sorrow over sin, humiliation before God, and changes in one's conduct to some degree. We will include in preparation all those forms of repentance that precede the sinner's trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Sometimes this distinction is referred to as the difference between legal repentance and evangelical repentance. We realize this distinction leaves open the question of the timing of the actual birth or onset of justifying faith. As we will see, the Puritans also wrestled with that question.

Preparation: Evangelical or Legalistic, Reformed or Arminian?

The teachings of the Puritans on preparation have evoked very different reactions. Some support the use of the law in evangelism as a helpful or even necessary tool to awaken sinners to their need of Christ. They see no contradiction between preaching the requirements and curse of the law to the lost and proclaiming the promise of salvation and call to faith that is essential to the gospel of grace. They invoke the law not as an alternative way to be justified before God, but in order to convince sinners that they can only be justified through Christ's work, not their own.

Others condemn such preparation as a sub-Christian legalism that falls back into the salvation-by-works mentality that Paul so strongly opposed in his Epistle to the Galatians. They believe evangelism should speak of nothing but free grace. Preaching God's law to fallen sinners only breeds morbidity, they say. Some even believe that frightening people with the curse of the law causes them psychological harm and contradicts God's unconditional love.

Others agree that preaching should use the law to convict sinners, but they also think that the Puritans went to an unhealthy extreme,

inclining their hearers to endless introspection that undermines faith and assurance. Even those who affirm the law in principle may feel so uncomfortable with it in practice that they rarely preach of God's law and His wrath against sin so as to stir the fear of damnation in anyone's heart.

Controversy has also risen regarding the Puritans' concept of preparation for grace and the Reformed doctrine of sovereign grace. Arminian theology teaches that God helps the lost sinner up to a point, then allows him to decide whether or not he will believe in Christ. Thus the human will is the decisive factor for determining who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. That is possible, the Arminian says, because fallen men still retain some ability to turn towards God. By contrast, Reformed theology teaches that mankind is so lost that no one would choose to trust in Christ unless God first changed the sinner's heart, causing him to believe. God's will is the decisive factor in determining who will be saved, for man is dead in sin. This point of view was articulated well by the apostle John in his gospel (John 1:12, 13 *et passim*), but obscured in the teaching of the church for many centuries prior to the sixteenth-century Reformation, when it was once more clearly and powerfully preached by Martin Luther (1483–1546), Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), Martin Bucer (1491–1551), Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), and, most famously, John Calvin (1509–1564).

Some people argue that when the Puritans developed their theology of conversion, especially the doctrine of preparation, they diluted the pure Reformed teachings they inherited from Calvin. We are told that though they considered themselves Reformed, the Puritans actually paved the way for Arminianism in England. This "Calvin versus the Puritans" argument has massive negative implications for Christians and churches that embrace the Westminster Confession of Faith, for it asserts that Westminster theology is not true to the Protestant Reformation.

Others argue that Puritan theology is the natural development of Calvin's teachings and may be found in seed form in Calvin's writings. More specifically, they say the doctrine of preparation for saving faith fits well in the Reformed system of beliefs, for it is one step in God's sovereign work toward saving sinners through Christ.

It should be plain by now that preparation is a controversial subject. Nonetheless, it is an important subject, for it addresses some of the most essential matters of Christian faith and experience, such as how the gospel is to be preached, and how sinners are converted.

We authors believe that the doctrine of preparation generally received among the Puritans is biblical, evangelical, and Reformed (though we will point out cases where some individual Puritans have carried certain aspects of this doctrine beyond biblical boundaries). Neglecting to preach law and judgment to lost sinners is one reason (though not the only one) why many churches are unhealthy today. Too many of their members are self-righteous, self-satisfied Christians in name only, whose spiritual pride has never been broken by the Spirit of Christ working through the Word of God. They have never come to see their true plight as sinners abiding under God's wrath, who merit nothing but condemnation and punishment, with no one to turn to for help other than Jesus Christ. A shallow view of sin must inevitably produce a shallow kind of faith. Feeling little need for grace, they want very little from God or from Christ apart from what they think they are entitled to.

On the other hand, we recognize that it is possible to abuse the doctrine of preparation. The Puritans knew that when confronted with the demands of the law, one can sink into despair of salvation, or be driven to cling all the more to legalism and self-righteousness, instead of fleeing to Christ for salvation. Preachers can dwell too long on the evils of sin without offering the sweet promises of the gospel. Steps to conversion can become roadblocks to trusting in Christ if they are viewed as conditions to be met in order to be worthy of receiving Him. Though we affirm the fundamentals of the Puritan doctrine of preparation, we do not always agree with the details of each Puritan's way of working out the implications of this doctrine.

We mean no disrespect to those who view these teachings as unbiblical, unhealthy, and/or contradictory to Reformed theology. Many of the scholars cited in this book have made significant contributions to the study of the Puritans. Even while we critique them, in some respects we stand upon their shoulders. When we argue that they have misunderstood the Puritans in various matters, we acknowledge that we also are liable to mistakes as fallen human beings. May God raise up students and scholars who will correct our own errors.

Our goal is to let Calvin and the Puritans speak for themselves. Please forgive us if the following pages are crowded with quotes and footnotes. We want you to hear these voices speaking from the past, rather than us telling you only what we think they said. We have conformed spelling and capitalization to modern standard usage to make the quotes more

readable. As Cohen says, "Seventeenth-century orthography is wonderful to behold, a salve for everyone who did not win his fourth grade spelling bee."⁸ But we have not substituted new words in place of old, or rearranged sentences.

We want you to taste some of the spiritual sweetness in Puritan writings. If that whets your appetite for further research, let our footnotes offer you some places to start. There is always more study to be done!⁹

8. Cohen, *God's Caress*, xi

9. A large collection of Puritan writings and many rare books are available at the Puritan Research Center, housed at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan.